

**ESL Instruction Based on Learning Style for the Faculty of Arts
First Year Tamil Medium Undergraduates –
University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka**

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Abstract

Among learner factors, one of the most important aspects is age. With this factor there are other factors also which play a significant role in differences in the achievement level of proficiency. For example, language aptitude of a learner, knowledge factors, personality, attitude, motivation, individual cognitive factors, learning style, hemisphere dominance and learner strategies are some of them. However, in this research I do not attempt to maintain that these are the only factors, which have an influence on differences in the achievement level of proficiency of a learner. There are other factors which are also contributing in differences in the achievement level of proficiency in ESL across individuals (for example, genetic factors, gender, etc., are a few to state).

To recognize one part of the solution for learning issues in ESL classrooms relevant to individual variations, this study attempts to examine the role and effectiveness of learning style in the learning process. The increasing attention in recognizing the effectiveness of learning style based instruction in second language is evidenced by the release of a large number of scholarly publications based on empirical classroom researches. These large volumes of studies provide adequate insights into the learning styles preferred by the learners and the effectiveness of learning style preference based ESL instruction in the classroom.

Given the importance of this, the present research was evolved to examine the effectiveness of learning style-based ESL training to 12 Tamil medium undergraduates at the University of Jaffna for 12 weeks (with unlimited hours of informal meetings) in our context. Having employed the qualitative methodology with participant observation, informal interviews and researcher intervention, the present study found out that the ESL learners have adopted their own learning styles to achieve their required language proficiency level.

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Key words: Learning style, visual, auditory, kinaesthetic learning preference, tactile way of learning, group/individual learning preference.

1. Introduction

One of the most important mysteries in the area of Second Language Acquisition/Learning is the issue of differences in achievement level of proficiency across learners in the same ESL classroom. After recognizing and acknowledging the above concept, slowly the notions of ‘learner-centredness’, ‘student-centredness’, and ‘personalized’ have entered the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching to shape the model of second language classroom instruction advantageously. This shift towards learner-centred programmes emphasizes the centrality of the learner in the teaching and learning processes of ESL classrooms; every learner in the classroom is unique but they do not adopt the same approach of learning due to the influence of learner factors. Thus the proponents of this view suggest that since learner factors have significant effect on learning, they have to be seriously taken into account for the successful teaching and learning enterprise.

Among learner factors, one of the most important aspects is age. With this factor there are other related factors as well, which play a chief role in differences in the achievement level of proficiency. For example, language aptitude of a learner, knowledge factors/background knowledge, personality, attitude, motivation, individual cognitive factors, learning style, hemisphere dominance and learner strategies are some of them. However, in this research I do not attempt to maintain that these are the only factors, which have an influence on the differences in the achievement level of proficiency of a learner. Certainly there are other factors contributing to the differences in the achievement level of proficiency in ESL across individuals (for example, genetic factors, gender, traits, etc., are a few to state).

Presently, we live in the information age and there is an information explosion everywhere in the world. This explosion, coupled with developments in various knowledge domains, demands communication among people compulsorily around the world. Since English happens to be the vehicle of communication in the international communities, the need to master English language skills is felt by people and governments all over the world. Countries which were Non-English Speaking (NES) countries until recently have also embarked on ‘learn English’ programmes with greater focus. The clear distinction between ESL and EFL is gradually eroding and the status of

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English has begun to move towards a higher level, if not the L1 position. That is, at present, in NES countries, English has become an important language just as their L1 languages. Currently emergence of various fields such as advertising network, e-commerce, global communication, and cyberspace in NES countries demands learning English language for varieties of purposes: ESL for academic purposes, ESL for business/conference purposes, ESL for job recruits and ESL for news reporters. Hence, the emphasis of teaching of ESL has currently acquired greater prominence in these settings.

Studies reported in Cornett (1983), Keefe and Ferrell (1990), Kyriacou, Benmansoure, and Low (1996), Reid, (1987) and Riding and Rayner (1998) provide insights into the learning styles preferred by the learners and the effectiveness of learning style preference based ESL instruction in the classroom. Following the lead given by these studies, the present research was undertaken to examine the effectiveness of learning style-based ESL training to Tamil medium undergraduates (tertiary level) in the University of Jaffna.

Background and Objective

This study took place in the University of Jaffna. The subjects were Tamil medium undergraduates in the faculty of arts. They were all proficient learners in their L1 (Tamil) and were very successful at the school level. They were able to pass the examination of General Certificate of Education – Advanced Level (G.C.E. – A/L) and they performed well in their majors at the university level. However, they were unable to achieve the satisfactory level (minimum requirements of the University of Jaffna) of proficiency in English language. Therefore, this study made an attempt to gain insights into the learning processes of ESL employing learning style based ESL instruction of the tertiary level learners in the University of Jaffna.

Actually, the method of teaching and classroom techniques generally employed in the classroom are not conducive for improving ESL general proficiency level in the University of Jaffna. We notice that in most of the ESL first year Faculty of Arts classrooms, teacher-centred approach is still employed by the teachers. This traditional type of approach does not permit the teachers to consider and utilise learners' resources as capital in the ESL classroom beneficially. Generally, time is not allotted for clarifications during the learning process, and discussion is not often encouraged. Peer/group discussion is completely restricted to maintain classroom discipline.

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In other words, the emphasis is normally laid on reproduction of language rather than innovative and creative use. Further this conventional type of approach still believes chalk and talk as effective tools for ESL teaching. Hence, this study attempted to reveal the effectiveness of learning style based instruction which helps recognize learners' learning preferences and use it profitably in the ESL classroom. Therefore, the major objectives of this study were: recognizing ESL learning problems of the University of Jaffna faculty of arts undergraduates, then identifying the preferred learning styles, afterwards implementing ESL instruction employing identified learning styles to the subjects with appropriate tasks in the classroom, and finally checking out periodically the efficacy of the instruction to make the unsuccessful ESL learners to become smart learners.

Some Definitions and Different Views of Learning Style

In recent times, the notion "style" has been very much correlated with personality, cognition, communication, motivation, perception, learning and behaviour of an individual. Now we shall observe how different scholars view the concept of "style" associated with the learning pattern adopted by an individual. Styles of an individual are broadly categorized into *learning style* and *cognitive style*. Learning style is classified based on learning centred-approach, whereas cognitive style is classified based on cognitive-centred approach (Riding & Rayner, 1998). Cornett (1983) defines learning style as "the overall pattern that gives general direction to learning behaviour" (p.09). Keefe and Ferrell (1990) claim

learning style, a complex of related characteristics in which the whole is greater than in parts. Learning style is a gestalt combining internal and external operations derived from the individuals' neurobiology, personality and development, and reflected in learning behaviours (Keefe & Ferrell, 1990, p.16).

From these definitions it can be concluded that learning styles of an individual can be observed explicitly. They have strong association with an individual's behaviour. They can be modified according to the needs of classroom situations. Learning styles are organized under four groups:

- 1) Style models based on the learning processes,
- 2) Style models grounded in orientation to study,

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- 3) Style models based on instructional preference, and
- 4) Style models are based on cognitive skills.

Kyriacou, Benmansoure, and Low (1996) provide us a more elaborate description on learning style. These scholars categorize learning styles into six major divisions:

- 1) Deep approach, surface approach, and strategic approach
- 2) Field-independent (holistic), and field-dependent (serialist)
- 3) Converger, and diverger
- 4) Concrete and abstract
- 5) Reflective and active, and
- 6) Solitary and social (Kyriacou, Benmansoure, & Low, 1996).

On the other hand, Riding and Rayner (1998) maintain, “a person’s cognitive style is probably an in-built and automatic way of responding to information and situation” (Riding & Rayner 1998, p.07). It has a physical basis of an individual; therefore, it is a stable characteristic of a person’s psychology, which does not seem to change. It is also impossible for an individual to alter his cognitive styles.

Cognitive style can be classified into two categories: the whole list-analytic dimension and the verbal-imagery dimension. Cognitive style, however, can be recognized from an individual’s chosen and habitual approach to systematize and represent information. A current theory pertaining to cognitive style seems to develop from four segments of psychology, namely:

- 1) Perception
- 2) Cognitive controls and cognitive process
- 3) Mental imagery and
- 4) Personality constructs.

Riding and Rayner (1998) also consider about personal style and describe it as,

the way in which a person habitually approaches or responds to the learning task. It comprises two fundamental aspects: first cognitive

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style, which reflects the way in which the individual person thinks; second, learning strategy, which reflects those processes, which are used by the learner to respond to the demands of a learning activity (Riding & Rayner, 1998, p.07).

The above discussion clearly distinguishes cognitive style from learning strategy. According to these authors, cognitive style is perhaps an innate ability and unconscious type of reacting to information and circumstances, whereas learning strategy can be noticed while a learner reacts to the demand during learning-activity and they can be overtly observable and modifiable. Elaborate debates on learning style with different learning style inventories and cognitive style with cognitive style indexes based on empirical study can be found in Riding and Rayner's (1998) work.

In a recent study Leaver, Ehrman and Shekhtman (2005) make use of the phrase "learning style" as an umbrella concept to cover both "learning styles" and "cognitive styles". They claim that learning styles can be sliced in at least four ways:

- 1) Sensory preferences (visual, auditory, motor learning)
- 2) cognitive styles (Ehrman & Leaver construct or E&L construct)
- 3) Personality types and
- 4) Environmental needs.

These authors offer ten subscales to explain cognitive styles:

- 1) Analogue – Digital scale
- 2) Concrete-Abstract scale
- 3) Field Independence – Field Dependence
- 4) Field Sensitive – Field Insensitive Scale
- 5) Global – Particular Scale
- 6) Impulsive-Reflective Scale
- 7) Inductive-Deductive Scale
- 8) Levelling-Sharpening Scale
- 9) Random-Sequential Scale

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10) Synthetic-Analytic Scale.

More elaborate discussion on these styles can be viewed in Leaver, Ehrman and Shekhtman's (2005) work.

The awareness of learning style and cognitive style is vital in the classroom settings for an ESL teacher. This will help the teacher harmonize learning styles, cognitive styles and classroom activities in a positive manner and which can be equipped for a successful learning condition without any classroom clashes.

Table – 3.1 - Learning styles

Learning styles		Descriptions
1.	Visual	learning by seeing/looking at things & learning
2.	Auditory	Learning by listening
3.	Tactile	Learning by hands on activities
4.	Kinaesthetic	Learning by involving themselves
5.	Group	Learning by group work
6.	Individual	Learning individually

Descriptions

1. Those who desire visual learning fashion,
 - Desire to watch drawings, pictures, charts, diagrams, graphs, models, slides, transparencies, posters, animation pictures and video clips while they learn.
 - Frequently identify words by seeing.
 - Employ lists to systematize their attention.
2. Those who enjoy auditory learning pattern,
 - Like the lecturer to present oral information.
 - Enjoy dialogues, discussions and plays during learning.
 - Work out problems by discussing.
 - Apply rhythm/tunes and sound as recalling aids.
3. Those who prefer tactile manner of learning,
 - Employ writing and illustrations/drawings as memory aids.

- Learn better in hands-on performances like projects, experiments and demonstrations.
4. Those who desire kinaesthetic learning tendency,
- Learn best when they occupy and dynamic in the classrooms.
 - Find it complicated to sit still for long periods to learn.
 - Apply motion and action as memory supporting aids.
5. Those who enjoy group activities,
- Learn fast and better when they are engaged in group activities.
 - Study adequate enough when they share ideas among group members.
 - Find it difficult to listen to instructor's coaching alone.
 - Are ready to acknowledge their friends' views without any disagreement.
6. Those who choose to find out individually/independently,
- Learn effectively when they study single-handedly in the classroom.
 - Never recognize other's view and suggestions; they always rely upon their own findings.
 - Retain information and recollect factors effortlessly.
 - Enjoy listening to the teacher and learn quickly.

Therefore, recognizing learning style is supposed to be a prerequisite in the classroom settings for an ESL teacher and learner. Recognising appropriate learning style will help the teacher orchestrate learning styles and classroom activities. This type of classroom instruction is hoped to enhance learners' learning process. A properly design learning style inventory can be employed to trace the appropriate learning style.

Generally, ESL practitioners adopt varieties of learning style inventory models to determine the learners' different styles. This inventory is expected to help the teacher mostly in the classroom management during the implementation of tasks/stimuli in ESL classrooms. From this inventory, language teachers can pull together learners' learning preferences which are strongly believed to enable the teachers to organize matching classroom activities. Internationally accepted models of learning style inventory are Reid's (1987) and Richards and Lockhart's (1996) models (Annexure-I).

Appropriate learning style recognition becomes essential for an ESL teacher because if a learner having individual learning style is asked to work in the group/pair work in the classroom, he/she might be affected psychologically. This mental nature may hinder his actual language learning and performance. Therefore, to avoid such an unusual situation and for the teachers' fair classroom role, the learning style inventory is strongly believed to enhance the classroom management, planning the teaching and classroom activities.

Research Design and Method

Subjects for this study were twelve first semester Tamil medium undergraduates of mixed ability in the faculty of arts at the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. They included five girls and seven boys. In this research, it was felt to employ a qualitative method using multi data gathering tools such as questionnaire, learning style inventory, participatory observation and post test with periodical classroom assessments. Initially questionnaire and learning style inventory (model based on Reid, 1987; Riding, & Rayner, 1998) were planned to employ to investigate learners' background information, barriers encountered by the ESL learners, their learning needs and preferred learning styles; thereafter, it was planned to implement preferred learning style based ESL instruction to the subjects. Periodical checking was planned to examine the effectiveness of the intervention programme; the subjects of this study confirmed that they liked to learn with visual support and in group work/activities.

In the intervention programme, which was carried out for a period of 12 weeks (approximately 32 hours), learners' preferred learning style based ESL instruction was implemented using varieties of tasks and classroom activities. This intervention programme has included participatory observation, casual discussion, and consecutive classroom assessments with a post test. These tools successfully helped evolve the effectiveness of learning style based ESL instruction for the Tamil medium, Faculty of Arts undergraduates, University of Jaffna.

Results and Discussion

The learning style inventory of my subjects indicated that most of them preferred ESL instruction with visual clues and group activities in the classroom. When I planned the ESL intervention programme, these aspects were taken into consideration. Hence, based on these results, and learners' requirements, more appropriate visual clues and group activities were

included throughout the intervention programme with the input; while performing the teaching the researcher carefully observed the effectiveness of this teaching style.

Visual Clues

It was observed during the classroom activities that learners enthusiastically participated in ESL learning with visual clues. They often associated words with visual clues and performed well in the ESL class. Regular assessments and post test result also confirmed this. It was further observed that their background knowledge was activated rapidly during learning process when visual clues were introduced in the classroom. Apparently, ESL teaching seemed extremely smooth when visual clues were coupled with input text.

Group Work and Learning from Peers

It was found from my observation that some learners were slow and took time to internalise the instructions and the advice of teachers during learning process, but they picked them up from the peer group members later. It was found that some of them were not completing the tasks suggested by the teacher individually at the initial stage but later when they worked and interacted with other members and exchanged their ideas with them, they completed those tasks quickly. It was noticed that, it was very beneficial to allow the learners to work in groups since this system allows them to interact among themselves in order to get their doubts clarified in the ESL classroom.

From my findings, it was further observed that free discussion among group members during ESL instruction session encouraged our subjects to learn independently and involved in self-evaluation activities. Since this style of ESL instructional approach was exclusively new for our subjects, they found it innovative and enjoyed participating in it completely. This feeling enabled them to minimise their anxiety and increase self-satisfaction and also get some practice in using English.

Conclusion

As I explained above, the primary mission of the present study was exploring learning issues of Tamil medium undergraduate L2 learners of the faculty of arts in ESL classrooms in the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, identifying their learning style preferences and study the impact of ESL instruction based on learning style preferences. My study very clearly evidenced and

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confirmed that there were some important learning style preferences of our subjects and they play a vital role for the successful ESL instruction in the classroom.

In my preliminary investigation, I found that my subjects were all Novice-High proficiency level ESL learners according to The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 1986) proficiency descriptors. For them I provided ESL instruction based on preferred learning styles (visual support and group learning) ESL training for approximately 32 hours and in the end it was proved that appropriate selection of learning style preference and ESL instruction based on preferred learning styles would enhance our ESL undergraduates' learning processes and that would help improve their proficiency level to intermediate – mid level according to ACTFL (1986).

Their classroom performances, participatory observational data, feedback reports and assessments with post-test provided evidences to suggest that they were able to perform well if they were given instruction based on preferred learning styles.

Therefore, a carefully planned ESL instruction based on preferred learning styles instruction will help the University of Jaffna, Faculty of Arts novice - high learners to capitalize on the input that they receive in the classroom based on preferred learning style, and to attain success in ESL learning. It is felt that ESL instruction based on preferred learning styles instruction accompanied by proper tasks are valuable tools for ESL novice learners because they lead less frustrating and more successful paths to successfully learn ESL compared to the conventional classroom teaching approach.

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Annexure I
Learning Style Inventory
 (Reid – 1987; Richards & Lockhart – 1996)

Name: -----

Date: -----

Scoring procedure

Read each statement on the following page. Please respond to the statements as they apply to your study of English. Decide whether you agree or disagree with each statement. For example, if you strongly agree, give 5 points, if you agree give 4 points, and so on.

- Strongly agree = 5 points
- Agree = 4
- Undecided = 3
- Disagree = 2
- Strongly disagree = 1

Now read the following statements and put the points in the appropriate boxes.

		Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.	When the teacher tells me the instructions, I understand better.					
2	I prefer to learn by doing something in class.					
3	I get more work done when I work with others.					
4	I learn more when I study with a group.					
5	In class, I learn best when I work with others.					
6	I learn better by reading what the teacher writes on the chalkboard.					
7	When someone tells me how to do thing in class, I learn better.					
8	When I do things in class, I learn better.					
9	I remember things I have heard in class better than things I read.					
10	When I read instructions, I remember them better.					
11	I learn more when I can make a model of something.					
12	I understand better when I read instructions					
13	When I study alone, I remember things better.					
14	I learn more when I make something for a class project.					
15	I enjoy learning in class by doing experiments.					
16	I learn better when I make drawings as I study.					
17	I learn better in class when the teacher gives a lecture.					
18	When I work alone, I learn better.					
19	I understand things better in class when I participate in role playing.					
20	I learn better in class when I listen to someone.					
21	I enjoy working on an assignment with two or three classmates.					
22	When I build something, I remember what I have learned better					
23	I prefer to study with others.					
24	I learn better by reading than by listening to someone.					
25	I enjoy making something for a class project.					
26	I learn best in class when I can participate in related activities.					
27	In class, I work better when I work alone.					
28	I prefer working on projects by myself.					
29	I learn more by reading textbooks than by listening to lectures.					
30	I prefer to work by myself.					

When you have completed transfer all the points in the respective category, add them and multiply by two, you will get score for each category.

VISUAL	TACTILE	AUDITORY
6. -----	11. -----	1. -----
10. -----	14. -----	7. -----
12. -----	16. -----	9. -----
24. -----	22. -----	17. -----
29. -----	25. -----	20. -----
Total ----- X 2 = ----- Score	Total ----- X 2 = ----- Score	Total ----- X 2 = ----- Score

GROUP	KINAESTHETIC	INDIVIDUAL
3. -----	2. -----	13. -----
4. -----	8. -----	18. -----
5. -----	15. -----	27. -----
21. -----	19. -----	28. -----
23. -----	26. -----	30. -----
Total ----- X 2 = ----- Score	Total ----- X 2 = ----- Score	Total ----- X 2 = ----- Score

Results

01. Major learning style preference - 37 – 50
02. Minor learning style preference - 25 – 36
03. Negligible - 0 - 24

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(This paper was read at the Forum, Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. This paper was not published and with necessary suggestions I present here for publication).
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