A Study on the Importance of Learning Styles in Foreign Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study, which examines learning styles in foreign language teaching, is to determine the learning style/styles predominantly possessed by French learners, and to identify the methods, techniques, materials and activities that can be applied to effective learning and teaching considering individual differences. By Dunn & Dunn's model of learning patterns, a questionnaire consisting of 36 questions, and 12 questions in each section was applied. İtems in the questionnaire were divided into four groups as visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and multiple learning styles and the data were analysed through "frequency values" (f) and percentage values "%". According to the result, the students preferred the visual learning style predominantly, followed by kinaesthetic and auditory learning respectively, and very few multiple learning styles. A number of methods, techniques, materials and activities have been proposed to improve visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning styles.

Key Words: Learning Styles, Language Learning, Language Teaching.

1. Introduction

Demirel (2005: 41) describes education, which is indispensable element in human life, in three articles as "1- in general, the process of changing behaviour in the individual; 2- the process of bringing about the behaviour of the individual through his or her own experience and intentionally changing the behaviour; 3- the process of bringing the desired change of behaviour to the individual through his own experience and intentional cultivation". One of the important ways of qualified education defined in this way is to create a learning environment suitable for individual differences. However, every student cannot learn at the same level and with the same quality (Saban, 2000). This situation is known to be caused by many factors such as interest, desire, expectation, ability, type of intelligence, learning style and socio-cultural characteristics - age, gender, material situation, environment comma etc. These individual differences naturally affect students' learning processes and learning levels, both in foreign language teaching and translation education (Ekici, 2013).

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From this point of view, contemporary educational approach necessitates an examination of the learning process of learners and their learning styles accordingly. In addition, the shift of education from teaching centered to learning centered, and from teacher centered to student centered starts the process of concentration on learning characteristics because the ways and the means of access to information reveal the importance of individual characteristics and differences that affect learning (Evin Gencel, 2007: 122). Determining the learning styles of the students and providing education appropriate to these styles are important in terms of providing permanent learning as learning styles are considered to be an important step towards eliminating individual differences, especially in language teaching and, in translation education. As Tatar and Tatar (2007) pointed out, in this step competence is one of the most crucial elements in education, which is known to depend on the teacher that directly affects the productivity of education. This is because the student's altered behaviour is affected by the teacher's qualifications.

1.1. Foreign language learning / teaching

The language learning process, naturally, depends on the learning methods and styles for each individual. A language learning process is continuous and individual. A language, whether native or foreign, does not have two users who have exactly the same abilities or who develop these abilities in the same way (Conseil de l'Europe, 2000: 27, Korkut, 2004: 30). This difference is mainly due to the cognitive forms of each individual, which is a way of perceiving, remembering, memorizing, and as a result, understanding the information comprehended among the different sensory changes, ready for new information (Korkut, 2004: 30).

Language learning consists of the functional integrity of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills that are accepted as four basic skills (Demirel, 1990: 23, Peçenek, 1998: 21). Different processes are required in the teaching and usage of the language skills oriented to production, speaking and writing skills, and the language skills oriented to understanding, listening and reading skills.

Therefore, we believe that it is very important in terms of foreign language teaching that all sense organs are put into action in the development of skills for understanding and production. It can be said that it would be beneficial to resort to very comprehensive techniques such as creative drama, analogy, role-playing, and so on… Demirel (1990: 62), who distinguishes the technique of drama into two sub-techniques as formal and natural, states that natural drama frees the student to express himself, to express emotions and thoughts while formal drama includes planned activities including memorization and rehearsals. Peçenek (1998: 66) argues that free plays, story staging, story staging with pictures, radio and television news, or imitating publications, and shadow plays are used in the natural drama while puppets, pantomime and games are activities used in the formal drama technique but there is no definite distinction between them. As creative drama includes activities related to eyesight, the senses of hearing and touch, these senses are used effectively within the drama process. Real life problems are experienced through animation and role play. While the games used in the creative drama technique activate the left brain skills like logical thinking, improvisation and role playing activities put more senses into action and activate the skills such as imagination and creativity. In other words, we believe that all these skills of a good language learner can be developed by the effective use of these language teaching techniques.

The recent studies showed that the students made significant progress in attitudes towards teaching and academic achievement when they were taught according to their own learning styles. Moreover, their tolerance towards cognitive diversity increased, they were better disciplined and improved internal discipline to do homework as well as they displayed a number of positive behaviours (Given, 1996; Tatar and Tatar, 2007). In addition, it was observed that learning happened in a shorter time and more efficiently and students were able to remember the information for a longer time and use it more effectively (Felder 1996, as cited in Demir, 2010). Many experts agreed that determining students' learning styles would enable a great convenience to create a teaching environment and to determine teaching methods, techniques and materials that the teacher would use (Mutlu, 2003).

1.2. Learning patterns model

Rita Dunn introduced the concept of learning style as "the method in which knowledge and intelligence are differentiated in each individual" for the first time in 1960 (Dunn and Dunn, 1993: 3). Cyr (1998: 83), on the other hand, states "the learning method, in its most general sense, indicates the individual's tendency towards learning or preferences." Boydak (2001: 8) defines it as "each student's using different and unique ways to learn and remember and to be prepared to learn new and difficult information, " and emphasizes the biological aspect of the learning styles by explaining as "the innate characteristics that the individual possesses and affects his/her success". In fact, explaining that "the individual's learning style is similar to or in harmony with his/her personal traits," Özer (2008: 151) suggests that learning style is the result of internalization of the individual's all environment and the internalization is not just a cognitive activity, but an activity that also has physical and affective aspects. For this reason, he adds "learning styles are formed by the combination of cognitive, physical and affective activities." Learning styles are defined as cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor features that enable learners to act according to the way they perceive and communicate in learning environments (O'Keefe and Nadel, 1978, as cited in Duman; 2010: 2054). Cuq and Gruca (2005: 120) state "when certain learning ways and styles are regularly preferred by an individual, then a learning style can be mentioned."

Learning styles are the most important components of the learning-teaching process. Although they are not the only effects of learning to happen at different levels and as they are a multi-dimensional concept, they have been discussed from different perspectives. In these approaches, the different aspects of individual's learning are emphasized and have been brought to the forefront. In this respect, the educators of different countries have made different classifications (Cuq, Gruca, 2005: 120, Korkut, 2004: 45). The following table shows some learning style models and developers (http://www2.ulg.ac.be/lem/StyleApprent/StyleApprent_CG/page_04.htm).

	LEARNING STYLE MODELS	DEVELOPERS
1.	Concentration Scanning	Bruner (1956)
2.	Impulsive Reflexive	Kagan / Pearson (1966)
3.	Holist	Pask / Scott (1976)

	Serialist	

4.	Intuitive
	    -Receptive
	     -Normative
	 Methodical
	    -Receptive
	     -Normative
		Keen / Mc Kenney (1976)

5.	Field dependent Field independent	Witkin/Huteau (1978)
6.	Auditory Visual	De la Garanderie (1980)
7.	Diverging Converging Accommodating Assimilating	Kolb (1985)
8.	Left brain Right brain	McCarthy (1986)
9.	Activists Reflectors Theorists Pragmatists	Honey / Mumford (1992)
10.	Concrete Sequential Abstract Sequential Concrete Random Abstract Random	Gregorc (1988)
11.	VAK or VARK's model Visual Auditory Read/Write Kinetic	Fleming (1979)
12.	Avoidant Participant Competitive Collaborative Dependent Independent	Grasha /Riechmann (1974)

Table 1: Learning Styles Models

However, one of the widely accepted learning styles model is the pattern of learning by Dunn and Dunn. Dunn and Dunn's learning style model includes environmental, affective, sociological, physiological, and psychological factors and the subordinate factors associated with them. Özer (2008:

151-152) explains the sub-factors of these main factors which differ according to student preferences as follows: Environmental factors related to the sound, heat, light and seating arrangement of the chosen environment for the student's realization; motivational factors related to students' motivation to learn, continuity or commitment to work, responsibility for learning and structured learning; sociological factors related to how learners want to learn in a social environment; the choice of sensory organs and time slots for learning, physiological factors related to the need for food-beverage and movement during learning; psychological factors that include holistic, analytical, reflective, and reactive characteristics in knowledge acquisition and processing.

As we have seen, in Dunn and Dunn's learning styles model, five key factors influencing learning in particular are discussed, and the effect of the twenty sub-factors in the learning-teaching process is discussed. In this learning styles model, learning, listening and kinaesthetic learning are emphasized (Dunn-Dunn 1978; Yucelsin Taş-Erdem, 2013: 155) and learning styles in perceptual dimension are gathered in three main groups as visual, auditory and kinaesthetic.

Visual learners are the learners who learn by seeing the information at their most comfortable. Listening learners are called "auditory learners" and they can use their hearing sense more effectively than other sense in the acquisition of knowledge. Those who learn by touching are called "tactile" or "kinaesthetic learners", and they learn by exploring knowledge through trial-and-error.

1.3. Purpose of the research

The purpose of this study is to determine the learning styles of the students who learn French in the School of Foreign Languages at Marmara University in order to determine the methods, techniques, materials and activities that can be applied for effective learning and teaching considering individual differences.

2. Method

In the study, a screening method was used as quantitative research techniques. The group of the study consisted of 48 students who are learning French in the School of Foreign Languages at Marmara University in 2016-2017 academic years. As a means of collecting data, a questionnaire by Dunn & Dunn's learning styles model was applied to determine which learning styles the students have. A total of 36 questions were included in the questionnaire of which each section consisted of 12 questions. For students who are curious about the way of learning, name-surname information is available in the questionnaire, which does not contain demographic information such as the age and gender of the students. Students are asked to mark the appropriate options in each section and the most marked option determines the student's learning style. Items in the questionnaire were divided into four groups as visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and multiple learning styles and the data were evaluated through "frequency values" (f) and percentage values "%".

3. Findings

The findings obtained from the analysis of the items of the questionnaire applied to the students within the scope of the research are shown in Table 2.

Learning Styles	Frequency values- (f)	Percentage values (%)
Visual	24	% 50
Auditory	6	% 12.5
Kinaesthetic	11	% 22.91
Multi-styled	7	% 14.58

Table 2: Distribution of Students According to Learning Styles

As shown in Table 2, the findings obtained at the end of the research to determine the students' learning styles are grouped into four groups as visual, auditory and kinaesthetic (motion / touch) and multi-styled. The result shows that 24 students (50%) were visual learners, 6 students (12.5%) were auditory learners, and 11 students (22.91%) were kinaesthetic learners. In addition, 7 students (14.58%) were found to have multiple learning styles in which two or three learning styles coexist. As seen in Table 3, the multiple learning styles were distributed as 2 visual-auditory learners (4.16%), 3 visual-kinaesthetic learners (6.25%) and 2 visual-auditory-kinaesthetic learners (4.16%).

Multi-mode Learning Styles	Frequency values- (f)	Percentage values (%)
Visual – Auditory	2	% 4.16
Visual – Kinaesthetic	3	% 6.25
Visual-Auditory-Kinaesthetic	2	% 4.16

Table 3: Distribution of learning styles of multi-styled students

4. Conclusion

The results obtained in this study have showed that it will be very useful to determine what learning style students have by applying similar questionnaires in the teacher's classroom. The teacher may take into consideration the students' learning styles in preparing in-class and out of class activities, planning teaching, organizing educational environments, choosing educational tools, creating study groups, presenting study recommendations while the student recognizes his own learning style (Özer, 2008: 153).

It can be said that visual learners are regular, they prefer learning by seeing, reading, taking notes, making a list, watching a show and learning individually. It is observed that they remember the things they saw and benefit from the books, videos, charts, graphics, maps, pictures, etc. colored images and

printed materials. They are successful in individual study, and in reading and writing skills in foreign language learning. For this reason, eye contact with the student can be established for them during the courses. Notes can be written on the board, symbols can be created, and concept maps can be used. Pictures, photographs, posters, brochures, etc. can be brought to class. Short movies and videos can be used as a teaching material.

It has been observed that auditory learners prefer learning by hearing, listening and discussing the information. They remember names and work with words and language. They speak fluently, and they are sensitive to sound and music. They make verbal repetitions. They follow sentences with their fingers while reading them very closely to the paper. It can be said that they are successful in pair and group work in foreign language learning, in speaking and listening skills and oral examinations. Thus, verbal instructions can be useful for this type of learners. Listening activities may include songs, poetry and audio story. Students may be asked to summarize verbally and discussions, panels, forums, etc. can be used to create an environment in which students can speak and express themselves.

It has been observed that kinaesthetic learners are very active and learn by touching, doing, living, experimenting and exploring the things; they like sports, dance and the actions that require the use of motor muscles. In addition, they apply the things that they learned, and their skills to do pantomime (mime art, silent theatre), imitation and role-playing. It can be said that they are successful in bilateral and group work and in performance-based evaluations in foreign language learning. For kinaesthetic learners, freedom of movement can often be created. Action is important for this kind of students, so the activities in which students can use their hands and bodies can be used in the classroom. The course materials that they can touch, examine, play can be brought to the classroom environment and their interactions can be provided.

As a result, course content, material and activities can be developed to address all three learning styles. Each individual can help to develop these three learning styles that naturally exist. Thus, students see that there are various ways of learning and realize that using non-dominant styles in themselves has a positive effect on learning processes. In order to develop these three learning styles, it is necessary to develop creative drama, role playing, simulations, drama games, scripted play, guided improvisation, improvisation, etc. as well as pair and group work in classroom activities in foreign language classes. In order to teach according to the learning styles, the necessarily specialized courses can be set up and in-service training programs can be arranged. As a result, no matter what learning styles model it is, it can be said that all sense organs must be fully engaged in the language teaching process.

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