

Language Students' Learning Styles

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ABSTRAK

*Paper ini mendiskusikan gaya belajar siswa bahasa. Paper ini merupakan laporan hasil penelitian yang dilakukan sejalan dengan pemikiran bahwa siswa bahasa memiliki perbedaan dalam gaya belajar yang dapat diukur melalui kesukaan, kebutuhan, dan keinginan. Perbedaan gaya belajar siswa tersebut dapat terdeteksi melalui perbedaan sikap mereka terhadap tugas-tugas yang diberikan selama proses pembelajaran di kelas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa siswa bahasa cenderung terkelompokkan menjadi dua gaya belajar yang berbeda yaitu **field dependence** dan **field independence**.*

Kata kunci: gaya belajar, gaya belajar siswa bahasa, *field dependence*, *field independence*.

Introduction

Most of learning experts believe that in attaining their goal of learning, students or learners have developed various ways of learning which is different from one student to another. This also happens to language students. In language classes, teacher is very familiar with the phenomenon that the students seem to have differences in ways to achieve their learning goals. Usually, the language students are different in preferences, needs, and wants. These differences can be seen through their participation in teaching learning process. Commonly, the teachers are aware of this phenomenon. However, they are reluctant to do a research to catch the phenomenon more deeply.

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This research was conducted since the researcher considers that the students' participation is one of factors which affect the success of teaching learning process. At that time the researcher was one of the teachers of speaking 2 classes in English Department of Faculty of Teacher Training and Education Academic Year 2002/2003. The researcher recognized that her students had different attitudes toward the tasks which mostly given through games. Many students seemed interested in participating in games. Yet, others looked reluctant or hesitate. The researcher felt uncomfortable with this circumstance and it bothered her mind. She, then, decided to conduct the research which dealt with students' learning styles.

The research was carried out to describe the characteristics of the learning styles of Speaking 2 students. It focused on the first dimension of learning styles namely field dependent and field independent proposed by Van Els et. al. It also focused on other dimensions offered by Clark i.e ear based versus eyes based, holist versus serialist, and support dependent versus self directed learners.

To gather the data, questioners were given to the students. The questioner consisted of 30 questions which were grouped into six areas. The first dealt with activities the students prefer to in class. The second was about what they think the teacher should do. The third concern with the way they learn. The fourth was about the aspects of language that the students like to study. The next dealt with how the students use their eyes, ears, and hands in learning English words. The last was about what kind of activities the students do at home to learn English. The questioner requires students to choose one of the four available options namely no, a little, good, and best.

The objective of language teaching and learning is to make students succeed as language learners. This objective leads to different approaches in curriculum design. Altman (1980: 3-4) proposes three different approaches namely curriculum centered instruction which gives emphasis on content, teachers centered instruction which focuses on teachers authority in deciding what learners should learn, and learners centered instruction which highlights on learners' goals.

According to Clark (1987: 49) the last approach is based on the progressivism's point of view which believes that education attempts to promote students' development as individuals with intellectual and emotional needs, and as social beings. By this, it means that the learner centered approach requires language practitioners such as language teachers and syllabus designers to involve language learners in deciding what they learn and how they learn.

Furthermore, this approach suggests the language practitioners to take into their consideration about the learners' characteristics. Altman (1980: 5) believes that language learners are different in 14 dimensions. The students can be differentiated according to their age, sex, previous experience with second language learning,

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proficiency in the native language, personality factors, language aptitude, attitude and motivation, learning rate, general intelligence, sense modality preference, sociological preference, cognitive styles, learners strategies, and learners errors. In addition, Clark (1987: 70) points out the characteristics of language learners as follows: ability or aptitude, language background and experience, cognitive, affective, and social maturity, sex, personality, learning styles and motivation.

From Altman and Clark point of views, it can be seen that learning style termed as cognitive style should be taken into account as one of the important factors. Richard et.al (1985: 45) states that cognitive style is the particular way in which a learner tries to learn something. He adds that in second or foreign language learning, different learners may prefer different solutions to learning problems. An example is given when some students may want explanations for grammatical rules while others may not need explanation. Some may feel writing down words or sentences does help them to remember the words and sentences, whereas others may find they remember the words and sentences better if they are associated with pictures.

The aforementioned statement of Richard shows that language learners tend to have different ways in coping with their problems of learning. Some students may prefer getting explanation from teacher while others do not. Some prefer to write sentences to make them easier to remember what they have learnt whereas others prefer to use picture to make them easier to remember what they have learnt.

“ Learning styles are characterized by cognitive, effective, and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment....learning style is a consistent way of functioning, that reflects the underlying causes of learning behavior.” (Nunan, 1988: 40)

It can be highlighted that learning styles can be reflected in students' learning behavior. Teachers will be able to identify the students' learning styles based on what they prefer doing. In other words, the students have different learning styles and those become their consistent characteristic.

There are three dimensions of cognitive styles stated by Van Els et.al (1984: 112). They are field independence, reflectively/impulsively, and broad/narrow category width. According to Van Els et. al. (1984: 113):

“ Field dependent person tend to show a strong ‘social orientation’. They are usually more emphatic and more receptive of feeling of others. Field independent person, on the other hand, tend to show an ‘impersonal

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orientation'. They are generally individualistic and less aware of the things by which others are moved''.

The quotation shows that the field dependent persons enjoy making contact with others. They prefer to talk to others to share ideas, feeling, and experiences. On the other hand, the independent learners prefer to do activities by themselves. They prefer activities which require them to solve problems without any help from others.

The aforementioned explanation brings about different hypothesis concerning with language learning. This is as stated by Van Els et.al (1984: 113):

“ ... it could be hypothesized that the field dependent person is the better L2 learner, as he would be better able to focus on the relevant variables in a language lesson or a conversation than a field independent person. ...it could also be hypothesized that field dependent persons are in virtue of their social orientation and greater empathy superior L2 learners.”

This implies that the dependent learners may become good language learners. This is because their activities in using their ability in the language they learn. They have a lot of exposures of the language they learn. As a result, they will be fluent in the language they learnt.

The independent learners may be more comfortable with traditional classroom situation in which they are required to do more on analytical activities. The field dependent learners, however, are more fit in situation where they are free in doing activities.

The second dimension of learning styles mentioned by Donough in Van Els et. al (1984: 114) is reflective versus impulsive. Reflective person tends to be careful but slow in answering questions. They think first what they want to say or write but impulsive persons are quick in giving respond.

The last dimension is broad versus narrow category width. The former tend to show their effort in making overgeneralizations of several items on one rule. The latter tend to make different rules over different items. They get difficulty in making generalization over the items they learnt.

Clark (1987: 74) mentions three types of learners, namely ear based versus eye based learners, holist versus serialist learners, and support dependent learners versus self directed learners. Ear based learners are those who like learning a language by listening to the news or songs while eye based learners are those who prefer to learn by reading or studying in private. Holist learners are those who like leaning a language by doing activity covering several components considered as a whole. Serialist learners

like learning language by doing a task comprised of several components. They are prudent and need guidance and reassurance. The last type is concerned with the learners who like others' guidance and support versus learners who like learning without any support.

Students' Preferences in Learning English and Their Learning Styles

This part discusses two main points. First it elaborates students' preferences. Next, it elucidates their learning styles. The focus of the analysis is the answer given in no and best options. If the option of 'no' gets the highest percentage of all the three options, it can be concluded that the students don't like the point discussed. On the contrary, if the option 'best' gets the highest percentage of all the three options, it can be concluded that the students do like the point discussed

Students' preferences are discussed into six areas. They are students' activities in class, teacher's activities, grouping, language aspects, vocabulary building, and activities outside class.

The students do six activities in classroom. They learn English through these following activities i.e. reading, listening to cassette, playing games, making up conversations, using pictures, writing notes on their notebooks, and using the text book.

There are two activities which are chosen as the most interesting activities. They are playing games and using pictures. This shows that the students are interested in accelerating their speaking ability. To improve their speaking ability, the students prefer to do games in class. Meanwhile by using pictures in class they have opportunity to enrich their vocabulary while doing the conversation. It seems that both activities are interesting because they can motivate the students to learn English more enjoyable.

Teacher does five activities in class. They are explaining every detail to the class, giving the class problems to be solved, helping the class discusses its interest, correcting students' mistake, letting the students find their own mistakes and correct them by themselves.

From the five activities done by the teacher, the students like to have a teacher who explains the detail of the activities they are supposed to do in class. This shows that the students are very dependent on the teacher. When they class begins they do not like to do the activities without the help of the teacher. In their opinion, the teacher should tell the students what to do and explain it in detail step by step. As a result, the rest of the options get lower percentage compared to the first one. In addition, the students prefer their teacher to correct their mistakes. In class the students wait for the time when the teacher shows them the mistakes they made. They definitely have no problem when their teacher tells them their mistakes. This fact also indicates that the

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students are very dependent to the teacher. However, it contradicts the theory of language learning which says that the teacher's correction can make the students hesitate in producing the language.

There are four possibilities in grouping the students to do the activities in class room. They are individual learning, in pairs, small group, and the whole class.

From the four available options, the students like to learn English with their friends. They like to make a conversation both in pairs and in small groups. However, they do not like to do the activities with the whole class meaning that when they should present the conversation in front of the class or do the activities with all of the students in the class.

This shows that the students are consistent in accelerating their speaking ability. To improve it, they have to practice it with friends. They can not improve it by themselves. It is true since accelerating speaking ability needs other parties. Become active in conversation with other parties, whom in this case are their friends, are seen as the opportunity to maintain their competence. Yet, the students are hesitant in doing the activities with the whole class. This is because they think it is not effective. Doing the activities with the whole class does not give them opportunities to talk intensely.

There are three language aspects that the students have to learn in class namely, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. From the answer given by the students, it is clear that they prefer vocabulary and pronunciation to grammar. This also indicates their consistency in improving their speaking skill. Vocabulary plays important role while speaking since new words are helpful in producing the language. In addition having many vocabulary means that the students can vary their sentences. Having limited vocabularies, on the other hand, can bring about difficulty in expressing ideas, feeling, and experiences.

Concerning with the way the students learn new word, they can learn it through seeing, hearing, and doing. The students prefer to learn the new word mostly through hearing. This correlates with the language aspect which they like most which is pronunciation. By hearing the new word they can identify the pronunciation which later on can help them building their competence in speaking.

There are five activities the students can do outside the class namely, reading English newspaper, watching TV, listening English cassette, studying English text book, talking to friends in English. From their answer of the five available options, it can be seen that the students prefer to watch TV. They are less motivated to do the rest of the options. This relates with the fact that they are very dependent on teacher's explanation. As a consequent, they do not like to the rest of the options since to do it they need guidance and explanation.

Based on the discussion on students' preferences, it is clear that the students tend to be both field independent and field dependent persons. The field dependence is

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seen through their preference of making conversations with friend. By so doing, they make contact and share ideas and experience with others. In other words, they maintain social relation with others.

They also are field independent persons. This can be seen through the fact that they like activities which do not involve others such as watching TV and learning new words by hearing. Both activities do not require them to make contact to others while doing these activities.

The students also tend to be serialist. This is indicated through the fact that they like to have teacher who explains details. However, they are also holist since they like learning new words. This shows that they are adventurous, a characteristic which plays important role in holist person.

Conclusion

From the discussion, it can be concluded that the second semester of English Department Students of Teacher Training and Education Faculty of UMP in academic year 2002/2003 have different types of learning styles. Some of them are dependents while others are independents. Some of them are serialists whereas others are holists.

These four different learning styles need different methods of teaching. They who do not like working in group refuse the activities which need others to be involved. These kinds of students do not like those activities. This off course will affect their participation in class. The students who are dependents will rely heavily on their teacher's explanations. They will feel uncomfortable when asked to find out their own mistakes and correct them by themselves.

The teacher should be aware of the students' learning styles. This is because the differences in will affect the rate of their participation in class. The teacher should be careful in making decision on how to involve them in class. There are two ways in involving the students in class: active and passive involvements. The former requires the presence of the students in the process of making decision in class, while the last does not.

One way of involving the students in class is by negotiation. It means that both the passive and the active students have the same right to decide what and how to do the activities.

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