KONCEPCJA STYLU UCZENIA SIĘ I JEJ PRAKTYCZNE IMPLIKACJE GLOTTODYDAKTYCZNE

Streszczenie. Obszerna literatura przedmiotu udostępnia szereg koncepcji „stylu uczenia się” i pokazuje, że pojęcie to odnosi się do dość rozległej gamy orientacji uczenia się, zarówno na poziomie psychologicznym, jak i behawioralnym. W prezentowanej koncepcji „styl uczenia się” to wielowymiarowy profil indywidualnych preferencji uczącego się, które charakteryzują jego/jej podejście do nauki języka obcego. Nie odnoszą się one wyłącznie do kognitywnego funkcjonowania jednostki, lecz do szeroko rozumianych indywidualnych preferencji podczas nauki języka obcego. W świetle wyników badań styl uczenia się wyłania się jako jeden z wielu diagnostycznych czynników częściowo warunkujących osiągnięcia językowe uczącego się, który warto wziąć pod uwagę w celu optymalizacji procesu uczenia się języka obcego.

THE CONCEPT OF LEARNING STYLE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

1. DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF “LEARNING STYLE”

Learning style preferences belong to the individual learner factors referred to as propensities (Ellis, 2004). They are not completely free from situational influences (Dornyei, 2005), and as such demonstrate a degree of changeability. Also, as claimed, some of the learning style preferences are determined physiologically, e.g. extroversion-introversion (Eysenck and Eysenck, 2003), sensory preferences (Oxford, 1995), and thus display a degree of stability.

As one of the individual learner differences, learning style is an intriguing concept for teachers and researchers alike. Many teaching practitioners seem to intuitively sense the individual learner variables referred to as learning style preferences. However, becoming acquainted with the literature of the subject, they are often confounded by the number of constructs. The fact undoubtedly accounts for some recurring problems pertaining to the conceptualization of learning style, and its definition.

In the literature of the subject, the term learning style has often been used in somewhat confusing ways, frequently being equated with personality type, cognitive style (Dornyei, 2005), to name but a few. Ehman’s (1996) rightly observes that learning styles are not tantamount to personality dimensions. Following her reasoning, it is possible to conclude that certain learning styles are personality-related aspects that have cognitive, as well as social and affective style correlates.

Learning styles should also be distinguished from cognitive styles. The latter construct is narrower than the concept of learning styles (cf. Dornyei, 2005) and relates to intrinsic information processing patterns that represent the individual mode of perception, thinking, remembering, and problem solving, whereas learning styles refer to “broad preferences for going about the business of learning” (Ehman, 1996:49).

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information and situations”, that is the core of a learning style. Cognitive styles are devoid of any educational, situational and/or environmental interferences. However, when embedded in an educational context and, thus, intermingled with a series of behavioral, physiological and affective variables, they are referred to as learning styles.

2. COHEN, OXFORD AND CHI’S (2001) CONSTRUCT OF LEARNING STYLE

As seen by Cohen, Oxford and Chi (2001), learning style is a composite construct encompassing eleven axes of variance. They are seen as bipolar continua that are measured through self-report questionnaires, in which groups of items relate to a given learning style dimension expressed as contrasts, such as, for instance, extroverted versus introverted. To avoid a “black and white” dichotomy, it is assumed that very few people are completely at one pole. It is more appropriate to view an individual as characterized more towards one pole or less towards the other pole of the dimension.

The proposed profile comprises the following dimensions:

1. Sensory preferences (visual, auditory, tactile/kinaesthetic) relate to the learner’s use of physical senses, i.e. his/her fondness for learning through the sense of sight, hearing and touch.

2. Extroversion versus introversion relates to the way in which one exposes oneself to learning situations. Extroverted learners derive their energy from the outside world, whereas introverted learners are stimulated by their own inner world of ideas and feelings.

3. Intuitive-random versus concrete-sequential relates to the individual learner’s approach to the structuring of information. Intuitive-random learners tend to employ their internal criteria to find their own learning sequence. When linking new and old information, they store it in various places, just like the computer does, and it is this scattering of various pieces of information that enables them to find the necessary data very quickly. Concrete-sequential learners, on the other hand, employ external criteria, and prefer learning step by step, following a logical order provided by the curriculum or textbook.

4. The open versus closure-oriented dimension refers to the learner’s ability to cope with ambiguity and deadlines. The open learner usually has a high tolerance of ambiguity and when absorbing a lot of information, neither worries about not comprehending everything nor feels the need to come to rapid conclusions about a given topic. In contrast, closure-oriented learners have low tolerance of ambiguity, and frequently jump to hasty conclusions about grammar rules or reading themes.

5. The global versus particular relates to perceiving information. A global style involves a preference for attending to a “big picture” or processing in a “top down” manner during which the learner focuses on overall meaning first. Particular learners, in contrast, pay attention to discrete items and details. Since they tend to process in a “bottom up” manner, they notice the form first and general meaning second.

6. The synthesizing versus analytic aspect relates to how the learner perceives the received information. The more synthesizing style implies a tendency to see a “big picture”, and
the ability to assemble component parts into a new whole in an integrative way. The more analytic qualities in a learner, on the other hand, relate to a tendency to notice particular details and the ability to pull ideas apart, to perform logical analysis and contrast tasks, as well as to focus on grammatical details and grammar rules.

7. The field independent (FI) versus field dependent (FD) dimension pertains to individual differences in dealing with multiple inputs. FD learners are inclined to deal with information globally and have greater difficulty in abstracting material from within a given context in the presence of distractions. Also, it is more difficult for them to restructure and reorganize their environment. Conversely, more FI learners display greater ability to separate material from within a given context, even in the presence of interferences. It is also easier for these learners to restructure and reorganize their environments. They do not tend to handle information holistically.

8. The impulsive/reflective relates to how the learner deals with response time, or the speed and manner of processing a response to a cognitive stimulus.

9. The inductive/deductive aspect relates to how different learners handle rules. Inductive learners move from the specific to the general and prefer multiple examples first rather than rules or theories, whereas deductive learners go from the general to the specific and prefer rule study by practice as applied to various examples.

10. The metaphoric versus literal dimension of learning relates to how the learner takes reality. Learners with a more literal style tend to deal with information in a fairly literal way, and do not even try to see or impose additional meaning to the material they learn. Metaphoric students seem to learn material more effectively when they impose additional meaning to it by conceptualising some of its aspects in metaphorical terms.

11. The levelling/sharpening dimension of learning style refers to how the learner perceives and commits the material to memory in terms of categorizing. When learning new information, levellers tend to lump together new data that may be distinctly different and may derive from different sources. In doing so, they are prone to overlook distinctions instinctively and focus on similarities. Sharpeners, on the other hand, notice differences and seek distinctions among items. They can also separate memory of prior experiences from current ones. They have no problems retrieving different items as they store them separately (Oxford and Anderson, 1995; Cohen and Oxford, 2001; Ehrman and Leaver, 2001).

The above style dimensions refer to an individual’s approaches to Second/Foreign Language (S/FL) Learning. They are displayed by the learner in concrete forms of behavior, mental operations, which are relatively stable, but may also vary in response to a situation-specific and/or task-related factors. For this reason, it is indispensable to include the concept of preference into the construct. This “extra” element is necessary since many learners might display a natural predilection towards a synthesizing approach, i.e. pulling information together from many different sources. However, being expected to comply with the requirements of the larger context (culture, school, parents, administrators, etc.), they tend to favour an analytic approach and are inclined to break information into component parts.

Learning style preferences stem from a wide range of individual learner differences, and involve a series of interrelated aspects: physiological, cognitive, interactional, behavioural, executive and affective. Each of the axes of variance, with the exception of extroversion – introversion continuum, and sensory preferences encompasses a cognitive component of
learning style. Some of these dimensions reflect social and/or affective aspects of learning styles. However, almost all of them relate to the individual manner of imposing order, organization on environmental stimuli, or seeking closure in the input and managing the learning process. Thus, they encompass to a lesser or greater extent the executive aspect of learning styles. In addition to that, all of them can be translated into different forms of behaviour.

It is the behavioural aspect of the construct of learning style that distinguishes it from cognitive style and enables us to access it not only by means of questionnaires or psychometric tests, but also, to some extent, through observation of learners’ preferences or adopted behaviour patterns when acquiring S/FL knowledge. Ignoring the issue of precision in gauging numerous poles of the continua differentiated within the presented construct of learning style by means of observation, it seems that the perspective adopted by Cohen, Oxford and Chi, (2001) makes the construct extremely useful. For it analyses and groups observable behavioural preferences around a finite number of axes of variance, and thereby allows teachers to come to grips with their students learning behaviour. In consequence, it makes teachers well-prepared to better respond to their learners’ subjective needs in an informed manner (Tudor, 1995).

3. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONSTRUCT

In view of the heterogeneous nature of style distribution, and the complex interference of many coexisting and frequently overlapping style dimensions, many classroom practitioners may voice some doubts and question the feasibility of the practical application of the construct of learning style in a S/FL classroom. Skipping over the complex issue of style-based instruction in a S/FL classroom, there seem to be some broad tendencies that can be taken into account. Accordingly, the complex issue of learning styles can be brought down to the teachers’ general awareness of a variety of learning style preferences that exist in a FL classroom. This entails striving for a balanced teaching style that attempts to accommodate multiple learning styles, and does not excessively favour one particular predilection. In terms of designing teaching activities in keeping with the recommendations of learning style researchers, it means the need for a more balanced and diversified blend of instructional input, which can include visual as well as verbal presentation of the materials, and the reinforcement of the new items through writing, drawing, speaking and acting-out activities, group versus individual work (for details see Oxford & Lavine, 1992; Kinsella, 1995; Weaver & Cohen, 1997).

Being more responsive to the diverse style needs of our learners may also involve devising a set of learner/group-specific trouble-shooting strategies. The strategies reflecting the principles of learner-focus approach to teaching boil down to offering a choice to the learner, and may include: inviting learners to plan some of the classes, select some of the learning assignments, discussion topics, forms of work in the classroom, etc.

Last but not least, it appears that one of the most effective ways for teachers to demonstrate awareness of learning styles is stay sensitive to their learners’ differential time requirements to cope with various types of language tasks (Yates, 2000 in Dornyei, 2005). The policy of time management in a FL classroom may be determined by the learners’ specific needs related to presentation time, speed of the presentation, thinking time, wait-time in questioning, time allocated to revision, remediation, extended practice (Dornyei, 2005), as well as to employing different test or task response-time formats, i.e. untimed formats versus speed format (Ehrman and Leaver, 2001).
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Summary. The literature of the subject abounds in a number of constructs of “learning style”, and shows that the notion refers to the whole gamut of learning orientations, both at psychological and behavioural levels. In the presented conception, learning style is a multi-dimensional profile of individual preferences which characterize the learner’s approach to second/foreign language acquisition. Not only do they refer to the cognitive functioning of the individual, but also encompass his/her broad preferences for learning a language. In the light of research findings, learning style emerges as one of the many diagnostic factors which are well worth taking into consideration in order to enhance and optimize the process of second/foreign language acquisition.