LEARNING STYLES CHARACTERISTICS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS

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Procesul de învăţare a unei limbi străine este unul complex şi presupune nu doar cunoştinţe, ci şi aptitudini. Fiecare persoană reprezintă o individualitate şi, prin urmare, este absolut firesc să-şi dezvolte un anumit stil ori mod de a învăţa. Este imposibil a găsi o clasificare unanim acceptată a acestor stiluri de învăţare, deoarece specialiştii în metodică au elaborat o clasificare în conformitate cu propria experienţă cu studenţii.

People's hereditary apparatus, their particular past life experience, and their present environment demands, makes most people develop their own way of learning that emphasizes some learning abilities on their part. Some people develop minds that do extremely well at assimilating contrasting facts into coherent theories, but they may be incompetent or uninterested in deducing hypotheses from those theories. Others are logical geniuses but find it impossible to involve themselves in active experience. For example, a mathematician may emphasize abstract concepts, while a poet may value concrete experience more highly, a manager may be primarily concerned with the active application of ideas, while a naturalist may concentrate on developing observational skills.

Ellis G. and Sinclair B. stated that one of the greatest problems people encounter in the learning process is the fact that they do not know how to learn the information and how to take control of their own learning abilities. That is why, in 1989, they introduced for the first time the "**learning to learn**" term, which describes the process of acquiring those skills that provide the learner with the possibility of understanding and mastering any area of knowledge at present or in the future [2, p.20]. They emphasized that people who had already learned to learn, knew how to develop a personal learning plan, how to learn effectively in any situation and even how to help others to learn more efficiently. Each person has his/her unique way of learning and through the process of the learning to learn process, an individual is given power to understand, appreciate and use his own particular style. The learner is exposed to a variety of learning styles in order to be able to choose the one, which works best for him according to the particular task he intends to do. Furthermore, identifying one's own learning style becomes an opportunity to develop thinking skills.

Witkin H.A. defined the learning style as *a characteristic, self-consistent mode of functioning, which individuals show in their perceptual and intellectual activities …, a term used to describe individual differences in the way one habitually tends to perceive, organize, analyze or recall information and experience.* Further, he affirmed that each person develops a unique learning style, which has both strong and weak points. His research confirmed the existence of constant unique learning styles, indicating that individual status within the tested population remained highly stable from early years to adulthood. Therefore, this means that individuals develop constantly having their own individual cognitive styles [10, p.244].

Wright T. defined learner's style *as a behaviour, which indicates the ways in which learners participate in-group learning activities.* According to him, learner's style refers to any individual who prefers special ways of going about learning. He insists on the idea that learner's style results from personality variables, including psychological and cognitive structure, socio-cultural background, and educational experience.

However, Wallace M. assumed that on the one hand, all learners are different but on the other one − they are the same. Based on their own experiences and observations, most teachers would probably agree, that students certainly learn in different ways [9, p.57].

It is nearly impossible to find a unanimous, undisputed and completely accepted learning style classification. As a result, different methodologists proposed various classifications of learning style, according to their own experiences with their learners. Here are some classifications I would like to mention, some of them being general and other-more concrete.

Rubin J. and Thompson I., for examples, spoke about two learning styles only.

1. ***Good language learners***
2. ***Bad language learners***

They consider that *good language learners* find their own special ways of learning and do not complain about difficulties. They try to be creative and to organize information about language having "a feel of language". They make their own opportunities and find strategies for getting practice in using the language inside and outside the class. When learning vocabulary, the good language learners develop various strategies for making sense of the target language without wanting to understand every word, letting the context to help them in comprehension. They include always knowledge of their first language in mastering the foreign language they learn. They learn different styles of speech and vary their language according to the formality of the situation [7, p.171].

Referring to *bad language learners*, Rubin J. and Thompson I. stated that, they usually try to memories the information without organizing or understanding it at all. They neither look for strategies and opportunities to practice and use the language nor make intelligent guesses for fear of making mistakes. They do not use mother tongue knowledge in mastering the foreign language they acquire [8, p.153].

The methodologists, Hudson T. and Parlett M. gave another classification of learning styles, where they divided learners into two groups as well:

1. *Syllabus bound learners*
2. *Syllabus free learners*

Syllabus bound learners have a traditional way of learning and need exams in order to study. Usually, they attend classes regularly, have assiduous study habits, but do not read widely outside the set work.

Syllabus-free learners are different from the syllabus bound learners from the point of view of their way of working. Their leading characteristic lies in the fact that they have their own methods of learning. They have a strong motivation and work better when they are free of any restrictions or requirements [6, p.440]. Analyzing these two learning styles classifications, one can observe that the distinction made by T.Hudson and M.Parlett is similar to that of J.Rubin and I.Thompson, but both of them have a week point, which consists in the fact that they give a general understanding of learning styles. This information is useful for the teachers, but only at the initial stage of examining the learners. In reality, teachers need a more detailed classification of learning styles in order to find a right way to the interaction with the learner and of the leaner itself.

Miller J. proposed the following classification of learner's styles. It divides the learners in:

1. *Cue-seeker learners*
2. *Cue-conscious learners*
3. *Cue-deaf learners*

Cue-seeker learners usually try actively to get from their teachers information about their subject or topic of the subject. They do not like to find the information themselves and in general do not like independent work.

Cue-conscious learners like the self-governing work and collect useful information concerning the subject of the lesson and for organization of the lesson in general.

Cue-deaf learners do not respond to such pieces of information and do not work at all, having no motivation and no desire to do anything [1, p.178].

Marton F. and Entwistle N. suggest another classification of learning styles. They distinguish two types of learners.

1. *Deep processing approach learners*
2. *Surface processing approach learners*

The first category of learners is characterized by conscious learning. The main emphasis of this approach is the deep understanding of the text or articles they read, trying to pay attention to all the details given in the article or text.

The second category of learners do not pay attention to deep understanding of the text but to details or tangible words, which do not play an important role in the comprehension of the given article or text. The main emphasis of this approach is on the mechanical learning. T. Knowles' classification of learners' styles is characterized by the cognitive styles and consists of four different types of learners. His classification is more concrete than those mentioned above are.

1. *Concrete learners*
2. *Analytical learners*
3. *Communicative learners*
4. *Authority-oriented learners*.

Concrete learners are always interested in new information. They are curious, spontaneous and prepared to take risks. They are fond of variety and a constant change of circumstances. They dislike routine learning work and prefer verbal or visual experiences or even physical involvement in learning. Here are the leading strategies the concrete learners use when learning the new material.

- to learn by games in class,
- to learn by pictures, films and video in class,
- to learn English by working in pairs.

Analytical learners are independent persons who like to solve problems in their own way and develop their own principles. They prefer a logical systematic presentation of the new learning material. Analytical learners are serious and extremely vulnerable to failure. This type of learners has the following preferences:

- to study grammar,
- to learn by studying English books at home,
- the teacher to let them find their own mistakes.

Communicative learners need to interact with other learners and learn well from discussions and group activities. They feel themselves better in a democratically run class. Usually, learners favoring a communicative style prefer the following strategies:

- to learn by watching, listening to American people or Englishmen,
- to learn by talking to their friends in English,
- to learn by watching English TV channels at home.

Authority-oriented learners are responsible and reliable. They like and need structure and sequential progression. They relate well to a traditional classroom. They prefer to have an authority figure teacher who establishes authoritative rules. They like to have clear-cut instructions and to know exactly what they are doing. Here are the authority-oriented learners' preferences:

- the teacher to explain everything,
- to write everything in their notebooks,
- to have their own textbooks.

It is possible to observe that the T. Knowles' classification of learning styles gives the teacher concrete information about the learners. In this way, it helps the teacher to find out to what learning style the learner belongs quickly and without misunderstanding, so that he/she could work with him/her in a right way, which will be more enjoyable and effective for both sides [3, p.234].

McCarthy B. has applied the learning theory to the classroom and described four learning styles and namely this description served for D. Kolb's further Learning Cycle as each of the four learning styles serve as a base for Kolb's Learning Cycle. She calls these styles in the following way:

1. ***Imaginative learners***,
2. ***Analytical learners***,
3. ***Common sense learners***,
4. ***Dynamic learners***

Imaginative learners respect the teacher's authority and learn by listening and sharing ideas. The special skills of these learners lie in observing, questioning, visualizing, imagining, brainstorming and interacting. Generally, they are considered cooperative, sociable and interested in people and culture.

Analytical learners prefer a teacher to maintain a traditional role and to run lessons with a clear chain of commands. They always need details as their special skills lie in organizing, analyzing, seeing relationships, identifying parts, classifying and comparing two or more things, persons or phenomena.

Common sense learners see teacher's authority as a very necessary element for a good organization of the classroom. These learners eat up small concrete tasks and tend to rely heavily on kinesthetic involvement to learn. They usually know where their personal effects are and seem to take pleasure in turning over the neatly copied pages of their notebooks. Their special skills lie in exploring and problem solving, experimenting, seeing, predicting and recording.

Dynamic learners tend, first, to disregard authority. The dynamic learners tend, for the better or for worse, to be the most physically active and to possess charismatic leadership qualities that attract the attention of their classmates. The special skills of these learners lie in integrating, evaluating, explaining, summarizing, and representing [5, p.122].

Analyzing the two learning styles discussed here, one can observe that M. McCarthy's classification of learning style has something in common with T. Knowle's classification. Let us examine the following table.

Table

T. Knowles' and B. McCarthy's classifications of learning styles in comparison

Knowle's classification	McCarthy's classification
Concrete learners	Common sense learners
Analytical learners	Analytical learners
Communicative learners	Dynamic learners
Authority-oriented learners	Imaginative learners

Analyzing the Table 1, one can observe that the slight difference consists in the names of the groups and the description of the learners' types. Another feature that is different from T. Knowle's classification is that both *Common sense* and *Imaginative learners* respect the authority of the teacher, but in T. Knowle's classification only *Authority-oriented learners* prefer teacher as an authoritative figure in the class.

Although these models are based on large amounts of experimental analysis, they are open in varying degrees to a number of criticisms. They are all based on binary oppositions and on the hypothesis that learning styles are all innate and do not change, as Lettery C. A. is convinced that people are born under the sign of a particular style and that nothing can be done about it [4, p.34].

Another conception concerning the variations of human behaviour and learning, explains that if individual **A** differs from individual **B**, it means that each of them develops at his own pace, both of them going through certain stages or phases of development. This conception assured parents that problems of infancy and early childhood would be solved in adulthood [2, p.26].

In conclusion it is necessary to emphasiye that a number of attempts have been made to integrate research on learning styles in the language teaching methodology, mostly in the context of learner-training activities where learners are being prepared for autonomous study. Two main approaches have developed. In the first, learners are invited to discover, reflect on and to trust to their learning styles. In the second, they are encouraged to become more flexible learners by widening their range of styles in order to be able to make appropriate cognitive choice when faced with particular tasks.

In what concerns the classification of learning styles, there is no one fully accepted categorization. This happens because of the fact that different methodologists had their own experiences with their learners and as a result, proposed various classifications of learning style.

Despite the amount of research that has been done into learning styles over the last few years, there is no clear evidence that one learning style is generally better than another is. This is just as well, because we cannot do very much to alter how we prefer to learn. What are much more important in influencing the rate of progress in learning a language, are the strategies that are employed in the particular learning situation.

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