



Investigating Omani EFL Students' Learning Styles at the Foundation Program in UTAS-Salalah

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the most preferred learning styles by Omani EFL students' and to find out the relationship between the students' learning style and their gender. 100 students were selected randomly from the four levels in the foundation program at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences. There were 56 females and 44 males. The participants answered the Grasha-Riechmann student learning styles scale. The findings indicated that the dependent learning style was the most preferred learning styles by Omani EFL students. Also, the female students obtained significantly higher mean in collaborative than male students, but in the rest of the learning styles, students were almost the same. The avoidant learning styles was the least favorite learning style by both female and male students. Based on the results, Omani EFL students are more dependent on their teacher and classroom. Moreover, female students tend to collaborate with other students and participate in their different activities and there is no huge difference between female and male students in the other learning styles. The results of this study can help teachers to become more sensitive to the diverse learning styles and it can serve as a guideline to design course content that is more compatible with the students' styles.

Keywords: Learning, EFL, students, gender

INTRODUCTION

Different individuals have different learning styles. These differences constitute the foundation of different learning style theories /models. To understand the learning process and the influential factors on this process, we have to shift our attention from individual abilities and skills to non-cognitive factors such as learning styles. A learner's learning style may be considered as a factor that differentiates learners, which, in turn, might affect their educational performance. Teachers who assume that all students share similar cognitive abilities and learning styles are probably making a big mistake in choosing the most appropriate teaching method to deliver their lectures. Thus, identifying a learner's learning style might help teachers to develop a teaching method which is more compatible with the learners' learning styles. In other words, the mismatch between students' learning styles and teachers' teaching style could lead to less effective learning outcomes.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Developing an effective learning environment is the main concern of any educational system. Reviewing the literature, the authors came up with a revelation that no study has been conducted to date to explore the learning styles of EFL students in Oman. The current study might shed light on and bridge the existing gap. It aims at exploring the learning styles utilized by Omani students in a study at the University of Technology and Applied Science- Salalah, Oman. Furthermore, a comparison between two gender groups' learning styles might reveal why female students outperform males.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The current study pursues the following two-fold purpose:

1. To investigate the preferred learning styles of EFL students in the Foundation Program at University of Technology and Applied Science- Salalah, Oman.
2. To explore the relationship between students' learning styles and their gender.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning as a crucial and prevailing endeavor has always been the main concern of educators who are interested in understanding how individuals learn. As Cassidy (2004) states, individuals' performance and learning outputs are the result of their approach to learning situation.

The past decades witness marked an upturn in the number of studies on students' learning styles. As a result, a variety of definitions and categories have been proposed for learning styles. For example, Kolb developed four learning styles, including: divergers, assimilators, convergers and accommodators (1976). Claxton and Ralston (1978) defined learning style as the way students respond to and use stimuli in the context of learning. Different theoretical models developed to characterize the way an individual approaches a learning situation. For example, according to Curry's Onion model (1987), learning consists of four layers: cognitive personality, information processing, social interaction and the outermost layer of instructional preference. Riding & Cheema's (1991) taxonomy, based on the way individuals process and represent information, classifies learners as who list- analytic and verbalizer-imager. Rayner & Riding (1997) categorize learners to three personality-centered, cognitive-centered and learning-centered groups. (Cited in Cassidy 2004).

Stressing that all learners have some ability in all four learning styles, Gregorc's (1982b) proposed classification of learning styles include; concrete sequential, abstract sequential, concrete random, and abstract random learners.

Grasha and Riechmann Student Learning Style

Grasha and Riechmann (1974) classify learning styles into six categories, each of which has its own characteristics. A close examination of the categories suggested by Gregorc and Grasha & Riechmann reveals that 'concrete random' learners in Gregorc's classification have similar traits to independent learners in Grasha & Riechmann's categories (1974).

Competitive

A typical competitive learner learns the content to perform better than others in the class. They believe that they must compete with other students in a course to be rewarded. They prefer to

be group leaders in class discussions, to dominate discussions and to be singled out for doing a good job. They like class activities where they can do better than others. And teacher centered instructional procedures (Rollins, 2015)

Collaborative

Collaborative learners believe that learning happens by sharing the ideas and opinions with others. Thus, they like to cooperate with the teacher and work with others. Their preferences are group projects, group discussions and seminars.

Avoidant

Learners with avoidant learning style dislike attending class and learning. They are not interested in what goes on in class. They study to get a passing grade and dislike tests and exams.

Participant,

Learners with participative style are interested in attending class and taking part in the class activities as much as possible. They like teachers who can analyze and synthesize information. They prefer lectures with discussion where there is a chance for students to discuss materials.

Dependent

Learners with dependent style show little curiosity in the content of course and learn only what they are asked. For them, teachers and classmates are just support sources. They follow teachers' instructions and guidelines. They prefer a teacher-centered approach to teaching. They use the outlines or notes on the board and follow the deadlines and instructions for assignments.

Independent

Independent style learners like to think on their own and are confident of their ability to learn. They learn the content they think is important. They prefer to work by themselves. Moreover, their preference is students-centered teaching method where they can design project.

To find out the relationship between the students' learning styles and their academic achievement, Malsawmkimi, & Fanai, (2019) collected data by employing a Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire among 192 students from two Private Higher Secondary schools. The results of their study showed no correlation between the academic achievements and students' learning styles. They conclude that "a particular learning style does not have any effect on the marks of the students" (p. 21)

To measure the undergraduate students' learning styles, Cassidy & Eachus (2000) conducted a research study using Approaches and Study Skill Inventory for Students developed by Tait & Entwistle (1996). The results of their study show a positive correlation between students' academic achievements and their selected strategic approach. Furthermore, there was a meaningful correlation between learning styles and other factors that are related to students' performance such as self-efficiency and locus of control.

Baneshi et al (2014) investigated the learning styles of 1039 graduate and undergraduate students, majoring in Science and Humanities. They used Grasha-Riechmann's student learning

style survey to collect data. The results of their study show that gender is an influential factor in the learning styles of students where female students are more collaborative, participative and dependent while males are more avoidant and independent. In addition, the Science students' means in collaborative, participative, dependent, and competitive styles were meaningfully higher than Humanities group.

Corbin's (2017) study on 670 tertiary level students in a Caribbean institution aimed at investigating the relationship between students' learning styles and their academic performance and to find out how variables such as age and gender might have an impact on students' learning styles. The results of his study show that 'collaborative' was the most preferred learning style among participants. In addition, there was a meaningful difference between male and female students on dependent, participant, independent, and competitive learning styles. Furthermore, age was an influential factor in participant, collaborative, independent, avoidant and competitive learning styles.

Panambur et al (2014) investigated the learning preferences of 140 students studying in the preclinical years of the medical degree program at Oman Medical College, Sohar. They used a learning style questionnaire (VARK model) to collect data. The findings of their study indicates that (35%) of students prefer a single mode of learning, either visual (8%), auditory (9%), read/write (9%), or kinesthetic (9%). The remaining students preferred learning using a combination of either two (14%), three (19%), or four (32%) sensory modalities (p. 461).

RESEARCH METHOD

Among the available instruments to measure students' learning style, Grasha & Riechmann's survey emphasizes on the type and level of a learner's interaction and his/her attitude toward teachers, peers and course content. The survey consists of 60 items, with ten items for each type of learning style. To measure the dominant learning style (s) of sample population, the items are averaged together. The survey includes a 5-degree Likert rating scale (strongly disagree, moderately disagree, undecided, moderately agree, strongly agree).

The present study used a 60-item version of Grasha & Riechmann's learning style survey (1994). The Arabic version of the survey was developed. A Google form was used to create the online questionnaire. The population of the study consists of one hundred students in the English Language Center at University of Technology and Applied Science- Salalah (UTAS), Oman. The survey link was circulated among students at the beginning of summer semester (semester 3), AY 2021-2022. The students were given three weeks to complete the survey.

Data Analysis

Table 1: Gender-wise distribution of sample

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Female	56	56
Male	44	44
Total	100	100

The above table showed that 56% respondents were female and 44 % respondents were male. The majority of the respondents were female.

Table 2: Means of all the respondents in the six learning styles

S.No	Independent		Avoidant		Collaborative		Dependent		Competitive		Participant	
1	1	4.11	2	2.82	3	3.90	4	3.85	5	3.84	6	3.79
2	7	3.78	8	2.76	9	3.80	10	4.24	11	3.71	12	3.97
3	13	2.88	14	3.21	15	4.06	16	3.97	17	3.63	18	3.58
4	19	3.23	20	3.74	21	4.34	22	4.57	23	3.89	24	3.83
5	25	3.68	26	2.45	27	3.16	28	3.15	29	3.74	30	3.98
6	31	4.14	32	4.19	33	4.17	34	4.01	35	3.88	36	4.29
7	37	3.57	38	4.15	39	4.27	40	3.94	41	3.00	42	4.30
8	43	3.96	44	4.35	45	4.34	46	3.98	47	3.91	48	3.94
9	49	3.73	50	2.12	51	3.64	52	4.37	53	3.19	54	4.02
10	55	4.20	56	2.44	57	3.95	58	4.18	59	3.17	60	3.51
Total		37.29		32.23		39.63		40.24		35.97		39.23
Mean		3.728571		3.223214		3.9632305		4.024269		3.59692		3.92256

Table 2 illustrates the mean scores of EFL Omani students on all the six categories of learning styles. The highest mean score was found as 4.024269 which is the dependent learning style. Based on that, majority of Omani ELF students prefer to follow teachers' instructions and guidelines. They prefer a teacher-centered approach to teaching. The lowest mean score was found as 3.223214 that represents avoidant learning style.

Table 3: Female and Male Mean Differences

Learning Styles	Female			Males		
	N	Mean	S.D	N	Mean	S.D
Independent	56	3.78	0.88	44	3.68	0.95
Avoidant	56	3.25	0.94	44	3.2	1.04
Collaborative	56	4.07	0.79	44	3.86	0.89
Dependent	56	4.13	0.75	44	3.92	0.89
Competitive	56	3.56	1.06	44	3.63	1.02
Participant	56	3.94	0.88	44	3.9	0.89

Table 3 shows that the mean scores of females and males are almost the same except in collaborative learning style. There is a noticeable difference between females and males in collaborative learning styles. In collaborative learning style, Female's mean is 4.07 while male's

mean is 3.86. Thus, females enjoy doing group works like group projects, group discussions and assignments. In general, there is no significant difference between female and male mean scores in the rest of learning style categories.

CONCLUSION

As male and female students have different learning styles, the course designers and assessment designers should take into account these potential different requirements. In other words, the results of this study can help authorities to become more sensitive to the diverse learning styles and different gender groups they have. Moreover, it can serve as a guideline to design course content that is more compatible with the students' styles. Furthermore, the outcomes of this study contribute to the efforts of teachers in choosing an appropriate teaching methodology to match with students' learning styles. Teaching at UTAS Salalah for a significant period of time, it hardly comes as a surprise to us that the predominantly accepted style is teacher-centered. There are probably several motivations for this. We are all sharing classrooms with numbers of students that do not allow teachers to customize teaching approaches with what preference they perceive individual learners, or small groups of learners within the larger classroom, to hold. Further, there is a wide and diverse array of motivations for attending college that may not be directly related to learning at all. The thought that comes to our minds is/was, if class sizes were smaller, and the students all came from the same specific geographic region, there might be a greater potential for engaging in the kinds of analyses suggested in the paper. These limitations should be considered in future studies.

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