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Research Paper

Identifying and Developing Learning Style Preferences in Indian Classrooms

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Abstract

This article presents a part of a detailed thesis being submitted to the Central Institute of Education, University of Delhi in order to fulfil the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education. This study was conducted in a secondary school as an attempt to help learners enhance their learning by using learning style based tasks in the classroom. The article briefly reports the objectives, methodology and the findings of the research.

Introduction

With the changing times, our classrooms are undergoing a gradual change, and with it, the concept of learning is also changing. The performance of learners has become a scorecard for students as well as teachers. As a result, the teaching-learning process gets affected and our classrooms tend to become exam-oriented. The teaching in the classroom focuses on aspects which would enable the learners to score better marks, but often, even though children score good marks, the corresponding learning outcomes are not as expected. A significant reason behind this is the fact that the focus of classroom interactions has shifted from understanding and application to knowledge and information-based learning.

The problem of ineffective learning has been addressed by many using ideas such as 'level based classrooms', 'changes in the curriculum', 'mixed ability classrooms', 'learning styles', and 'alternate teaching pedagogy'. This study focused on 'Learning Style' approach, which has been successfully implemented in countries abroad and has brought about a significant change in the teaching-learning scenario. However, the approach has not been tested much in India. This study attempted to see how learning in the Indian context can be enhanced by using the Learning style approach.

Learning styles

Learning is different for different people. Individual learners might have a different route to the same destination, and they might take different amounts of time to get there. What is important is that if the path is easy to tread, the journey might become faster. Learning styles make that path easier for learners.

Zhang, Sternberg and Rayner (2012) tell us that the term 'Learning Style' was first used by Thelen (1954) and Riesman (1962) and that the idea of individualised Learning Style originated in the 1970s and since then has dramatically influenced education. A Learning Style is a person's natural or habitual way of acquiring knowledge and processing information in any learning situation. Reids (1995) defines Learning Style as an individual's natural, habitual and preferred way(s) of absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skills. He believes that these Learning Styles persist, regardless of teaching methods and content areas.

The Learning Style approach aims to enhance students' learning capacities by providing learning situations that match their Learning Style. Proponents of the use of Learning Style in education recommend that teachers assess the Learning Style of their learners and attempt to adapt their classroom transactions to fit each student's Learning Style best. Many pieces of research support the claim that using styles helps learners learn better. Several studies report the success of the learning style based approach.

Objectives

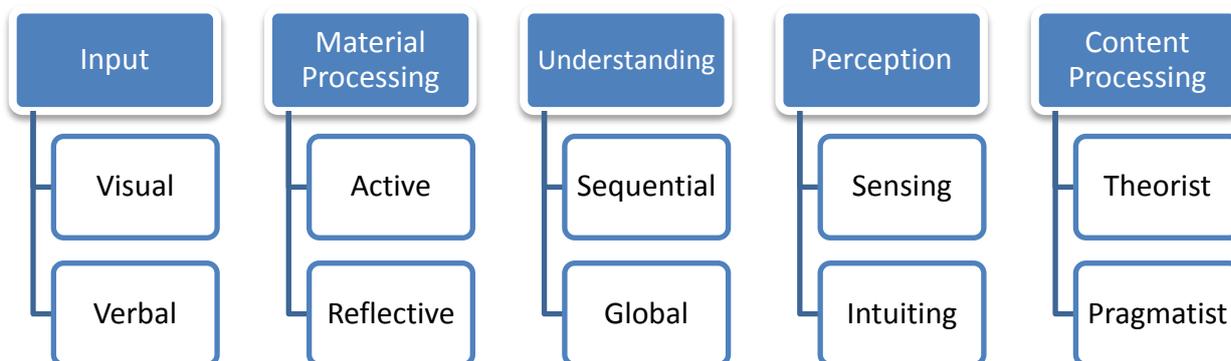
The objectives of this study are/ were as follows:

1. To identify the learning styles preferences of learners in Indian English classrooms.
2. To identify/develop a learning styles model to be used in Indian English classrooms.
3. To help learners identify what helps them learn better.
4. To help learners develop styles other than their prominent learning styles.
5. To develop learning styles based teaching materials.
6. To evaluate/assess the efficacy of the learning styles based teaching materials by teaching in a sample classroom.

Learning Style Model developed

After a careful analysis of the existing models and model classifications (Bello 1990, Cassidy 2004) and keeping in mind the research objectives, two learning style models were found (to be) suitable to the needs of the study: The Honey and Mumford (1982) model and the Felder Silverman model. The two models had one style continuum common between them. The 'Theorist and Pragmatic styles' of the Honey and Mumford model were included in the

Felder Silverman model to add a new dimension to it. The five style continuums and the ten corresponding styles taken up in the study are represented below:



According to their preferences, all individuals can be placed at some point on each of the continuums. Learners with strong preferences would be placed at either end of the continuum while those with no clear preference would be placed around the middle of the continuum.

Attempts must be made to help learners develop all learning styles to enable them to work with all kinds of content and help them become better learners.

Research Design and Methodology

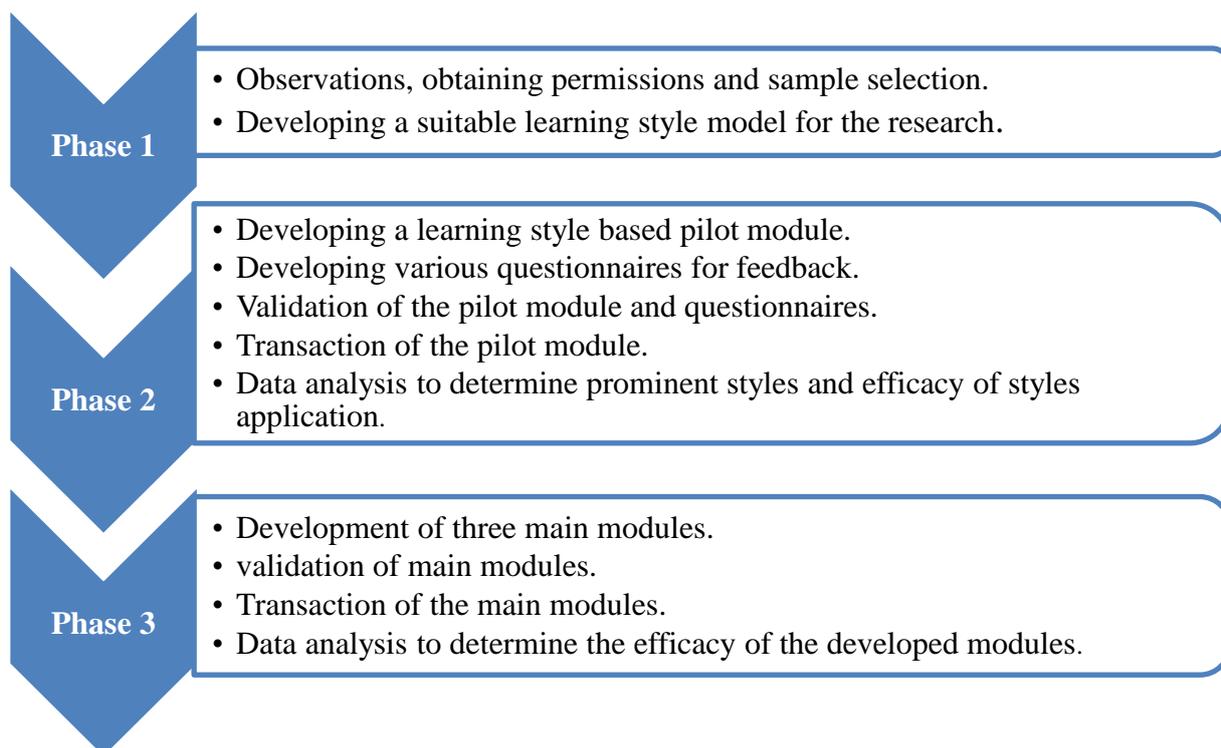
The research methodology, as designed according to the following objectives has been discussed below:

1. **Identifying or developing a suitable learning style model that is appropriate and flexible.** The study required a learning style model that promoted the development of other styles. An analysis of various learning style models needed to be carried out to identify / develop a model suitable for the study.
2. **Determining the probable learning styles in the classroom.** An assessment of learners' learning style was done using observations and their feedback on styles based tasks in the pilot module.
3. **Developing further modules in order to help learners develop learning styles.** Three teaching modules were developed in order to provide the learners with exposure to learning style based learning. The modules also served the dual purpose of helping learners identify the styles they prefer and develop other learning styles.
4. **Transacting learning styles based modules.** Learning using styles helps learners learn better and retain learning for a longer duration. The learning style based materials were transacted with the sample group of class VIII learners with the three-

fold objective of helping them learn better, making them aware of their learning styles and helping them develop other styles.

5. **Analysing and determining the efficacy of the designed modules.** Learners' feedback on individual tasks was collected in order to analyse the efficacy of the tasks.

Keeping the objectives in mind, the study was designed in three phases, which are graphically represented below:



Participants

The pilot study was conducted with one class of forty-five learners of class VII of a government school in Delhi. The main study was conducted with the same group of learners in the following academic year when they were in class IX (forty-nine learners due to new admissions in class nine).

Data collection and Analysis

The following instruments were designed for the study:

1. Validation tool: to take experts' feedback on the designed modules in order to give it a better shape.
2. Task end feedback questionnaire: to collect learners' responses on the tasks transacted. This was administered immediately after the completion of a task.
3. Module end feedback questionnaire: to collect learner's responses on the tasks and the module transacted. This was administered after the completion of the module.

Researcher's notes, observation and video recordings on the class transactions were also used in order to collect data for analysis. A qualitative and quantitative analysis was conducted to identify learners' style based preferences.

Research Findings

An analysis of style preferences on the five continuums was conducted to arrive at the following conclusions:

1. **Visual-Verbal:** Visual style was most preferred by a majority of the learners in the classroom. Therefore, visual components help more learners in concept building and retaining information for a longer period. Classroom transactions should attempt to include some amount of visual content such as charts, pictures, flashcards, picture stories, comics or some other form of visual content.
2. **Active-Reflective:** Active tasks were preferred more over reflective tasks, which were one of the least preferred. This could be because the learners of that the selected age group were still developing reflection capabilities. Class transactions if reflective, should be kept short and simple.
3. **Sequential-Global:** Learners' preference for sequential and global style was almost equally distributed. Learners performed equally on both sequential and global tasks. Large tasks, whether global or sequential, were both challenging for the learners. Classroom transaction should include a sequence of small global tasks to benefit all learners.
4. **Sensing-Intuitive:** Learners' preference for sensing and intuiting style was also almost equally distributed. While transacting the task, it was observed that learners worked better with sensing tasks than intuitive tasks, but, they enjoyed intuitive tasks more than sensing tasks.
5. **Theorist-Pragmatist:** These two styles were also almost equally preferred. Learners indicated a preference for deductive methodology and rule building, at the same time, they found pragmatic tasks to be easier to transact as they could utilise personal examples to build up arguments.

An average classroom consists of learners who prefer different styles. Thus making it difficult to provide all the learners with different instructions and materials according to their preference. By adding instructions and by modifying the content slightly, a task can be made suitable for learners of various learning styles; therefore attempts must be made to include tasks that cater to multiple styles or are easily modifiable to enhance the learning process of each learner and enrich the transactions in a language classroom.

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