

The Effect of Different Learning Styles on Developing Writing Skills of EFL Saudi Learners

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Abstract

The major objective of the present study is to investigate the effectiveness of using different learning styles on developing EFL Saudi students' writing skills. Exploring the specific needs of those students, it was found that they experienced some writing difficulties. They were taught regardless to their different learning styles. A group of students were randomly chosen and divided into a control and an experimental group. Accordingly, a learning style inventory was given to the experimental group to help them as well as their teacher be aware of their learning styles. They were divided into small heterogeneous groups according to their learning styles. The activities utilized in teaching were based on their learning styles. A writing test was used as a pre-post test. The findings of the study showed that the performance of the experimental group was far better than that of the control one in the writing skills.

Keywords: learning styles, writing skills

1. Introduction

There are a number of factors which influence the success of foreign language learning—language aptitude, motivation, personality, age, learning styles and learning strategies etc. Learning styles and learning strategies are two important factors among them. Therefore, attempts to explore the individual differences on learning styles that exist among learners become necessary for better English teaching. The role of the senses in learning, long appreciated as 'See it, hear it, do it' is now more formalized as visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning styles.

Learning style refers to an individual's characteristics and preferred ways of gathering, interpreting, organizing and thinking about information. Some learners prefer to learn by means of visual forms of information, like pictures, diagrams, and schematics; others prefer to learn from verbal forms, such as written and spoken explanations; some learners tend to focus on facts and data; others are more comfortable with theories and mathematical models; some students favor learning actively and interactively; others prefer to learn more introspectively and individually. Some researchers have found that exposed to the same material and learning environment, some students may learn with ease and achieve success while others feel terrible and despaired. They believe that this may be attributable to the fact that each individual has his or her preferred way of learning a foreign language.

Learning styles are internally based characteristics, often not perceived or used consciously, which are the basis for the intake and understanding of new information; students can identify their preferred learning styles and stretch those styles by examining and practicing various learning strategies.

2. Literature Review

Learning styles form a student's unique learning preference and aid teachers in the planning of small-group and individualized instruction (Kemp, Morrison & Ross, 1998, p. 40). Grasha (1996), has defined learning styles as, "personal qualities that influence a student's ability to acquire information, to interact with peers and the teacher, and otherwise participate in learning experiences" (p. 41). Blackmore (1996) suggested that one of the first things educators can do to aid the learning process is to simply be aware that there are diverse learning styles in the student population.

There are probably as many ways to "teach" as there are to learn. Perhaps the most important thing is to be aware that people do not all see the world in the same way. They may have very different preferences than you for how, when, where and how often to learn. Educational researchers have shown that not all students learn the same (Witkin, 1973; Gregorc, 1979; Jacobs, 1990). Students are unique in their own ways, including the way they learn.

The education literature suggests that students who are actively engaged in the learning process will be more likely to succeed (Hartman, 1995). A key to getting and keeping students actively involved in learning lies in understanding learning style preferences, which can positively or negatively influence a student's performance (Birkey & Rodman, 1995; Hartman, 1995). Learning style as Reid defines (2002) is an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred ways of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills. Learning style studies can help both learners and teachers facilitate their work.

A combination of political, social and economic drivers has effected major changes in higher education. Much of the change is centered on the ever-widening diversity of students entering the sector and academics are realizing that a change to their teaching is required to accommodate this. We can no longer assume all students will achieve by being taught the same way, and consequently new teaching practices are required. Adopting new methods and techniques is aided greatly by the appreciation of the existence of different learning styles.

Teaching and learning practices in higher education urgently need improvement--witness the recommendations of several national commissions on higher education and the difficulties faculty faces with the diverse preparation of today's students. Learning style is a concept that can be

important in this movement, not only in informing teaching practices but also in bringing to the surface issues that help faculty and administrators think more deeply about their roles and the organizational culture in which they carry out their responsibilities. (Diaz, D. P., & Cartnal, R. B. (1999).

Information about learning style can help faculty become more sensitive to the differences students bring to the classroom. It can also serve as a guide in designing learning experiences that match or mismatch students' styles, depending on the teacher's purpose. Some studies show that identifying a student's style and then providing instruction consistent with that style contribute to more effective learning. (Reid, 2002)

In considering learning styles, the influence the surrounding field has on a person's perception of items within the field as well as its impact on the person's intellectual domains and personality traits have been extensively studied. Witkin (1973) has shown that a person whose mode of perception is strongly dominated by the surrounding field is said to be leaning toward a field-dependent learning style. A person who perceives items as more or less separate from the surrounding field leans toward a field-independent learning style. Individuals with a field-dependent learning style tend to perceive the world in a global fashion. Field-dependent learners are socially oriented and best learn material with a social content. Field-dependent learners require externally defined goals and must be provided with organization. Consequently, they may need more explicit instruction in problem-solving. As teachers, field-dependent learners tend to use student-centered activities. Teachers that are field-dependent are strong in establishing a warm and personal learning environment. Subsequently, field – dependent teachers are less likely to provide negative feedback and evaluation towards the student (Garger & Guild, 1984).

Field-independent learners view the world more analytically. Field-independent learners rely on self-defined goals and self-structured situations. Teachers with a field-independent learning style tend to be more subject-centered in their instruction. Field-independent teachers serve more as a "guide" than a "teacher" for their students. Field-independent teachers place more emphasis on the cognitive aspect of instruction. Furthermore, teachers with a field-independent learning style are more likely to use an inquiry or problem-solving approach to learning due to their analytical perspective (Garger & Guild, 1984).

Gee (1990) studied the impact of learning style variables in a live teleconference distance education class. The purpose of the study was to examine the influence of student learning style preference, in an on-campus or distance education remote classroom, on student achievement in the following areas: course content, course completion rates, and attitudes about learning. Both distance and on-campus groups were taught simultaneously by the same instructor, received identical course content, and both groups met weekly. Gee administered the Canfield Learning Styles Inventory (CLSI) (Canfield, 1980). Students in the distance learning class who possessed a more independent and conceptual learning style, had the highest average scores in all of the student achievement areas. People with the lowest scores in student achievement in the distance learning course had a more social and conceptual learning style. Students with both a social and applied learning style performed much better in the on-campus class. The outcomes of the Gee study suggested that successful distance education students favored an independent learning environment while successful on-campus students showed a preference for working with others. The relatively small sample of 26 students suggested that additional work is needed to further explore this relationship.

There are many approaches to identify students' learning style preferences, various learning style instruments for native speakers of English have been developed, for non-native speaker of English, O'Brien's (1990) learning channel preference checklist and Reid's (1987) perceptual learning style preference questionnaire are among the better-known of the learning style assessment instruments in the ESL/EFL field (Wintergerst, et al., 2003). When teachers help students discover their own learning preferences, it is possible to help students develop more versatile approaches to

learning, not just in the EFL classroom but also in every subject across the curriculum and in many situations beyond school.

While the expanding of college enrollment and the growing of social demand for Saudi excelling in English, the issue of English teaching to Saudi undergraduates has become increasingly important. Learners to English language programs of universities and colleges in Saudi Arabia are taught homogeneously by teachers who have little knowledge of learning styles and their culture background. Consequently, students quickly lose confidence in English learning and the teachers tend to be overcritical of the learners for their disappointing class performance. However, they may not be aware that their frustration, to some degree, is related with learning styles.

Three important factors to consider when selecting a learning style instrument include: considering the intended use of the data to be collected, finding an instrument and matching it to the intended use and, finally, selecting the most appropriate instrument (James and Gardner, 1995).

3. Hypotheses of the Study

The study attempted to test the following hypothesis:

1. There is no statistically significant difference between means of scores obtained by the subjects of the control group and the experimental group on the pre test of writing skill.
2. There is no statistically significant difference between means of scores obtained by the subjects of the control group and the experimental group on the post test of writing skill.

4. Methodology

Writing skills are often overlooked in EFL education. Through teaching EFL and ESP classes the researcher has observed that most students have difficulties in learning English specially writing. The low achievement of non- specialist students especially in the English language courses shows that it is not the right learning style of the students that is used to suit their needs and abilities in learning. The researcher suggests that students should have self-awareness of their learning styles and know how to use them to better achieve in learning English.

Through interviewing both students and teachers in Yanbu University College it became clear that most students find it difficult to write in English. Writing is a challenge for most , including Saudi, EFL learners.

Many factors may contribute to difficulties students experience in writing such as the complexity of transforming their organized ideas on paper. Students are not accustomed to write. Teachers use the same teaching and learning activities with all students regardless of their different learning styles. Students learn in different ways and the conventional methods of teaching English as a foreign language emphasize whole language group lecturing regardless to the students' different learning styles.

This current study samples EFL Saudi female students from Yanbu University College and hopes to offer a broader look at how learning styles could be used more to improve student writing.

The major objective of the study is to investigate the effectiveness of using students' different learning styles on developing their writing.

While it is essential that teachers have a practical understanding learning styles, it is equally important for students to understand their individual learning styles and to become aware of the modalities and strategies they avoid or seldom use. Knowledge of one's own learning style is fundamental in "learning to learn". Students can't be expected to acquire successful language acquisition strategies, study methods, or collaborative learning skills incidentally, yet many students come to EFL and other classes without a full realization of what is expected of them. They consequently continue to use inappropriate approaches with no awareness of the limitations of their habitual style of learning or more productive options for completing academic tasks, so it is necessary for teachers to identify students' learning style preferences.

The study was limited to first year female students at Yanbu University College. They were chosen because it is better for them to be aware of their learning styles from the very beginning so as to get the chance to benefit from that in their subsequent years.

Since the purpose of the present study was to identify learning style preferences of Saudi learners two questions were raised accordingly:

A: What are the different learning style preferences of Saudi EFL learners in Yanbu University College?

B: Can preferred learning styles help Saudi EFL students improve their writing skills?

4.1. Research Design

The present study used an experimental research design. The experimental design used had a control group and an experimental group. The control group was taught by the conventional method of teaching without considering their preferred learning styles. The experimental group was divided into heterogeneous groups according to their different kinds of learning styles. The experimental group and the control group were subjected to pre-testing and post-testing means of collecting data. The experimental group was exposed to a systematic training of some activities based on their learning styles.

4.2. Variables of the study

I. The independent variable is:

The use of the suggested activities based on different learning styles defined by Grasha-Reichmann Student Learning Style Scale, 1996.

II. The dependent variable is:

Students' writing skills.

4.3. Sample of the study

Participants for this study ($N = 50$) were chosen from different sections of students in Yanbu University college. They are studying for Bachelor's degrees in Computer Science (CS) and Management Information Systems (MIS). All students chosen for the study had already completed their preparatory year and were enrolled in English writing classes at the freshman level. They were of the same age range. They were all female.

4.4. Procedures for collecting the data

The Test

A writing Test was designed by the researcher.

A) Objectives of the test:

To assess students' ability to:

1. freewrite about a given picture.
2. edit a given text by identifying the irrelevant sentences.
3. edit a given text by correcting fragments.
4. correct the run-on sentences in a given text.
5. write a paragraph about a given topic.

B) Item type:

The items were of the following types:

1. Freewriting.
2. Editing.
3. Revising.
4. Writing a paragraph.

C) Scoring:

A rubric was designed to evaluate students' writing.

D) Instructions of the test:

Test instructions were written in simple English. They were brief, easy to understand and free from ambiguity. They gave information about the purpose of the test and time allowed to complete the test.

E) Test validity and reliability

To determine content and face validity of the test, it was shown to a group of TEFL specialists. The reliability of the test was calculated by the use of the split-half method. The students completed the tests in the usual way, but each student was given two scores. One score was for one half of each test and the second score was for the other half. The two sets of scores were used to obtain the reliability coefficient. The reliability coefficient was calculated by using Spearman-Brown formula. It was (0.84).

Student Learning Style Scale

Grasha-Reichmann Student Learning Style Scales (GRSLSS) was chosen to collect the data from the sample. Of the different learning style instruments, the Grasha-Reichmann Student Learning Style Scales (GRSLSS) seems ideal for assessing student learning preferences in a college-level. The GRSLSS (Hruska-Riechmann & Grasha, 1982; Grasha, 1996) was chosen as the tool for determining student learning styles in the present study based on criteria suggested by James and Gardner (1995). First, the GRSLSS is one of the few instruments designed specifically to be used with senior high school and college/university students (Hruska-Riechmann & Grasha, 1982). Second, the GRSLSS promotes an optimal teaching/learning environment by helping faculty design courses and develop sensitivity to student/learner needs. Third, the GRSLSS promotes understanding of learning styles in a broad context, spanning six categories. Students possess all of six learning styles, to a greater or lesser extent. This type of understanding prevents learning style stereotyping, and provides a rationale for pursuing personal growth and development in the underused learning style areas. A brief discussion of each learning style is included below.

1. Independent students prefer independent study, self-paced instruction, and would prefer to work alone on course projects than with other students.
2. Dependent learners look to the teacher and to peers as a source of structure and guidance and prefer an authority figure to tell them what to do.
3. Competitive students learn in order to perform better than their peers do and to receive recognition for their academic accomplishments.
4. Collaborative learners acquire information by sharing and by cooperating with teacher and peers. They prefer lectures with small group discussions and group projects.
5. Avoidant learners are not enthused about attending class or acquiring class content. They are typically uninterested and are sometimes overwhelmed by class activities.
6. Participant learners are interested in class activities and discussion, and are eager to do as much class work as possible. They are keenly aware of, and have a desire to meet, teacher expectations.

The styles described by the GRSLSS refer to a blend of characteristics that apply to all students (Grasha, 1996, p. 127). Each person possesses some of each of the learning styles. Ideally, one would have a balance of all the learning styles, however most people gravitate toward one or two of the learning style preferences. Learning preferences are likely to change as one encounters new life and educational experiences. Grasha (1996) and Dowdall (1991) also have suggested that particular teaching styles might encourage students to adopt certain learning styles.

Pre-testing Results

The test of the study was administered as a pre-testing tool. The statistical program SPSS was used to analyze the obtained data. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to ensure the homogeneity of both the control and the experimental group in the pre-test. Analysis proved that there is no significant difference between groups.

Table (1)

Means, and Standard Deviation of scores of subjects of the control group, experimental group on the pre test

Group	Number of Students	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	F	Sig.
Control	25	18.21	4.15	1.76	Not Sig
Experimental	25	19.50	3.42		

The Experimental Treatment

Students of the experimental group involved twenty five students had to finish the learning style inventory adopted to help them identify their different kinds of learning styles. Students were given different kinds of activities with different tasks according to their different learning styles. Students had group work, discussion and individual work. In each lesson there were different activities addressing the different kinds of learning styles.

Post- testing Results

The test of the study was administered as a post-testing tool. The statistical program SPSS was used to analyze the obtained data. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to find the difference between pre and post testing data of the study groups. Results and verification of the study hypotheses were presented and a set of recommendations and suggested research studies were offered.

Table (2)

Means and Standard Deviation of scores of subjects of the control group and experimental group on the post test

Group	Number of Students	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	F
Control	25	23.72	2.33	50.15*
Experimental	25	43.32	3.98	

It is clear from table (2) that there is a statistically significant difference at 0.01 between means of scores obtained by the subjects of the control group and the experimental group on the post test of writing favoring the experimental group.

5. Summary and Conclusion

It is clear from the analysis of the data, that the two groups were approximately equal in their modest performance in the pre test of writing. They find difficulty to freewrite about a picture or a

given topic. It is clear that a lot of learners can keep some sentences by heart, but when it came to expressing themselves freely in writing, they got confused, and unable to convey the message successfully. They also have difficulties in writing even simple English sentences.

Results of the post test show clear improvement in the performance of the experimental group. Their ability to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant sentences, to edit and revise a given text and to write correct English sentences in a paragraph form was developed.

This result is also supported by the findings of Long and Porter (1995) who stated that group work, one of the elements of the incorporation of competitive and collaborative learning styles, not only gave students greater practice opportunities, but also allowed them to escape from traditional teacher-fronted lessons. The results also coincide with those of El Maleh (2000) who proved the effectiveness of utilizing the cooperative learning techniques compared with the traditional lecture method in developing the essay writing skills of first year English majors.

Of course, in the reality of the EFL classroom teaching, it is impossible to always take all of learning preferences into account; also, it is impossible to constantly remember how each student learns best, learning style is just one of the many factors which influence the learning process and the learning results. Knowledge of learning styles cannot be used to remove all difficulties in understanding the learning process and other troubles in foreign language teaching, it is necessary for teachers to combine learning style with other individual differences, such as a learner's personality, language aptitude, and so on. However, learning style is an important factor in successful language learning, teachers' skills in matching and diversifying learners' style preferences is essential to effective teaching and learning. Knowledge of students' learning styles is helpful for teachers in class preparation, designing, class delivery methods, choosing appropriate technologies, and individual instruction for effective EFL classroom. Needless to say, my study is just a small part of the research into learning style and its enlightenments for English teaching; further study of it is highly appreciated.

6. Recommendations

1. English learning programs using learning styles should be used in developing other skills such as listening and speaking.
2. Teachers of EFL and ESP should be aware of the incorporation of learning styles into the classroom activities and the importance of guiding the students to focus on a student-centered cooperative learning context.
3. Heterogeneous grouping should be encouraged in all ESP courses.
4. Designing language activities based on students' learning styles should be a common goal in teaching ESP and EFL.

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Appendix (1)

The Test

(45 minutes)

Question (1)

Freewrite about the following picture:

(5 Marks)



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Question (2)

Read the first draft of the following paragraph. Do all of the sentences relate to the main idea? Does the paragraph have any irrelevant sentences? If you think a sentence is irrelevant, put parentheses () around it and underline. (5 Marks)

I am a morning person because I love the early morning. In the morning, my mind is fresh and active to start my new day. My sister never gets up or speaks to anyone before nine o'clock. The sun's rays enter my room through the window. I always leave the curtains open for the morning sun. Last summer, I used to hang very heavy curtains to cool my room temperature. I usually walk in the early morning. Almost daily I see the fat couple from my neighborhood busy in jogging. I enjoy the fresh air, songs of birds, and greenery. I feel energetic and peaceful. My day starts happy. Then, I cook my breakfast and take a shower. My houseboy cleaner is never on time; actually he is very lazy and dull. I begin to study. Also, I listen to music because I feel happy. Huda likes the pop music more than the classic music. I think the morning is very productive and useful time.

Question (3)

Read the following pairs of sentences. In each pair, one sentence is a fragment. Correct the fragment by adding something to it or by joining it to the other sentence. (10 Marks)

1. I can cook. My sister a better cook than I.

2. He eats a lot during the day. And sleeps at night.

3. In the morning. My sister and I go to school.

4. Layla a delightful girl. She keeps us happy with her jokes and sweet talk.

5. Also, very smart. She loves school, and she gets good grades.

6. He short for his age. He is a little heavy.

7. In the evening. My sister watches TV with me.

8. Ali a kind boy. With short black hair.

9. Likes to sleep on my bed. At night.

10. One night my cat came to my door. And cried for food.

Question (4)

The following paragraph has both simple and compound sentences, but there are ten run-on sentences in it. Correct the run-on sentences by adding periods and capital letters. You may need to add or remove some commas. You may choose to add or remove some coordinating conjunctions. Please rewrite the correct version of the paragraph in the given space below.

(10 Marks)

(1)A funny story happened to my family three years ago. (2)One evening, my parents, my brother, and I went to see a movie. (3)We enjoyed the movie very much we ate the popcorns and chips altogether. (4)After that, we went to eat dinner at a restaurant, we took a long time there, so we came back home about twelve o'clock. (5)I opened the front door, I was very surprised. (6)It didn't look like my home nothing was in order. (7)Somebody had scattered everything in my house. (8)Books and records were on the floor, and the sofa was torn up. (9)My parents were truly speechless my brother was nervous in this scary situation. (10)At that time, I heard a strange noise from my room, and I was sure that there was somebody in my room, and I wanted to be a hero, so I told my family, "please, watche out. I will check my room." (11)It was a very tough time my heart was beating very fast. (12)Suddenly, something jumped out the window it was a cat. (13)We realized that the cat had scattered everything in our house. (14)Luckily, it wasn't much serious problem we were assuming a thief in our house in vain. (15)I had forgotten to close the window. (16)Then, we all laughed together thus the story took a turn from scary to funny situation.

Question (5)

Write a paragraph about one of your relatives (father, mother, uncle...etc.)

Describe his/her appearance, Personality, and life. Write a title and a topic sentence. Write at least 120 words.

(10 Marks)

Appendix (2)

A sample lesson

Activity One

Brainstorming and Freewriting

1. Using the brainstorming technique, ask your students to give as many meanings as possible to the word "learning style". You may prompt them with the following questions:
 - * What does the word "learning style" mean?
 - * What abilities do schools and colleges value and promote?
 - * How do you like to learn? For example, in groups, individually, through projects or lectures...etc.
2. Write their ideas on the board as they say them.
3. Select the most suitable ideas or meanings of the word.
4. Ask your students if they can define the field of their learning as " What kind of learning style is yours", and "What are the indications that you have such sort of learning style?
5. Encourage the students to work in groups and tell you their ideas.
6. Again write all their ideas on the board and then select the most relevant ones and discuss them.
7. Ask them to practice brainstorming and freewriting about any topic such as their (holiday).

Activity Two

Based on independent learning style

1. Ask your students to individually freewrite about their own abilities.

Start sentences like: I can.....

I am able to

I can't.....

2. Let individual students read their writing to the class and correct their mistakes.

Activity Three

Based on competitive and collaborative learning styles

Ask students to work in groups and read the following text and identify the main idea, ask them

The sun has produced energy for billions of years. Solar energy is the solar radiation that reaches the earth. Solar energy is a success story. It already supplies electricity to several hundred thousand people around the world, provides employment for over ten thousand and generates business worth more than one billion dollars. In the future, the pace of change and progress could be even more rapid as the solar industry unlocks its hidden promise. The benefits of solar power are compelling: environmental protection, economic growth, job creation, diversity of fuel supply and rapid deployment, as well as the global potential for technology transfer and innovation.

Activity Four

Based on participant and avoidant learning styles

Ask students to work in groups to read the following text and underline the irrelevant sentences that can be deleted from the text without influencing its meaning

A morning person generally feels at his or her best during the hours before noon. Waking up to the first rays of the sun or an alarm clock set in single digits is rarely a problem. Many morning people feel energized after a full night's sleep and can shake what few cobwebs remain by taking a bracing morning shower. The early hours are also ideal for taking care of routine matters such as email correspondence, household finances and reading the newspaper.

Unlike their night owl counterparts, who prefer to stay up late and sleep away the morning, a morning person actually gains energy from the sights and sounds of a day just beginning. Jogging or

walking can seem more invigorating when performed in the crisp morning air, and many morning people enjoy the feeling of accomplishment before they start their actual workday.

There are a few drawbacks to a morning person's preferred routine, however. Many stores and professional services are not available during the early hours when a morning person is at his or her best. In order to maintain a morning riser schedule, a morning person may also have to go to bed earlier in the evening than their night owl family members and friends. A morning person rarely stays up past 9 or 10 o'clock on most nights, meaning he or she may miss out on some late night activities.

Activity Five

Based on dependent and avoidant learning styles

1. Ask students to work individually and use their freewriting to write a first draft paragraph. Tell them not to worry about grammar or spelling.2.
2. Ask them to exchange their drafts with their classmates for editing and revising.
3. Ask them to write the second draft.