

Chapter 2

Learning Style Preferences

Why do some students have trouble understanding directions in the second language while other students get them easily? Why do some students do well in large groups, while others are at their best when they can work alone or with a single partner? What can you do to help each student when there can be such a variety of learners in your classroom? This chapter offers ways to handle the diversity of your students' learning style preferences.

What Are Learning Style Preferences?

Learning style preferences refer to the way you like to learn. They are put into action by specific learning strategies (Ehrman, 1996, p. 49). Learning style has been referred to as "...the biologically and developmentally imposed set of characteristics that make the same teaching method wonderful for some and terrible for others" (Dunn & Griggs, 1988, p. 3). According to Oxford and Anderson (1995), learning styles have six interrelated aspects:

1. The *cognitive* aspect includes preferred or habitual patterns of mental functioning (usually referred to as cognitive styles).
2. The *executive* aspect is the extent to which learners look for order, organization, and closure in managing the learning processes.
3. The *affective* aspect consists of the attitudes, beliefs, and values that influence what learners focus on most.
4. The *social* aspect relates to the preferred degree of involvement with other people while learning.
5. The *physiological* element involves what are at least partly anatomically based sensory and perceptual tendencies of the learners.
6. The *behavioral* aspect concerns the learners' tendency to actively seek situations compatible with their own learning preferences.

There are no positive or negative traits, only preferences, and even strong preferences can change. Students tend to learn better when the classroom instructor nurtures their learning style. If you can present language material in a variety of ways, the language styles of all of your students are more likely to be nurtured. For example, you could teach the present and past perfect tenses in your target language by having your students listen to a tape and then draw a chart in their notebook of a timeline that describes when to use each form of the perfect aspect. In this way, you teach to both the auditory and visual learners.

The Value of Learning Styles

Research suggests that the greater the number of styles students can use, the more successful they will be at learning language. Research also shows that we all have learning style preferences and thus may tend to favor our preferred approaches in our learning. You can help students by getting them to think about learning in strategic terms and to expand or stretch their learning approaches. You can also accommodate to style differences by providing opportunities during class for your students to learn in different ways. You may already do this, but the idea is to vary the tasks so as not to continually favor one style preference over another.