An Exploration into the Learning Style Preferences of Second Year English Language majoring Students in Wolaita Sodo University

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Abstract

Learning style is one of the factors that affect learners' overall learning behavior. Learners behave in their own ways to perceive, interact, and respond to learning tasks mainly due to the differences in their learning styles. This makes studying learning style preferences variations among students necessary. Information about learners learning style preferences makes teachers aware of the differences, and this, enables them to accommodate the differences in their teaching practices. The motivation for this study evolved from this understanding. The study was, therefore, designed to explore and describe second year university students' learning style preferences. The study was conducted in Wolaita Sodo University in the 2019/2020 academic year. The study participants were twenty English majoring students in the university. They were selected using simple random sampling technique. Data for the study was collected in the first semester of the academic year. Joy Reid's Perceptual Learning-Style Preference Questionnaire (1987) was the data collection instrument used in the study. The statistical procedures employed in this study were percentage, mean, standard deviations and independent t-test analysis. The study result indicated Group Learning style as the major learning style preference of the study participants. In the same study, t-test result shows that there was a statistically significant difference in the learning style preferences of male and female students regarding auditory and visual at 5% significance level. Therefore, the results suggest avenues for future research to understand this phenomenon better.

Introduction

Background of the study

Individuals vary considerably in their ways they learn or prefer to learn. Some of the causes for this difference could be variations in learning style preferences, attitudes, motivations, and preferred mode of instructions (Rosalind, 2001). In addition, individuals often adopt the learning style, which they are most comfortable with and leave behind the ones that they are less comfortable using. As a result, among students in the same classroom and taking the same course given by the same teacher, the degree of learning success may not be the same due to individual differences. Formal education is, an example of such an environment, where these differences are apparent and unavoidable. Therefore, the teaching-learning process to achieve its objectives, the kind of instruction given must be in line with students learning style preferences and be designed in manner that

addresses students various learning modes (Guven and Sozer, 2007; Adıguzel, 2009). Teachers, who know in advance the kind of learning style students' employ, can adjust the mode of instruction to accommodate range of learning style preferences (Lovelace, 2005).

Supporting this, several studies also show that every individual has a unique learning style, this influences the way an individual chooses for receiving, and retaining an information, which again determines the learning success of an individual (Felder and Silverman, 1988; Bargar *et al.,* 1994; Abidin *et al.,* 2011; Yeung *et al.,* 2012; Gappi, 2013). For Reid (1995), the term '*learning style'* is a generic term that refers to; "An individual's natural, habitual, preferred way for; absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skills" (xiii). While other use it to describe the overall mental faculties such as "…the cognitive, affective, and physiological traits of an individual that are relatively stable indicators of how learner perceives, interacts, and responds to the learning environment" (Keefe 1979; in Reid, 1987: 87). Any given person has academic or learning strengths determined by a combination of hereditary and environmental influences. Then, it is these strengths, which translate into preferences to learn and receive information visually, orally, spatially, tactilely, or be in groups/individually determine the learning style preferences (Dunn *et al.,* 1995; Rosalind, 2001). Therefore, this validates the assumption that not all children learn in the same way and their preferred ways for learning the same task differs from one to another (Claxton and Ralston, 1978:7; Keefe, 1979; Jacobs, 1990; Reid, 1995: xii).

Furthermore, English language learning success of an individual can be associated with range of factors such as age, gender, motivation, intelligence, achievement, teaching and learning styles (Sharp 2004, in Nurul *et al.,* 2011). Similarly, (Ellis, 1985); Brown, (1987); Richards and Lockhart (1994); Torre Blanca (2007) and Ortega, (2009)) mention cultural beliefs, gender, and educational background as main factors that determine learner's acquisition of Second/Foreign Language (L2). On the other hand, giving instruction practically by design instructional activities taking into account all above-mentioned variables and address learning styles' diversities in typical classroom is beyond the abilities of teachers in terms of time allocation, teaching facilities and expertise. Nevertheless, having an awareness of students' learning style can be helpful "for educators to analyze, motivate, and assist students learning in school…to establish a foundation for truly modern

approach in education" (Keefe, 1979 in Dunn, 1984: 10). Since teachers who use teaching styles that correspond to their students' learning styles are more likely to reach a larger number of students (Claxton and Murrell, 1987; Felder and Henriques, 1995; Hartman, 1995). Thus, this study was an effort made to identify and describe the learning style preferences of second year English majoring students in university.

Statement of the study

Theories of learning style suggest that individuals think and learn best in various ways. In other words, individuals have unique ways to receive process and retain information. They have their own preferred ways to perform learning tasks. Their preferred approach to a learning situation, influences their learning motivation and achievement (Reid, 1995 in Renou, 2009:1). Learning styles are learners' customary pre-dispositions that determine the way they process information. In addition, learners whether because of heredity, educational background, situational requirements, age, learning style or other factors, understand and process information differently. Some learners, for instance, prefer to hear information. These are auditory learners, while visual learners prefer to see the learning material (Skehan, 1991; Lawrence, 1993). Therefore, it makes determining learners' learning styles and providing instruction that accommodates various learning styles an important educational activity.

In the last seven years, the researcher has been teaching different English courses in Wolaita sodo University. This teaching experience has enabled him to closely wittiness the challenges students face to learn from classroom instruction. In the university even though it was not empirical, the kind of instructional method commonly used appear to be lecture method. Based on the researcher's observation the extensive use of lecture method, to some degree, has affected students' learning motivation and academic performance in English courses. The reason here, roots from a belief that learners who are taught based on their dominant learning style(s) will be engaged actively in the learning task, and will desire higher levels of attainment. In addition, in a typical language classroom, it is common to notice that some students prefer to learn by listening carefully to the lecture (auditory) while others ask for course handouts in the beginning of the class to read and understand it well (visual). Yet, others may prefer to see a direct demonstration by the teacher to understand better (kinesthetic). This clearly shows that every students use

different approaches to acquire and respond to new information in classroom teaching, at the same time, desire to the teaching material be presented in a way that favors their varied language learning styles. Unfortunately, instructors either knowingly or unknowingly, fail to consider the diversified learning needs of students; or seem comfortable in using the same teaching method, even if it is not compatible to the various language learning styles of students. Consequently, students get bored easily and be inattentive in class, do poorly on tests, get discouraged in the subject, and in some worse cases, they may decide to drop out the school (Emily, 2008).

In this regard, being pioneer in the context of language education, Reid (1987) large-scale study on perceptual learning styles preferences on 1300 ESL students across the United States, paved the way for a mass body of research on this direction. The study examined the relationship between perceptual learning style preferences and various variables, such as cultural/language backgrounds, gender, age, and major fields of study. Results showed that ESL students from different backgrounds differed in their learning style preferences. It also revealed that males preferred visual while females choose tactile learning style. This implies that recognizing students' learning preferences would be useful to show teachers the preferred learning approach in which students become more engaged in the class and find suitable way for students learning English language for both general and specific purposes.

Similar to Reid's (1987) study, a small-size cross-cultural study took place in the Tunisian context to research differences in preferences between American students of Arabic and Tunisian students of English taking age and gender as main variables. Bouzayen (2008) noticed that Tunisian learners had a stronger preference for visual learning than their American counterparts did but no significant difference identified between male and female, which contradicts the case in Reid's research. Another study conducted by Stapa (2003), concerning teachers' awareness of ESP students' learning preferences on a sample of 53 students of English for Hospitality Purposes at University of Kebangsaan in Malaysia and using questionnaires for teachers adopted from Bindley (1984). The study discovered that preferred way for the majority of students was working in pairs or small groups. Besides, significant number of students expressed their views favoring more outdoor classroom activities (tactile learner) as one of learning style preferences that would

help them gain proficiency in English. The findings also revealed that the types of instruction that focus merely on receptive skills do not appeal to students (Stapa, 2003).

Moreover, wide range of literature show there are a broad theoretical foundation for the existence differences in learning style preferences among students and has influences on the success of the instructional process. In Ethiopia, given the role of English where it serves as a medium of instruction in higher institutions, proficiency in English language matters greatly particularly for university students seeking degree, grants, and future career opportunities. It is one of the least researched areas and much of what has been done so far did not tell us clearly about English language learning styles characteristics and the relationships between learning styles and certain variables such gender, language proficiency, academic performance, etc. For instance, to mention some of related studies in the local context, Meskerem (2014) who has conducted a research on teaching and learning styles of Graduate programs at AAU. Reported that the majority of graduate students learning style preferences were tactile while the majority of instructors used delegator type of teaching style by neglecting its influences on overall language education practices.

On the other hand, Seyoum (2012) conducted a study on the effects of gender, listening proficiency and perceptual learning style preference of EFL learners. He reported that female students used more listening strategies than male students use and stated that there is also positive significant correlation between kinesthetic learning styles and effective listening strategy. Whereas, Emily (2008) conducted research on topic in one of Ethiopia university (specifically, at Bahirdar University Techno-campus), strictly recommends that many educators in developed countries well aware of the effects of learning styles, give the required considerations and use multi-modal instructions in their education. However, in the context of Ethiopia, due to the absence of information regarding concentrated impact learning styles on the performance of the learner; many of language learners and teachers in Ethiopia have not learned how to discover students' language learning styles or to address differences among learners' and keep using monotonous traditional teaching approaches. In sum, there are many issues seeking consideration in context of Ethiopian to improve the quality of instruction and promote learning outcomes of students at the classroom level. One of which is identifying Ethiopian students' learning style profile, and determine its

influence on language learning success of learners. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct a research, particularly in the region the present study conducted, the absence of information about the kind of preferred learning styles adopted by Ethiopian English language learners at higher institutions, inspired the researcher's motivation as part of an effort made to fill the existing research gap.

Objective of the study

To identify university English majoring students learning style preferences
To explore if there are significant differences in learning style preferences due to gender.

Materials and Methods

Research design

A research design is a plan for achieving the research purposes and solving the research problems. It is also a guide used to determine the techniques and procedures followed in collecting and analyzing data. Research design specifies the variables that are studied, the sampling procedures, the research context, the data-gathering approaches, and the data-examining techniques (Kalaian, 2008:724). A descriptive research design is among the commonly used non-experimental research designs used in the social sciences to gather information from a relatively small group taken from the population (Kalaian, 2008:725-728). The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the learning style preferences of second year English majoring students in Wolaita Sodo University; the descriptive study design was used. The design of the study was both descriptive and exploratory. It is descriptive in the sense that descriptive statistics such as mean, frequency, standard deviations and t-test analysis were employed. It was exploratory because no research on English language learning style preferences has been conducted in this study setting.

Research setting and participants

A convenience-sampling technique is among sampling techniques used in research. The purpose of the study is one factor to be considered for determining the data sources and the sampling techniques to be used. In this study, therefore, two universities, namely, Wolaita Sodo and Wachamo Universities were used as the study setting. Proximity of the universities in terms of their nearness to the researcher's residence was considered in selecting them from the nine universities found in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Regional state of Ethiopia (SNNPR).

The data reported in this work was collected from students in Wolaita Sodo University. The data was collected from second year English majoring students in the first semester of the 2019/20 academic year. Second year students were selected on the assumption that they had one year university English leaning experience behind themselves. The experience believed to enable them to identify their weakness and strengths in their approaches to learning tasks designed at their level.

Sampling techniques

According to Kothari (2006), a researcher should determine his/her sample size to be optimum and fulfill the requirement of research efficiency, representativeness and reliability. In order to take a representative sample size out of second year university students and run the investigation in a desirable manner, simple random sampling technique was used. Using simple random sampling technique allows the researcher to give a study population an equal chance of being selected (Best and Kahn, 2002).

Before using random selection in this study, the students were stratified based on their gender category-male and female. Following that, 40 students were selected randomly and completed the questionnaire from among the estimated total number of 53 students attending in the same field of study. The random selection was done through drawing lots. To do this, first, students name list with their ID No was obtained from their respective university departments. Then, their identification numbers were written on pieces of papers of roughly equal size. The papers were rolled up and the students were made to draw one each. Following this random selection procedure, 20 male and 20 female students were chosen as the study participants.

Data collection instruments

Student questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this study had two sections: the first section aimed at gathering basic information about the background of participants, whereas the second section of the questionnaire contains major questions about students learning style preferences. The questionnaire was partially adapted from Reid, (1995).

The questionnaire had 30 items based on Reid's six learning style preferences: visual, auditory group, kinesthetic, tactile and individual. The questionnaire was designed in the way that it allows participants to indicate their learning style preferences on a five–point scale. The participants put a tick (√) mark to show how much they agree with each item on a scale from one to five: (5) strongly agree, (4) agree, (3) undecided, (2) disagree, and (1) strongly disagree.

The 30 items in the questionnaire categorized and assigned randomly into six styles based on how students learn best using their senses: auditory, visual, kinesthetic, and tactile preferences and two social aspects of learning: group and individual. As a result, *auditory* learning style had items 1, 7,9,17 and 20 in the questionnaire. Items 6,10,12,24 and 29 grouped under visual learning style. Items included under tactile learning style are 11,14,16,22 and 25 while items 2, 8, 15, 19 and 26 were categorized into kinesthetic learning style. Group learning style included items 3, 4, 5, 21 and 23. Individual learning style preference, on the other hand, encompassed items 13, 18, 27, 28 and 30, (Reid 1987).

The PLSPQ (Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire) format reproduced and used in this study. This because various related studies show that students can precisely identify their own learning styles (Dunn, 1984). Alkhatnai (2011), for example writes, "This instrument has been used extensively in many studies across different cultures, especially non-native speakers of English". The instrument has become one of the popular instruments used to explore ESL/EFL students' learning styles, and this, makes it a vital tool for the present study. The researcher adapted Reid's PLSPQ with some modifications of some items to suit the Ethiopian context. Before the actual data collection, the effectiveness of the instruments, in terms of validity and reliability, has been piloted in a context that has a similar setting with the actual research setting. In addition,

senior colleagues in the department evaluated the adapted questionnaire prior to its administration. This helped to check the validity of the questionnaire and the clarity of the questions. To make sure the accuracy of data analysis, the reliability of the questionnaire was checked using Cronbach's alpha statistical method. Accordingly, the reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.75; this strongly supports the validity and reliability of this research instrument (Khamkhien, 2011).

Data analysis

The data gathered through the questionnaire was analyzed using descriptive statistical method.

Because of the similarity in terms of determining students' preferences in five learning style, the statistical analysis used by Reid (1995) was adopted in this study. Accordingly, frequency counts, percentage, and mean score of the raw data obtained from respondents through questionnaires were calculated and organized using computer software called statistical package for social science (SPSS) 20 versions. In addition, among the inferential statistical measures, the independent T-test was used to check the differences of learning style preference between male and female students. T-test gives accurate probabilities even when the populations do not have assumed characteristics.

Ethical consideration

Research ethics is a scientific standard followed by a researcher to ensure that no one is harmed during or after the research activities. In other terms, the researcher has an obligation to respect the rights, needs, values and desires of the informants. Appropriate steps were taken in this study to adhere to strict ethical guidelines in order to uphold participants' privacy, confidentiality, dignity, rights, and anonymity.

Table.1 Gender Category of the Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	20	50	50.0	50.0
Female	20	50	50.0	50.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table.2 Overall Learning Styles Profile of respondents

Descriptive statistics

Types of Learning styles	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Preference Rank order
Auditory	40	4.09	.87047	**3rd**
Kinesthetic	40	3.70	.65003	**5th**
Visual	40	4.17	.74634	**2nd**
Tactile	40	3.13	.57946	**6th**
Group	40	4.23	.49446	**1st**
Individual	40	3.81	.60925	**4th**

Table.3 Independent sample T- test Result on Gender Differences

Group statistics

Learning styles	Gender		t-value (P-value)	95% CI
	Male	**Female**		
	Mean (SD)	**Mean (SD)**		
Auditory	3.57 (.849)	4.60 (.525)	-4.613 (.000)	(-1.482, -.578)
kinesthetic	3.74 (.584)	3.65 (.722)	.433 (.667)	(-.331, .511)
Group	4.20 (.584)	4.25 (.399)	-.361 (.754)	(-.370, .270)
Visual	4.56 (.595)	3.78 (.685)	3.845 (.000)	(.369, 1.190)
Tactile	3.01 (.560)	3.24 (.590)	1.265 (.214)	(-.598, .138)
Individual	3.85 (.608)	3.77 (.623)	.411 (.684)	(-.314, .474)

Data analysis and discussion

This chapter presents the data analysis and interpretation. The chapter also includes a narrative discussion of the results and implications of the data gathered based on the objective of study.

Demographic data of the respondents

The demographic data of the sample (21) respondents were captured using items 1 and 2 of the questionnaire (see Appendix A). Then, the result is presented as follows in Table 1.

Learning style preference profiles of respondents

Objective 1: *To determine English language learning style preferences of second year EFL students.* (Please see section 2.4.1. for the categories of the six dimensions of learning styles in Reid's PLSPQ classification.). The result is shown in Table 2, which indicates the students' preferences as major, minor or negligible.

As indicated in Table 2, relatively the highest number of students preferred Group Learning style with the mean score (x̄ =4.23). The least preferred learning style is found to be Tactile Learning style with the mean score (x̄ = 3.13). Apart from the most and the least preferred learning styles, respondents have also shown preferences considerably towards Visual learning style (x̄ = 4.17), Auditory (x̄ = 4.09), and Individual Learning styles (x̄ = 3.81) respectively. This implies that classroom instructions has to be organized in multi-modal fashion to address different groups of learning styles, at the same time, group activities has to be encouraged for the reason that in the community they grew up they may have already developed this experiences .

Meanwhile, the finding in this study contradicts Reid's (1987) major learning style preferences; that is, the result of the present study shows that Group Learning was a major learning style preferred by majority (x̄ = 4.23) rather than Individual Learning (x̄ = 3.81). Similarly, the finding of this study had some differences with finding in Reid (1987) where respondents put auditory learning style, as their secondary learning style preference as compared to visual learning style even if it was found the reverses in present study with mean scores for Visual and Auditory Learning were 4.71 and 4.09 respectively. This indicates that students learning style preferences seem to alter when there is difference in educational background and learning environment.

Rossi-Le (1995) studied the perceptual learning styles of adult immigrant learners and the relationship between preferred learning styles and strategy preference in an ESL context. Rossile concluded that the major learning style preferences of the majority of the participants were the tactile and kinesthetic learning styles, which require a practical and experiential approach in learning. Whereas, all the language groups in Rossi-Le's study preferred group learning, while individual learning showed to be a minor learning style as it was the case in the present study. Rossi-Le also found that the perceptual learning style preferences based on the learners' native language background. For instance, the major learning style preference of the Spanish learners in the study was Auditory Learning. On the other hand, Chinese and Vietnamese students showed a major learning style preference for Visual Learning. In conclusion, it was found that language learners have differences in their learning style preferences, mainly, due to differences in the learning environment/context (Reid, 1987). This shows that the diverse cultural and educational backgrounds that ESL/EFL students come from put

influences on students' preferences to learn in certain styles. Consequently, students learning styles not addressed properly, they may lack interest to participate, may feel uncomfortable, and be less attentive to the classroom instruction and achieve lowest scores (Holtbrugge and Mohr, 2010).

Learning style differences based on gender

Data collected on whether 'gender' as a variable matters in determining learning style preference is another issue of concern in this study. In this study, it was hypothesized that there was no significant differences in learning styles preferences due to gender. Table 3 below summarizes the data collected in this regard.

Objective 2: To determine whether or not there were significant differences in learning style preferences due to gender.

As can be seen in Table 3, the most preferred learning style by male students was Visual with mean value (x̄=4.56) while female students preferred Auditory Learning with mean (x̄=4.60). In addition, there was an interesting finding about Tactile Learning; both male and female considered this Learning style to be their least preferred learning style among others. It can be seen that both male and female students employed tactile with nearly the same mean score (x̄ =3.85, 3.77) respectively. Supporting this, Lincoln et al. (2006) found that female learners preferred to learn using their auditory senses, while male learners learn best when taking notes. In contrast, Wehrwein *et al.,* (2007) who conducted a study focusing on four ethnic groups reported that female students had a higher preference for Kinesthetic learning style, while male students were more tactile than female students were. Similarly, the result of an independent sample t-test at p< 0.05 revealed that there were statistically significant differences (.000) in between male and female students regarding visual and auditory learning style preferences.

However, there were researchers who reported no significant difference in learning style preferences among the participants due to gender (Cezair, 2005; Slater *et al.,* 2007; Sizemore and Schultz, 2005). Hence, variations in learning styles due to gender are still controversial. Whereas, other studies such as Dobson (2009), Lincoln and Rademacher (2006), Wehrwein *et al.,* (2007), Kia *et al.,* (2009) reported that 'gender' as one of the variables affecting learning style preferences of students. Therefore, the inconsistency of findings

among studies shows a venue for further investigation (Dobson, 2009; Kia, Aliapour and Ghaderi, 2009).

This study explored the learning styles preferences of Wolaita Sodo University second year English Major Students. Identifying students' learning styles preferences is believed to help WSU instructors to plan classroom lessons and teach course materials in the ways diverse needs of students can be accommodated.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that even though the students were involved in the same field and were the same batch; they did not have the same learning styles. Their learning style preference varied from one to another. That is why learning styles of students and their characteristics have to be considered, and understood by teachers before teaching them. This may enhance students' performances in language courses. Furthermore, teachers must be able to provide classroom lessons, and materials that respond to various students' learning styles.

According to Krashen (1982), learning styles is one of the important factors affecting language acquisition, especially second language acquisition (SLA); it affects English language learning, and English Language Teaching (ELT). "The true causative variables in second language acquisition derive from the input hypothesis and affective filter - the amount of comprehensible input the acquirer receives and understands, and the strength of the affective filter, or the degree to which the acquirer is 'open' to the input" (p.95).

It can thus be concluded that learning styles can be seen as the affective filter because it is related to learners' preferences and feeling to acquire language. This shows how teachers can provide the 'input', which is appropriate for learning styles of learners. The result of this study shows that students employed Group Learning the most. The implication is that group activities and collaborative language learning opportunities help the students learn best, and achieve their own learning goals.

Besides, for auditory learners, apart from lecture presentation, audio/tape recorded materials should be provided . Teachers should provide activities and materials that students like to learn. Doing this may motivate and encourage students to take the initiative to learn by themselves. Motivated learners will eventually become autonomous learners.

In this connection, research shows that learners will be motivated to learn best from their favorite habit (Dörnyei, 2001a; Dornyei, 2001b). In doing this, however, teachers should not avoid other learning styles of students. It is also argued that learning styles of students can be changed, and adjusted all the time if they are in different learning environments. Thus, teachers should encourage their students to be familiar with various learning styles. For example, even though students of this study preferred Auditory Learning rather than Visual Learning, teachers might provide video clips that include both sound and pictures. Students, who are already familiar with auditory learning style, can be trained to learn to become Visual Learners (Fourier, 1984; Ramburuth, 1998; Reid, 1995; Wasanasomsitthi, 2000).

In conclusion, it can be said that having insights about students' learning style preferences is one of the important strategies that influence the success of teaching and learning. The researcher strongly believes that teachers can adjust their teaching styles, provide classroom lessons, and materials to serve their students' needs. This can best be done after exploring and identifying students' learning styles preferences. In addition, students should be encouraged to try various learning styles and make themselves familiar with various learning styles. This helps them become autonomous students. Learner autonomy is the basis of the current educational paradigm - i.e., learner-centered approach.

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