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## A STUDY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING STYLES USED BY GEORGIAN STUDENTS

The aim of the work was to research learning style distribution in Georgian university students to determine which styles or their complexes are optimal in foreign language learning in similar conditions of teaching. Learning style preferences of more and less successful students were compared using a standardized test (Ehrman, 1998). An analysis of frequencies does not reveal reliable differences between more successful and less successful students. A statistically reliable correlation between varieties of styles was detected only in more successful students, giving grounds to conclude that successful students use diverse and multiple styles, while less successful ones are mostly stuck with one style.

*Key words:* learning style, individual differences, more and less successful students

The need to integrate students' individual traits is one of the declared requirements aimed at improving foreign language teaching. Unfortunately, adapting teaching to individual differences has been problematic. As early as in the 1960s Cronbach wrote that "it has not yet been the subject of the logical and philosophical analysis." In this context the concept of aptitude was used in the sense of "a complex of personal characteristics that accounts for an individual's end stand after a particular educational treatment, i.e. that determines what he learns, how much he learns or how rapidly he learns" (Cronbach, 1967).

Four decades later, Dornyei (2005) indicated that "Research results after the past decades have consistently demonstrated that key reasons why many second language learners fail is in various learners attributes. The scope of individual differences is broad ranging from creativity to learning style and anxiety – there is

no comprehensive unified volume that provides an overview of the considerable amount of research conducted on various language learner differences.”

In modern approaches individual differences in foreign language learning embrace the areas of language aptitude, motivation, learning strategies and learning style (Skehan, 1989). Two interrelated concepts – learning style and learning strategy – are used with equal popularity.

The interrelation of these concepts is considered differently. Learning style is the way someone chooses to learn and teach something (Thelen, 1954). Ehrman, Leaver, and Oxford (2003) reserve this term for “preferred forms of brain activity associated with information acquisition and processing and consider personality variables to represent another kind of learning style.”

Learning style is an intrinsically deterministic characteristic, often unconsciously used by the learner (Reid et al., 1998). In contrast to style, strategies are the skills consciously used to improve the process of teaching (Oxford, 1990). Style is revealed through learning strategies. A strategy cannot be good or bad. It is useful if it meets the requirements of the problem, suits the style of the student and corresponds to other strategies. It is the case when strategies “make the process of learning easier, faster, more directed, efficient, and more portable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990). On the basis of this definition, learning strategies help the student to use the most effective means. However, O’Malley and Chamot (1990) showed that English-speaking students learning foreign languages displayed ambiguous results: positive effects alternated with neutral ones. Oxford (2001) supposed that there was not enough systematic integration of the individual style of learning. Thus, the determination of the individual style of learning is a prerequisite for the effectiveness of foreign language acquisition.

Different types of learning styles are distinguished (Reid et al., 1998). Reid et al. identify the following:

- Perceptual learning styles (visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, group, individual);
- Field-dependent (sensitive) and Field-independent learning style;
- Analytical and Global learning styles;
- Reflective and Impulsive learning styles.

The question arises: how might these types of styles be combined in the process of learning, do they exclude one another or do they form complexes?

In the 1950s Russian psychologist and methodologist Belyaev proposed a typology of learning a foreign language, on the basis of the system components (Belyaev, 1959). He identified two personal types: rational-logical and intuitive-sensual. The rational-logical type requires theoretical knowledge, grammar analysis of text and translation; using the foreign language, this person draws attention not only to the semantic aspect of speech, but also to its linguistic characteristics. The intuitive-sensitive type acquires language skills primarily through practice and does not need any theoretical knowledge; the semantics is understood through guesses, the

intuitive grasp of the foreign language laws. Belyaev did not offer any method for diagnosing this typology, nor their actual distribution in different learning environments; he did not indicate whether their formation is determined only by the methods of teaching or they are innate personality characteristics. These questions have become the object of the present preliminary study.

In Georgia, the English language is a compulsory subject at all universities, however there has not been any concrete study of students' learning styles.

To answer these questions, a questionnaire based on Belyaev's typology was developed (Spring, 2008).

The questionnaire aimed to determine whether Belyaev's selected criteria are real in the constant conditions of learning a foreign language at university. The results of the survey conducted among second-year students confirmed the existence of typological differences among the students of a foreign language as a specialty. The results showed that despite identical teaching methods (sessions were conducted by several teachers, but with one and the same methodology and the same books), students can be attributed to different types (identified by Belyaev).

## Research problem

The problem of the experimental study was as follows: a) what is the distribution of the types of learning styles in the conditions of teaching at our university; b) whether any of the learning styles could be considered as the best; c) whether it is possible to develop concrete recommendations for considering assigned individual characteristics in the teaching process at the university.

## Method

### Participants

The survey was carried out on 203 students studying at Ilia State University, Georgia, specializing in a foreign language: English, German, French, and Spanish. All of them were involved in a standard program of teaching with standard textbooks<sup>1</sup> and were taught by different teachers. Their progress in learning the foreign language was evaluated by their teachers using a standard system according to which they were divided into two groups: more successful with more than standardized 75 points and less successful – fewer than 75 points. As a result of this procedure 124 students were placed in the more successful group and 79 in the less successful group. The native language of all the subjects was Georgian.

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the textbooks are: *Total English* (student book) Mark Foley, Diana Hall; *Studio D.*, Cornelsen, 2007 (German), *Forum 1*, Hachette, 2002 (French), *Nuevo Espanol Sin Fronteras*, Primera Edicion, 2005 (Spanish).

## Procedure

The adaptation of Personal Learning Techniques MSQ Part II b (made by Ehman) was used as a research method (45 graduate students participated in the pilot).

Participants were given the following instructions: "You can do various things to help yourself learn. How often do you think you are likely to do the following? Use the scale provided to rate each item."

The subjects were offered a five-point scale of frequency:

1. *Almost never* – 2. *Rarely* – 3. *Sometimes* – 4. *Often* – 5. *Most of the time*

The findings were to show strong preferences for teaching in the following areas: field-independent, analytic, random, open-ended learning, global, kinesthetic, auditory, visual, deductive, reflective, impulsive, and multi-tasking<sup>2</sup>.

## Research Results

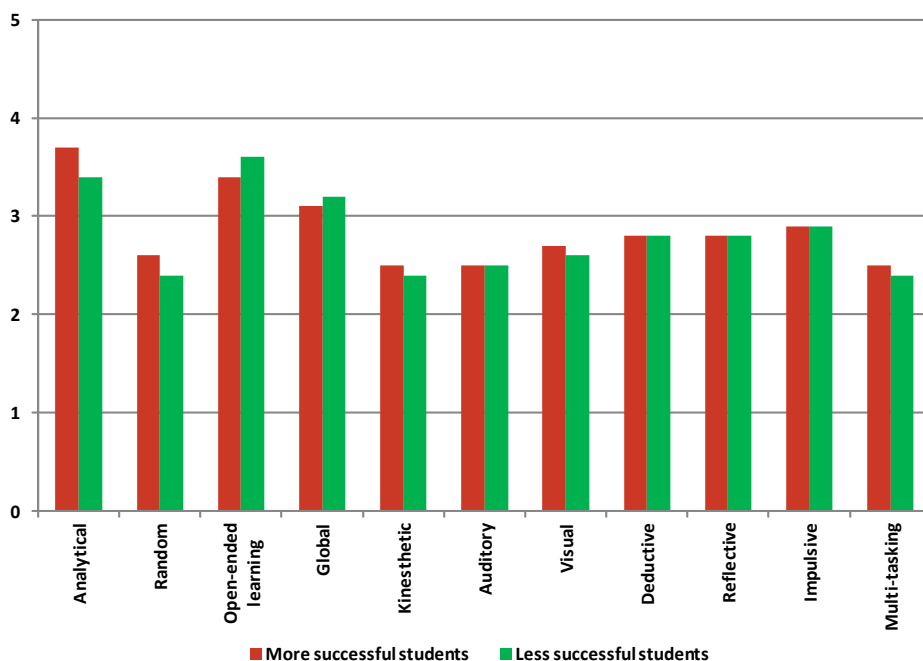
The test data were processed under the SPSS program and the following results were obtained: 1. A net statistically significant difference in the averages of different styles between more and less successful students; 2. Higher rates obtained for the analytical and open-ended styles of learning; successful students prefer the former, and less successful students the latter (see Figure 1); 3. Based on a correlation analysis, a difference between more successful and less successful students was revealed: in more successful students there is a significant correlation between the analytical and visual styles ( $r = 0.240$ ,  $p > 0.01$ ); between the analytical and open-ended learning styles ( $r = 0.189$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ); between the analytical and deductive styles ( $r = 0.216$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ); between the analytical and impulsive styles ( $r = 0.230$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ); between the open-ended and impulsive styles ( $r = 0.510$  and,  $p < 0.001$ ); between the global and kinesthetic styles ( $r = 0.224$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ); between the auditory and visual styles ( $r = 0.242$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ); between the auditory and impulsive styles ( $r = 0.251$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In less successful students such a correlation exists only between the auditory and visual styles – both perceptual ( $r = 0.323$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The above correlation suggests that when learning, more successful students use a variety of styles, while less successful ones are more attached to one of the styles.

## Discussion

The idea of considering the individual learning style in the process of foreign language acquisition is not new but it is associated with a number of difficulties.

<sup>2</sup> The meanings of the styles are: analytical – learns more effectively sequentially, linearly, individually; Open-ended – learns without any limits, aims or dates fixed in advance; Global – learns more effectively through concrete experience and through interaction with other people; Kinesthetic – learns more effectively through complete body experience; Auditory – learns more effectively by ear (hearing); Visual – learns more effectively through the eyes (seeing); Deductive – likes to know how the system works and what the rules are; Reflective – learns more effectively when given time to consider options; Impulsive – learns more effectively when able to respond immediately; Multi-tasking – can do more than one thing at once (Reid et al., 1998).

Figure 1. Frequencies of learning styles



According to Reid et al. (1998), if the teacher helps the student to realize his/her individual learning style, this stimulates him/her to use analytical skills that generally are not characteristic for every individual. On the other hand, considering the style of each student in each situation is pedagogically impossible.

Learning styles in different cultures may be different. However stereotyping is not justified. Reid et al. (1998) say that each of styles can be placed on a continuum, i.e. every student in some measure is an analyst, able to reflect and, at the same time, depends on the context.

Education systems give a value to different learning styles. A successful student at an American university is usually an independent individual who thinks analytically, objectively responds well to tests, and articulates an individual opinion. From this perspective, a study on learning strategies conducted on a large volume of material (1758 learners) in Taiwan is interesting. It showed significant gender differences in the use of strategies as well as differences in students of humanities and technical departments. The former more frequently use cognitive strategies while the latter use them less frequently.

The majority of Ilia State University students prefer the analytical and open-ended styles. Is this the result of teaching methods or peculiarities of the Georgian mentality? We can only hypothesize about these results. There are very few

experimental data about Georgian ethnic peculiarities (Surmanidze, 1993) and the open-ended style corresponds with such characteristics.

Nevertheless, the majority of authors agree that despite potential barriers to implementation of knowledge on styles, awareness of the style has a positive effect in foreign language learning.

Ehrman, Leaver, and Oxford (2003) cite the opinion of Rothbart and Derryberry (1981) that learning styles are based on individual differences in reactivity and self-regulation, so they are relatively stable at different ages and in different situations and cultures. These authors believe that researchers and practitioners use the concept of personality and cognitive style to predict results and enhance learning, and rely on different models, ranging from the Gardner model of multiple intelligences, ending with Jung's model. R. Oxford (1990) and her collaborators have created a system of learning strategies, reflected in the fact that teaching is effective if it is adapted to students' learning style.

The main obtained result regarding the multitude of learning styles used by successful students could be interpreted as either their innate peculiarity or greater plasticity or sensitivity towards different teaching methods. In both cases, cross-cultural analysis would provide the adequate direction for further reasoning.

## Conclusion

The learning styles used by the Georgian university students in the foreign language acquisition process were studied. According to the data: a) students of the university prefer the analytical and open-ended styles; b) the frequencies of learning styles used by students (analytical, global, perceptual, multi-tasking, impulsive etc.), do not reveal statistically reliable differences between more successful and less successful students; c) a correlation analysis has shown that the correlations between the different styles are more important with more successful students. Based on this, more successful students use diverse and multiple styles, while less successful students are attached to only one style.

The results offer the possibility to formulate some recommendations for foreign language teachers: Teachers should help students to use a wide spectrum of multiple ways of learning; teachers should help students to break stereotyped styles of learning.

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