

A Survey of Teacher-Student Style Mismatches

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Abstract

An important aspect of the differences among students has to do with their learning style. As with learning style, the concept of teaching style is also important since a stylistic mismatch between teacher and student may determine how well they get along, with important consequences for the learning process. This study is intended to find if there are serious teacher-student style mismatches in college teaching. Four teachers and one hundred fifty-seven college students are involved in this study. All of them are asked to complete the questionnaire designed by Juan Du (2003) to measure their teaching styles and learning styles. Besides the questionnaire the present author has designed an interview so as to get qualitative data concerning the learning styles, the teaching styles and mismatches between them.

Key words: Individual difference; Learning style; Teaching style

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INTRODUCTION

Put forth first by Herbert Thelen in 1954, learning style refers to an individual's natural, habitual and preferred way of absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skills. These styles persist, regardless of teaching methods and content areas. An individual's learning style is formed gradually in the leaning process

based on his physiological features as well as the social and educational backgrounds and is unique to each individual (Tan, 1995). Rather fixed in nature, learning style is subject to change to some degree, but not easily. Moreover, learning style is neutral; no one style is better than others. Though often described as opposites, such as analytic vs. global or visual vs. auditory, learning style exists on wide continuums, that is, a person's learning style is not on either of the two poles.

Kinsella (1995) states, "Although there is probably some truth to the maxim that teachers teach the way they were taught, there is probably a lot more truth in saying that teachers teach the way they learned best in school" (p.170). Teaching style thus tends to correspond to how each person learns, which explains why some teachers are traditional instructors and others are informal ones.

A stylistic match or mismatch between a teacher and his students may determine how well they get along, with important consequences for the learning process. Therefore it is important for the teacher to understand his teaching style and his students' learning styles so as to design instructional teaching strategies to fit his students' diverse learning styles.

Focusing on college English teaching in China, it is natural to ask: Are there serious mismatches between college students' learning styles and teachers' teaching styles? This study is an attempt to find plausible answers to this question.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Compared to the study on learning strategy and affective variables, learning style research has a shorter history. However, it remains a prosperous domain in recent years. Herbert Thelen put forth the concept of learning style in 1954 and since then more than 30 theories and models emerged. In the following section the present author tries to give a clear picture of this theory.

The essence of learning style can be seen clearly, that is, a “pervasive quality in the learning behavior of an individual” (p. 87) as Reid (1987) pointed out. This quality is rather stable and manifested from the cognitive, affective and physiological perspectives through the whole process of learning -- taking in information then putting it into process so as to remember it. Learning style has four main aspects, all related to each other: cognitive, affective, physiological and behavioral (Willing, 1988; Wallace & Oxford, 1992).

Learning style is individualistic. Every one has his own particular learning style, which is rather a fixed, “stable” and “pervasive” characteristic of an individual (Garger & Guild, 1984).

According to Oxford *et al.* (1992) the most significant learning style dimensions for EFL include the following:

- field-independence and field-dependence, also known as analytic and global styles;
- sensory preferences (e. g., visual, auditory and hands-on);
- extraversion and introversion, intuitive and concrete-sequential styles;
- closure-oriented and open styles.

To the present author the important learning style dimensions in EFL classroom setting are visual, auditory and hands-on (learning best via the eye, the ear vs. movement and touch), random and sequential (focusing on futuristic possibilities and abstract thinking vs. paying close attention to step-by-step task requirements), analytic and global (centering on small details and specific rules vs. focusing on the “big picture” and on major trends), impulsive and reflective (showing immediate responses to the teacher’s initiatives vs. thinking for a long time before responding to the teacher’s questions), dependent and independent (relying on the teacher to set learning aims and tasks vs. relying on oneself to do these) and group and individual (liking working with others vs. preferring working by oneself).

“Style wars” called by Oxford *et al.* (1992) refers to the mismatches between teaching and learning styles. The compatibility of a teacher’s instructional style and his students’ learning style is a significant factor in the success of the learning process (Dunn & Griggs, 1995). Conversely a serious mismatch between a teacher’s teaching style and his students’ learning style may have a decidedly negative impact on classroom learning (Felder & Henriques, 1995; Oxford *et al.*, 1991). Serious mismatches between teaching and learning styles often result in students’ anxiety and negative attitudes toward learning and thus demotivate them, which will ultimately influence their learning achievements. Each individual has his/her own natural and preferred ways of absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skills (Kinsella, 1995). Students bring their learning style preferences, which have formed before they come into the classroom. If teachers ignore this and continue to teach the same lesson to an entire class in the same way and

eventually require a demonstration of mastery in exactly the same way, some students will benefit while others will suffer. For not all the students’ minds work in the same way. Moreover, it is usually the case that teachers assume that the way they teach is the most efficient way and consequently bias their teaching in favor of students who approach learning in much the same way as they do. For example, teachers who prefer group works in class certainly like group-oriented students and take the individual oriented students as passive participants.

From the above analysis there arises the necessity of teachers being aware of their students’ learning styles. Then they can maximize their students’ learning by incorporating learning situations that employ students’ preferred learning styles.

Learning style research in China has been centered on getting a learning style profile of Chinese learners and what relations exist between learning style and foreign language achievement. Wang Chunming (1992) employed Reid’s (1987) Learning Style Preference Questionnaire with some modification, to test 490 English majors and found out that the most favored style was tactile style and group work least favored. Hu Xiaoqiong’s (1987) study came out with similar results with Wang’s. The participants in Hu’s study were also English majors and they were found to dislike the learning style of group work and prefer multidimensional styles instead of one only. Yu Xinle’s (1997) study not only provided a learning style profile of college students but also investigated the relationship between learning style and English proficiency by using Keefe and Monk’s learning style test and CET Band-4 as the instruments. Yu concluded that among 24 observed styles, sequential processing information and memory styles significantly correlated with achievements in CET Band-4.

2. METHODOLOGY

This section gives a detailed explanation of the objectives, subjects, instruments and procedure of this study.

2.1 Objectives

This paper tries to find if there are serious style mismatches between college students and their English teachers.

2.2 Participants

Four college English teachers and one hundred fifty-seven second-year college students are employed in this study. The teachers are aged from 26 to 42. Among them 1 is male and 3 are females. They have been teaching for English for an average of 8 years and are qualified and experienced. The students are all non-English majors, aging from 18 to 21. Of them 76 are males and 81 are females. They are from four departments, specializing in the field of the humanities and sciences respectively. The

students are quite familiar with their English teachers after more than one year of college learning.

2.3 Instrument and Methodology

The survey includes two parts: 1. Survey questionnaire; 2. Focus group interviews. The survey questionnaire is adopted from Du Juan (2003) with some modifications and the present author has designed the interview questions.

Du Juan's questionnaire is designed by herself, which incorporates many learning style dimensions of former research and of the strong points of the former learning style assessment instruments. Thus it is comprehensive for assessing classroom learning styles.

The questionnaire consists of 65 statements, measuring the students' 13 dimensions of learning styles on a five-point Likert Scale (1=almost never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5=almost always). The questionnaire is also used to assess the teachers' teaching style preferences.

The 10 interview questions are designed by the present author to gather qualitative data about the students' learning style preferences and the teachers' teaching style preferences and mismatches between them.

2.4 Procedure and Data Analysis

Both the students and the teachers finished the questionnaires in about ten minutes and questionnaires were collected immediately. In analyzing them, 8 students' copies had to be dropped out because they were unfinished. The participants, therefore, are 4 teachers and 149 students.

In the focus group interviews, four teachers and 8 students were interviewed respectively. The students were asked about their learning style preferences, the influence of their learning history on their learning styles and mismatches between their learning styles and their teachers' teaching styles. The teachers were inquired about their teaching styles and their counter teaching strategies to deal with teacher-student style mismatches. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and in a relaxed and casual atmosphere so as to ensure that the subjects would express their opinions freely and openly. The whole process was recorded and transcribed. The main points of the interview are presented in the major findings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section will present the results and discuss the findings as regards the task of the current study.

3.1 The Mean and Standard Deviation of the Students' Learning Style Variables

A rough examination of the data reveals that the students are seldom oriented to one extreme or the other in terms of their learning style tendency. To each style there are 5 items and each item has five choices, *almost always*, *often*, *sometimes*, *rarely*, *almost never* in terms of the conformity with the subjects' specific learning situations. Few of them chose the choice of *almost always* and *almost never*.

Table 3.1
The Mean and Standard Deviation of the Students' Learning Style Variables

Variable	Mean	S.D.
Visual	17.33	2.61
Auditory	13.27	2.46
Hands-on	15.10	3.40
Independent	18.54	2.82
Dependent	12.66	3.42
Group-oriented	15.83	3.94
Individual-oriented	15.57	3.40
Analytical	14.74	2.93
Global	16.45	3.18
Sequential	17.22	3.32
Random	14.98	2.83
Impulsivity	15.01	2.80
Reflectivity	17.98	2.60

Table 3.1 shows the statistics including the mean and standard deviation of each category of learning style. At first sight, one will find that the mean of each learning style variable is mostly around the average score 15. And only the means of five variables, namely visual, independent, global, sequential and reflective deviate from the average point 15 to a noticeable degree, that is 17.33, 18.54, 16.45, 17.22 and 17.98 respectively. In addition, the frequency distribution of each score of the 5 variables is also illustrated in graph, which verifies and reinforces the 5 respective learning style preferences. In the frequency distribution figures the level axis indicates the total score a learner got as regards each specific variables of learning style, while the figures on the vertical axis represent the number of learners who got that particular score. Form Table 3.1 it can be seen that the mean score of independent learning style is the highest one.

3.2 Comparison of the Students' Learning Styles and Their Respective Teachers' Teaching Style

In the following section the present author will first present the four teachers' teaching style preferences and then compare these with their students' learning styles.

Table 3.2
The Four Teachers' Respective Teaching Styles

Variance	X1	X2	X3	X4
Visual	20	19	17	18
Auditory	13	14	12	14
Hands-on	12	11	11	13
Independent	18	17	17	18
Dependent	14	13	12	13
Group-oriented	19	16	15	14
Individual-oriented	13	15	16	15
Analytic	12	14	13	14
Global	18	16	21	17
Sequential	17	13	15	16
Random	12	19	16	15
Impulsivity	11	13	13	20
Reflectivity	17	16	16	11

X1 style preferences of the English teacher teaching the History Department.

X2 style preferences of the English teacher teaching the Philosophy Department.

X3 style preferences of the English teacher teaching the Information Department.

X4 style preferences of the English teacher teaching the Environment Protection Department.

3.2.1 Comparison of the Learning Style of Students from the History Department and the Their English Teacher's Teaching Style

Table 3.2.1
Comparison of the General Learning Style of Students from the History Department and Their English Teacher's Teaching Style

Variable	Mean	S.D.	X1
Visual	16.80	2.47	20
Auditory	12.94	2.40	13
Hands-on	14.94	3.45	12
Independent	19.08	2.66	18
Dependent	11.22	2.83	14
Group-oriented	15.66	3.70	19
Individual-oriented	16.05	2.97	13
Analytical	14.61	2.78	12
Global	17.19	3.67	18
Sequential	14.61	2.76	17
Random	17.30	2.87	12
Impulsivity	14.63	3.31	11
Reflectivity	18.02	2.10	17

Table 3.2.1 shows the general learning style preferences of students from the History Department are visual, independent, global, random and reflective. And their English teacher is inclined to the visual, independent, group-oriented, sequential and reflective style variances.

“Concerning my teaching style, I think...I am visual, independent, group-oriented, sequential and reflective. I like to use blackboard to help my students understand new words and important grammar points. I like to arrange group works for the students to accomplish. This may be partly due to my teaching experience as an oral English teacher. As to the class planning, I am very systematic and like to let the class go in a step-by-step way. I rarely tell jokes to my students since telling these disturbs my thought. I am very patient and usually give enough time for students to think their answers. In addition I would like to give students more freedom to arrange their own learning plans.”

3.2.2 Comparison of the Learning Style of Students from the Philosophy Department and their English Teacher's Teaching Style

Table 3.2.2
Comparison of the General Learning Style of Students from the Philosophy Department and Their English Teacher's Teaching Style

Variable	Mean	S.D.	X2
Visual	17.05	2.94	19
Auditory	13.76	2.23	14
Hands-on	14.23	3.61	11
Independent	17.68	3.00	17
Dependent	11.73	3.21	13
Group-oriented	15.00	3.97	16
Individual-oriented	15.65	3.44	15
Analytical	14.28	2.62	14
Global	16.76	2.98	16
Sequential	16.89	4.01	13
Random	14.57	2.98	19
Impulsivity	14.86	2.35	13
Reflectivity	17.81	2.43	16

From Table 3.2.2 it can be said that students from the Philosophy Department are oriented to the visual, independent, global, sequential and reflective style variances. And their teacher prefers the visual, independent, global, random and reflective style variances, which can be confirmed from the interview:

“I think I am visual, global, random, independent and reflective oriented. Before starting teaching a new article I usually first tell my students what the author mainly talks

about. I think this can help them grasp the meaning of the article. In class I sometimes diverge from the given topic, telling something interesting to live up the classroom atmosphere and relax the students. I am strongly visual. I think most Chinese teachers and students prefer this style. In addition I often encourage my students to plan and manage their learning by themselves.

3.2.3 Comparison of the Learning Style of Students from the Information Department and Their English Teacher's Teaching Style

Table 3.2.3
Comparison of the General Learning Style of Students from the Information Department and Their English Teacher's Teaching Style

Variable	Mean	S.D.	X3
Visual	18.00	2.69	17
Auditory	13.79	2.78	12
Hands-on	16.18	3.41	11
Independent	18.97	2.61	17
Dependent	14.13	3.48	12
Group-oriented	16.61	4.24	15
Individual-oriented	15.43	3.79	16
Analytical	15.25	3.53	13
Global	16.06	3.17	21
Sequential	17.34	3.35	15
Random	15.29	3.15	16
Impulsivity	15.11	2.78	13
Reflectivity	18.18	2.86	16

Table 3.2.3 shows the general learning style of students from the Information Department. They are visual, independent, analytic, reflective and sequential oriented. And their English teacher has the similar tendency expect that he bears the global style variance in contrast with the students' analytical style variance, which can be seen from the following statements:

"I usually pay more attention to the general idea of an article or paragraph than to every small language points. I would like to spend more time on discussing the implied meaning of an article and its institutional meaning with my students than on explaining each grammar points."

3.2.4 Comparison of the Learning Style of Students from the Environmental Protection Department and Their English Teacher's Teaching Style

Table 3.2.4
Comparison of the General Learning Style of Students from the Environmental Protection Department and Their English Teacher's Teaching Style

Variable	Mean	S.D.	X4
Visual	17.35	2.12	18
Auditory	12.32	2.07	14
Hands-on	14.80	2.76	13
Independent	18.35	2.91	18
Dependent	13.38	3.30	13
Group-oriented	15.96	3.67	14
Individual-oriented	15.12	3.35	15
Analytical	14.74	2.22	14
Global	15.77	3.07	17
Sequential	17.35	1.99	16
Random	15.48	2.74	15
Impulsivity	15.48	3.01	20
Reflectivity	17.87	2.86	11

Table 3.2.4 displays the preferred learning styles of students from the Environmental Protection Department and from the statistics it can be said that they are visual, independent, analytic, sequential and reflective. And their teacher possess the similar style variances expect that she is rather impulsive. The interview with her reflects this: "I am rather impulsive in class teaching. This may be caused by my personality. I am usually impatient to wait the students to think over my questions. And sometimes to save time I would answer the questions raised by myself since waiting for the students to answer those needs a long time."

3.3 Mismatches of Teacher-Student Style

From the analysis of 3.2, it can be said with certainty that there are mismatches between learning style and teaching style but these are just very slight, and by no means serious. This can be seen more clearly through the interview with the four teachers and 8 students.

"There are mismatches between my teaching style and my students' learning styles. I have noticed this. For instance I am group-oriented so I like to assign group works for my students to do. Sometimes I found they did not show much enthusiasm in these works. I think group work offers a good chance to learn from others. My students, however, prefer to work individually. But I do not think these mismatches are serious. If I and my students communicate more frequently I think we can solve this problem."

“Style mismatches, yes, there are. I am rather random while I feel my students are very sequential. They like to be presented in a strict step-by-step organized fashion while I often diverge from a given topic. And I am sure we can deal with this problem well if both of us do some alterations.”

“I think it is natural to see teacher-student style mismatches since teachers and students are quite different in every aspect. But I think they are not big problems. For instance we are rather reflective and our English teacher is rather impulsive. But we can be more impulsive and our English teacher also can make changes to be more patient to wait us to give responses. It is not difficult if we cooperate well.”

“I have met with student-teacher style mismatches in the middle school. One of our English teachers often gave us lectures without writings on the blackboard. I could not hear her well and follow her. I was often confused at her class. I think our English teacher at present has a rather balanced teaching style.”

In summary, style mismatches exist between teachers and students but they are not serious. And if the students and teachers communicate with each other more frequently, teachers will have more balanced teaching styles and students will have more versatile learning styles.

CONCLUSION

Learning style constitutes an important aspect of individual learner differences, which have been attached great importance to in second and foreign language teaching and research. This study aims to enrich the current knowledge about learning style.

Concerning mismatches between teaching and learning styles results obtained from the current study reveal that they are not serious. Even so these mismatches deserve due attention.

Some suggestions for teachers to improve their teaching have been put forward in this thesis. Namely, language teachers should be aware of their teaching styles and their students' learning styles so as to develop a well-matched teaching style to cater for students' different learning styles. Students also have to know their learning styles in order to use fitful learning strategies in different learning situations. In addition, teachers should help their students to stretch their learning styles to be accustomed to various learning situations and tasks. Thus teachers

should on the one hand design activities to accommodate their students' learning styles and on the other hand develop a variety of other activities to help them diversify their learning styles.

Learning style is a pervasive phenomenon; it is a subject that is very extensive in the scope of study. Therefore, there are surely issues not well illustrated and ideas not well developed in this thesis. The writer is thus faced with much more hard work in her further research. And she expects help as well as criticism from those who are experts in this field, so that she could achieve more for the benefit of foreign language teaching and the learners as well.

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APPENDIX I

Questionnaire to Students and Teachers

Read each sentence carefully and think about how it applies to you. On each line, write the number that best describes your reactions to each sentence.

- 1---almost never;
- 2---rarely;
- 3---sometimes;
- 4---often;
- 5--- almost always

1. I learn better by reading what the teacher writes on the blackboard. ()
2. I remember things I have heard in class better than things I have read. ()
3. I avoid sitting at a desk when I don't have to. ()
4. I learn best when I can participate in related activities when I build something. ()
5. I like to find the answer for myself. ()
6. I think that the teacher should arrange everything for us in the class. ()
7. Talking with lots of other students in class gives me energy. ()
8. In class when I study alone, I learn better. ()
9. I try to find patterns in an English material. ()
10. I can summarize information easily. ()
11. I usually complete one task before starting another.()
12. Following a step-by-step way bores me. ()
13. I seldom talk in class unless I am asked to. ()
14. I need written directions for tasks. ()
15. I prefer to learn by listening to a lecture or a tape.()
16. Manipulating objects helps me to remember. ()
17. I think we can be given more free choices in class.()
18. I learn better if the teacher tells me how to do. ()
19. I get more work done when I work with others. ()
20. When I am in large group, I tend to keep silent and just listen. ()
21. I focus on the details rather than the big pictures. ()
22. I prefer that the teacher give us the answer to every problem. ()
23. It is easy for me to see the overall picture. ()
24. A large quantity of unstructured material does not bother me greatly. ()
25. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English. ()
26. I want my reading to follow a clear plan. ()
27. I need oral directions for tasks. ()
28. I enjoying breaking the general ideas down into smaller pieces. ()
29. Charts, diagrams and maps help me understand what someone says. ()
30. I draw lots of pictures in my notebook during class.()
31. When I work alone, I learn better. ()
32. It doesn't bother me if the teacher changes the schedule for the class. ()
33. I enjoy working on an assignment with two or three classmates. ()
34. I prefer to look for differences rather than similarities. ()
35. I do not like to observe a strict schedule for my learning. ()
36. I usually notice my mistakes and try not to make the same. ()
37. I like to be given more time for self-study. ()
38. When I turn on the TV, I listen to the sound more than I watch the screen. ()
39. I learn more by reading textbooks than by listening to a lecture. ()
40. I need written instruction for tasks. ()
41. I ignore details that are irrelevant. ()
42. I prefer to learn with others. ()
43. I like to find how to do by myself. ()
44. I expect the teacher to arrange my learning schedule. ()
45. I learn better in an organized class than in self-study. ()
46. I like to move from one paragraph to another systematically when reading. ()
47. I would not speak unless I am sure of my answer.()
48. I like to design my own reading schedule. ()
49. I like to speak out my opinion even if it may be wrong.()
50. I usually slow in response because I need time think over my answer. ()
51. I prefer things presented in a step-by-step way. ()
52. To understand unfamiliar words I make guesses.()
53. I avoid using a word that I am not sure of.()
54. I think a large amount of language input is the best way to progress. ()
55. I enjoy speaking in classes. ()
56. I prefer to work by myself. ()
57. I can see the main point very easily. ()
58. I read English articles without looking up every new word. ()
59. I learn more when I study in a group. ()
60. I like to scan through a text at first when reading. ()
61. When the teacher tells me the instruction, I understand better. ()
62. I learn more when I make something for a class project. ()
63. I prefer working on projects by myself. ()
64. I usually find the meaning of a sentence by dividing into parts that I understand.()
65. I think through mastery of individual language point is the surest way to progress. ()

APPENDIX II

Interview Questions

Interview of Four Teachers

1. Could you say something about your teaching style?
2. Do you know well of your teaching style?
3. Do you know your students' learning style?
4. Do you think there are mismatches between your teaching style and your students' learning style?
5. How to deal with the mismatches between your teaching style and your students' learning style?

Interview of Eight Students

1. Please talk about your learning style:
2. Do you know well of your learning style?
3. Do you think your learning experiences have influences on your learning style?
4. Do you think there are mismatches between your learning style and your English teacher's teaching style?
5. If there are mismatches between your learning style and your English teacher's teacher style, what will you, remain your own learning style or make adjustments to adapt to your teacher's teaching style?