

Preferences of Learning Styles and Approaches of English Language Teachers Enrolled in Distance Education Program

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Abstract

This paper explores the learning styles and approaches of English language teachers enrolled in master's program at an Open University in Pakistan. A total of 78 male and female teachers who were in their last stage of writing their dissertation at an open university in Pakistan were identified through stratified sampling and survey method was used to collect the data. Entwistle's three distinct approaches to learning were utilized to collect the data for this study: deep approach, surface approach and strategic approach. A self-developed pre-coded survey questionnaire founded on Entwistle (2001) was developed based on the purpose of the study. The results indicated that there was no sufficient evidence to conclude that the use of different learning approaches in distance programs through deep, surface, and strategic approaches were different for male and female students. Academicians teaching in distance universities could benefit from the research findings and consider them when developing materials for their learners. The results can also raise awareness among the distance learners regarding the learning styles and approaches that are mostly used by them.

Keywords: Open university, learning approaches, learning materials, learning styles, private and public schools

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Introduction

The concept of learning styles is very closely related to adult learning behavior in the literature. The styles can be measured through various tools and have long been generally accepted as established and intensely entrenched internal cognitive processes for taking in and processing information (Kolb, 1984; Kramer, 2002). Cawley, Miller and Milligan (1976) identify three domains of learning: (a) cognitive, related to facts, theories, conceptions and problem-solving; (b) affective, related to attitudes, feelings, morals and beliefs; and (c) psychomotor, related to learning by doing. The process of learning includes interpreting and deciphering new information, intuitions and skills into practice and all learners incline to do it differently from others in the three domains based on their experience, background knowledge and interest. These preferences are called individual learning styles. Some researchers are of the opinion that when students are involved in a task, their learning is heightened and retained for a longer period if it is presented in ways that they prefer (Claxton & Murrell, 1978).

Literature on learning style has often been identified as a strong variable to adult learning behavior in all types of environment. Numerous tools have been developed to measure learning styles, which are generally accepted as processes used by human beings to perform a cognitive activity (Ausburn & Ausburn, 1978; Kolb, 1984; Kramer, 2002). Psychologists and educators have over the years realized that though different students prefer different methods of learning, referred to as learning styles, research has often failed to establish differences that can be used for astute groups of learners (Conti & Kolody, 2004). Hussain and Ayub (2013) claim that learning styles have an impact on how data and information are treated and glitches are elucidated; it is steadfast for the tasks that students perform inside and outside the classroom and the learning styles remain persistent over a certain period of study time. Some researchers believe that if a task is presented by the teachers in ways that the learners' prefer, learning is quicker and retention is much longer (Claxton & Murrell, 1978). In the same vein, Blackmore (1996) advises that one of the major responsibilities of the teachers to assist learners in their learning process is to make themselves aware of the diversified learning styles that the learners bring with them. Assuming that learning styles influence student success and these styles differ between those enrolled in distance and conventional setup, it is the responsibility of the teachers to be vigilant and adjust their teaching style accordingly (Diaz & Cartnal, 1999; Hussain & Ayub, 2013).

Research into students' learning styles at tertiary level has been an ignored dispute in marginalized countries and very limited empirical studies have been carried out in this respect. This is even more with the students who are studying through the distance mode. This study aimed to examine the learning styles and approaches of those male and female teachers, who were studying through distance and to identify styles and approaches that would result in optimum learning. Thus, the primary research question that emerged for this exploratory study was: what learning styles and approaches are used by male and female distance learners?

Literature Review

Research studies done during the past 35 years specify that students take different approaches to learning and they become crucial aspects in the classroom than the teachers as verified by Marton and Säljö (1976), Entwistle and Entwistle (1997) and Biggs (1999). Although the terms learning styles and approaches are used interchangeably (James & Gardner, 1995), a clear difference when referring to these terms according to Sadler-Smith and Smith (2004) and Smith and Dalton (2005) is: learning style refers to a particular and habitual way a learner likes to go about when acquiring knowledge or skills and the style usually remains consistent in different learning contexts for a long time; whereas, learning approaches reflect the method that students prefer to use to understand various activities and tasks during their learning process. Distance students are adults who come with varied goals, experiences and expectations and therefore, have different characteristics than younger learners. Hence, it is vital for the adult learners to use different approaches that suit the learning materials and the context that they dwell in.

Learning styles and theories

Coffield, Moseley, Hall, and Ecclestone (2004) in their study identified over 100 models of learning styles, but selected the top 13 for their indepth analysis due to their robust nature, that is, retest reliability and constructive and predictive reliability. Entwistle's model was one of them. Marton and Säljö (1976) identified deep and surface learning processes and ascertained that distance students are more likely to adopt a deep approach as they are matured and adult learners and bring a vast array of experience and knowledge with them, whereas campus students are younger and immature and are more likely to fear failure and adopt a surface approach. Jayatilleke (2002) reported a study conducted at the

Open University of Sri Lanka that revealed that the majority of students sought meaning rather than reproducing facts, irrespective of teaching methods used. These findings are similar to the findings of Kember (2000) and Watkins and Regmi (1990).

In 1984, Knowles put forth four principles associated with adult learning: (a) give an opportunity to the learners to contribute in the planning and evaluation of teaching; (b) learners will learn by making mistakes; (c) subjects/courses should have immediate relevancy to the learners; and (d) learning should be problem-solving rather than content oriented. Thus, a combination of the mentioned factors contribute to an ideal teaching learning situation (Renzulli & Smith, 1978). Pask (1976) reported two specific learning styles that learners engage in while studying: holists and serialists. Pask's research outcome showed that no matter what learning styles the learners used, the level of understanding was the same; therefore, he suggested that learners should take a flexible approach to instruction and he referred this as versatile style.

Martin and Säljö (1976), Proser and Trigwell (1998), Biggs (1999) and others in their research findings reiterate that the learning styles deployed by learners are more important than what teachers do, as the role of the teachers is to facilitate students' learning. They further argue that students can easily adapt to different learning approaches. Cassidy and Eachus (2000) support the claim and argue that learning styles keep on varying with the type of environment and context. Lublin (2003) in the same vein contends that students have the capacity to take different approaches to learning.

Entwistle (2001) conducted a similar research study to the Gothenburg study carried out by (Säljö, 1979) on 90 participants about their approaches to learning. Entwistle (2001) modified Säljö's (1979) original idea and proposed three learning styles: (a) surface learning; (b) strategic learning; and (c) deep learning in terms of predominant motivations (interest in the subject matter, fear of failure, competition, etc.) and intentions (fulfil assessment requirements by reproduction). Surface learning is associated with the idea of memorizing or rote learning to learn facts, probably without comprehension. For example, students may expect teachers to share prepared answers or notes of the expected questions just before a test or exam and are told to memorize the answers. Such students recall and list all the information and are bogged down with information that usually does not make any sense to them and they are unable to make any connection with the real world. Strategic learners ensure that the environment, conditions and materials suit the objectives of the study and they organize their time effectively to achieve the maximum in minimum

opportunities available in order to aim their targets to get high grades. These learners have high expectations and are high achievers. Deep learning occurs when learners are motivated and interested in what they are learning and try to make connections between facts, ideas and concepts in order to interpret, evaluate, analyze and synthesize the information based on their past experience. It was therefore; considered to base the learning style and approach model for this research on Entwistle's theory as the teaching and learning environment of the participants very closely matched with it. Although Entwistle's three categories involve value judgments, the categories should not be taken in isolation by the students as there is a strong possibility that a student may fall in more than one category and use multiple approaches for a single task in hand. Entwistle (2001) recommends that with time the students become more aware of their own learning styles and approaches and realize the implications of using deep, surface or strategic approaches to learning.

Distance learners and learning styles

Ausburn (2004) is of the opinion that considering the fast-paced life of adult learners, who are also referred to as non-traditional adult students, have shown an immense interest to get enrolled in distance courses. It is an accepted fact that distance learning courses are geared in such a way that the students are separated by time and space, which often leads to social and emotional isolation, and requires a greater dependence on independent learning skills. Gee (1990) administered Canfield Learning Styles Inventory (CLSI) to study the learning style variable, preference of students enrolled in a distance learning and conventional course. Both groups were taught by a common teacher with the same objectives and teaching materials. Those with independent and conceptual learning style scored the highest in distance course and those who preferred social and conceptual learning styles did well in on-campus course. Diaz and Cartnel (1999) in their study discovered that students enrolled in health education distance learning programs probably have different learning styles than those enrolled in conventional universities. Distance students in the study were more autonomous than campus students, had a more traditional approach to learning and possessed extrinsic motivation to obtain returns related to grades and positive comments from their teachers by meeting their expectations. On the other hand, distance students were enrolled to catch up on their incomplete education, which they had to forego for personal reasons and possessed intrinsic motivation. Shaw

(2012) in his research study found that different learning styles were associated with significantly different learning scores

Blackmore (1996) suggests that different ways of teaching and learning enable learners to look at the world from different lenses, which are healthy for learning. Many teachers assume that introducing different teaching styles will serve the learning styles of most of the students and going one step further, what applies for students in conventional classes should apply for distance as well. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that the teachers should realize and understand the diverse learning styles that exist in students enrolled in distance programs to perform at their maximum.

Teachers should know the characteristics of their distance students to assist them in designing learning activities as they are heterogeneous students, bringing in varied learning styles and experiences (Gibson, 1998). Dun and Dun (1993) emphasize that if the students do not learn the way teachers teach then the teachers should teach the way students prefer to learn, but this notion would seem possible in developed countries where trained teachers are available. Daniel (1999) and Ally and Fahy (2005) propagate that this will enable teachers to meet educational needs and goals of the majority of students resulting in higher retention rate. Diaz and Cartnal (1999) ring a caution bell that with time, more distance courses will be offered; hence, students and faculty should be assured that distance courses will have worth to meet the expectations of quality education, almost comparable to conventional education in which the students' needs and expectations will be considered.

Distance learning and gender

Women and men bring varied learning styles when enrolled in distance programs, which affect their active participation. Plummer (2000) posits that research has proved feminist theories of differential learning styles in men and women and their socio-economic characteristics inspire their learning styles to a large extent. Adults due to their multi-tasking and complex responsibilities have limited time on hand and therefore are usually flexible, independent and autonomous learners and work their way out with their study schedule. At times, female students may differ and seek for support of other students and the institution. Contrary to their male counterpart, females prefer to work with others and look for moral support, which is mostly missing at home. Burge (1990) in his study found that women students acknowledged that distance study was not for everyone and the experience was absolutely different for them; however, studying

from their homes was most convenient and had opened new vistas for them.

Distance education as a mode of study provides flexible time management possibilities, while preventing classroom attendance since adults have constraints of time, space, resources and socio-economic disabilities. These factors aggravate for female distance students. Literature also throws light on the fact that females are more persistent than males when it comes to distance learning (Proost & Elen, 1997) due to the above mentioned facts. Moreover, distance learning supports non-traditional learners, who are over 25 years of age and prefer to reside off campus (Eastmond, 1998). Such students are more persistent and capable of attaining their goals at the same level or even at times higher than full-time campus students (Coffield, Moseley, Hall & Ecclestone, 2012; Karademir & Tezel, 2010). The principles of androgogy as propounded by Malcolm Knowles acknowledges the distinctive learning needs of adults, which focus on learning, sharing life experiences, believing in self-directed and independent learning and owning one's learning as some of the characteristics of adult learning (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998). Adult learners also have differences which may stem from their personal life, educational and work experiences, how they perceive the world leading to expectations, habitual preferences and behaviours as students (Ausburn, 2004) and affect their learning behaviour in various learning environments. Learning styles are believed to be more established and profoundly entrenched internal cognitive processes, especially in adults for taking in and understanding evidence (Kolb, 1984; Kramer, 2002).

Methodology

The objective of the study was to identify the learning styles of male and female distance learners based on Entwistle's learning style characteristics. Quantitative research was deployed using a survey approach. Using Entwistle's (2001) adapted learning style and approaches model as the base, a self-developed questionnaire considering the purpose of the study and literature review was used to investigate and measure facts, perceptions and opinions of the participants regarding their learning styles as distance learners. This approach was best suited for the study as the purpose of all surveys is to collect information and then to describe or explain the characteristics, opinions, attitudes, or relationships of a population through the use of a representative sample (Creswell, 2013).

Sample

Stratified random sampling was used to collect data from the teachers who were spread throughout Pakistan. The name list and addresses of those who had completed their master's during the past three years were obtained from the Records Office of the Distance University and post paid questionnaires were posted to 90 teachers out of which 78 (86.66%) forms were returned duly filled in. The delivery mode of the distance program was largely print, supplemented with face-to-face interactions, tutorials at study centres and a two-week workshop at the end of the program. The majority of the subjects was male English language teachers. More than half of the participants were working in public sector schools and were in the age range of 31 to 40 and above.

Tools

The questionnaire had two parts. The first was developed to get the demographic information of the participants and the second part included an adapted version of Entwistle's (2001) tool, which sought to find out their learning styles and approaches. The researcher used postal questionnaire for this project that included stamped self-addressed envelopes as the samples were scattered all over the country. This allowed the classification of responses into analyzable and meaningful categories. Informed consent form included the purpose, importance and benefit of the research, return date, confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. A pre-coded structured questionnaire was developed based Entwistle's model (2001). The questionnaire had sections on (a) deep approach, (b) surface approach, and (c) strategic approach that included five, four and five sub sections respectively.

1. Deep approach
 - i. Interaction with the content
 - ii. Relate new ideas to previous knowledge
 - iii. Relate concept to everyday experiences
 - iv. Relate evidence to conclusion
 - v. Examine the logic of the argument
2. Surface approach
 - i. Intent to complete the required task
 - ii. Memorize information
 - iii. Focus on discrete elements
 - iv. Ignore purpose or strategy

3. Strategic approach
 - i. Intent to obtain highest possible scores
 - ii. Organize time
 - iii. Ensure appropriate conditions for studying
 - iv. Consult previous exam papers
 - v. Refer to marking scheme

Content and face validity were determined by a panel of experts who were working at the open university and the students who were graduates of the same university. Later, they were contacted to get detailed feedback on the efficiency of the instructions given, time they took to fill in the questionnaire, the problems they faced in understanding the questions, relevancy and importance of the questions and any other suggestions to improve the questionnaire. Based on the feedback, the questionnaire was revised to increase the reliability and validity. Reliability of the tool was not a problem as the questions did not require much time to understand and therefore did not pose reliability threat (Dillman, 2000). The data were entered using a statistical analyses package and all statistical tests for this particular research were conducted with a significance level of .05.

Findings

For data collection, a self-developed pre-coded structured questionnaire was used and Chi-square test was applied to cull the data.

Table 1 shows the distribution of male and female study participants using the deep approach.

Table 1

Distribution of Study Participants by Use of Different Learning Approaches by Gender

Use of Learning Approaches	Male (n = 3)	Female (n=35)	p-value
Deep Approach			
Interaction with the Content			0.802
Always/Usually	72.1	66.7	
Sometimes/Seldom	14.0	19.4	
Never	14.0	13.9	
Relate New Ideas to Previous Knowledge			0.458
Always/Usually	69.8	58.3	
Sometimes/Seldom	18.6	30.6	
Never	11.6	11.1	
Relate Concept to Everyday Experiences			0.812
Always/Usually	53.5	50.0	
Sometimes/Seldom	34.9	33.3	
Never	11.6	16.7	
Relate Evidence to Conclusion			0.808
Always/Usually	48.8	41.7	
Sometimes/Seldom	23.3	27.8	
Never			
Examine the Logic of the Argument			0.431
	34.9	47.2	
Always/Usually	41.9	38.9	
Sometimes/Seldom	23.3	13.9	
Never			

Overall no significant difference was observed for the different learning approaches used (deep approach) in a distance program by gender through interaction with content ($\chi^2=0.442$; $df=2$; $p\text{-value}=0.802$), relate new ideas to previous knowledge ($\chi^2=1.563$; $df=2$; $p\text{-value}=0.458$), relate concept to everyday experiences ($\chi^2=0.417$; $df=2$; $p\text{-value}=0.812$), relate evidence to conclusion ($\chi^2=0.427$; $df=2$; $p\text{-value}=0.808$), examine logic of the argument ($\chi^2=1.685$; $df=2$; $p\text{-value}=0.431$). Therefore, there is no sufficient evidence to conclude that the use of different learning approaches in distance programs through deep approach is different for male and female students. Table 2 displays the distribution of study participants who use surface learning approaches by gender.

Table 2

Distribution of Study Participants by Use of Surface Learning Approaches by Gender

Use of Learning Approaches	Male (n = 43)	Female (n=35)	p-value
Surface Approach			
Intent to Complete Task			0.357
Requirement	79.1	80.6	
Always/Usually	16.3	8.3	
Sometimes/Seldom	4.7	11.1	
Never			
Memorize Information			0.294
Always/Usually	53.5	63.9	
Sometimes/Seldom	25.6	27.8	
Never	20.9	8.3	
Focus on Discrete Elements			0.649
Always/Usually	44.2	47.2	
Sometimes/Seldom	37.2	41.7	
Never	18.6	11.1	
Ignore Purpose or Strategy			0.008
Always/Usually	4.7	30.6	
Sometimes/Seldom	44.2	33.3	
Never	51.2	36.1	

Overall no significant difference was observed for the different learning approaches used (surface approach) in a distance by gender program through intent to complete task requirement ($\chi^2=2.101$; $df=2$; p-value=0.350), memorize information ($\chi^2=2.447$; $df=2$; p-value=0.294), focus on discrete elements ($\chi^2=0.863$; $df=2$; p-value=0.649), ignore purpose or strategy ($\chi^2=9.581$; $df=2$; p-value=0.008). Therefore, there is no sufficient evidence to conclude that the use of different learning approaches in distance programs through surface approach is different for male and female students. Table 3 given below illustrates the distribution of study participants using strategic learning approach by gender.

Table 3

Distribution of Study Participants by Use of Strategic Learning Approaches by Gender

Use of Learning Approaches	Male (n = 43)	Female (n=35)	p-value
Strategic Approach			
Intent to Obtain Highest Possible Scores	83.7	83.3	0.966
Always/Usually	7.0	8.3	
Sometimes/Seldom	9.3	8.3	
Never			
Organize Time			0.450
Always/Usually	55.8	69.4	
Sometimes/Seldom	34.9	25.0	
Never	9.3	5.6	
Ensure Appropriate Conditions for Studying			0.425
Always/Usually	41.9	47.2	
Sometimes/Seldom	48.8	36.1	
Never	9.3	16.7	
Consult Previous Exam Papers			0.017
Always/Usually	30.2	13.9	
Sometimes/Seldom	53.5	41.7	
Never	16.3	44.4	
Refer to Marking Scheme			0.597
Always/Usually	16.3	13.9	
Sometimes/Seldom	39.5	30.6	
Never	44.2	55.6	

Overall no significant difference was observed for the different learning approaches used (strategic approach) in a distance program by gender through intent to obtain highest possible scores ($\chi^2=0.068$; $df=2$; $p\text{-value}=0.966$), organize time ($\chi^2=1.595$; $df=2$; $p\text{-value}=0.450$), ensure appropriate conditions for studying ($\chi^2=1.710$; $df=2$; $p\text{-value}=0.425$), consulting previous exam papers ($\chi^2=8.206$; $df=2$; $p\text{-value}=0.017$), refer to marking scheme ($\chi^2=1.003$; $df=2$; $p\text{-value}=0.597$). Therefore, there is no sufficient evidence to conclude that the use of different learning approaches in distance programs through strategic approach is different for male and female students except for consulting previous exam papers.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to identify the learning styles and approaches used by students enrolled in distance program. Student approaches to learning describe the way they set out to tackle a particular learning task or a piece of work. Felder and Silverman (1988) and others found in their study that managing teaching and learning and using a mix of approaches has a strong positive benefit on the learners. The present research findings did not indicate explicitly that male and female participants concentrated differently when using learning styles. The findings showed that the participants used eclectic learning approaches, that is, surface approach, strategic approach, and deep approach depending on the circumstances and availability of time. The participants varied in age, experience and qualifications (to a certain extent), had set goals and aspirations, had an urge to study further and therefore came with intrinsic motivation. Thus, application of all three types of styles is justified. The survey data showed that three-fourth of the participants used surface as well as strategic approach, whereas one-fourth preferred deep approach. This variety of use of approaches is usually visible in developing countries where rote memorization is encouraged and practiced, and independent learning and student autonomy is almost unknown in public sector institutions. Such participants need to be supported and encouraged by their tutors to engage in deep approach learning to improve their learning outcomes. Personal experience as a teacher shows that this scenario is true in Pakistan education system. This would be possible if they understand the underlying meaning of the content, question the author's arguments and relate them to their previous knowledge and personal experiences (Entwistle, 1988).

The study also revealed that although the majority of the participants was satisfied with the materials, there was a possibility that the course design, assessment and activities did not encourage the participants to adopt a deep approach or they failed to realize that the learning activities were relevant for them in terms of needing to know the materials being studied. Adult distance learners usually bring varied experiences, ownership of one's own learning, independence and self-direction with them (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998) and seek ways and means to bring about a change in their lives. Some join such programs to change jobs, some to gain employment or to increase their chance of promotion, and some continue with their studies after redundancy or other personal crisis (Shea, 2002; Symond, 2003). There could have been unanticipated changes like crisis in the family or at the workplace or limitations of the

current job responsible for participants' approach to learning. These aspirations could have played a vital role on how the participants engaged themselves in learning. Female learners have multiple tasks to perform and undergo different circumstances and therefore need to adopt different learning styles to suit their needs. Therefore, the prospective distance learners should realize the potentially far reaching implications of studying (Evans, 2000).

There is a possibility that the course design, materials and assessments did not encourage the participants to adopt deep approach or they failed to realize that the learning activities were relevant for them in terms of needing to know the materials being studied. The students being adult learners had brought varied experience with them and were exploring the opportunity to bring out some sort of change in their lives (Prosser & Trigwell, 1998). They may have joined the programs to change jobs, some to gain employment or to increase their chance of promotion, and some to continue with their studies after redundancy or other personal crisis. These aspirations could have played a vital role on how the participants engaged themselves in learning. Therefore, the prospective distance learners should realize the potentially far reaching implications of studying (Evans, 1995).

Conclusion

This research study explored the learning styles and approaches of male and female teachers studying in an open university in Pakistan. The data gathered in this study illustrates that irrespective of gender, the students use an eclectic approach to suit the context and medium of the study. This may be possible since the distance learners are adults and bring in personal experiences with them to tackle academic constraints. The distance program focused on face-to-face instruction and therefore the affect of teacher facilitation cannot be included. The research outcomes may benefit the academicians teaching in distance universities and give them insights when developing materials for their learners and to support them accordingly. The results could also raise awareness among the distance learners regarding the learning styles and approaches that are mostly used by them. These suggestions could be pursued with a qualitative or mixed-method research in order to dig into the perceptions of students and teachers to get thick descriptions on students learning styles and their effect on learning outcomes. The findings also guide the distance teachers to be prepared for the extra support that they could provide to female students in developing appropriate learning styles and approaches.

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