

Exploring Iraqi Kurd EFL Students' Learning Styles at University Level

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Abstract

Learning styles have gained the attention of educators specially curriculum designers due to its relation with how learners transfer information into knowledge. The present study tries to explore the learning styles of Kurd students at university level. In an attempt to find answers to the following research questions : "What are the common learning styles of Iraqi Kurd EFL learners?" and "Do Iraqi Kurd learners are able to define their styles of learning?". The study hypothesizes that English department students are visual, auditory, reading/writing and kinesthetic (hereafter VARK). It is also hypothesized that they are not able to regulate their learning styles. The results of the study have been collected by applying a questionnaire given to the sample. Furthermore, the results showed that most Iraqi Kurd EFL learners are visual and social learners that they agree with the items that are related to the above mentioned styles.

استكشاف اساليب التعلم للطلبة العراقيين الكرد الدارسين للغة الانكليزية كلغة ثانية في المرحلة الجامعية

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المستخلص

اكتسبت اساليب التعلم اهتمام الكثير من الباحثين بالأخص مصممي المناهج الدراسية حيث يعود ذلك الاهتمام الى ارتباط هذه الاساليب بكيفية تحويل المعلومات الى معرفة. تحاول الدراسة الحالية اكتشاف اساليب التعلم للطلبة العراقيين الكرد الدارسين للغة الانكليزية كلغة ثانية في المرحلة الجامعية. من اجل الحصول على اجابة لأسئلة البحث المطروحة والتي تقول: ماهي اساليب التعلم الشائعة التي يمتثلها الطلبة الكرد الدارسين للغة الانكليزية؟ و هل الطلبة الكرد قادرين على تحديد انماط التعلم الخاصة بهم؟ تفترض هذه الدراسة ان الطلبة الكرد هم متعلمون مرثيون و سميعيون و حركيون كما تفترض الدراسة انهم غير قادرين على تحديد انماط التعلم الخاصة بهم. اثبتت النتائج والتي تم جمعها عن طريق اجراء استبيان ان الطلبة الكرد هم متعلمون مرثيون و اجتماعيون اي انهم يعتمدون على الوسائل المرئية في التعلم بالإضافة الى التعلم عن طريق المجاميع.

1- Introduction

Learning styles are considered as important factors in determining the learning process. Learning styles are not ways of teaching, but they are the natural patterns of learning in the learning situation to overcome the learning barriers and problems. They vary from one learner to another and what suits one learner may not be suitable for the other. The focus on the learning styles begins 30 years ago when researchers find that there are huge differences among learners and that learning strategies are seen as

obstacles for some learners. So, it is necessary to focus on the field of learning styles to find the good ways that help teachers and curriculum designers choose the effective strategies to enhance and develop the learners' performance.

2. Aims of the study

The study aims at the following:

- Identifying the learning styles that are followed by Iraqi Kurd learners.
- Helping foreign language teachers to find the agreement between learning strategies they follow and the learning styles followed by learners.

3. The research questions:

This research directs the following questions:

- What are the common learning styles of Iraqi Kurd EFL learners?
- Do Iraqi Kurd learners able to define their learning styles?

4. Hypotheses:

The study hypothesizes that:

- Iraqi Kurd students are VARK learners.
- Iraqi Kurd students are unable to determine their own learning styles .

5. Defining Learning Styles

To achieve learning in an efficient way, learners have to use their own ways and senses to get information. Many scholars have identified this term and it has been viewed differently. Lohri- Posey (2003: 54) defines learning styles as "an individual's technique used for getting and understanding information". Similarly, Felder and Henriques (1995: 21) say that learning styles are "ways followed by students to acquire, retain and review information". While Ellis (2005: 4) mentions that learning styles are seen as "a group of manners used to solve learning problems inside the classroom".

Mackeracher (2004:71) calls learning styles as "cognitive, social and psychological features that learners depend on to receive, analyze and respond to the learning environment", and Dunn et al (1981: 372) add that learning styles are "learners' special techniques to improve the new skills". From all the above mentioned definitions we can conclude that learning styles are the specific techniques that learners relay on to help them react to the learning process.

6. Language Learning Styles and language learning Strategies

This section is primary devoted to shed the light on the differences between language learning styles and language learning strategies which are interrelated. Both terms are considered as major factors in helping EFL learners learn the foreign language. In one hand, language learning styles

are approaches that foreign language learners use in learning the new language. They are “internally based characteristics” in which the students rely on unconsciously towards the learning situation. They are stable and are not likely to change by time. As for the types of learning styles, there are seven types, including visual, auditory, kinesthetic, verbal, logical, interpersonal and intrapersonal styles, and each one of these types is going to be tackled alone in separation.

On the other hand, language learning strategies are external conscious skills. Rubin (1987:22) defines language learning strategies as “ strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affects learning directly”. Also, Oxford (1990:8,2002:124) views language learning strategies as “specific actions taken by learners to improve their progress in developing second language skills”. Language learning strategies are changeable and flexible. They are self-directed and related to the language task. There are several kinds of learning strategies such as cognitive, meta-cognitive, social-affective, memory and compensatory strategies. These strategies are used to assist learners “stretch” their styles of learning to learn the second language effectively. When mismatches occur between the learner's way of learning

and the teacher's way of teaching the gap is clear. As a result the learners will be bored and the teacher will form a passive image of them. Therefore it is important for teachers to help their learners be active through using the appropriate learning strategies. If the balance is achieved , the learners will have their leaning in the way they prefer.

7. The Significance of Learning Styles

As learning styles are powerful tools for learning, there are several advantages of them for both teachers and learners. As for learners, the importance of learning preferences can be summarized in the following points:

- 1- When learners discover their own styles of learning, they can use these styles in the learning process. Besides, when they induct their styles in their learning, the result will be a successful learning process. (Awla, 2014: 242).
- 2- If learners can recognize their way of learning, they will be able to overcome their learning problems and barriers and will become better in learning.
- 3- It is known that learning styles assist learners how to learn, so they are closely related to learners' confidence. When learners' self-confidence is raised, they will center the process of learning (Biggs 2011 as cited in ibid).

From the above mentioned advantages of learning styles, it is essential to say that learning styles have a great effect on enhancing learning the second language easily. Thus, knowing students' own styles, teachers can decide and improve their classroom strategies and curriculums.

The importance of learning styles for teachers can be mentioned below:

- 1- Teachers will be facilitators if they could know the learning styles of their students. Here, teachers will be the directors of the classroom activities.
- 2- Teachers can reduce the gap of learning by dealing with learners directly and they can design a successful lesson by distinguishing the preferred ways of their students (Tuan 2011: 287).

8. Learning Styles Classifications

When learners learn the second language they own a distinct baggage of learning. Therefore, in order to classify learners, it is more essential to know what kind of learners they are. There are seven kinds of learning styles and learners. To begin with , the most important types of learning styles are those tackled by Flemming and Miller (1992) which are referred to as VAK(visual, auditory and kinesthetic).

Visual learning style is one of learning patterns that connects ideas , concepts and information to pictures (Fatt 2000:35). Visual learners or spatial learners are technically oriented since they can remember information through images, graphs, diagrams, videos and PowerPoint representations; they learn by eyes.

Auditory learning style refers to the use of sounds, music, rhyme and rhythm. Learners who use this style are called aural learners. According to David and Franklin (2004: 54) aural learners like listening to lectures, seminars, tapes and debates. Here, learners are capable of picking up the main ideas when listening to the given information. They learn by ears.

In **Kinesthetic** learning style ,or as it is called physical style, learners tend to use their body movements as hands and the sense of touching. Physical learners like engaging in classroom activities and doing the role play. Movements for kinesthetic learners are very important because they depend on their bodies in learning (Tyas and Safitri 2017: 56).

Verbal or linguistic learning style refers to the use of written language. Verbal learners will do better if they use written words and lectures. They focus on writing tasks and their memory work efficiently when remembering what they have written (Sabatova 2008:28). Pitchard (2008:65) mentions that **logical or mathematical** style points to the use of logic when learning. Learners who follow this type tend to do problems and experiments. The last two kinds are interpersonal and intrapersonal. Interpersonal or social learning style means learning in groups. **Social** learners like to learn through relationships and communications. They like to share information and ideas with others. In **intrapersonal** learning style, learners prefer to learn individually, think, work and study alone. They cannot learn if they are engaged in groups because they cannot recognize themselves(Reid 2005:84).

9. Literature Review

Learning styles are seen as the bridge that connects between the student and the teacher. So many pedagogical studies have focused on them. Ilcin et al (2018) did a study to identify Turkish physiotherapy students learning styles and their academic performance. The population consists of 184 students. The results proved that 34.8% of students are

collaborative learners which affect their performance. Similarly, Rezaeinejad et al (2015) examine learning styles and its relation to learning enhancement. The population was consisted of 3958 high school girls. Followed the questionnaire of Felder and Soloman, the results of their paper proved that there is a strong correlation between learning achievement and learning styles.

In addition, Kazu (2009) studied the relationship between learning styles and teaching process. The results concluded that both learning styles and teaching process are closely related and that to improve the learning individual differences, learning strategies should be taken into consideration. Vyas and Singh (2015) conducted a study to investigate the impact of medical students awareness of their learning styles. To prove the hypotheses, the researchers followed VARK questionnaire and the results showed that there was a great awareness of learning styles among students.

The present study is a completion of the above mentioned studies. It tries to find out the major learning styles of Iraqi Kurd university students at English Department through making a questionnaire. It comes up with the conclusion that Iraqi Kurd learners are visual and social learners since they tend to learn through groups and through using visual means.

10- Methodology

10.1. The Sample

The sample of this study is limited to 40 first-year students at English Department , College of Arts ,Cihan University, Duhok. They are randomly selected.

10.2. The Instrument

The instrument of the current research is applying a questionnaire during the academic year 2019-2020 (**see appendix I**). The main aims of applying the questionnaire were to find out how do Iraqi Kurd students learn the target language, to measure learning preferences and to find the appropriate teaching strategies that go with students' learning styles . The questionnaire consists of (24) items and each group of the items seeks a specific learning style. The items are divided as follows:

- 1- Visual is presented in items number (7/10/18/21)
- 2- Auditory is seen in items number (2/11/16/19/22)
- 3- Kinesthetic is clear in (1/3/9/23)
- 4- Verbal can be seen in items number (5/12/14)
- 5- Logical is obvious in items number (6/15)
- 6- Interpersonal is evident in items number (8/13/20)
- 7- Intrapersonal is explicit in items number (4/17/24)

10.3. Data Analysis and Discussion

To analyze the gathered data, the researchers followed AWM (Arithmetic Weighted Mean) which is seen as a useful way for analysis. It depends on analyzing the data from top to bottom that is the items are going to be discussed according to their weighted means.

Table (1) Ranking of Items According to their Weighted Arithmetic Means

Item No.	Items	WAM
1	Diagrams are good ways for learning.	4.92
2	It is better to learn by PowerPoint presentation.	4.61
3	I prefer to learn in form of pictures.	4.55
4	I used to connect images to information when learning.	4.49
5	It is best to share knowledge while learning.	4.43
6	It is better to learn by taking notes.	4.26
7	I used to work in groups.	4.23
8	I prefer to do classroom activities.	4.22
9	It is better to remember information in form of words.	4.02
10	I would rather learn by listening to lectures.	3.97
11	I like to listen to my teacher when learning.	3.67
12	I prefer to learn by moving hands.	3.52
13	It is better to listen to the spoken instructions when learning.	3.33

14	I like to learn individually.	3.12
15	I used to move when learning.	2.86
16	I like to learn alone.	2.64
17	It is better to work alone.	2.05
18	I prefer to use written instructions.	2.03
19	I like to engage in communications.	2.00
20	I prefer to walk when studying.	1.63
21	I do my best in aural examinations.	1.32
22	It is better to learn by listening to tapes.	1.01
23	I prefer to learn when connecting what is known with what is new.	0.99
24	I like to do mathematical and logical problems.	0.92

It is clear that the above table illustrates the questionnaire's results. It is vivid that items which respectively read " *diagrams are good ways for learning*", " *It is better to learn by PowerPoint presentation*", " *I prefer to learn in form of pictures*" and " *I used to connect images to information when learning*" are set in the questionnaire to seek the visual learners have got the highest scores. There is a little difference in their means. These results deduce that Iraqi Kurd English learners are visual learners in that they strongly depend on what the teacher writes on the board and what he/she presents such as pictures or electric slides. Such kind of learners use their eye memory to recall the information. Depending on visual tools, visual learners are divided into linguistic and spatial learners.

The linguistic learners depend on what is written whereas the spatial learners rely on watching videos or pictures (Reid 1995:17).

The second group of items which read " *It is best to share knowledge while learning*" , " *It is better to learn by taking notes*", " *I like to work in groups*" , " *I prefer to do classroom activities*", and " *It is better to remember information in form of words*" are seeking verbal, social and kinesthetic learners. These items are near to each other in their weighted means to indicate that EFL learners use different styles to acquire knowledge. Some learners prefer to use the social style in which they can share information and work in groups to involve information. Other learners tend to do activities inside the classroom and tend to take notes in order to make the process of learning more easy. It will be facile for such kind of learners to remember the given information by remembering what they do in the classroom.

The third group of items which say " *I would rather learn by listening to lectures*", " *I like to listen to my teacher when learning*", " *I prefer to learn by moving hands*" and " *It is better to listen to the spoken instructions when learning*" are mainly looking for auditory learners and kinesthetic ones. It is a matter of fact that listening to the lectures, tapes or audios is a very effective way of learning but this way may become ineffective if learners do not comprehend what they listen to. So, auditory learners must have a high level of comprehension to call the heard information. Auditory learners are not of a wide type among Iraqi EFL learners simply because they will be distracted if they hear another sound

while listening and as a result their ears will pay attention to the new sound.

The fourth group of items which say " *I like to learn individually*", " *I used to move when learning*", " *I like to learn alone*" and " *It is better to work alone*" are used to detect individual learners and kinetic learners. Some learners can learn effectively when they use their bodies and hands to do the activities. Individual learners can master their learning if they study alone. These learners become lost when they are engaged in communications. Using this style of learning, learners can appreciate the value of this way and improve their performance.

The fifth group of items is a collection of verbal, social and kinesthetic styles which read " *I prefer to use written instructions*", " *I like to engage in communication*", " *I prefer to walk when studying*", " *I do my best in aural examinations*" and " *it is better to learn by listening to tapes*" are discussed earlier. These items receive low scores to indicate that such ways of learning are not of great importance for learners to gain knowledge. The last group of items show logical styles. The items are " *I prefer to learn when connecting what is known with what is new*" and " *I like to do mathematical and logical problems*" have got a very little score among the other items. This result clarifies the fact that Iraqi EFL learners are not logical learners. They are incapable of utilizing their minds to find out or invent a way which may assist them to abbreviate their learning.

From the above discussion, it is explicit that Iraqi Kurd EFL learners at University level are visual and social learners. They use their eyes as a

machine to scan the given information. Here the first hypothesis which says " Kurd students are VARK learners" is not completely verified since the results proved that they are visual and social learners. Also, the second hypothesis which reads " Kurd students are unable to determine their learning style" is not verified because the results showed that University students are capable of determining their preferred ways of learning.

11. Conclusions and Recommendation

This research has come up with the following conclusions:

- Learning styles are the core of the process of learning and the more teachers can find their students' styles, the more they make learning powerful.
- Language learning strategies and language learning styles are inseparable elements and complete each other.
- The most preferred ways of learning of university students are the visual and social ways. Students cooperate with each other to use their cameras (eyes) to print what they see in form of pictures, slides or diagrams in their memory to get use of them when recalling the information.

Accordingly, the results of this study recommends to seek the learning styles of non-English department students who study English

language to help the teacher find the learning strategy that is near to students' style.

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Appendix I

Dear students,

The researchers do a study entitled " **Exploring Iraqi Kurd EFL Students' Learning Styles at University Level**" . Please write down your answers in front of each item below.

Thanks in advance

SN.	Items	To a very large extent	To a large extent	To moderate extent	To a low extent	To a very low extent
1	I prefer to learn by moving hands.					
2	I would rather learn by listening to lectures.					
3	I prefer to do classroom activities.					
4	I like to learn alone.					
5	It is better to remember information in form of words.					

6	I prefer to learn when connecting what is known with what is new.					
7	I used to connect images to information when learning.					
8	I like to work in groups.					
9	I used to move when learning.					
10	It is better to learn by PowerPoint presentation .					
11	It is better to learn by listening to tapes.					
12	I prefer to use written instructions.					
13	I like to engage in communications.					
14	It is better to learn by taking notes.					
15	I like to do mathematical and logical problems.					
16	It is better to listen to the spoken instructions when learning.					
17	I like to learn individually.					
18	I prefer to learn in form of pictures.					
19	I do my best in aural examinations.					
20	It is best to share knowledge while learning.					
21	Diagrams are good ways for learning.					
22	I like to listen to my teacher when learning.					

23	I prefer to walk when studying.					
24	It is better to work alone.					