Enhancing EAP Students' Autonomy by Accommodating Various Learning Styles in the Second Language Writing Classroom

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Appealing to a variety of learning styles in second language writing instruction in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) setting may help students more effectively channel their efforts and develop learner autonomy, an important characteristic of successful language learners. Learning style preferences of second language learners are innate and enduring; they differentiate one learner from another, but also reflect learners' educational and cultural backgrounds. Teachers who are aware of their students' learning style preferences can vary their modes of instruction and the structure the classroom environment in ways that will reach a wider spectrum of learners. In addition, helping learners become aware of their own learning style preferences empowers them to become "strategic practitioners" in realizing their full potential (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 141). Three paired learning style dichotomies have ramifications for second language writing in particular: sensing/intuitive, active/reflective, and inductive/deductive learning styles. Addressing students' learning style differences throughout all stages of the writing process - from group brainstorming to instructor feedback - will allow student writers in an EAP setting to best develop their writing skills and their strategies for continued learning.

Appealing to a variety of learning styles in second language writing instruction in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) setting may help students more effectively channel their efforts and develop learner autonomy, an important characteristic of successful language learners. A second language writing (SLW) student with a strong degree of autonomy will have an enhanced ability to continue learning independently, beyond the walls of the classroom and after the

conclusion of the SLW course. Wenden (1991) described autonomous language learners as those who have "acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher (p. 15). In this article I explore the ways in which EAP students' learning styles impact their language learning and how engaging each student's learning style(s) might enhance learner autonomy. Recognizing the variety of learning styles and individual differences likely present among learners in the EAP classroom, I consider the implications for SLW instructors and offer recommendations for structuring classroom activities and tasks to appeal to the largest possible range of learning styles, thereby increasing learner autonomy and enhancing the potential for long-term development of students' SLW skills.

BACKGROUND

In the 1970's in the field of cognitive psychology, research emerged that investigated the ways in which human beings process information and experience their environment. Researchers developed various sets of dichotomous terms to categorize these ways of knowing and being in the world. For example, *field independent* describes those who can filter out extraneous information, stimuli, and social context to focus on the particular problem at hand, while *field dependent* describes those who rely more on context and situational setting. *Analytical* and *atomistic* characterize ways of experiencing the world or processing new information in manageable, sequential segments, while *global* and *holistic* describe the process of making large leaps of insight or understanding, recognizing connections and details later. These ways of processing information and experiencing one's environment greatly influence the way students learn. In 1976, Reichert demonstrated that U.S. school children had four basic "perceptual learning channels" (Reid, 1987, p. 89): visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile. These information pathways came to be known as learning styles, and they illustrate students' preferences to learn through reading, listening, experiencing, or in a 'hands-on' manner, respectively.

LEARNING STYLE PREFERENCES AMONG LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Brown (2007) described learning style as the constellation of "consistent and enduring traits" that differentiate one learner from another (p. 264). Felder and Henriques (1995) further characterized learning styles as ways in which a student "acquires, retains, and retrieves information" (p. 21). During the 1980's, learning styles of native English speakers were extensively discussed in the educational psychology literature, and the point that these preferences are *consistent and enduring* became very salient in the training of classroom teachers. Subsequently, much work has been done to understand how individual learning styles specifically affect language learners (Cohen, 2003; Felder & Henriques, 1995; Reid, 1987). In a questionnaire asking graduate and undergraduate students who were non-native speakers of English to self-report their preferred learning style, Reid (1987) found that these students' learning style preferences differed significantly from their native-English-speaking counterparts. Furthermore, her results indicated that language background had an impact on learning style preferences. For example, Arabic native speakers indicated a very strong preference for kinesthetic and tactile learning styles, with a strong preference for auditory learning, while Japanese native speakers expressed only a minor learning style preference, with all styles being equal. Reid (1987) found that, overall, the majority of these non-native-English-speaking college students in her study exhibited a preference for kinesthetic and tactile activities and showed a negative preference towards group learning; these findings were cited repeatedly over the next two decades. However, recently Xiao (2006) found that ESL student learning style preferences have been rapidly changing due to the globalization of education and the prevalence of social media worldwide. English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction by native English speakers with training in second language acquisition has introduced learners across the world to new ways of learning such as group work, communicative activities, and peer feedback. The advent of the Internet has introduced more visual and auditory channels of information gathering to learners of all ages, while social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and other synchronous and asynchronous 'chat' platforms have encouraged an increased amount of written communication worldwide.

Other Ways of Considering Learning Style Differences

Felder and Henriques (1995) reach beyond the traditional three- or four-pronged division of learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic/tactile) to describe five dichotomous learning style dimensions that come into play in the foreign language classroom. They explore the paired concepts of sensing/intuitive learners, visual/verbal learners, active/reflective learners, sequential/global learners, and inductive/deductive learners. Of these five paired dimensions, the learning styles preferences of sensing versus intuitive learners, active versus reflective learners, and inductive versus deductive learners have the greatest ramifications for the SLW classroom due to the intersection of these dimensions with the stages of the writing process and with the types of instruction and feedback commonly used in EAP writing classrooms. Therefore, I will discuss these three paired dichotomies and their implication for EAP writing instructors.

The concept of *sensors* and *intuitors* grew out of Jungian psychology, and is a prevalent component of the widely-used Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. In relation to language learning, sensors are described by Felder and Henriques (1995) as "concrete and methodical" (p. 22), preferring to deal with facts and data, appreciating the structure of established rules and procedures, and being careful but sometimes slow in their work. Intuitors, on the other hand, are "abstract and imaginative" (Felder and Henriques, 1995, p. 22), enjoying complications, variety, new concepts, and exceptions to rules; they are bored by repetition, standard procedures, and memorization. In addition, intuitors tend to work quickly, but may come across as careless.

The second dichotomy of learning styles among language learners can be found within an experiential learning approach. Kolb (1984) described a circular four-stage experiential learning process whereby a new experience is followed by reflective observation by the learner, giving rise to a new idea or a modification of an existing concept. The learner then engages in active experimentation, which leads to more new experiences. Felder & Henriques (1995) suggested that the second and fourth stages of this cycle - *active experimentation* and *reflective observation* - are two dichotomous mental processes towards which learners gravitate when dealing with new information. Active learners do well in situations where they can put new information into relief with the world around them, consciously applying new concepts and interacting actively with the information

or with other learners. Reflective learners need opportunities to think about the material that is being presented. Careful structuring of group work in the language classroom can provide learning opportunities for both types of learners; the specific implications of this in the SLW classroom will be discussed later.

A third intriguing dichotomy among language learners as presented by Felder and Henriques (1995) is that of *inductive* versus *deductive* learners. Inductive reasoning moves from observing a particular example to inducing the rules or laws that would govern similar examples. The use of model paragraphs or sample essay structures in the SLW class provides an opportunity for inductive reasoning. Inductive learners can consider the model, observe what elements make up the structure, and apply those rules to their own writing. Deductive reasoning, on the other hand, starts with "axioms, principles, or rules" (p. 26); the learner then works to deduce consequences and find applications for these rules. Felder and Henriques (1995) pointed out a parallel between inductive and deductive reasoning and the concepts of *acquiring* or *learning* a language. They posited that the inductive learner will find a match in immersion-style instruction where the language is acquired gradually in a communicative fashion, whereas the deductive learner will do better in a setting where language learning is a conscious process of formal exposure to rules of syntax and semantics – a setting seen in many EAP SLW classroom.

Teaching Style Versus Learning Style

Felder and Henriques (1995) also investigated how foreign language teachers' teaching styles matched students' learning styles. They found that, when an instructor's teaching style does not correspond to a student's learning style, the resulting mismatch can have unfortunate consequences for the student's learning and attitude toward the material. Students may become bored and inattentive in class, do poorly on exams and projects, become discouraged about the course, and even conclude that they are not capable of learning the material. Teachers may also become frustrated and disenchanted if they feel their students are not learning well. Reid (1987) points out that, in many instances, "neither students nor teacher are aware that difficulty in learning class material, high frustration levels, and even failure may not rest solely in the material itself" but in the mismatch

of teaching styles and learning styles (p. 91). Furthermore, a mismatch between teaching style and learning style means that a student has to spend precious emotional and intellectual capital adjusting to this non-preferred mode of instructional input. Felder and Henriques (1995) cautioned, however, that the teaching style that best matches a particular student's learning style may not correspond to the method of presenting input that allows for the most effective learning. For example, a student may indicate a strong preference for individual work and auditory input, when research has shown that effective language acquisition comes through interaction with other learners and multi-modal input. Therefore, the most effective instruction is that which appeals to the widest variety of learning styles. This variety also allows students to have exposure to all teaching and learning styles so that they can develop a range of learning strategies to call upon in other classes and other learning settings.

The Role of Culture in Learning Style

Connor (2011), Kara (2009), Xiao (2006), and others have investigated the implications of ESL students' cultural background on their language learning and learning style preferences. Increasing sensitivity towards the potential stereotyping of various groups of ESL students has led scholars to distinguish between large culture (a broad, simplified view that focuses on ethnic and national characteristics and is quite static) and small culture (the cohesive behavior observed in small social or educational groupings that is constantly in flux). The large-culture comparison between individualist and collectivist societies and the implications of this orientation on students' motivation for language learning is particularly relevant to this discussion. An individualist cultural background encourages students to believe in their own unique identities and capabilities; these students are likely to believe in the right to self-expression and to pursue their own ideas. Their motivation to succeed is based on the desire to accomplish personal goals and achieve individual self-fulfillment. Students from a collectivist orientation, on the other hand, see themselves as an integral part of a group; their success is therefore socially motivated, taking into account the views, needs, and goals of the group. In the SLW classroom, these two cultural orientations can be observed particularly in students' attitudes towards group work and peer feedback.

Behaviors common to a group of students can also be a result

of small-culture influences such as the particular English language intensive training program the student attended before entering college, the educational culture of the student's home country, or the type of living situation the student has while in college. The culture of the student's first language (L1) educational environment is particularly relevant as it often establishes the student's view on power and authority in the educational setting (regarding expected teacher behavior and student/teacher relationships, for example) and may solidify inherent learning style preferences. Xiao (2006) cautioned, however, that while "cultural influence on L2 education is deeply rooted, strong and persistent" (p. 9), it is important that teachers do not allow generalizations about educational cultural backgrounds to become stereotypes.

Another small-culture influence is the dynamic of the second-language writing classroom itself. Classroom dynamics are situated in the affective domain of learning, or how students feel emotionally in the classroom. The affective domain in the language classroom impacts students' level of anxiety, situational self-esteem (as related to this particular course and the course material), tolerance for ambiguity, and willingness to take risks in using language. In an investigation of the relationship between motivation and autonomy, Lyddon (2012) described self-motivation as taking charge of the affective domain of learning. He found that students who used a larger number of self-motivation strategies – and therefore gained greater control over their affective domain in the classroom - had greater autonomy.

LEARNER AUTONOMY

Learner autonomy has been established as a vital characteristic of successful second language learners. Kumaravadivelu (2003) described autonomy in the academic setting as that quality which "enables learners to be strategic practitioners" in realizing their own potential (p. 141). He explains that learner autonomy is grounded in the fundamental human desire to take control over one's life: to achieve freedom of thought and action. Autonomy is reached when a learner has gained the ability to take initiative in the classroom and continue to learn beyond the classroom. In short, learner autonomy is an expression of the learners' capacity to "learn how to learn" (p. 133). Autonomous learners are those who have acquired learning strategies,

a metacognitive awareness of those strategies, and a positive attitude about learning so that they can use the strategies as appropriate, with confidence, independent of a teacher. When learners become aware of their learning style preferences, they can exercise control over their learning; plan, monitor, problem solve, and evaluate their learning; and gain situational self-esteem and motivation, leading to greater autonomy and continued learning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SLW CLASSROOM

In the quest to appeal to the learning style preferences of all students in the SLW classroom, the teacher's first step is to become aware of his or her own learning and teaching styles. Moody (1988) administered the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to undergraduate foreign language students and found that fifty-nine percent of them were intuitors, a substantially greater percentage than in the population as a whole. The majority of these students were in language classes by choice, either as a result of their chosen major or as a self-selected elective. Moody surmised that, because language is symbolic in nature, it would attract these intuitors, who are more abstract, imaginative thinkers than their sensor peers. If we extrapolate this finding and consider that most EAP instructors have gone into the field by choice due to an interest in language, we can surmise that many SLW instructors will also be intuitors by nature. Their EAP students, on the other hand, are in the SLW class not by choice but by requirement. Therefore, the percentage of intuitors among SLW students will likely not be inflated. Felder and Henriques (1995) cautioned that strongly intuitive language instructors must therefore be careful not to move too quickly through the concrete, rule-based material in an effort to move on to what they find more intriguing: the complexities and nuances of language, the exceptions to the rules, the cultural considerations. This might appeal to their intuitive learners but would do a disservice to their sensing learners, who could become confused and fall behind.

Adapting to Students' Learning Styles

Moody (1988) noted that "one cannot expect a student to adapt to the instructor. Rather, the instructor must design approaches that will take advantage of the student's unique talents" (p. 389). Student struggles may have more to do with conflicts in learning and

teaching styles than with a deficit of proficiency or motivation. In order to make the most of students' strengths as writers, it is necessary to become aware of their inherent learning style preferences. This can be accomplished by administering one of the many learning-style inventories that are appropriate for college-level ESL students (see Appendix.) Knowing which learners will face difficulties with which types of material or methods of instruction can help the instructor guide each student more effectively. Xiao (2006) recommended that teachers develop an awareness of their learners' cultures of learning, including their learning style preferences, in order not only to meet students' expectations as much as possible but also to "foster their guided self-stretching" (p. 1). This 'self-stretching' would include helping students to understand that they will encounter all sorts of teaching styles in their college career, encouraging them to diversity their preferences as much as is feasible and to develop strategies for dealing with teaching styles that lie outside their comfort zone. Reid (1987) and others in fact advocated explicit instruction in learning style awareness. This metacognitive skill helps students to self-monitor the affective dimension of their learning: to know why they might feel comfortable in a certain type of classroom activity and not in another, to understand which types of assignments or activities might produce anxiety and require additional self-motivation to accomplish.

Classroom Environment and Learning Styles

Teachers can co-create a positive classroom environment with their students by modeling and encouraging a culture of respect, consideration, and support in student-to-student and teacher-to-student interactions. This is especially important in the pre-writing stage of the writing process - which is often accomplished as group work - and during peer feedback. Students from collectivist societies may need scaffolding and explicit instruction in the purpose and benefits of group work and in ways to provide constructive suggestions for improvement to their classmates. Grouping students purposefully to have a combination of learning styles together allows the active learners to lead and the reflective learners to think, and assign or have students choose roles such as 'encourager/time-keeper,' 'recorder,' and 'reporter.' A student who is not the strongest writer in the class may have a special talent for keeping discussions focused, encouraging

group-mates, or making helpful suggestions to others about their writing, and this can be hugely empowering for that student.

A respectful and supportive classroom environment can also encourage students to take risks with language, help students tolerate ambiguity as they build their writing skills, and begin to think more positively about their capabilities. Lyddon (2012) studied the use of self-encouragement and self-motivation strategies among Japanese university students learning English, and found that the most highly autonomous learners used a higher number and variety of self-encouragement and self-motivation strategies. He suggested, therefore, that "the modeling of positive thinking [by teachers] might also be in order" (p. 462).

The SLW teacher in an EAP setting can also look for opportunities remind students of the practical applications of becoming a better academic writer in English. The highly rule-based, prescriptive nature of many introductory academic English writing courses can be especially frustrating for intuitors, who tend to be imaginative and enjoy exceptions to the rule; and for kinesthetic or auditory learners, who might struggle with the visual nature of learning to write in a specific way in a second language. In addition, students may have an internally persuasive discourse that is at odds with the authoritative discourse they are being required to learn. In other words, they prefer their 'inner writer' – who is present due to their own agency, identity, culture, and educational background – to the writer they are being asked to become (Lee, 2008).

Hyland (2011) additionally recommended that teachers help students to understand that "there are different cultural criteria for effective writing" (p. 49) and that both their own practices and the practices being required in the EAP SLW class are equally valid. Class discussions of students' career goals and brainstorming sessions with students offering ways in which academic writing can help their classmates reach these goals can be an effective way to diffuse the tensions regarding the criteria SLW students are being asked to meet.

Sensing Versus Intuitive Learners

SLW teachers may find it helpful to recognize the continuum of sensing to intuitive learners who will likely be present in their classroom. They can appeal to intuitive learners by offering a range of writing prompts or allowing students latitude in topic selection, opening up space for intuitors' imagination and creativity. The

Conference on College Composition and Communication (2009) goes so far as to recommend that writing instructors should provide EAP students "with multiple options for successfully competing an assignment" whenever possible. Teachers can stress to intuitive students that the structures of writing being learned in the class are like the theme of a piece of music; variations can come only after the theme is played. These intuitive learners will be able to stray from the structure once they have mastered it. Instructors can reach their sensing learners with clear, concrete instructions and guidelines for assignments. Timed writing assignments can be used judiciously, keeping in mind that these favor intuitors and penalize sensors.

Inductive Versus Deductive Learners

Another dichotomy for the SLW teacher to keep in mind is the inductive/deductive distinction. Varying the presentation of structures will allow teachers to appeal to both ends of this spectrum. Offering paragraph models is an ideal way to reach the inductive learner, who likes to see the larger picture and discern rules and procedures from there. Carefully chosen authentic materials can also be very helpful to the inductive learner. On the other hand, providing specific rules and principles and asking students to apply them to new structures will be a comfortable approach for the deductive learner. Reid's (2006) advice is ideal for both types of students: "make writing tasks, formats, and writing conventions visible to the students" (p. 54), enhancing noticing: that 'aha' moment when a rule or principle is understood.

The use of multi-modal input is one of the most well-established principles of second language instruction, and its importance in SLW instruction at the university level is no less vital. For the visual learner, charts or graphs to represent the writing structures being discussed can be very helpful. Color-coding the sentences of a paragraph to show their role as topic sentence, supporting ideas, supporting details, or thesis statement is another way to vary the input. For the kinesthetic/tactile learner, offer a model paragraph with the sentences cut apart, and have students reassemble it. Always give both verbal and written instructions and guidelines for assignments, posting visuals such as PowerPoints online so that students can review them later. If possible, record the verbal guidelines for assignments and post online as well.

Teachers may find ways to offer a variety of types of feedback and writing conferences over the course of the semester. For example, the following three ways to provide feedback on a writing assignment would reach three difference types of learners: writing feedback on the document; highlighting with various colors to indicate different types of errors; recording aural feedback and posting it online. A variety of methods for giving feedback could be used in alternation throughout the semester, or on successive drafts of one assignment. Online writing conferences can appeal to reflective, sensing, verbally-oriented students. In-person conferences can appeal to the auditory learners and those who may process information in large leaps. These could also be done in alternation throughout the semester.

CONCLUSION

While "no finite number of dimensions could ever encompass the totality of individual student differences" (Felder, 1995, p. 27), awareness of student learning style preferences is an important first step for the teacher in maximizing learning in the SLW classroom. Designing activities and modifying tasks to appeal to the learning preferences of SLW students can help them gain "personal ownership of learning" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 131), thus increasing their situational self-esteem and improving their motivation. Students who have been taught to be aware of their learning style preferences can develop strategies to deal with any teaching style they may encounter in their college career. Thus, they will gain the confidence and the capability to continue to improve as academic writers of English beyond the SLW classroom.

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APPENDIX

Connor, Marcia. (n.d.). What is your learning style? Retrieved from http://marciaconner.com/assess/learningstyle/

Designed for business settings, this brief twelve-question survey is nevertheless a good vehicle to use with advanced language learners to assess and discuss learning styles. Descriptions of reactions in specific circumstances lead survey-takers to identify their preferences as visual, auditory, or tactile/kinesthetic. Connor seems to reading under the category of visual.

Fleming, N. (2001). Vark: a guide to learning styles. Retrieved from http://www.vark-learn.com/english/index.asp This site includes an online questionnaire of sixteen questions that allows learners to quickly obtain a picture of their learning style preferences: visual, aural, reading/writing, or kinesthetic. The language in the basic questionnaire is accessible to English learners at the high intermediate level; the site also includes a version of the questionnaire for "younger people" which has simpler language but also relates situations more appropriate for children.

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