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ELŻBIETA DANUTA LESIAK-BIELAWSKA

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## **The Relationship between Learning Style Preferences and Reading Strategy Use in English as a Foreign Language**

**ABSTRACT.** The study explored the relationship between learning style preferences and the use of reading strategies triggered during the performance of a reading comprehension assignment in English as a foreign language (EFL). The research conducted drew on the hypothesis that the type of language task activates a battery of strategies that reflect the subject's learning style preferences and the task requirements.

The study has resorted to a well-established research method and employed highly-structured written surveys to determine learning style preferences and reading strategy use reported within the group. It was conducted with 49 intermediate adult EFL learners, studying English as a FL at the University of Technology in Warsaw.

The results obtained seem to point to the relevance of the key research categories for foreign language learning and teaching. They also appear to provide some support for the current process-oriented approaches to teaching EFL reading comprehension. However, the findings presented here are to be viewed as suggestive rather than definite since the study conducted is the first of its kind. As such, it needs to be followed by additional research that would provide more evidence concerning the relationship explored, and its educationally related applications.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The article aims at presenting research findings on reading comprehension in English as a foreign language (EFL). The role of this skill area takes on increasing importance, as the demand for proficient reading continues to grow. The pheno-

menon is not in the least surprising. All the more so that the contemporary *lingua franca* is the language of almost one third of the world's books (Komorowska 2006), as well as science, technology and advanced research. It goes without saying then that English as a secondary/foreign language (ES/FL) reading skills, if appropriately developed, enable learners to benefit from various real life reading situations and achieve their professional and personal goals.

## 2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The objective of this cross-sectional study was to explore the relationship between learning style preferences and the use of reading strategies triggered during the performance of the reading assignment. The issue of strategy use has been widely investigated by second language acquisition (SLA) researchers in relation to different S/FL skills. Thus, the study into EFL reading comprehension becomes part of a relatively young, but flourishing research area, whose results provide information on the actual processes of S/FLA, occurring in and out of the S/FL classroom.

The methodology adopted is in line with other studies exploring the range of strategies employed by the more and less successful learners performing ES/FL reading comprehension tasks (cf. Hosenfeld 1976; Block 1986, 1992; Carrell 1989; Anderson 1991; Haastrup 1991; Karpińska-Szaj 2001; Piasecka 2001). The study design also follows the way, paved by the findings of the investigation conducted by Vann and Abraham (1990), in which the researchers explain unsuccessful task performance in terms of less orchestrated and, at times, haphazard strategy use.

Last but not least, drawing on research findings by Ehrman and Oxford (1989, 1990), Rossi-Li (1995), Anderson and Vandergrift (1996), Oxford and Nam (1998), as well as by Gallin (1999), which link strategy use to learning style preferences, the present study sets out to go slightly deeper into the process aspect of the task performance. Referring to all these research findings, it was an attempt at viewing the process of the task performance, as reflected in the relationship between learning style preferences and reading strategy use, in relation to the product itself, i.e. the learners' differential success in performing the assignments.

## 3. KEY RESEARCH CATEGORIES

The following research categories are central to the understanding of the problem investigated.

*Language learning style preferences* are defined as a profile of general approaches of an individual to the process of second/foreign language

learning (S/FLL). In contrast to cognitive styles, *learning styles* are deeply embedded in the educational context, and relate to the learner's continuing adaptation to the environment.

*Reading strategies* are defined as individual procedures deliberately employed by the learner to cope with EFL reading problems by selecting the shortest and the most effective route to the goal pursued.

*The language task* is defined as a unit of human cognitive purposeful activity whose completion enables one to process feedback. Its effective performance involves setting in motion a series of **bottom-up (local)** and **top-down (global)** processes.

#### 4. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Though the task is not a research category directly investigated here, it is not devoid of its significance. For it was hypothesized that depending on the type of language task, a battery of language strategies that reflect the subject's learning style preferences, as well as the task requirements, are triggered. Since it is the language task that provides an indispensable context for strategy use, reading strategies employed by the learners in the group are evaluated in terms of their effectiveness for the assignment at hand. Each strategy is also considered appropriate if it is in keeping with learning style preferences reported. This implies that **global strategies** of inferring the meaning, and summarizing the information in the text, for instance, stem from global style preferences, like being more open, global, etc. In contrast, **local strategies** which involve focusing on the information in the text, translating some of its parts, etc., result from local style preferences, such as being more closure-oriented, particular, and so on. Additionally, consistently with the findings of Vann & Abraham (1990), it was assumed that unsuccessful task performance results from insufficient self-regulatory skills to assess the task at hand, and set in motion strategies indispensable for its completion.

#### 5. METHOD

##### 5.1. Subjects

The study was conducted with a group of 49 intermediate adult EFL learners, studying English as a FL at the University of Technology in Warsaw. They came from 3 second-year student groups. Their level of proficiency in English was determined on the basis of the written grammar-based placement test.

They are a homogenous group as regards their language exposure. The overwhelming majority report having sporadic contact with English, limited for the most part to the EFL course offered at the University of Technology, or occasional use of English for communication in Poland. Likewise, as far as their motivational orientation is concerned, their reasons for learning English seem to be linked to utilitarian goals for language learning, defined by Gardner and Lambert (1972) as instrumental motivation.

## 5.2. Instrumentation

The study has resorted to a well-established research method and employed highly-structured written surveys to determine learning style preferences within the group, as well as the learners' reading strategy use. To capture strategy use, the **post-task reading strategy use questionnaire** was designed. Drawing on the taxonomies created by Chamot and O'Malley (1994), Oxford (1990), as well as Cohen and Chi's (2001) language strategy survey, it only focuses on metacognitive, cognitive and affective strategies employed by readers at different stages of the reading task performance. These strategies are presented in five phases which reflect the process of completing the task:

- pre-reading phase
- first reading
- second reading
- vocabulary phase
- self-evaluation phase.

In addition, the *Learning Style Preference Survey* (Cohen, Oxford, Chi 2001) was translated into Polish, and assigned to the learners in the group. The taxonomy identifies eleven dimensions of individual learning style preferences, which include:

- 1) sensory preferences, i.e. **visual**, **auditory**, and/or **tactile/kinaesthetic**,
- 2) being more **global**, i.e. seeing the big picture, versus more **particular**, i.e. focused, detail-oriented,
- 3) being more **open**, i.e. having a high tolerance of ambiguity, versus more **closure-oriented**, i.e. seeking rapid closure due to a low tolerance of ambiguity, etc.

Both surveys make use of a five-point Likert scale, and require the learners to produce their responses to the questions provided by utilizing appropriate indications of frequency. The choice of the assessment measures was justified by the objective of the study, as well as by the fact that the research categories explored are unlikely to be captured by other available assessment procedures employed in the field, e.g. observation or verbal report.

### 5.3. Research questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

- 1) to what extent are the strategies employed by the more versus less successful learners related to the overall nature of learning style preferences reported by them;
- 2) to what extent is the learners' differential success in the task performance reflected in the use of strategies consistently related to learning style preferences reported;
- 3) to what extent are the strategies employed by the more and less successful learners performing reading comprehension assignment in English as a foreign language (EFL) linked to other relevant strategies;
- 4) to what extent are the strategies employed by the more and less successful learners in keeping with the requirements of the task at hand.

### 5.4. Procedures

Addressing the above research questions, the study made use of the reading assignment and four written surveys. All of the questionnaires were administered to the learner group in Polish, following the procedure presented below:

- 1) **the background questionnaire** to collect data on the subjects' background, education, their knowledge of FLs in general, and English in particular;
- 2) **the motivation questionnaire** to determine their reasons for FLL, beliefs related to language learning, language aptitude, and learning practices employed;
- 3) **the Learning Style Preference Survey** to assess the learners' general approaches to language learning;
- 4) **the reading comprehension task**, i.e. a passage entitled *Meeting in Videospace* from Taylor's (1997) *International Express Teacher's Resource Book*, preceded by seven true and false statements to check reading comprehension;
- 5) drawing on **the final scores** for the reading task, **the group was divided** into the more and less successful subgroups;
- 6) **the post-task reading strategy use survey** attached to the language assignment to collect the learners' responses concerning strategy use;
- 7) **Spearman's Rank Correlation Test** was employed to identify the relationship between learning style preferences reported by the respondents and their reading strategy use;
- 8) the covariance between the two research measures was inspected in relation to the learners' differential success in completing each task.

## 6. RESULTS

The results obtained for the reading assignment provide evidence that the more effective group definitely displays more consistent relationships between learning style preferences and reading strategy use reported. The congruously related strategies not only seem to be well-matched to the task at hand, but also appear to go hand in hand with the whole gamut of other strategies employed within the group throughout the task performance. What is more, the learners in the group tend to comfortably operate in a wide range of diverse, but related style preferences compatibly linked to the strategies reported by them.

The results obtained for **the more effective group** performing the reading task seem to go hand in hand with a "good reader" profile proposed by Cohen (1991). Since the readers in the group activate various accessible sources of prior knowledge, as well as pay attention to the purpose, content, context, and forms of the passage, they appear to employ a spectrum of local and global cognitive as well as a range of metacognitive strategies helpful in decoding the message. When performing the task at hand, they also seem to be engaged in comprehension monitoring (cf. Cohen 1991; Karpińska-Szaj 2003), and are, thus, open to feedback. Table 1 summarizes the study findings for the more successful group.

**Table 1:** The style consistently related reading strategies as evidenced in the findings of the study for the more successful group

Stages of the task performance	Strategies reported at different phases of the reading assignment
Pre-reading phase	1. Activation of background knowledge; 2. Recalling what is known about the subject matter of the passage; 3. Predictions related to the possible passage content; 4. Planning the task performance; 5. Planning to identify the most important information to focus on during the second reading; 6. Deciding how to perform the task at its different stages.
First reading	1. Paying attention to the text organization; 2. Employing prior knowledge-based predictions; 3. Employing text-based predictions; 4. Making ongoing summaries of the most important information in the text; 5. Inspecting difficult parts of the text.
Second reading	1. Skimming the text; 2. Employing predictions, 3. Employing ongoing summaries and translations.
Vocabulary phase	1. Going for the gist of the passage; 2. Linking the spelling of known and unknown words.
Self-evaluation phase	1. Identifying the most difficult aspects of the task; 2. Identifying a series of useful strategies; 3. Estimating the final effect of the completed task.



The findings also seem to go hand in hand with Haastrup's (1991) profile of proficient FL readers who tend to employ parallel processing at various levels, i.e. top-down and bottom-up levels, with direct communication between these two poles. They are as well consistent with Piasecka's (2001) conclusions that the more proficient the learners are, the more they tend to link text information with their prior knowledge. Moreover, they are also in keeping with Block's (1986) profile of the successful SL reader, who, while recognizing various aspects of the text structure, resorts to his/her general knowledge, personal experience and associations at the same time. Attempting to grasp the ideas conveyed by the author, the more proficient readers tend to monitor their understanding of the text consistently and effectively. As observed by Cohen (1991), learners' retrospective accounts related to detailed self-evaluation are linked to the processes of monitoring, which in a reading task involve decoding the meaning and its interpretation.

As opposed to them, **the less effective group** not only displays a lot of inconsistent relationships and quite a few incoherent ones, but also demonstrates very little co-variance between the variables explored. The compatible relationships between learning style preferences and reading strategies employed by them considerably differ from those obtained in the other group. The study findings for the less successful group point to the predomination of the upper pole in their discourse processing. Table 2 displays the results obtained for the less successful group.

**Table 2:** The style consistently related reading strategies as evidenced in the findings of the study for the less successful group

Stages of the task performance	Strategies reported at different stages of the reading assignment
Pre-reading	1. Planning to scan the passage fragments with the most important information.
First reading	1. Scanning the passage fragments by focusing on key words in meaningful units; 2. Summarizing the most important information in writing.
Second reading	1. Scanning the passage fragments with the most important information.
Vocabulary phase	1. Employing context clues to guess the meaning of new words; 2. Focusing on concrete passage fragments with new words.
Self-evaluation phase	1. Reflecting on useless strategies.

The results obtained for the less effective group indirectly seem to go hand in hand with the findings reported by Carrell (1989). Discussing them, the researcher concludes that being aware of their reading deficits, the less

successful learners, in contrast to the less proficient learners in the present study, tended to rely more on bottom-up decoding skills. Moreover, the results obtained for the less effective group in this study appear to bear out directly Haastrup's (1991) findings. Accordingly, one of the less successful groups performing the reading comprehension assignment employed top-down processing that turned out to be ineffective since it did not involve direct interaction with the stimulus structure at the local level.

The results of the present study also seem to be in keeping with the findings by Block (1986, 1992). As evidenced by her research, one of the characteristics which seems to differentiate less successful from more successful readers is their response to the reading input. Processing the reading passage in the reflexive mode, the readers appear to relate affectively and personally. Instead of concentrating on the meaning conveyed by the author, they tend to direct their attention away from the text, towards themselves, and are inclined to focus on their thoughts and feelings, rather than on the information in the text.

## 7. RESEARCH QUESTIONS REVISITED

The study set out to investigate the relationship between learning style preferences and reading strategy use in EFL. Its results have shown some of the hypothesized relationship. Thus, the findings presented provide support for the relationship between learning style preferences and reading strategy use reported by the learners when performing the EFL reading comprehension task. Drawing on them, it can be concluded that consistent and coherent relationships between the variables explored are linked to the more successfully completed assignment (cf. research questions 1, 2). Not only do the style compatibly related strategies appear to be well-matched to the task that is being processed (cf. research questions 1, 4), but they also seem to be well coordinated with other relevant strategies (cf. research questions 1, 3). It is also worth emphasizing that the study results pertaining to the style compatibly related strategies in both the more and less successful groups go hand in hand with other research findings in the area of F/SL reading comprehension.

## 8. IMPLICATIONS FOR S/FL LEARNING AND TEACHING EMERGING FROM THE STUDY

In the very first place, the study results seem to point to the relevance of *learning style* for S/FLA, and S/FL teaching. Drawing on these findings, it appears that strategies, as well as style preferences are well worth taking in-

to account in order to enhance and optimize the process of S/FLA. However, not being the only diagnostic factors, they need to be considered in a web of interrelated individual learner variables implicated in the process of S/FLA.

Secondly, the study results also appear to provide some support for the current psycholinguistically motivated approaches to teaching S/FL reading comprehension. They entail breaking a reading lesson into three stages, during which by nurturing the use of successful reading strategies, teachers give learners the opportunity to engage in style-flexing, i.e. to use strategies not necessarily compatible with their learning style preferences.

Given that the use of metacognitive strategies, particularly comprehension monitoring, appears to be essential for successful readers, it is advisable to foster the growth of metacognition. In view of the fact that the task is an overriding category, metacognitive training is first and foremost to focus on the use of task appropriate strategies, and to provide explicit feedback on how to use them intelligently in keeping with the requirements of the assignment. Incorporating the style component into awareness raising is likely to complement the training as it will provide learners with some insight into their learning process, and aid them in understanding their preferred strategies, as well as strategies missing from their repertoire.

Following the task completion, learners can be taught to evaluate the utility of the employed strategies, and their success in the task performance. Reflection on those strategies will help them become aware of their reading style, and sense surfacing deficits in order to develop and improve their competence in S/FL reading.

It follows that when teaching S/FL reading comprehension, it is indispensable to draw on a wide range of diverse reading assignments. Texts designed for intensive reading, employed as learning experience for S/FL reading comprehension, help practise a variety of reading strategies, learn vocabulary, discourse types, etc. Learners can also be encouraged to engage in extensive reading which is a significant source of cultural and factual knowledge.

The approach to teaching S/FL reading comprehension considerably expands the range of communicative options accessible to S/FL learners, and entails the growth of experience in the area. It is also conducive to awareness raising, provided that learners realize what they do while assigning meaning to forms. However, it is only when they become aware of the dependence between planning, assessing and monitoring their reading process that they can learn to exercise efficient control over it. The strategies resulting from such an approach to S/FL reading comprehension will certainly be well-adjusted to the assignment at hand and the whole gamut of individual learner differences, among which learning style preferences are but the tip of the iceberg.

## 9. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The results presented here are to be viewed as suggestive rather than definite since in many ways the study is the first of its kind. As such, it needs to be replicated, and followed by additional research that would explore the relationship between learning style preferences and strategy use to overcome the constraints of S/FL reading comprehension assignments. Subsequent studies, trying to further investigate the relationship between learners' awareness of various reading strategies as being reflected in diverse learning style preferences, and triggered in response to the learning task at hand, must also explore the links between the learners' strategic awareness and their reading ability and performance in a wide range of reading comprehension tasks.

We also need more training studies into the most effective and beneficial instructional means for teaching reading strategies. It seems advisable that these training studies incorporate the style component, which would enable S/FL readers to assess the employed strategies in terms of their utility for the individual subject, and the task at hand. Additionally, since, as demonstrated in this study, the most consistent relationship between learning style preferences and strategy use appear to be linked to EFL proficiency-related successful performance in the task, it might be a worthwhile effort to embark on a longitudinal study exploring the development of learning styles in relation to strategy use in various S/FL reading comprehension tasks appropriately related to the subjects' level of S/FL proficiency. Such a study may shed some light on the style- and strategy-related changes, and the learners' gradual shift to parallel bottom-up and top-down processing. It might as well demonstrate that the notion of learning style preferences is a cover term or merely a convenient way of referring to certain patterns of information processing and learning behaviours whose sources can be found in a wide range of diverse factors, such as differential levels of acquired skills or abilities, idiosyncratic traits of personality, different exposures to learning experiences in the past, etc. Irrespective of the outcome, it seems that in view of its practical implications for S/FL Learning and Teaching, the construct of learning style cannot be dismissed out of hand as a completely irrelevant S/FL linked measure. What we need is more evidence concerning the relationship explored and its educationally related applications. As yet, only a first tentative attempt at exploring the processes and mechanisms of interlanguage reading comprehension has been made.

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