

An Investigation of the Relationship between L2 Learning Styles and Teaching Methodologies in EFL Classes

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Abstract

Individual differences have always been a key element in the success and failure of learners in language classrooms. Learners come to EFL classes with various learning styles and teachers utilize different methodologies targeting different needs of the learners which may have important effects on the quality of the learning environment. In this study a comparison is made between learning styles and teaching methodologies to figure out whether there is any consistency between the two. The participants in this survey study are 108 EFL learners and 108 teachers from private institutes. The instruments for gathering data are two questionnaires, one for learning style (Honey & Mumford, 2006) and the other for teaching style (Grasha, 1996). The results of this study revealed that not only there is little consistency between learning styles and teaching methodologies but also there is not a suitable way of measuring learning proficiency in language classes. In many EFL classes, there is little chance for feedback and a traditional paper-pencil evaluation is still on the stage in some classes. The paper ends with addressing the relevant pedagogical implications.

Keywords: Learning Style, Teaching Methodology, Survey Study, EFL Context

1. Introduction

According to some great thinkers and philosophers such as *Confucius*, learning is the beating heart of every human activity. The following inspiring quote further clarifies the place of learning in the development of humanity (Dawson, 1993, p. 70):

If one loves humaneness but does not love learning, the consequence of this is folly; if one loves understanding but does not love learning, the consequence of this is unorthodoxy; if one loves good faith but does not love learning, the consequence of this is damaging behaviour; if one loves straightforwardness but does not love learning, the consequence of this is rudeness; if one loves courage but does not love learning, the consequence of this is rebelliousness; if one loves strength but does not love learning, the consequence of this is violence.

Confucius also mentions that human mind is like a *tabula rasa* which is going to be affected by the environment and the experiences one gathers throughout the life (Huang, 1997). Therefore, environment and the ecological aspects, which education is part of it, are of key importance in learners' success. One of these ecological aspects which has an undeniable effect on learners is teaching methodology. Most of the philosophers and experts in the realm of teaching and educational sciences have always considered learning and teaching as complementary terms. Considering different viewpoints of learning-teaching dichotomy has a key role in increasing the quality of EFL classes. Socrates believes that an influential teaching take place when the teacher helps learners to achieve autonomy and independence. Learning autonomy is also advocated as being effective by many SLA researchers (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). As Socrates discusses, teacher should not be the main source of knowledge in the class and there should not be a unidirectional relationship between the teacher and the learners. Teaching is best achieved when it is based on a mutual relationship

between learners and the teacher through asking questions and increasing learners' problem-solving ability. In other words, learning environment should create a curious insight in the mind of the learners through which learners are able to change the environment and to gain independence (Rowe, 2001). If the learning environment treats learners as consumers and there is no creativity on the part of the learners, then no new knowledge is produced and there is no questioning from the learners. Learners take the information they receive from environment for granted. This condition changes learners into a couch potato willing to accept everything as being true. Plato mentioned that knowledge is innately endowed to human being and education is a tool to increase the quality of behaviors in order to reach a decent condition which is praised by the society (Cooper, 2001). If there is no good faith behind education and knowledge, devastation is the output of human endeavor. Confucius has the idea of learner's social development through learning and believes that in a learning situation, education is not the only goal to be achieved by teaching. Education is a tool to achieve a goal which is outside the realm of education (Shen, 2001). Aristotle definition of learning is related to learners' five senses; he further mentioned that the whole learner should be involved in the process of learning. Learning is best achieved when the differences between the learners' inner and outer world are decreased (Seraphine, 2001). Ghazzali (cited in Tavit, 2001) put emphasis on affective factors and mentioned that teachers should not create a unidirectional relationship in the class in which the teacher is the main source of information. There should be a consultative relationship between the teacher and learners. Ghazzali further believed that human values should be taught to learners (Tavit, 2001). As the aforementioned discussion suggests, increasing the quality of learning environment is the concern of many philosophers and thinkers to the date.

In the same vein, Freire (1970) distinguishes between two kinds of education which show the nature of learner-teacher relationship. In the first kind of education, which is called the *banking concept of education*, learners are considered as a bank account which need to be filled with the information from the teacher and learners are not allowed to draw this information from their account which is the input learners receive from the environment. In banking concept of education, learners have a passive part in the class and there is a unidirectional relationship between the teacher and learners, i.e. the teacher is the only source who provides input for the learners. In this kind of education, learners have little chance of asking or participating in class and teachers' knowledge is taken for granted. The teacher takes lead of the class and there is no dialog. However, in the second kind of education, which is called the *problem solving concept of education*, learners have the chance to participate in class discussion and there is a mutual relationship between the teacher and learners. This kind of education is what Ghazzali (cited in Tavit, 2001) emphasized in his definition of education. In this kind of education, learners are treated as an active part of learning environment and their voices are treated as being important for shaping the process of learning. Problem-solving concept of education provides learners with a creative mind, enabling them to generate novel ideas. The output of such an educational system is a person who is going to change the environment in a way that what is in the environment is not of fixed nature but changing. It can be concluded that teaching methodology has a great effect on the nature of learning.

As it was discussed earlier, teaching sheds shadow on learning and the nature of this two-way relationship is important in increasing the quality of language classrooms. What is crystal clear is that educational contexts are affected by many elements which can have hindering or beneficial effects on learning. One cannot utilize a one-dimensional method to reach the goals of educational system and there

should be an eclectic approach to target different needs of the learners and situational context. Therefore, there is not a magical method for increasing the quality of learning environments. Through the research findings, teachers can determine the principles of good language learning. Such an effort is done by Brown (2001) who has determined ten principles of language teaching and another study is conducted by Kumaravadivelu (2003) to show macrostrategies of language teaching.

This should be taken into consideration that teaching theories have also an influential role in the quality of learning. For instance, NLP techniques help teachers to establish a suitable relationship with learners. NLP approach advocates that each person has an outstanding feature. The teacher should distinguish learners' outstanding features and enter the mind of learners through stimulating these features and guide learners (Millrood, 2004). The sentence *I am tired* has different connotations regarding gender differences. For men, this sentence has an illocutionary meaning of *I need rest* and *I need to be alone*. However, for women, the opposite meaning holds true in that women want to show that *they need more attention* just unlike what men intended to say. Therefore, people have different concepts and definitions about the reality and teachers should take these discrepancies into consideration. In other words, teachers should help learners to come to new insights. Congruency between teachers and learners leads to more motivation on the part of learners, more attention to learning, more self-esteem, the enhancement of learners' role in class, and the reduction of tension (Thornbury, 2001). Teaching is not only an expertise but an art in nature. In some circumstances, teachers have good knowledge but they are not competent enough to transfer the knowledge to learners in an appropriate way. Undoubtedly, the interaction between teaching and sciences such as psychology and sociology has provided learning with many challenges.

2. Theories of Language Teaching

To understand the main elements of good language teaching, an attempt should be made to first introduce the theories of teaching. A sound methodology is not necessarily a fixed and a determined one. Sociology of SLA advocates that every individual has miscellaneous needs and people are going to operate on the surrounding world based on their own experiences. According to Bourdieu (1986), social and cultural capitals will be strong predeterminers why some learners are more competent regardless of the methodology they have been exposed to. For increasing the quality of learning, the ecological factors should be taken into consideration which the surrounding world is part of it (Williams & Burden, 1997). Zahorik (1986) has classified teaching theories under three main umbrella terms:

2.1. Science-Research Conceptions

In this paradigm, empirical investigation is of key importance and as Zahorik (1986) mentions, *operationalizing learning principles*, *following a tested model*, and *doing what effective teachers do* are some of the examples of science-research conceptions. Operationalizing learning principles embraces research on memory, motivation, and all the factors which are to some extent related to learning. Through these principles, it is possible to develop good language teaching guidelines to follow in other situations. Through following a tested model of teaching, “a view of good teaching is developed through logical reasoning and previous research; good teaching is defined in terms of specific acts” (Zahorik, 1986, p. 21). Another approach in science-research conceptions is achieved by identifying effective teachers and the way they perform in actual classes. This is referred to as reaching good teaching by doing what effective teachers do. Observation of language classes can provide teachers with a stockpile of good teaching principles. In a research of this kind, Blum (1984, pp. 3-6) has determined twelve characteristics

of effective teaching as (1) instruction is guided by a preplanned curriculum; (2) there are high expectations for student learning; (3) students are carefully oriented to lessons; (4) instruction is clear and focused; (5) learning progress is monitored closely; (6) when students do not understand, they are retaught; (7) class time is used for learning; (8) there are smooth and efficient classroom routines; (9) instructional groups formed in the classroom fit instructional needs; (10) standards for classroom behaviour are high; (11) personal interactions between teachers and students are positive; and (12) incentives and rewards for students are used to promote excellence. It should be mentioned that the teaching principles characterized by Blum (1984) are not the only elements for improving teaching but learners' needs and situational factors are also effective in determining good teaching methodology.

2.2. Theory-Philosophy Conceptions

This paradigm is further divided into two underlying categories as theory-based approaches and values-based ones. The first perspective which is a rationalist approach is the foundation of many teaching methodologies (Richards, 2002). Reason and rational thought are the yardsticks for evaluating teaching methodology. What is important in this approach is not empirical investigation but rather systematic thinking. This model is defined through the values one holds about teachers, learners, classrooms, and the role of education in society. Thus, what is congruent with the values of society is considered as an effective teaching.

2.3. Art-Craft Conceptions

From another perspective, teaching methodology is defined as a personal skill and teacher's characteristics (Zahorik, 1986). Personal skills which the teacher resorts to are of paramount importance. Thus, there is no universal way of teaching, and the concept of a magic

formula for teaching is rejected in this paradigm. Teachers can adjust their teaching style based on the situational needs which can be related to both learners' needs and educational facilities. What is crystal clear is that teacher's decision making and choice play an important role in the classroom. In the previous theories, teacher was assigned a passive role as a consumer but in this approach teachers become practitioners of their own theories. These theories have been made through the process of teaching and are more related to situational needs of the classroom and can better target the objectives of the situation-specific policies. Variety and creativity can be better achieved in this approach.

3. Purpose of the Study

This survey study investigated the perceptions of L2 learners and teachers with reference to teaching methodologies and learning styles in EFL classes, aiming at exploring the extent to which L2 learners' learning styles match the teachers' instructional methodologies. Through the findings of this study, it is possible to figure out the dominant learning styles in language classes. Moreover, learners' learning styles can be explored to compare them with teachers' dominant instructional methodologies.

4. Research Questions

1. What is the L2 teachers' dominant teaching style in EFL classes?
2. Is there any significant difference among various teaching styles?
3. What is the L2 learners' dominant learning style in EFL classes?
4. Is there any significant difference among various learning styles?
5. To what extent teachers' instructional styles match with learners' learning styles in EFL classes?

5. Methodology

In this study an attempt is made to investigate the relationship between learning style and teaching style through analysis of

frequencies. To this end, 108 Persian EFL learners and 108 teachers from the private EFL institutes were randomly chosen. The average age of learners was 15 years old. Learners were from different proficiency levels and were from various social statuses.

5.1. Research Instruments

5.1.1. Honey and Mumford Learning Style Questionnaire (2006)

This questionnaire is designed to measure different learning styles. Learners come to language classes with different styles and these styles are changed or reinforced during the course of learning a foreign language. Most of the learners are unaware of their own learning styles; therefore, this questionnaire can help learners to recognize their dominant style of learning. Learners are given 10 to 15 minutes to answer this questionnaire. Learners are to choose their learning style based on providing an answer on agreeing or disagreeing. *Honey and Mumford Learning Style Questionnaire* includes 80 questions which measures four styles of learning which are Activist, Reflector, Theorist, and Pragmatist. Figure 1 shows the four learning styles:

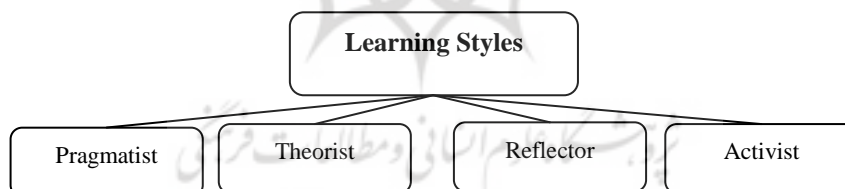


Figure 1-Honey and Mumford Learning Styles

Activists involve themselves fully and without bias in new experiences (Honey & Mumford, 2006). They enjoy the here and now and are happy to be dominated by immediate experiences. They are open-minded, not skeptical, and this tends to make them enthusiastic about

anything new. Their philosophy is *I'll try anything once*. They tend to thrive on the challenge of new experiences but are bored with implementation and longer term consolidation. They are gregarious people constantly involving themselves with others but, in doing so, they hog the limelight. They are the life and soul of the party and seek to center all activities on themselves. *Reflectors* like to stand back to ponder experiences and observe them from many different perspectives. They collect data, both first hand and from others, and prefer to chew it over thoroughly before coming to any conclusion. The thorough collection and analysis of data about experiences and events is what counts so they tend to postpone reaching definitive conclusions for as long as possible. Their philosophy is to be cautious, to leave no stone unturned. They prefer to take a back seat in meetings and discussions. They enjoy observing other people in action. They listen to others and get the drift of the discussion before making their own points. *Theorists* adapt and integrate observations into complex but logically sound theories. They think problems through in a vertical, step-by-step logical way. They assimilate disparate facts into coherent theories. They like to analyze and synthesize. They are keen on basic assumptions, principles, theories, models and systems thinking. Their philosophy prizes rationality and logic. *Pragmatists* are keen to try out ideas, theories and techniques to see if they work in practice. They positively search out new ideas and take the first opportunity to experiment with applications. They are the sort of people who return from courses brimming with new ideas that they want to try out in practice. They like to get on with things and act quickly and confidently on ideas that attract them (ibid, 2006).

5.1.2. Grasha's 5 Teaching Style Questionnaire (1996)

Grasha's Teaching Style Questionnaire (1996) includes 40 items and teachers should answer each question based on their own teaching methodology using a Likert-scale five-point questionnaire. This questionnaire measures five teaching styles as Delegator, facilitator, Personal Model, Formal Authority, and Expert. The definition of each

style is provided in Appendix 1. Figure 2 shows the Grasha's (1996) five teaching styles (p. 154):

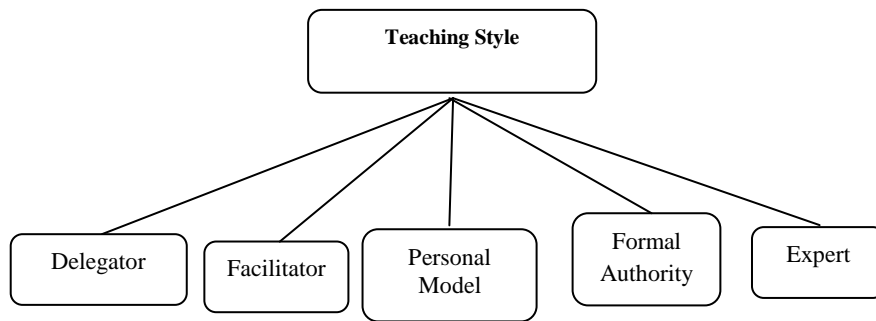


Figure 2- Grasha's Five Teaching Styles

6. Results and Discussion

After investigating the learning styles, it was revealed that most of the learners are placed within the *reflector* style of learning. Statistical analysis of Chi-square showed that there is a significant difference among the observed frequencies of learning styles ($\chi^2=48.850$, $p < .05$). Figure 3 shows the frequencies of learning styles:

Frequencies: (Activist=31; Reflector=54; Theorist=16; Pragmatist=6)

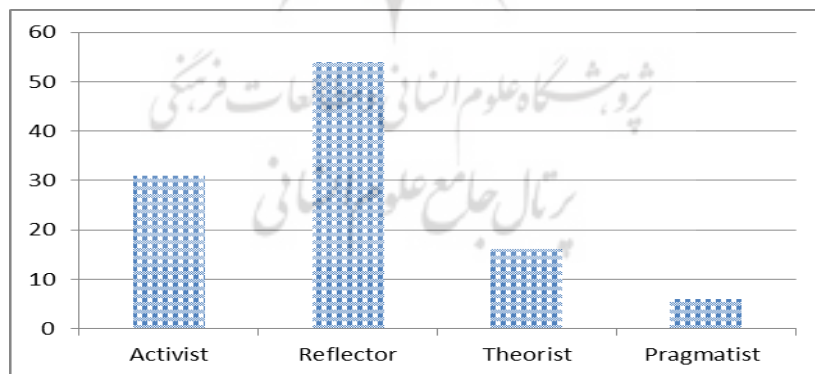


Figure 3- Distribution of Learning Styles by Frequency

As it is revealed in Figure 3, the least used learning style is pragmatist which points out that there is little tendency in learners to put everything in practice. After considering the teaching methodology, it was figured out that most teachers have a tendency toward *formal authority* and *expert* styles of teaching which is in contrast with the dominant learning styles. Teachers who are mostly labeled as a formal authority or an expert are less likely to allow learners to talk and participate in class discussion and procedures. This finding indicates that there is a discrepancy between learning styles and teacher methodology in that being an expert or a formal authority does not match a reflector style of learning.

Among the teachers, the result of Chi-square showed that there is a significant difference among the frequency of chosen teaching styles ($\chi^2=34.075$, $p < .05$). The frequency of each teaching style is presented in Figure 4:

Frequencies: (Expert=29; Formal Authority=41; Personal Model=12; Facilitator=17; Delegator=8)

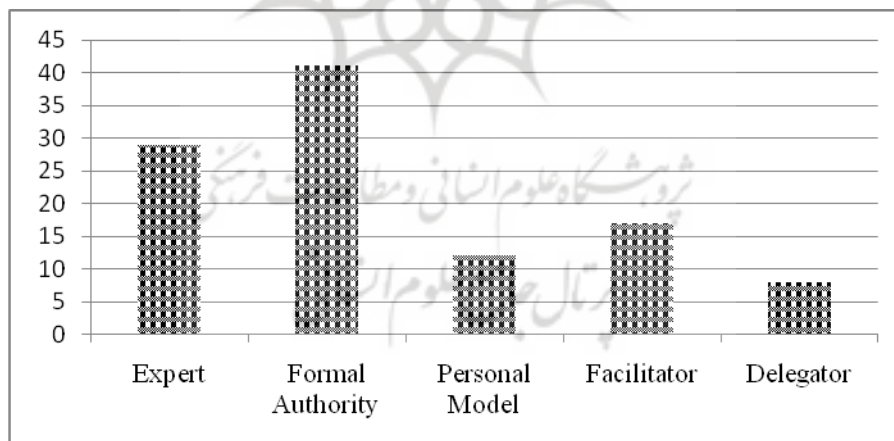


Figure 4- Distribution of Teaching Styles by Frequency

As it is revealed in Figure 4, teachers have less tendency toward creating a sense of autonomy in learners. This feature is specifically seen in Eastern curriculum in which learners see themselves as passive receivers of information (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) and teachers consider themselves as the main source of knowledge. Therefore, there is less air for engaging learners in the process of learning. It is not far from reality that some teachers want to be accepted as the authority and an expert in the class. This tendency is more applicable to novice teachers. Thus, to assert their territory, teachers become the main speakers of the class. For example, in one of the classes, one of the learners asked a question and a classmate happened to know the answer and provided the answer verbally. The teacher did not enjoy the scene and criticized annoyingly that it is the teacher that should provide the answers—not learners.

Assessment is also one of the underlying elements of each classroom. That is to say, teaching is not separated from evaluation. Inappropriate evaluation based on final-term score, and not based on the quality of learning and understanding, is a serious problem affecting the quality of language classrooms negatively. It should be highlighted that evaluation should not be constrained to final-term score. Oral evaluation which is done during the class time helps teachers to provide feedback for the learners. Giving feedback to learners has both cognitive and affective advantages. In other words, educational policies should move towards the *formative assessment*. Black and William (1998) pointed out that the consistency between learners' position and the realization of educational objectives, immediate feedback, and the possibility of fostering changes in the teaching methodology are the most important features of formative assessment. As Johnson (1996) puts it, learning best takes place when teachers provide feedback for the learners. He further mentions that

there are two viewpoints regarding the nature of assessment which is schematized as below:

Traditional Learning (Learning → Performance)

Effective Learning (Learning → Performance → Learning)

The aforementioned scheme advocates the idea of formative assessment in that after the performance of the learners, which is the assessment of learners' proficiency, learning take place. However, in traditional way of assessment, there is no feedback after the assessment and learners are left without any feedback. According to the assessment model proposed by Johnson (1996), the assessment system in language classrooms should be changed since the assessment system in most EFL classes is a summative one in which there is no chance for the teacher to provide feedback for the learners and learners' errors are left unchecked. In the effective assessment, after the learners take the exam, the process of learning is continued. Therefore, learning is in close relationship with assessment too. In other words, assessment is a tool for increasing learning not an end in itself.

After investigating the relationship between learning styles and teaching methodology, the criteria of effective teaching are obtained through learners and teachers perspectives. According to learners' and teachers' viewpoint, *managing learners*, *quality of teaching*, *educational output*, *expertise*, *personality*, and *educational policies* were the main recognizing criteria of elite teaching respectively.

Most learners mentioned that managing learners is the most important characteristic of teachers. Teaching methodology and expertise are not sufficient to address the various needs of learners. Some teachers are not able to motivate learners for further learning and there is less discussion activities in the class. Giving motivation to learners and increasing learners' critical thinking are part of managing learners. Managing learners means considering the affective and cognitive needs of the learners, sharing the responsibility of learning,

providing a comfortable situation for the learners, learner participation in class procedures as a teacher, considering the capabilities of learners, and increasing learners' motivation. According to teachers, having effective relationship with learners, increasing learners' self-esteem, and making learners ready for a long-life learning are parts of managing learners.

Quality of teaching is another characteristic of effective teaching. Learners mentioned that systematicity of teaching, up-to-date knowledge, merging theory into practice, learners' understanding of the lesson, engaging learners in the teaching process, and a problem-solving style of teaching are essential for a good language classroom. Teachers pointed out that learners' comprehension of the lesson, having disciplines in teaching, and targeting various skills and sub-skills play important role in increasing the quality of language classrooms.

Encouraging learners to continue learning outside the classroom context, increasing learners' curiosity toward expanding their knowledge, and educating insightful learners are related to learners' viewpoint for educational output. Teachers also mentioned that learners should be taught to be able to continue their learning outside of the classroom. This will help learners to be autonomous and independent.

Teachers' knowledge or expertise is another criterion of a good language classroom. Having a comprehensible knowledge and being up-to-date are mostly discussed by learners as having effective influence on teaching. Teachers believed that having both general and expert knowledge could be important.

By personality, learners meant having a friendly relationship in class and mutual respect. Teachers advocated that having an academic personality and being well-mannered are essential for establishing an appropriate situation in class. There are some teachers who object to learners' opposite viewpoints which are discussed in the class. This would create a tough and unfriendly environment.

Learners posited that educational policies embrace the educational objectives, decreasing the obsession of getting good marks and increasing the quality of learning, and providing facilities.

Teachers endorsed that objectives of the class should be consistent with the needs of the society, assessment should be systematic and well-defined, and government should support the educational planning.

It is now possible to answer the questions of this study mentioned earlier. The first question of this study considered the dominant teaching style in EFL context. As Figure 4 shows, formal authority is the dominant teaching style and delegator is the least used one by the teachers. The second question of this paper can be addressed through the Chi-square result. It was found out that there is a significant difference among different teaching styles ($\chi^2=34.075$, $p < .05$, Sig=.000). The third question targets the dominant learning styles. Figure 3 showed that the dominant learning style is reflector and the least used style is pragmatist which advocates that learners have more tendencies to participate in class procedures such as free discussions. The fourth question of this paper deals with the significance of differences. The Chi-square results revealed that there is a significant difference among learning styles ($\chi^2=48.850$, $p < .05$, Sig=.000). And the fifth question is about the relationship between learning style and teaching methodology. It was mentioned earlier that there is little consistency between learning and teaching styles. Learners try to have more positive part in the class but teachers mostly tend to recognize themselves as the authority and as a result, there is less air for learners to participate.

7. Conclusion

In this study an attempt was made to investigate the perceptions of L2 teachers and learners with respect to leaning styles and teaching methodologies in EFL classes in Iran to provide effective guidelines for improving language learning programs. The findings of this study showed that there is little congruency between learning styles and teaching methodologies. Most of the teachers want to take control of the class in a way which is not consistent with the reflector style of learning. Delegator style of teaching is the least used style by the teachers. This shows that there is little air for learners to talk in the class. The nature of language classrooms requires a situation in which discussion is formed with the contribution of learners. In the end, it should be mentioned that there is no magic formula for improving the

quality of language classrooms. However, there are specific guidelines that through their application teachers can take steps toward more effective handling of the classroom.

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Appendix 1

Advantages and Disadvantages of Grasha's Five Teaching Styles

Five Teaching Styles
<p>Expert Possesses knowledge and expertise that students need. Strives to maintain status as an expert among students by displaying detailed knowledge and by challenging students to enhance their competence. Concerned with transmitting information and insuring that students are well prepared. <i>Advantage:</i> The information, knowledge, and skills such individuals possess. <i>Disadvantage:</i> If overused, the display of knowledge can be intimidating to less experienced students. May not always show the underlying thought processes that produced answers.</p>
<p>Formal Authority Possesses status among students because of knowledge and role as a faculty member. Concerned with providing positive and negative feedback, establishing learning goals, expectations, and rules of conduct for students. Concerned with the correct, acceptable, and standard ways to do things and with providing students with the structure they need to learn. <i>Advantage:</i> The focus on clear expectations and acceptable ways of doing things. <i>Disadvantages:</i> A strong investment in this style can lead to rigid, standardized, and less flexible ways of managing students and their concerns.</p>
<p>Personal Model Believes in "teaching by personal example" and establishes a prototype for how to think and behave. Oversees, guides, and directs by showing how to do things, and encouraging students to observe and then to emulate the instructor's approach. <i>Advantage:</i> An emphasis on direct observation and following a role model. <i>Disadvantage:</i> Some teachers may believe their approach is the best way</p>

leading some students to feel inadequate if they cannot live up to such expectations and standards.

Facilitator

Emphasizes the personal nature of teacher-student interactions. Guides and directs students by asking questions, exploring options, suggesting alternatives, and encouraging them to develop criteria to make informed choices. Overall goal is to develop in students the capacity for independent action, initiative, and responsibility. Works with students on projects in a consultative fashion and tries to provide as much support and encouragement as possible.

Advantage: The personal flexibility, the focus on students' needs and goals, and the willingness to explore options and alternative courses of action.

Disadvantage: Style is often time consuming and is sometimes employed in a positive and affirming manner.

Delegator

Concerned with developing students' capacity to function in an autonomous fashion. Students work independently on projects or as part of autonomous teams. The teacher is available at the request of students as a resource person.

Advantage: Helps students to perceive themselves as independent learners.

Disadvantage: May misread student's readiness for independent work. Some students may become anxious when given autonomy.