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Learning Styles and Teaching Styles. Do They Really Need to Be Matched?

One of the main topics of the methodology of teaching a foreign language in teacher training programs are learning and teaching styles. During the courses the teacher trainees are introduced to the numerous theories, methods and techniques, which help teachers in improving their performance and ability to cope with unexpected, special or difficult situations which might arise during the lessons. Methodology courses also provide them useful tips and tricks for handling certain problems caused by indiscipline, and methods for improving the learning processes and performance of the students as well. One of these methods contains the necessary steps that are needed to enable the teacher to match his/her teaching style with the students' learning style. There are four main learning styles (or three, depending on the approach the teacher decides to use) which are the following: (1) visual, (2) auditory, (3) tactile and (4) kinesthetic, and a number of minor ones such as social or physical. These categories can be combined to form pairs like visual-auditory or auditory-social. A visual learner for example (according to the theory) learns best by the exposure to pictures and posters, on the other hand and auditory student comprehends and memorizes new information best if the teacher verbally emphasizes it. There are a number of tests and quizzes to determine the students' learning style (one can find many of these online by typing "learning styles" into any search engine). After the teacher determines the learning styles of the students, to improve students' understand-

ing, s/he only has to match them to the equivalent teaching styles (and techniques). The idea is based on the assumption that students learn best if their learning style matches the teaching style. Actually, this assertion is being used as if it was a fact, even though the truth is that it is not.

Scott O. Lilienfeld and his co-authors in their book *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology* are exploring and revealing many misbeliefs, from which one is the abovementioned connection between learning and teaching styles (this misbelief is described in detail under the chapter of *Myths about Intelligence and Learning*). Their argument is logical and illuminative. First of all, the assumption that students have different kinds of learning styles has a great impact on the way parents look at their children regarding their studies. They might think that the only reason for their child not performing well in school is the teacher's wrong approach to the child's learning style. It also implies that every student possesses the same ability to learn and in order to exploit this potential it is enough to match the given learning style with its equivalent teaching style. The second reason of the popularity of this idea is probably the vast number of articles, conference presentations and books based on learning/teaching style models. One of the problems is that none of these models provide a clear concept of what a learning style is and because this notion is the basis of every LS model, it is understandable that there are scholars who question their validity. Another issue is that there is

no reliable way of assessing students' learning style, mainly because a person approaches different problems in a different way. You don't start to learn a new language, analyze a literary work or solve a mathematical equation by using the same method. And lastly, there is no evidence to support the effectiveness of matching the teaching style with the learning style. What is more, certain teaching styles are more effective than others, regardless of the students' learning styles (the references to the researches can be found in the bibliography of the book).

The biggest problem of matching the teachers' teaching style with the students' learning style is the fact that it actually might cause negative effect. If the teacher encourages only one of the aspects of the student's way of learning, all the others might get neglected. In other words, it is not beneficial for the student to be surrounded by artificially constructed learning conditions simply because real-world situations do not provide such environment. The authors end the subsection about LS/TS with a thought-provoking quotation from Frank Coffield, which is probably the most appropriate one to end this article as well: "We do students a serious disservice by implying they have only one learning style, rather than a flexible repertoire from which to choose, depending on the context."

Reference:

Lilienfeld, Scott O. et al. *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology: Shattering Widespread Misconceptions about Human Behavior*. Blackwell Publishing, 2010.