

Leaving one's comfort zone: Individual learner profiles

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Individual learner profiles

- Can be created on the basis of an assessment of individual learner differences (IDs)
- IDs are characteristics which all learners possess, but on which individual learners differ
- IDs can be categorical (e.g. age, gender) or on a scale (e.g. general intelligence, language learning aptitude)
- IDs can refer to demographics, cognition, or affect/emotion
- Some IDs are more stable than others
- → We may be able to leave our comfort zone

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Examples of individual difference variables

- Language learning aptitude
- Working memory capacity
- General intelligence
- **Cognitive/learning style**
- Use of language learning strategies
- Personality
- Language learning motivation

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Cognitive/learning style

- Some researchers use the terms interchangeably, others make a distinction:
- Cognitive style is “a predisposition to process information in a characteristic manner”
- Learning style is “a typical preference for approaching learning in general” (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003: 602)
- “[T]he core of learning style is the ‘cognitive style’, which can be seen as a partially biologically determined and pervasive way of responding to information and situations; and when such cognitive styles are specifically related to an educational context and are intermingled with a number of affective, physiological, and behavioral factors, they are usually more generally referred to as learning styles.” (Dörnyei, 2005: 124)

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Style as a preference

- Styles refer to a person's preferences
- Between cognition and personality
- A particular stylistic preference is not necessarily ‘good’ or ‘bad’
- In other words, there is often no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’:
- We can take different routes to the same goal (= learning a language)
- Styles are (mostly) bipolar, forming a continuum between two poles (e.g. wholist – analytic)
- It is possible to have either a strong preference or no particular preference on a particular stylistic dimension

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Key questions

- (1) How can we assess an individual's stylistic preferences?
- (2) Once we have established an individual's style profile, what can we gain in practice?

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(1) How can we assess an individual's stylistic preferences?

- There are different models (theories) of cognitive/learning style
- Accordingly, there are many different measures:
- Tests and questionnaires
- Our focus points:
- Riding's model of cognitive style and the CSA-test
- Ehrman & Leaver's model of learning style and the E&L Questionnaire

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Riding's model of cognitive style

- Focuses on two dimensions:
- **Wholist – Analytic**
- Wholists tend to organise information as an integrated whole
- Analytics tend to organise information in discrete parts
- **Verbal – Imagery**
- Verbal individuals tend to be outgoing and are inclined to represent information during thinking verbally
- Imagery individuals tend to be more inwardly oriented and are inclined to think in mental images

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CSA (Cognitive Styles Analysis)

- A computer-based test measuring preferences on each of the two dimensions
- Example: E-CSA-WA (Peterson & Deary, 2006; Peterson, Deary, & Austin, 2003)

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Some research findings based on the CSA-WA: Littlemore (2001)

- Littlemore (2001) studied the relationship between wholist-analytic cognitive style and the use of communication strategies
- Participants: 82 French Belgian university-level learners of English
- Task: Picture descriptions, including pictures of plants and animals for which vocabulary was not known
- Cognitive style was measured using the CSA-WA:
- Participants were categorised as wholist, analytic, or neutral
- Use of communication strategies to compensate for missing lexical knowledge when describing the pictures in the L2:
- Participants used analytic or holistic strategies

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Some research findings based on the CSA-WA: Littlemore (2001)

- Analytic, description-based strategies refer to the object's individual properties
- e.g. "They're orange and you can grow them in the garden." (= carrots)
- Holistic, comparison-based strategies refer to the intended concept by using related concepts
- e.g. "It's like a snail." (= slug)
- Learners with a wholist cognitive style (N = 28) used significantly more holistic strategies than learners with an analytic cognitive style
- Learners with an analytic cognitive style (N = 20) used significantly more analytic strategies than learners with a wholist cognitive style
- → Use of communication strategies reflects stylistic preferences

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Some research findings based on the E-CSA-WA: Ziętek & Roehr (2011)

- Ziętek & Roehr (2011) studied the relationship between wholist-analytic cognitive style and metalinguistic knowledge
- Participants: 20 Polish school-level learners of English (aged 18)
- Cognitive style was measured using the E-CSA-WA
- Participants completed a 24-item test of metalinguistic knowledge (explicit knowledge) about 12 aspects of English grammar
- Task: correct highlighted errors and describe and explain correction (give pedagogical grammar rule)
- e.g. *It's really cold in here. Could you close a door, please?*

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Some research findings based on the E-CSA-WA: Ziętek & Roehr (2011)

- Overall level of metalinguistic knowledge (correction, description, explanation) correlated with wholist cognitive style ($\rho = 0.64$)
- The relationship seems to depend on the description/explanation task ($\rho = 0.54$)
- No significant correlation for correction task on its own
- At first glance, a counter-intuitive result (?)
- On close inspection, the task sequence was arguably inductive: correct error and infer underlying rule (from data to principle)
- Wholists prefer to take an inductive approach
- Using metalinguistic knowledge successfully seems to require the organisation of information as an integrated whole
- → Considering language in context is always important

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Ehrman & Leaver's model of cognitive/learning style

- One superordinate style dimension: Synoptic vs. ectasis (Ehrman & Leaver, 2003)
- **Synoptic** individuals 'trust their guts', while ectenic individuals tend not to
- **Ectenic** individuals want and need more conscious control over the learning situation than synoptic individuals
- 10 subordinate style dimensions, e.g.:
- Field dependent / field independent
- Random / sequential
- Inductive / deductive
- Concrete / abstract

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E&L Learning Style Questionnaire

- 30-item self-report questionnaire
- Learners respond to contrasting statements on a 9-point Likert scale (most like statement A or most like statement B)
- Individual style profiles can be derived
- Example – see handout

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(2) What can we gain in practice from style profiles?

- We can relate learners' preferences to their approaches to language learning (in the classroom)
- If a learner has strong preferences on a particular stylistic dimension, we can encourage him/her to broaden their approach and try to work outside their comfort zone
- May result in more balanced progress
- May lead to greater enjoyment of a greater number of classroom activities

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