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### Breaking the Barriers in English Language Learning in Nigeria: Focus on Learners' Learning Styles

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#### Abstract

The paper examined students learning styles in English language teaching and learning in Nigeria. It discussed the barriers that English language teachers and learners undergo and how they affected their English language learning which affected their overall academic performance and communicative competence. It explores five different models of language learning styles from different psychologists and psycholinguistics and related them to the English language teaching and learning issues in Nigeria. The summary of this review triggered the understanding of the summation that eight learning styles are applicable in English language teaching and learning in Nigeria. This paper implies that when the English language learning styles

are provided with the required instructional styles, the English language students would be brought back to their forgotten glory of better English language learning. The paper suggested that English language teachers in Nigeria should understand and identify their English language students learning styles and design their English language instruction according to their student's learning styles, they should provide instructional resources that appeal to the identified students learning styles in the classroom and employ necessary instructional differentiation that can cater for the personality differences in their English language lessons.

**Keywords:** Barriers, Second Language, Language Learning Styles, Models of Learning Styles, English Language in Nigeria, Basic Education

#### Introduction

It is an obvious fact that Second Language (L2) teaching and learning is a complex process that deals with teaching, coaching, training, and learning. These activities have attracted the attention of many researchers in the field of L2 education to work on finding out the most important attributes or factors that can be used to help these students master the target language by achieving the desired literacy rate and intelligibility level.

The position of the English language in Nigeria is incomparable to any other language. It plays a vital role in the social, educational, commercial, and political life of society. It is a language of official communication, mass media, and medium of instruction starting from the Middle Basic Education (Primary 4) level. Hence, the Federal Government of Nigeria adopted bilingual education. This is a system of education that recognizes the use of a child's mother tongue or native language at some level and an additional language that is sometimes a second language, which in most cases is the official language of the country (Owu & Sarah, 2013). It is on this note that proficiency in the English language is a must for any Nigerian child that wants to prosper in national life.

Despite the status the English language occupies in Nigeria, the learning of the language has some barriers that are put down to different factors. There were many studies conducted on National Language Policy, English language curriculum, different L2 teaching and learning methodologies, instructional media and practices; teachers' qualifications, exposure, and punctuality, students' attendance and learning abilities; school and classroom environment; motivation; and socioeconomic backgrounds, yet English language learners struggle in their language learning. This is obvious as mass failures of senior secondary school students are being recorded annually in the Senior Secondary Schools Certificate Examinations.

However, on policy, the researchers reported that the policy had not been rigorously observed and enforced by teachers and educational administrators, respectively. Some researchers report that educational objectives will remain unachieved unless teaching-learning of English is properly done. In a nutshell, some scholars are of the view that the entire learning process of English, in general, is attributed to many variables' adverse effects, which may be connected to the barriers that exist among

Nigerian learners as Nigeria is a multicultural and multilingual state. Some researchers report inadequate and necessary teaching and learning media, infrastructure, and workforce to carry out the teaching and learning activities. This demonstrated that the barriers to learning English in Nigeria can be either extraneous, which can be controlled, or intervening, which cannot be controlled but must be subsidized.

### **English Language in Nigeria and its Barriers to Language learning**

In history, English became the official language of Nigeria when a unanimous consensus was not reached on a common local language to assume the status in the first National Policy on Education in 1976. Though none of the local languages was agreed to be selected, the quality of English teaching and learning at that time was reported to have achieved some dedication and competence on the part of teachers and learners, respectively. This might be partly because of the high premium placed on the language as a result of its utility value, as well as the opportunities it provided as a window to the world and white-collar jobs (Josephin & Busary, 2014)<sup>[12]</sup>. It also served as a vehicle of inter-ethnic and cross-cultural communication in the multilingual setting of Nigeria. The proficiency level of language learners after secondary school is characterized by the high quality of communication skills in their spoken and written English forms. That reflected a positive disposition towards the teaching and learning of the English language.

However, the English language's communicative competence was also demonstrated by the mass media, in the administration of government, in commerce, and in social interactions, particularly among an expanding middle class that used it as a lingua franca (Akeredolu, 2007)<sup>[1]</sup>. The acquisition of the English language was taken seriously as a result of the linguistic and social functions vested in it. There was a correspondingly high level of motivation to learn and attain proficiency in the language among students at all levels of the educational system.

Conversely, as the population of Nigeria grows more cosmopolitan, there has been a gradual decline in the quality of English teaching and learning in the last 30 years, and the situation has deteriorated drastically. This has become a national concern. The gravity of the decline can be easily detected in the mass failure recorded in the last three decades in the English language and other secondary school subjects in the Senior Secondary Schools Certificate Examinations. According to the Chief Examiner of the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), the performance of English-language senior secondary school students in WAEC in 2019 is cause for great concern due to poor grammar and spelling mistakes. It was evident that some candidates could not even respond to questions properly. There were rambling sentences with little or no punctuation marks in the candidates' essays that rendered the essays unintelligible. Poor paragraphing was observed by examiners. Similarly, there is poor storage of vocabulary as no registers were properly used in the students' essays.

### **Learning Styles**

Learning is an act of experimenting, observing, listening, practicing, and participating in an activity to be part of it consciously or unconsciously. In an educational setting, it is thought of as a two-step process that involves the reception

and processing of information (Felder, 1988)<sup>[4]</sup>. The reception is a process of selecting relevant information from the external (observable through the senses) or internal (arising introspectively) stimuli and ignoring the details that are irrelevant to the learner. Memorization, reasoning (inductive or deductive), reflection or action, and introspection or interactions with others are all examples of information processing. In these processes, the materials can be either understood or ignored. Hence, each learner has their learning style.

Hussain (2017) conceived learning style as a manner or fashion in which individuals acquire, attain, retain, and use imagination to attain skills or information. This enhances the individual's calibre and made the individual more productive in the community. That might be the reason that Fleming (2005)<sup>[6]</sup> conceived learning styles as an individual's psychological features and preferred ways of collecting, organizing, and thinking about information. These perceptual modes of processing information directly the learner to be a more creative, genuine, effective manager, timely, decisional, and a problem solver (Fleming, 2005)<sup>[6]</sup>. Keefe in Felder and Raleigh (2020) described students learning styles as the individual's cognitive, affective, and psychological behaviours that serve as stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning materials. However, having reviewed this conception and discovered that it was leaky and subjected to different interpretations, Felder and Raleigh (2020) proposed that learning styles are simply "the common patterns of student preferences for different approaches to instruction, with certain attributes-behaviours, attitudes, strengths, and weaknesses- being associated with each preference" (p. 2). These perceptual and information-processing differences gave birth to different models of learning styles.

### **Models of Learning Styles**

The models of learning style are some of the concepts that are suggested by researchers and educational scientists to depict learners' differences and varied needs (Kolb & Kolb, 2005)<sup>[13]</sup>. They are used to classify students according to reception and processing of information. This is aimed at the practical implementation of teaching models that fit the student's learning needs. It also enables students to utilize their L2 learning resources to make the best of their learning. The following are some of the learning style models reviewed in the paper and they help break barriers in English language learning in Nigeria: Felder and Silverman, Kolb, Honey, Fleming and Anthony.

### **The Felder-Silverman Model**

This model was originally formulated by professor Felder, an educational psychologist, in collaboration with Dr Linda K. Silverman in 1988. The model was formulated for use by college instructors and students in engineering. The model defined students' preferences for specified modes of teaching. Though the model was proposed to be applied to engineering students, it has subsequently been applied in a broad range of disciplines, including L2. The Felder-Silverman Model identified four dimensions of learning styles. These dimensions can be understood as a continuum with one preference on the far left and the other on the far right. Thus, the learners are categorized into four dichotomous learning styles, namely sensing, visual, active,

and global (Felder & Raleigh, 2020).

The Sensing or Intuitivespectrum determines how we perceive or take in information, visual or verbal, this spectrum determines an individual's preference for information presentation which can be active or reflective. This scale limits the information processing from the global or sequential in which individuals organize and move towards understanding the information presented to them.

### Neil Fleming's VAK/VARK Model

VAK is an acronym of three words- visual, audio, and kinesthetic senses proposed by Barbe and colleagues in 1920 on the representational systems (VAKOG) in neuro-linguistic programming. Neil Fleming's reviewed the model in 1992 and came up with the VARK model. This is an expanded inventory of learning styles based on the utilization of basic sensory organs that deal with the reception and learning of new information. Fleming (2005)<sup>[6]</sup> stated that it is a category of instructional preference that deals with perceptual modes.

The model initially identified three and later four perceptual styles that focused on how an individual receives and processes new information in a learning situation. These modes are visual, auditory, reading, and kinesthetic. Visual learners are those learners that learn the best things by seeing them (Fleming, 2011)<sup>[9]</sup>. Their modes of learning are snaps, films, demonstrations, painting, charts and graphics. Stash (2007)<sup>[20]</sup> elaborated that these categories of learners favour pictographic illustration. Auditory learners are learners that grasp information by listening to tape recorders, audio discussions or lectures. They have sharp memory that can easily commit information to memory and retains it when it is presented to them. They learn information in form of a melody, poem or song. They become skilled at something by listening (Drago & Wagner, 2004)<sup>[3]</sup>. Kinesthetic learners learn through bodily movement. They possess the ability to understand and solve problems in the world through the body or parts of the body (Armstrong, 2004)<sup>[2]</sup>. They learn by moving, touching and doing. The Read and write categories of learners learn best through the repetition of written words (Hussaini, 2017). They retain information by jotting down notes of the materials presented to the class. Their preferred mode of instruction is displaying words, activities, events etc. Drago and Wagner (2004)<sup>[3]</sup> called these categories of students "note takers".

### David A. Kolb's Model

David Kolb formulated the experiential learning style model in 1984. The model outlines two related approaches toward grasping experience and two approaches towards transforming experience. These are the concrete experience and the abstract conceptualization, as well as reflective observation and active experimentation respectively. According to Kolb's model, all four modes of perception of information can be engaged in a learning situation. They form a learning cycle from experience to observation down to conceptualization and experimentation and move back to experience in a circular form. For students to learn effectively, Kolb (1984)<sup>[14]</sup> postulated, all four of these approaches must be incorporated. These are as follows:

1. Accommodator: Concrete Experience + Active Experiment: these modes deal with students who are strong in "hands-on" practical activities (e.g., physical

therapists). They use their visual, audio or tactile senses to participate in activities to learn.

2. Converging: Abstract Conceptualization + Active Experiment: these kinds of students possess strong learning behaviour in practice having had "hands-on" application of theories (e.g., engineers). They possess the two qualities of being active and passive in the process of information assimilation.
3. Diverging: Concrete Experience + Reflective Observation: these categories of students possess both the qualities of strong imaginative and reflective thinking. They are robust in imaginative ability and discussion (e.g., social workers). They like to learn through social interactions.
4. Assimilator: Abstract Conceptualization + Reflective Observation: these students are characterized by strong reasoning, reflection on experience and creativity. They are strong in inductive reasoning and the creation of theories (e.g., philosophers).

According to this model, individuals may exhibit a preference for any one of the four styles - Accommodating, Converging, Diverging and assimilating- depending on their approach to learning in Kolb's experiential learning model (Kolb, 2015)<sup>[13]</sup>.

### Honey and Mumford Learning Styles

This learning style was proposed by Peter Honey and Alan Mumford in 1986. It was inspired by and built upon the models developed by Kolb which was criticized for its low validity (Leaver, 2005)<sup>[16]</sup>. It emphasized the importance of the teacher's knowledge of their student's learning preferences for them to engage them based on their learning needs. To identify the student's learning styles, the model opted for the engagement of students with the questionnaire to record their general learning behavioural tendencies. It proposed that for students to be effective learners, the student must know about their learning styles or preferences and find ways to teach the students through their preferred learning needs. Therefore, classroom instruction should be tailored to instruct students on the application of different learning styles according to their individual learning preferences. To this end, four learning styles were identified: activists, theorists, pragmatists, and reflectors. The activists are students who learn by doing. These students need to be involved in the act. Their receptive way to learning is by including them completely and without inclination in new encounters. The theorists are learners that prefer to learn by comprehension. They formed hypotheses behind the activities by requiring models, ideas, and truths with a specific end goal to participate in the learning procedure. They like to analyze and synthesize information by drawing new information in a methodical and consistent 'hypotheses'. The pragmatists are students that learn by connecting the learning experience with reality. They conceived ideas and recreate them. They experiment with new ideas, speculate and trial out methods to check whether they work in their mode of action. The reflectors are students that learn by speculation. They learn by watching and contemplating what happened. They may desist from jumping into any action and prefer to watch from the sidelines. They want to sit back and watch the events gather information and use their opportunity to work towards a suitable conclusion.

### Anthony Gregorc's Model

Anthony Gregorc and Kathleen Butler proposed a model that describes different learning styles that are rooted in the different ways individuals acquire and process information (1988). This model posited that an individual's perceptual abilities are the foundation of their specific learning strengths or learning styles. In this model, two perceptual qualities and two ordering abilities were identified. They are concrete and abstract as well as random and sequential. Concrete perceptions involve registering information through the five senses. Abstract perceptions deal with the understanding of ideas, qualities, and concepts which cannot be seen. Concerning the two ordering abilities, sequential ordering has to do with the organization of information linearly and logically. Random ordering is an organization of information in chunks and no specific order. The model contended that both the perceptual qualities and the ordering abilities are present in each individual, but some qualities and ordering abilities are more dominant within certain individuals (Margaret, 2004) <sup>[18]</sup>. Hence, four combinations of perceptual qualities and ordering abilities can be possible. So, one can have concrete sequential, abstract random, abstract sequential and concrete random modes of learning style.

### English Language Learning and Learning Styles

There are many English learners in Nigeria that are frustrated by the English language instructions in the classroom. This is because the instructional styles do not coincide with their English language learning styles. Thus, teaching styles do not appeal to the student's learning preferences as a majority of the teachers teach the way they learn (Litzinger *et al.*, 2007) <sup>[17]</sup>. This learning condition consequently undermines learners' motivation, kills their creativity, and retard their English language learning potential. For this reason, English language students in Nigeria remained inattentive in the English language class and get bored with language instruction despite the efforts of the teachers.

In a nutshell, the English language learning styles differ according to an individual language learner. Some language learning styles are more suitable for one language instruction, while other learning styles are endangered for different language learning styles. Hence, it is of paramount importance for an English language teacher to know, identify, and provide for the different learning styles of his learners. Having reviewed some models of language learning styles in this paper and identified some features attributed to different learning styles, the paper agreed with a summation that eight learning styles are most common among English language learners which the language instructors in Nigeria have to activate and provide for efficient English language teaching and learning— four perceptual, two cognitive, and two personality style.

1. **Perceptual learning styles:** There are four perceptual language learning styles. These styles deal with how individuals perceive the world around them. This learning style cut across Kolb's model of learning style as in grasping experience: concrete experience and abstract conceptualization, as well as two approaches related to the transformation of experience: reflective observation and active experimentation. According to Kolb's model, the ideal learning process involves these four modalities in response to situational demands.

They form a cycle of learning from experience to observation, conceptualization, experimentation and return to experience.

- a. **Visual Learners:** these are students that learn through what they see and read because they like to visualize the actions, events, ideas, and concepts in form of words and letters in front of them. They appreciate making language connections through flashcards or photographs and other paraphernalia. This learning style is in line with Felder and Silverman's model of learning style as it is related to a sense of perception. It can similarly be found in Fleming's model which has a concern with visual learners.
  - b. **Auditory Learners:** As the name suggests, auditory learners love to learn through sound. They are very fond of interacting and conversing with others. They do not need to see words in writing as in the case of visual learners. This learning style is directly connected to the four sensory modalities in Fleming's model as follows: visual learning, auditory learning, physical learning, and social learning.
  - c. **Tactile Learners:** Language learners who have an affinity for tactile enjoy manipulating various instructional media while learning a language. They like what is called manual labour.
  - d. **Kinesthetic Learners:** This type of student likes to take long breaks and be physically active while learning English. They don't like to sit behind a desk for long periods and like to move around while they learn. This learning style is connected to the model of Mumford and Alan in which activist learners are among the four learning styles named: activist, reflector, theorist, and pragmatist. These four learning styles are assumed to be learned preferences that are adaptable, either at will or through changed circumstances, rather than fixed personalities or characteristics.
2. **Cognitive Learning Styles:** Two cognitive learning styles can affect how a particular student learns a language.
- a. **Field Addicted Students:** Another name for analytical students, these individuals like to focus all of their attention on the small details of the language. They love learning grammar rules and enjoy breaking down parts of the language into smaller parts. Due to their attention to small details, they may not see the big picture when learning a language.
  - b. **Independent Field Students:** Also known as Global Students. They don't like to go into details about English. They don't care about the inner workings of a language. They focus on the big picture, on everything a language stands for, and they want to convey an idea, without worrying about the flawless grammar behind it.
3. **Personality Learning Styles:** Finally, a student's personality can also influence the way they learn a language. The two language learning styles that concern personality is:
- a. **Reflective Learners:** These learners like to think about a language, think about how to convey their thoughts accurately, and reflect on their efforts in

language learning. They tend to make fewer mistakes and take longer to get a point across.

- b. **Impulsive Learners:** These students are born to take risks when learning the language. They want to talk, they want to interact, and they don't care too much about grammar. They are always trying new things; they make mistakes and learn from them.

### Requirement of Every L2 Learner to Learn

English language instruction appeared to be a complex process in Nigeria because the language has to be taught according to the learners learning styles because there's no such thing as being born good at languages. However, some students learn languages faster and very well, but that has nothing to do with their being naturally good at it. English language learning in Nigeria has to do with the language learning attitudes of the learners and their learning styles which deal with students' personalities, attitudes and how they approach their learning. That is why it is advisable for English language learners in Nigeria to know the language learning style that best suits them and follow the suit. When students learn the English language, they will communicate and think in it. Therefore, the cultural influences of the local community should be observed by cherishing the cultural values and norms and avoiding the taboos of the original language community.

New information can be obtained through the use of new words, maps, pictures, or simulations of events in the English language classroom. The facts and concepts can also be learnt through lectures, discussions, and explanations. These are possible when the students learning styles were accorded with relevant instructional styles. The English language methodology should be as integrative as possible to take every learner along irrespective of his language learning needs. Although learning styles will inevitably differ among learners in the classroom, Dunn and Dunn (2005) say that teachers should try to make changes in the classroom that will be helpful for any learning style. Among these developments, we can cite the redesign of the rooms, the development of techniques for small groups and the development of "activity package contracts". Classroom redesign involves identifying dividers that can be used to organize the room in creative ways (such as having multiple learning stations and instructional areas), clearing the floor area, and incorporating student thoughts and ideas into the design of the classroom (Dunn & Dunn, 2005).

Visual learners as the name implies are a category of learners that prefer to learn by seeing objectives or their written representations (visual aids that represent ideas using methods other than words, such as graphs, charts, diagrams, symbols, etc.) (Fleming & Mills, 1992)<sup>[7]</sup>. The findings of neuroimaging research reported that visual learners usually convert words into pictures in the brain and vice versa even though, some psychologists argued that this "is not an instance of learning styles, rather, an instance of ability appearing as a style" (Willingham, Hughes, Elizabeth, Dobolyi, & David, 2015)<sup>[21]</sup>.

### Auditory learners

This category of language learners best learns through listening so they prefer to learn language via lectures, discussions, tapes, or any medium through which learners listen even without any visual aids.

### Tactile/kinesthetic learners

This category of language learners prefers to learn language through moving, touching, and doing. They learn language through active exploration of the objects around them, the objects, events, activities, ideas, concepts etc. discussed or presented in the English language lesson. These learners can be identified by engaging them with an inventory to identify their preferred learning style. They can be helped and motivated to the English language learning by focusing on the English language instructional mode that benefits them the most. Fleming's model opined that students are found to possess two or types of modalities, hence the term "multimodality". This means that no one has a single defined and preferred modality of learning; some mixtures make up their preferred learning style (Fleming, 2014)<sup>[5]</sup>.

### Analytic learners

These learners enjoy learning grammar rules, and they enjoy breaking down language parts into smaller ones. Due to their attention to small details, they may not see the big picture when learning a language. Traditionally these sorts of language learners are better to be taught via a structural approach, for its emphasis on grammatical structure analysis.

### Global learners

These categories of language learners do not care about the inner workings of a language. They focus on the big picture, on everything a language stands for, and they want to convey an idea, without worrying about the flawless grammar behind it. Global learners most of the time enjoy the communicative approach as it enables the language learner to develop proficiency by practical use of the language in a given social setting.

### Educational Implication

The English language learning styles are provided with the required instructional styles, the English language students would be brought back to their forgotten glory of better English language learning. Learning style is a phenomenon that should occupy a prominent position in the arena of language teaching and learning, ignoring them could cause a barrier in the process of learning. which many language teachers ignore as it enables them to know the different varieties of learners before them in the process of language teaching, for them to employ some different methodologies and strategies such as to carry such learners along. Although it was observed that most of the teachers do not consider or take care of these differences that exist among language learners which may be one of the contributing factors responsible for failure to achieve the designed objectives of attaining competence in the use of language.

### Suggestions

1. The English language classroom in Nigeria should be a setting for the teaching and learning of a Second language that stimulates and facilitates both inductive and deductive learning processes for effective English language acquisition and learning.
2. The English language teachers should utilize multiple English language students' resources for them to cater for the individual student's instructional psychological needs in English language instruction.
3. The English language teachers should understand that

there are models for designing English language lessons according to the student's learning preferences. This is done by employing instructional strategies that cater for every English language learner to his best learning styles in the language classroom.

### Conclusion

The students learning styles are important to know and be identified by the English language teachers. This is because, with the current English language teaching and learning crises, English language teachers can use the students' language learning styles and reach their students. This can be through individual instruction, differentiated instructional strategies, or improvised, or adapted instructional media in English language instruction. Since students differ in their thinking styles, traditional teacher-dominated instruction is not helpful in language teaching and learning. This is because rather than help in bridging the gap created between the English language curriculum objectives and curriculum implementation that became a big barrier to English language instruction in the country, it worsened the practice.

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