

UNIT 8: Understanding Learning Styles

Introduction

Learners in the EFL classroom are not identical. They differ in personality, motivation, background knowledge, pace of learning, and especially in the ways they prefer to receive and process information. Some students learn better by seeing, others by listening, discussing, moving, or practicing. These individual preferences are often described as **learning styles**.

Understanding learning styles helps teachers design lessons that are more inclusive, flexible, and effective. When teaching methods match learners' preferences, students often show greater participation, confidence, and achievement (Brown, 2007).

This lecture focuses on:

1. Key theories of learning styles
2. Identifying different types of learners in the classroom
3. Adapting teaching materials and activities
4. Strategies for mixed-ability classrooms

Part I: Key Theories of Learning Styles

1. Definition of Learning Styles

Learning styles refer to the preferred ways individuals perceive, process, organize, and retain new information (Keefe, 1979).

They answer the question:

“How do students learn best?”

Learning styles do not mean students can only learn in one way, but rather that they may have stronger preferences for certain methods of learning.

Teachers should not label students permanently, but should use learning styles as a guide for instructional variety.

2. The VARK Model

One of the most widely known models is the **VARK Model**, developed by Fleming (2001).

VARK stands for:

- **V** = Visual
- **A** = Auditory (Aural)
- **R** = Reading/Writing

- **K** = Kinesthetic

This model explains how learners prefer to receive information.

2.1 Visual Learners

Definition

Visual learners understand information better when it is presented through images and visual representation.

They prefer:

- charts
- diagrams
- mind maps
- pictures
- videos
- color coding
- written notes on the board

Example

A student remembers vocabulary better when words are linked to pictures.

Visual support improves comprehension and memory (Harmer, 2007).

2.2 Auditory Learners

Definition

Auditory learners learn best through listening and speaking.

They prefer:

- lectures
- discussions
- oral explanations
- songs
- repetition aloud
- pronunciation practice

Example

A student remembers grammar rules better after hearing the teacher explain them.

These learners benefit greatly from interaction and oral practice.

2.3 Reading/Writing Learners

Definition

These learners prefer information displayed as words.

They learn best through:

- reading texts
- taking notes
- writing summaries
- lists
- definitions
- handouts

Example

A student understands a lesson better after writing key points in a notebook.

Traditional academic classrooms often favor this style.

2.4 Kinesthetic Learners

Definition

Kinesthetic learners learn best through movement, action, and hands-on experience.

They prefer:

- role plays
- experiments
- games
- real-life tasks
- projects
- physical movement during learning

Example

A student remembers vocabulary better after acting it out.

These learners often struggle in purely lecture-based classrooms.

3. Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory

Howard Gardner (1983) proposed that intelligence is not a single ability but consists of multiple intelligences.

This theory expanded the concept of learning preferences.

He identified several intelligences, including:

- Linguistic
- Logical-Mathematical
- Visual-Spatial
- Musical
- Bodily-Kinesthetic
- Interpersonal
- Intrapersonal
- Naturalistic

This theory reminds teachers that students can be intelligent in different ways.

3.1 Examples in EFL Context

Linguistic Intelligence

Strong ability with words, reading, writing, and speaking.

These students enjoy:

- debates
- storytelling
- writing tasks

Musical Intelligence

Sensitivity to rhythm and sound.

These students benefit from:

- songs
- chants
- pronunciation rhythm activities

Interpersonal Intelligence

Strong social interaction skills.

These students enjoy:

- pair work
- group discussions
- collaborative projects

Intrapersonal Intelligence

Strong self-awareness and reflection.

These students prefer:

- independent work
- journals
- self-assessment tasks

Gardner's theory helps teachers diversify instruction (Gardner, 1983).

Part II: Identifying Different Types of Learners in the Classroom

Teachers must observe learners carefully to understand their preferences.

There is no perfect test; observation is often the best method.

1. Classroom Observation

Teachers can identify preferences by noticing:

- how students respond to tasks
- what activities they enjoy most
- how they solve problems
- whether they prefer individual or group work
- whether they ask for visual or oral explanations

Observation provides practical classroom evidence.

2. Learning Style Questionnaires

Teachers may use simple questionnaires to help students reflect on how they learn best.

These tools are useful for awareness, not for strict classification (Fleming, 2001).

3. Student Reflection

Teachers can ask questions like:

- “Do you remember better by reading or listening?”
- “Do you prefer working alone or with others?”
- “Do pictures help you understand better?”

This encourages learner autonomy and self-awareness.

Part III: Adapting Teaching Materials and Activities

Effective EFL teaching requires variety. A single teaching method cannot meet all learner needs.

Teachers should design lessons that include multiple styles.

1. Use Multimodal Teaching

Multimodal teaching combines:

- visual input
- spoken explanation
- written practice
- physical activity

Example

Teaching vocabulary:

- show a picture
- explain pronunciation
- write the word
- ask students to use it in role play

This increases retention and participation (Tomlinson, 2011)

2. Diversify Classroom Activities

Teachers should include:

- videos for visual learners
- discussions for auditory learners
- note-taking for reading/writing learners
- games and projects for kinesthetic learners

Variety improves motivation and fairness.

3. Flexible Assessment Methods

Assessment should not rely only on written exams.

Teachers can use:

- oral presentations
- posters
- projects
- portfolios
- peer teaching
- role plays

Different forms allow students to demonstrate learning in different ways.

4. Use Technology

Technology supports diverse learning styles through:

- interactive videos
- educational apps
- online quizzes
- digital storytelling
- pronunciation software

Technology increases engagement and personalization (Chapelle, 2003).

Part IV: Strategies for Mixed-Ability Classrooms

Most EFL classrooms contain students with different:

- proficiency levels
- learning speeds
- motivation levels
- confidence levels
- learning styles

This creates the challenge of the **mixed-ability classroom**.

The goal is not to teach all students the same way, but to provide fair access to learning.

1. Differentiated Instruction

Differentiation means adjusting teaching according to learner needs (Tomlinson, 2001).

Teachers can differentiate:

- content
- tasks

- support
- expected outcomes

Example

For one reading text:

- weaker students answer basic questions
- stronger students analyze the writer's opinion

Both groups learn successfully.

2. Tiered Activities

Prepare tasks at different difficulty levels for the same objective.

Example

Grammar lesson:

- Level 1: complete sentences
- Level 2: write original examples
- Level 3: use grammar in a short paragraph

This supports all learners without exclusion.

3. Pair and Group Work

Pairing strong and weak students can:

- increase peer support
- reduce anxiety
- encourage communication
- improve confidence

However, grouping should be balanced and respectful.

4. Scaffolding

Scaffolding means giving temporary support until learners become independent (Vygotsky, 1978).

Examples include:

- sentence starters
- vocabulary lists
- models
- guided practice
- teacher prompts

Gradually, support is reduced.

5. Positive Classroom Management

Teachers should avoid making weaker students feel inferior.

Instead:

- celebrate progress
- recognize effort
- encourage participation
- create a non-competitive atmosphere

Emotional safety improves learning for all students.

Conclusion

Learning styles remind us that students do not learn in the same way. Effective EFL teaching requires flexibility, observation, and variety.

Teachers should not teach only to one type of learner, but should create opportunities for all students to succeed.

In mixed-ability classrooms, fairness does not mean treating everyone the same—it means giving each learner what they need to learn.

A good teacher adapts instruction not to simplify learning, but to make learning accessible.

Teaching is most effective when it respects learner diversity.

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