Teaching Styles of Malaysian ESL Instructors: An Investigation into Current Practices and Implications to English Language Teaching (ELT)

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Abstract

Research studies (Felder and Silverman, 1988; Lawrence, 1993; Oxford, Ehrman and Lavine, 1991; Schmeck, 1988) have pointed out the problems associated with serious mismatches between the learning styles of students in a class and the teaching styles of instructors. It is not always possible for the teaching styles of teachers to match that of students, considering that in a class there are students with a variety of learning styles. However, it is crucial for ESL (English as Second Language) teachers to be aware of the students' different learning styles and to adapt their teaching styles accordingly (Kinsella, 1995; Kinsella and Sherak, 1998; Thang, 2003). In addition, it is crucial for ESL teachers to possess knowledge of current theories and thinking in ESL teaching and learning and to help students inculcate strategies and processes for effective and autonomous language learning (Oxford, 1990; Oxford and Erhman, 1995; Rossi-Le, 1995).

This study is undertaken on a group of ESL instructors teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses in a public university in Malaysia to find out (1) to what extent ESL instructors apply current theories and thinking on ESL teaching and (2) to what extent they consider the learning styles of their students in their teaching and help their students to be aware of the appropriate language learning strategies and processes for autonomous language learning. A questionnaire was used to collect data for the study and the results were analysed quantitatively. Pedagogical implications of the findings would also be discussed.

Background

This study investigates the teaching styles of a group of ESL instructors in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), one of the eight public universities in Malaysia. UKM was the first Malay medium university in Malaysia and was set up with the nationalistic mission of promoting Malay as an academic language for knowledge acquisition. Despite its nationalistic fervour, there has been an awareness of the need to improve its students' proficiency in English. To this end, the university has employed a large team of ESL instructors who have been entrusted with the task of upgrading the undergraduates' English proficiency. The English language courses offered consisted mainly of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses and advanced level courses such as Critical Thinking, Interactive Reading, Speech Communication, Public Speaking and Technical Report Writing.

The courses offered are conducted purely through the face-to-face mode. Students have to attend four hours of tutorials per week. The ESP courses aim primarily at equipping students with the necessary reading skills to handle authentic discipline-specific reading materials. They also provide students with a better understanding of the terminologies and concepts learned and equip them with the ability to summarise information specific to their discipline. The advanced level courses aim mostly at further developing the students' mastery of specific skills.

Literature Review

Definitions of Teaching Styles

What is teaching style? This is a difficult question to answer, as there is as yet no 'definitive' definition of teaching styles widely agreed upon by researchers. However, there have been many attempts to define teaching styles that reflect the development in thinking in language teaching and learning. For example, Fisher and Fisher (1979:246) describe teacher style as "a pervasive way of approaching the learners that might be consistent with several methods of teacher". This definition from the late seventies emphasizes the importance of teaching methods and the ability of the teacher to select the right approach for the class. Teaching styles tended to be equated with teaching approaches, as that was the mainstay of language teacher training at that time (and possibly now as well).

To Kaplan and Kies (1996:2), 'teaching style consists of a teacher's personal behaviour and the media used to transmit data to or receive it from the learner'. This definition stresses the teacher's behaviour and media use which affect the delivery of the instruction. Terms such as 'initiating and responsive behaviour' (Flanders, 1970) and 'progressivism and traditionalism' (Bennett, 1976, Kerlinger and Pedhazur 1968) have also been used to refer to teaching styles. Each of these terms refers to a particular set of teacher behaviour and media use, which elicits different reactions from the learner. Within this context, it does seem reasonable to assume that the progress of the learner is dependent on the teaching style of the teacher.

Now, with better understanding of the complexities that influences the way a teacher teaches in class, a teacher's teaching style is seen as being a result of the teacher's past learning and teaching experience, present frame of mind and body, and future plans and actions (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988). This suggests that teaching style is highly individualistic and is something that is constantly in a state of flux. If this is so it will be difficult to investigate teaching styles. However, researchers such as Witkin (1981), Dunn and Dunn (1991), Kaplan and Kies (1995), and Peacock (2001) assert that teaching styles can be identified, and this is the assumption that this study adheres to. For this study, teaching style is defined as the language teaching and learning theories and practice that the teachers believe in and subscribe to in the execution of their duty.

Current Theories and Thinking on ESL Language Teaching and Learning

A review of current literature on ESL language learning and papers presented at language education conferences seem to suggest that the buzzwords for the language teaching and learning for the 21ˢᵗ century are *learner-centred learning* and *learner autonomy* which are further development to Communicative Language Teaching introduced in the seventies. The fundamental elements of this approach are:

- focusing on process rather than product
- focusing on function over form
- using a holistic approach
- developing communicative competency
- developing cross-cultural insights and strategies for effective cross-cultural communication
- using authentic materials and providing real-world experiences for language learning
- encouraging collaborative learning
- developing lifelong learners
- promoting student-directed, student-centred learning
- accommodating different learning styles and strategies

(Pusak and Otto, 1997 & Williams and Burden, 1997)

With the shift in emphasis in language learning to the learner, the teacher's role has shifted from that of being a provider of knowledge to that of a facilitator of learning. As a facilitator, she is to provide students with opportunities to develop their knowledge so that they can take greater control of their learning. This is consistent with the current emphasis on self-access, self-instructional, individualized and autonomous language learning. As a facilitator, the teacher is 'a guide on the side' not 'a sage on the stage'. According to Benson and Voller (1997, p. 102), a facilitator provides 'psycho-social support' and 'technical support'. Some salient features of psycho-social support are:

- the personal qualities of the facilitator (being caring, supportive, patient, tolerant, empathic, open, non-judgemental);
- a capacity for motivating learners (encouraging commitment, dispersing uncertainty, helping learners to overcome obstacles, being prepared to enter into a dialogue with learners, avoiding manipulating, objectifying or controlling them);
- an ability to raise learners' awareness (to 'decondition' them from preconceptions about learner and teacher roles, to help them perceive the utility of, or necessity for, independent learning).

Some key features of technical support identified are:
- helping learners to plan and carry out their independent language learning by means of needs analysis (both learning and language needs), objective setting , work planning, selecting materials, and organizing interactions;
- helping learners to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to implement the above (by raising their awareness of language and learning, by providing learner training to help them identify learning styles and appropriate learning strategies.

Other roles of teacher are as counsellor, motivator and subject expert or resource person. All these developments impact on the teachers who have to cope with the change. Hence, one of the objectives of this paper is to ascertain if our teachers possess an awareness of their changing and multiple roles in line with current developments in ESL teaching and learning.

Mismatch between Teaching Styles and Learning Styles
Many research studies have found that a serious mismatch can occur between the learning styles of students in a class and the teaching style of the instructor (Felder and Silverman, 1988; Lawrence 1993; Oxford, Ehrman & Levine, 1991; Smith and Renzuli, 1984;). This mismatch is said to have a negative effect on students' learning and can affect his attitude and his motivation (Reid, 1987; Cortazzi, 1990). In addition, many researchers have hypothesized that a better match between teaching style and learning style will improve learning, attitudes, behaviour and motivation (Willing, 1988; Reid, 1987; Oxford, Hollaway & Horton-Murillo, 1992). They suggest that matching teaching style to students' learning styles will provide all students with equal opportunity to learn and would build students' self awareness. Reid (1987) prescribes a balanced teaching style so that all learning styles could be catered for. While Willing (1988) agrees with Reid's prescription, he feels however, that asking teachers to adopt a style that they are not comfortable with might be counter-productive. Willing underscores the need to respect the individual teaching style of teachers. Felder (1995), on the other hand, warns that what learners like may not be the best for learning. Generally, most researchers agree that a better match between teaching styles and learning styles will lead to better students' attitude and heighten motivation thus leading to more effective teaching and learning.

A study by Peacock (2001) is the first study that attempts to provide empirical evidence to support this widely accepted hypothesis that the mismatch between teaching and learning styles will

result in ineffective learning, demotivation and frustration. Data was collected using questionnaire, interviews and tests. His samples were EFL students and teachers at a Hong Kong University (both local and Western). Peacock (2001) found that the learners preferred Kinesthetic and Auditory styles and disliked Individual and Group styles. His sample of 46 Hong Kong EFL teachers preferred Kinesthetic, Group and Auditory styles and disliked Tactile and Individual styles. Western teachers also dislike Auditory styles. There was a mismatch between Group and Auditory styles. Peacock concludes by saying that EFL teachers should teach in a balanced style so as to accommodate different learning styles. This is similar to suggestions made by other researchers.

In our study, we are interested in finding out what the teaching styles of our language teachers are. This is important because according to Willing (1988) teachers' awareness of their own teaching style will help them to be more effective because they would then be able to adjust their teaching styles so as to accommodate the diverse learning styles of the students.

The Research

This study was undertaken to investigate Malaysian ESL teachers' styles in teaching English. While there are many methods that can be used to explore teaching styles, this study adopts a wholly quantitative approach that only uses data obtained from a questionnaire-survey. Admittedly, such data is one-dimensional and more insights can be gained if the data is triangulated with findings from other qualitative sources. However, since this study is a preliminary investigation into teaching style, it has confined the discussion within the quantitative paradigm.

Sample Population

The study was conducted on 26 ESL teachers from the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. The teachers were of varied ethnicity, 16 Malays, 7 Chinese and 3 Indians, which is reflective of the racial composition of Malaysia. Fig. 1 below gives a breakdown of the instructors according to gender, age, qualifications and teaching experience:

Gender	Age	Qualifications	Teaching Experience			
			3-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	> 15 years
Male	35-40	MA				1
		BSc				2
Total						3
Female	Below 30	BA	1			
	30-34	MA		1		
		BA		2	1	
	35-40	MA	1		2	1
		MSc*				1
		BA			3	
		BSc*		1	1	
	41-45	PhD				1
		MA				2
		BA				2
		BBAdmin*				1
Total			2	4	7	8
Overall total			2	4	7	11

*These includes degrees in related disciplines

Figure 1: Breakdown of the instructors according to gender, age, qualifications and teaching experience.

Purpose of the research
This research study aims to investigate:

(1) the extent to which the ESL instructors apply current theories and thinking on ESL teaching and learning.
(2) the extent to which they consider the learning styles of their students in their teaching.
(3) the extent to which they help their students to be aware of the appropriate language learning strategies and processes for autonomous language learning.

Research instruments
The questionnaire used comprises 60 objective questions that explore various aspects of teaching styles. It is not derived from any specific source but developed by the researchers based on their vast experience in this field. However, references were made to Willing's Learning Styles Questionnaire (1988) and Oxford's Styles Analysis Survey (2003). See Appendix I for the questionnaire.

Research procedure

The questionnaires were distributed to all instructors teaching English Language courses in UKM. Out of the 40 instructors that received the questionnaires only 26 of them completed and returned the questionnaires giving an attrition rate of 35 %.

Statistical Procedure

Factor analysis and estimates of reliability (internal consistency and stability) were completed using SPSS (Version 9) statistical package. The 'factor analysis' procedure was adopted from Willing's study (1988). This procedure was used to identify sets of responses, which have a high correlation with each other. The procedure involved was purely mathematical, that is, there was no preconceived pattern, which the analysis was attempting to find. Instead, it sorted through the possible combinations or responses across all cases studied in order to discover whether there were any combinations of questions whose response-levels consistently tended to move in parallel. If such a set or sets were discovered in the data for this survey, it would then be necessary to examine the particular issues involved, in order to see whether those sets appeared to have any coherent 'meaning' in recognisable teaching styles terms. Then, the mean score of each subject's response to the items listed in each factor was calculated. The factor that yielded the highest mean score was then considered the predominant pattern of preference of that person. The characteristics of each 'group' were then studied. Following this, the patterns of preference of the instructors of the different categories were compared by calculating the percentage of learners that belonged to each group.

Using factor analysis to identify patterns of teaching style preference

Exploratory factor analysis was used. Principal components factor analysis of the thirty items was carried out (with SPSS 11 programme). The varimax ® (orthogonal) rotation and Kaiser normalisation procedure (Nunnally, 1978; Kim and Mueller, 1978) was used. It yielded a fourteen-factor solution, which accounted for 92.47% of the variance in the ESL instructors. The Scree Test (proposed by Cattel, 1966) suggested the possibility of ignoring the last ten factors, as they appeared to be levelling off with the lower components. In view of that, we decided to limit the factors to four and performed principal components factor analysis again. This time we obtained a four-factor solution with an explained variance of 52.41. To decrease cross-loadings and to increase efficiency from these results, all items that loaded below 0.3 were deleted. In cases where there were cross-loadings of items between factors, the lower loadings were automatically deleted. Items that loaded highly on two or more factors were not counted as items of these factors. Finally, any loading of below 0.4 was deleted. Based on the patterns that emerged, it was possible to identify four teaching styles groups (as shown in Fig 2).

The learner-centric teacher (the LC style)

This teacher subscribes to the more contemporary notions of ELT theories and practice. She is independent, flexible and innovative. She does not depend on prepared materials but tends to use her own materials. She is also not bound by a prescribed syllabus. She adapts her materials and teaching styles according to the needs and demands of the class. Her approach to teaching and learning is very liberal and she is tolerant of learners' mistakes and she is also not adverse to the use of L1 in class. She values students' opinions, is culture-sensitive and tries to empower her students so that they will become autonomous learners. She believes in challenging the students and encouraging them to use the language in real situations.

The go-by-the book learner-centric teacher (the Gbb style)

This teacher realizes the value of learner independence and she is sensitive to the students' needs but at the same time she has a tendency to go by the book. She encourages peer evaluation and allows students to voice their opinions. She realizes that variety and student's choice are important when selecting content. At the same time, she would conscientiously make sure the syllabus is covered and would conscientiously give feedback to all assigned work. She also expects students to adapt to her teaching styles rather than the other way around.

The grammar-centric teacher (the GC style)

This teacher believes that 'accuracy is everything' in language teaching and learning. She believes that instructions in grammar are important and will devote time to teaching it. She does not tolerate errors and will correct all spoken and written errors committed by the students. She also believes that practice is important. She doesn't believe in the use of L1 in class. At the same time, she also subscribes to more comtemporary ELT beliefs. She believes a teacher should be flexible in her approach to suit the diverse needs of the learners. She also believes in the value of collaborative learning activities among students and the value of students working independently outside the classroom. She believes in teaching learning strategies so that learners would be more independent.

The teacher-centric teacher (the TC style)

This teacher believes that 'teacher knows best'. She subscribes to the practices of the old-ELT school. She believes that language learning is serious business and that there is no place for fun and games in the language class. Thus, she gets students to memorize vocabulary and forbids the use of L1 in the ESL class. She does not believe in empowering students so that they will be autonomous learners. Surprisingly, this teacher believes in the use of new technologies (online discussion, e-mail and multimedia laboratory) in teaching and learning.

Figure: 2 Characteristics of the four teaching styles groups

Reliability

Cronbach's μ reliability coefficient was used to check the internal consistency of the items in each factor. Factor I had a standardised ∝ coefficient of 0.83, Factor II, 0.85, and Factor III, 0.82 and Factor IV, 0.85 indicating reliability in classification for all four factors.

Description of the factors

The analysis reveals four factors that represent four types of teaching style preferences. The characteristics of each group are summarised in Figure 3. These types do not represent 'real people' in the sense that most of the instructors do not fall neatly into a specific quadrant.

However, they suggest that certain instructors display certain groups of characteristics more than others, thus it is reasonable to place an instructor in the group that he/she displays the greatest preference for.
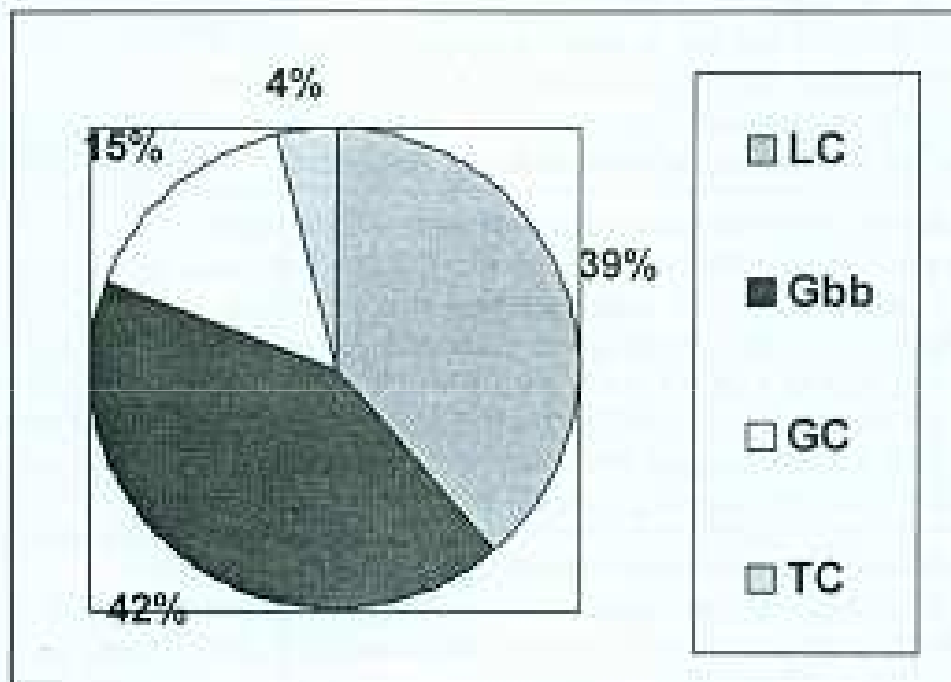
Presentation of findings

Figure: 3 Teaching styles groups according to types for all categories of instructors

From Figure 3 it can be seen that the percentage of instructors preferring the LC (Learner-centric) style is the highest at 42% (11 instructors) and those preferring GBB ("Go-by-the-book" learner-centric) style, a very close second at 39% (10 instructors). 15% (4 instructors) expresses preference for the GC (Grammar-centric) style and a mere 4% (1 instructor) shows preference for the TC (Teacher-centric) style.
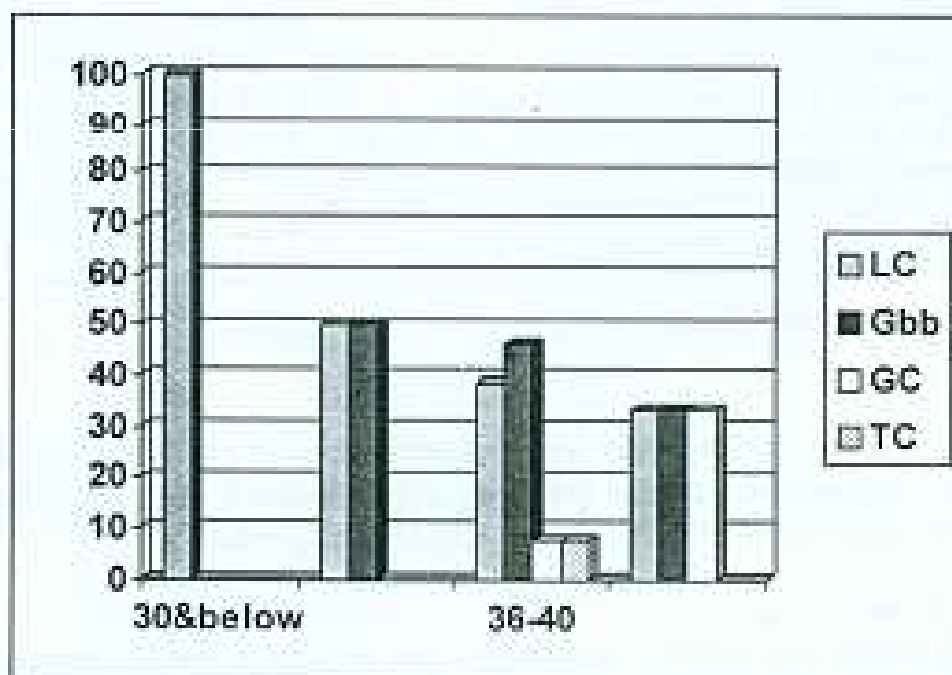

Figure 4: Teaching styles groups for different age groups

Figure 4 indicates that the percentages of instructors according to age groups preferring the various styles are fairly well distributed. The 30 & below group has only 1 representative and he/ she indicates preference for the LC style. The 31-35 group has 4 instructors with 2 (50%) preferring the LC style and 2 (50%) preferring the Gbb style. The 36-40 group has 13 representatives with the highest of 6 for Gbb (46.2%) followed closely by 5 (38.5%) preferring LC and 1 (7.7%) each for the other two styles. The 41-45 group has 6 representatives with 2 for LC (33.3%), Gbb and GC. On the whole it can be said that the most preferred styles for all age groups are the LC and Gbb. Notably, the GC style is preferred by those in the higher age groups.
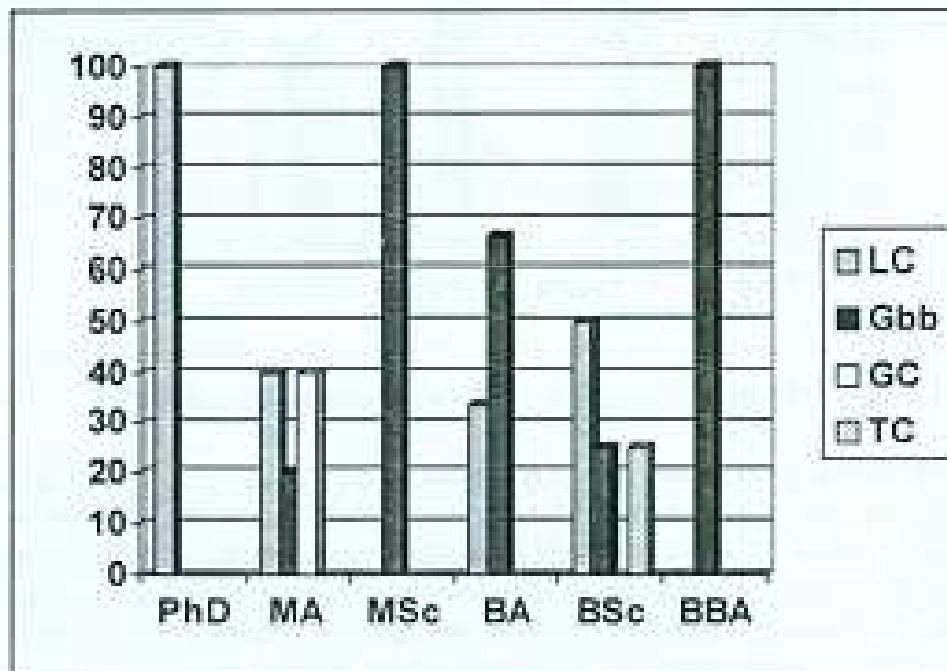

Figure 5: Teaching styles groups for different qualifications

Figure 5 reveals that the teaching styles groups according to qualifications also appear fairly evenly distributed. The only PhD holder (100%) indicates a preference for the LC style whereas the only MSc holder and the only BBA holder seem to prefer the Gbb style. 2 MA holders (40%) prefer the LC style and 2 prefer the GC style with 1 (20%) expressing a preference for the Gbb style. For the 9 BA instructors, 3 (33.3) of them prefer the LC style and 6 (66.7%) prefer the Gbb style. Conversely, for the BSc group, more prefer the LC style (2 i.e. 50%) and 1 each (25%) seems to prefer the Gbb and the TC styles. The results here suggest that the dominant teaching styles are the LC and the GBB styles for all types of qualifications.
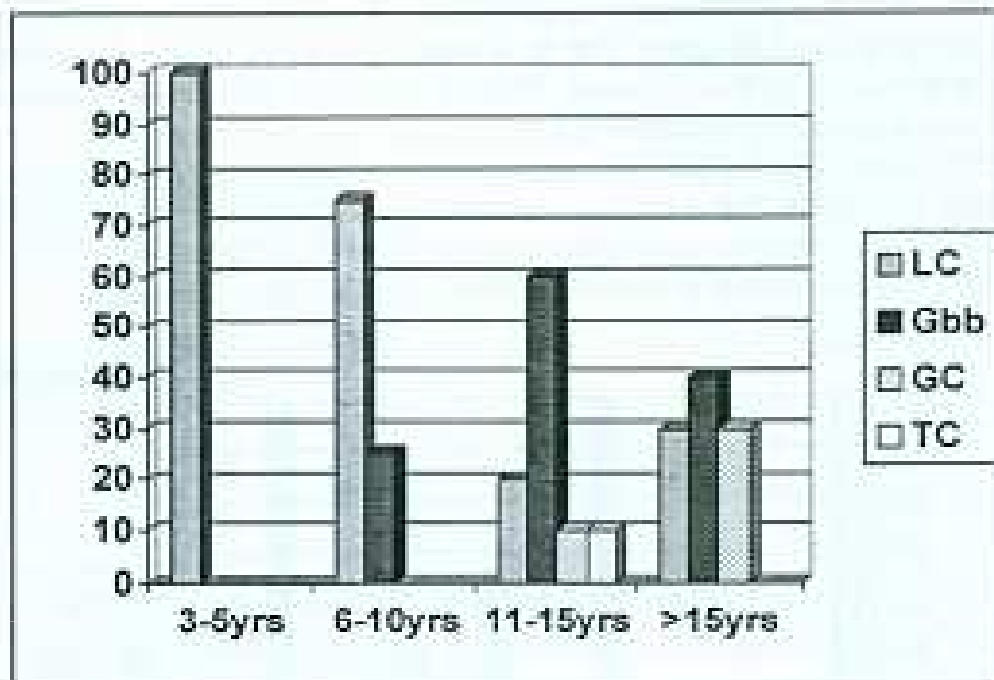
Figure: 6 Teaching styles groups for different teaching experiences

Figure 6 also reveals a good distribution of teaching styles according to teaching experience. The only instructor with 3-5 years teaching experience expresses preference for the LC style. 3 instructors (75%) with 6-10 years teaching experience also display preference for this style and only one in this group prefers the Gbb style. Conversely, those with 11-15 years teaching experience seem to prefer the Gbb style more with 6 (60%) opting for this style and only 2 (20%) choosing LC and one each (25%), preferring the GC and the TC styles. For the group with more than 15 years experience, there seem to be a fair distribution among the LC, Gbb and the GC styles with 3 (30%), 4 (40%) and 3 (30%) respectively. On the whole the dominant styles are the LC and the Gbb styles. However, a point to note is that the GC and the Gbb styles seem to be preferred by those with more teaching experience.

Discussion of findings

The results reveal that a majority of the instructors display a preference for learner-centric teaching styles (the LC and Gbb styles). This is by and large a good sign as it shows that they are aware of current practices and thinking in language teaching and are aware of the appropriate language learning strategies and processes to autonomous language learning. More specifically, the LC group indicates that they adapt their teaching styles to suit those of the students, are sensitive to students' cultural needs and take steps to empower students to be autonomous. The Gbb group also realises the importance of learner independence. However, they seem to expect their students to adapt to their teaching styles and follow the syllabus conscientiously and diligently give feedback. This is not necessarily a negative point as a good balance between the more traditional approaches and the more current approaches may enhance learning.

The results further demonstrate that instructors' preferences of the various teaching styles according to age, teaching experiences and qualifications are generally fairly distributed. However, it is noted that the GC style is preferred by those in the higher age groups and the GC and the Gbb styles seem to be preferred by those with more teaching experiences. This is understandable as these groups are those that have most probably gone through the grammar-based syllabus in their school days and have also been trained to place more emphasis on the teaching of grammar. However, this is not a problem as the majority of them have shown greater preference for learner-centric teaching styles.

Of course, it may be argued that learner-centric teaching styles may not always be the best approach in some classrooms situations. However, as Nunan (1996) points out a teacher achieves dual aims in creating a learner-centred classroom. He/she not only teaches the language content but also helps the students to systematically develop skills and knowledge they will need in order to make informed choices about what they learn and how they want to learn. These skills will lead to the development of an autonomous learner — a much-desired goal of language teaching.

Implications and recommendations for ELT

The study reveals that a majority of the instructors are aware of learner-centred approaches to teaching English and show preferences for promoting learner autonomy among their students. Hopefully all these are translated into actual classroom practices. In addition to using the right approach, it is necessary for teachers to assure that their styles of teaching are suitable for their students. Research studies have shown that serious mismatches can occur between teaching and learning styles (Felder and Silverman, 1988; Lawrence, 1993; Oxford et al., 1991; Smith and Renzuli, 1984) and this can have negative effects on students' learning and can affect their attitudes and motivation (Reid, 1987; Cortazzi, 1990).

Thus, a follow-up research would be necessary to find out the learning styles of the students and to see whether they match the teaching styles of their teachers. Reid (1987) proposes that matching teaching styles with students learning styles will enable students to learn better and increase self-awareness. However, we believe it also important to respect the individual teaching style of teachers (Willing, 1988) especially if their teaching styles are a reflection of current theories and practices in language teaching and learning. Besides, there is also a possibility that learners may not know what is best for learning (Felder, 1995). In our opinion what is necessary is to create a balance. If a teacher finds through a learning styles survey that her students are too teacher-centred then she should not adjust her style to suit her students completely. She may try to be more accommodating but her ultimate goal should be wean her students away from their teacher-dependent behaviour.

In order to achieve this, Thang (2003) proposes helping students stretch their learning styles by designing a flexible programme that offer a variety of tasks and support that can cater to a variety of learning styles. Students will then have the option to choose activities that they prefer. For example, listening activities can be included to cater to students who like to listen to spoken English. This can be in the form of listening to programmes on radio and television or listening to tapes. Online teacher tutoring or e-mail contact can also be introduced to provide for students who prefer more teacher contact. Tasks that allow group interaction either face-to-face sessions or group project can also be added to help students who like group interaction. Students should also be encouraged to try activities that they do not like. This will expose them to different learning styles that initially they may be uncomfortable with, but in time they may learn to appreciate. In addition, it is important to ensure that the instructional design principles of the tasks given take into account salient patterns of the various styles. This will maximise the performance of diverse learners (Kinsella and Sherak, 1998).

Acknowledgment

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