

TEACHER CLASSROOM PRACTICE: A CASE STUDY OF TEACHERS' AWARENESS OF STUDENTS' LEARNING STYLES IN CALABAR, CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *Despite on-going global shifts in teaching and learning, driven by technological advancements, Nigerian teachers continue to practice the traditional 'teach and test at the end of the term' method. This instruction method is used with little consideration for pupils' learning styles which has been proven to be key to learners' academic success. This study seeks to investigate some Nigerian teachers' awareness of their students' learning styles in the course of instructional delivery. Pre and post observation techniques, semi structured interviews and questionnaires are going to be used to generate data. Data will be coded and analysed to obtain the findings. Thereafter, recommendations will be made based on the result.*

KEYWORDS: Teacher, Classroom practice, learning styles, instructional delivery, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

As advocates across the globe continue to push for best teaching and learning practices in schools, Nigerian teacher classroom practices continue to be the traditional way of teaching and administering examination at the end of the term. Little or no consideration is given to learners' learning style which remains key to students' academic success. Many teachers may not be aware of learners learning styles and some may be but have not considered it to be of any significance to students' learning. Teacher classroom practice has to take into consideration students' holistic academic achievement, focusing specifically on the unique needs of each learner for maximum benefit from instruction. Felder and Brent (2005:57) highlight this when they note that 'Students have different levels of motivation, different attitudes about teaching and learning, and different responses to specific classroom environments and instructional practices. The more instructors understand students' differences, the better chance they have of meeting the diverse learning needs of all of their students'. The authors further add that, with the wide spectrum of teaching methods different teachers prefer different methods that include lecture and demonstrations or activities; yet others focus on principles, applications, memory and others understanding. Moreover, how much a given student learns in a class is governed in part by that student's native ability or innate strength and prior preparation but also by the compatibility of the student's attributes as a learner and the instructor's teaching style.

Nigerian classrooms are heterogeneous combination of learners with diverse learning styles. These learning styles have to be taken into consideration as teachers plan and deliver instructions in classrooms. The diversity in learning styles sometimes pose problems for the teachers who do not adequately understand or recognize them in students. However, if teachers identify these learning

styles early and nurture them, the students will benefit from their instruction because it will also help the teacher to employ the teaching styles that match with the students learning styles.

Teacher classroom practices ranges from designing of learning experiences for the students, selection of instructional materials, developing lesson objectives, presentation of the lesson and managing students' behaviours. The all-encompassing nature of teachers' classroom duties underscores the need to study how these duties are based on clear understanding of students' learning preferences. It could be argued that in a situation where, the method of presenting lesson is the same without considering the way learners processes information, poor learning outcomes could be blamed on the teacher's ignorance of the students' learning preference.

By understanding their own particular learning style, teachers better meet the needs of their students and how essential learning style is to students' academic performance (Whitney, 2005). Barman, Aziz, and Yusoff, (2014) support this position by arguing that, identifying individual students' learning styles and sharing the results with them can provide them with valuable clues about their possible strengths and weaknesses and indications of ways they might improve their academic performance.

It is necessary to provide definition and context for terms used in this study. In looking at teacher awareness, awareness here refers to the knowledge or the ability to perceive a situation or be conscious of a fact. That is having knowledge of the situation. Mashoedah, DwiSurjono, Zamroni and Hartmann (2014) define awareness as the state or condition of being aware, having knowledge and being conscious. In other words, it means knowing that something exists, or having knowledge or experience of a particular thing. The authors went further to add that teachers' awareness of students' learning styles refers to the awareness of what activities related to their students' preferences in the learning process that teachers need to design before teaching. In order for the teachers to be aware of the pupils learning styles, the researchers of this study argue that the teacher need to know their own learning style in order to appreciate its significance in the teaching and learning process. Knowing students' learning style requires administering a learning style inventory in addition to assessing the learning behaviours of the students by observation. Teachers' awareness of students' learning styles increase the teachers' sensitivity to the differences in their pupils (Kauchak & Eggen, 2011). This knowledge also enables the teachers to treat their pupils as individuals. By being aware of the pupils' learning styles, teachers will now have the capacity to assist pupils to identify their best and most effective mode of learning and studying. This in turn will bring about improved learning outcomes. When teachers encourage pupils to think about how they learn best, they have provided a powerful learning tool their pupils can use throughout their life time(Kauchak & Eggen, 2011)

According to Cruckshank, Jenkins and Metcalf (2006), familiarity with different learning styles enables the teacher plan and execute lessons in a more flexible manner. Teachers become more flexible in their lesson planning, choice of examples, purposeful and simless flow from one teaching method to another within the same lesson. More importantly, adopting multiple methods within the same lesson opens up the learning landscape for more 'comprehension and improved academic performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Khanum(2014)conducted a research to investigate the English language learning styles of the higher secondary learners in Bangladesh and how far the teachers are aware of the learners' preferences. For the purpose of the study, 30 students were selected from 3 higher secondary colleges to express their styles through a questionnaire as to how they preferred learning English as a foreign language. The study also included 8 teachers' interview on how they perceive learners' preferences while teaching English. The questionnaire containing 13 items, were adopted and adapted from Reid's (1987) original study of perceptual learning style preferences. The findings of the study showed some specific styles preferred by most of the learners. In various cases, the teachers were not aware of the learners' styles and those who were aware showed their problems of implementing these styles in classroom.

Khanum (2014:2) maintained that, 'different students may have different levels of motivation, different attitudes about teaching and learning, and different responses to specific classroom environments and instructional practices. The author concluded that the more instructors understand students' learning differences, the better the chance they have of meeting the diverse learning needs of their students. It is also logical to argue that academically successful students are more interested in their learning and more motivated to work harder. So, the need for teachers' knowledge about their students' preferences and styles is indisputable' as reinforced by Reid (1987:88) who opined that, "identifying the learning style preferences ... may have wide-ranging implications in the areas of curriculum design, materials development, student orientation, and teacher training". This implies that when teachers are aware of their students' learning styles, they would be able to design appropriate learning experiences and select appropriate learning materials for better learning outcomes. Accordingly, Alfonseca et al. (2006) pointed out that, an awareness of students' learning styles will enable teachers to adapt appropriate techniques and methods that suit the students' preferences.

Furthermore, Khanum (2014) observed that, in Bangladesh, the teachers are not so aware about the learning styles of the learners and that, nowadays newly appointed teachers are trying to apply new techniques of communicative Language Teaching without showing their enthusiasm as it is very difficult to arrange class according to learner's preference in the context of Bangladesh. The author said again that, most of the learners are not aware about their preferred styles as well. This study therefore tries to find out how Nigerian teachers' classroom practice is informed by their awareness of their own learning styles and consequently their students' learning styles. Many teachers, in the Nigerian context may not be aware of their students' learning styles or preferences in learning. The teachers are not that much aware about learning styles of the learners and so, they have to bring out learners likings and disliking in order to implementing syllabus, materials and teaching activities (Khanum, 2014). It is of utmost importance that, an awareness of both the teachers' teaching and students' styles are taking into cognizance in order to achieve an effective result in the field of teaching and learning.

Also, Hassain and Ayub (2012) carried out a study to find out the association between learning styles and teaching styles at undergraduate level in a business school. Canfield Learning Styles Inventory (CLSI, 1992) and Staffordshire Evaluation of Teaching Styles (SETS, 2007) were used.

262 students and 12 teachers were taken through random sampling from four disciplines: Marketing, Management, Human Resource Management, and Finance. There was a positive correlation between student learning style and teacher teaching style, which was statistically significant. The results indicated that, awareness raising sessions should be arranged for students and teachers to realize the importance and implications of knowing their learning and teaching styles in business education environment.

Studies carried out by Stitt-Gohdes (2001), Tucker, Stewart and Schmidt (2003), revealed that teachers are untrained and teach the way they had been taught not realizing that effective teacher has to consider the what and how of teaching, that is, the environment, context, course and learning styles of students. It is important to note that, most teachers do not even know their own learning styles not to talk of learning styles of the students and since they are not trained and are unaware, they teach based on how they were taught without considering the way students learn.

Again, Ross and Vincent (2001) undertook a study on learning styles awareness: A basis for developing teaching and learning strategies,. The research provide an overview of learning styles theories and show how being aware of learning styles can benefit both teachers and students. The study revealed that, there is prevalence of auditory learners at the university of Louisiana and advised that , educators must be prepared to accommodate all learning styles. The authors concluded that, a better understanding of learning styles can benefit not only students but their teachers who use the knowledge to develop lesson plans and materials that disseminate identical information across spectrum of learning styles. On the contrary, if teachers do not have the understanding of students' learning styles, it may be difficult for them to reach out to all categories of students with diverse learning styles which will affect the students' learning outcomes.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of the study is to investigate teacher classroom practice: case study of teachers' awareness of students' learning styles. Specifically the study seeks to find out whether:

1. Teachers are aware of students' learning styles in their classrooms.
2. Teachers have ever identified students' learning styles while delivery lesson.
3. They teach lesson based on students' learning styles.

Research Questions

The following questions are raised to guide the study

1. Are teachers in primary aware of their students' learning styles?
2. How do teachers in primary assess and identified their students' learning styles?
3. Do teachers in primary know their own learning style and how did they identify it?

METHOD

The survey research design was adopted for this study and content analyses were employed to answer the research questions. The university of Calabar demonstration primary school teachers were used. Forty-five (45) of them form the population of the study. A sample size of twenty-six teachers was done accidentally. A ten (10) item questionnaire titled Teachers awareness of pupils'

learning styles (TASLSQ) was used to gather the data. The questionnaire was coded and analyzed question by question using content analyses.

Analysis and Discussion of findings

Questions 1, 2, 3

While 73% of the sampled teachers claimed to have heard and know what learning style is in question (1 and 2), when asked to define learning style, in (question 3) in their own words, 76% do not seem to define it correctly. The 79% of the respondents defined it using words/ Phrases such as:

“It is the way you present your lesson”.

“Learning style is a method in which one use to impact information to the learner”

“Learning styles are the patterns, methods, system and techniques applied in teaching...”

These are various methods or techniques of teaching....”

It is obvious that even though, 73% agreed that they have heard and know what learning style is, but 76% which is a little above 73% defined learning incorrectly. It has shown that most teachers are not aware of learning style of their pupils in the classroom. This finding is in line with the findings of Khanum (2014) who found that the teachers are not that much aware about learning styles of the learners and so, they have to bring out learners likings and disliking in order to implementing syllabus, materials and teaching activities.

Question 4 was designed to give respondents opportunity to mention learning style such as the authentic way of finding out students’ learning styles, none of the respondents did. Rather 65% of them listed “Attendance”, “speaking clearly”, “practical activity”, “Individual learning”, “Group learning” “Demonstration”, etc as learning styles.

Question 5 which is very closely linked to question 4, further demonstrated respondents’ lack of clear understanding of the concept of learning styles. Respondents simply picked from the list of responses in question 4, many of which were incorrect in the context of learning styles. For example, they listed “ Group learning”, “Demonstration Style” The implication is that, the respondents do not know their own learning styles, hence they do not know what the concept learning style is. This finding is in line with Stitt-Gohdes (2001), who said that most teachers do not even know their own learning styles not to talk of learning styles of the students and since they are not trained and are unaware, they teach based on how they were taught without considering the way students learn.

Question 6 was designed to give respondents opportunity to mention the use of learning style inventory. No respondent mention “learning inventory” which is the globally recognized instrument used to identifying learning styles. 23.07% of the respondents gave no answer; 34.61% listed textbooks, Internet and using magazines; 19.23% listed observation and assessment; 7.70% listed workshops and conferences and 15.38% listed, “It helps the teacher, bring quick understanding and make learning concrete”. One respondent listed, “simple versus complex learning style, whole versus part learning style and role versus discovery learning style”. This implies that, the teachers are unaware of the learning style inventory as well.

Question 7-10 focused on the respondents who were all teachers, to determine their awareness of their classroom practices as it relates to their students learning styles. **Question 7 and 10** are specifically directed at actual instructional practices, evaluating how respondents pay attention to student learning habits during teaching. For example, when a teacher is teaching, are some students

writing down what they hear, others are drawing images to remind them of what the learned and yet others simply listening and memorizing....

In the same line, **question 10** respondents' belief about the intersection between traditional/conventional classroom practice where the teacher teaches while the students simply sit in rows quickly and listen and more democratic classrooms where students can work cooperatively, helping and learning from each other. 76.92% of the respondents said that; "if the students are quiet during teaching or lesson, they believe that the students are actually learning the material being taught". The other 23.07% responded no to the same question showing their inability to apply democratic way of delivering lessons in the classroom which allows students to participate fully in a lesson.

Question 8 and 9 subliminally explored how much planning goes into lesson preparation. **Question 8** specifically asks respondents what informs their choice of instructional materials. Is it based on the topic taught or based on consideration of students learning styles? Question 8 is directly related to question 9 which in reverse way explore two issues; one, that the teacher actually takes the time to find instructional materials which included picture and two, what the teachers think about varied teaching methods including using the pictures to enhance students' comprehension of content taught....Obviously, respondents who believe that the use of pictures is a waste time 19.23% inadvertently reveal their old traditional teacher centred teaching style in a 21st century classroom.

In a sphere where conversation around teaching and learning are underscored by multiple intelligences (Amstrong, 2000) and student-centered classroom (Amstrong, 2000) where instructions are not only driving by students' interest but also by hands on learning and skills-based learning, learners will excel base on how they understand to learn best. This will go a long way to improve their learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious from the foregoing that in the Nigerian context, teachers are unaware of students' learning style which is key to students' success in school. The teachers are still using the traditional strategies in lesson delivery. From the discussion, many respondents were unaware of their own learning styles hence they were unable to identify the existing types of learning styles. They rather mentioned teaching methods as learning styles and some are still using the traditional talk and chalk method in teaching without considering pupils' preference in learning. It is important to note that, teachers need to be aware of pupils' learning styles and prepare their lesson in such a way that will benefit all the pupils with different learning styles in their classrooms.

Recommendations

1. Teachers should take note of pupils' learning styles when delivering their lessons.
2. Teachers should develop their lesson base on pupils learning styles
3. The teachers should implore eclectic method of teaching to enable them reach out to many pupils.
4. Teachers should strive to identify their own learning styles so that they can assist the pupils adequately.

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