



# A diary study focusing on listening and speaking: The evolving interaction of learning styles and learning strategies in a motivated, advanced ESL learner



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## ABSTRACT

Using a personal diary, the first author, an advanced learner of English as a second language (ESL) who desires to improve her academic language competence, focuses on her own evolving learning styles and learning strategies for ESL listening and speaking while living in the US. The author examines dual contexts: the internal context of attitudes, motivations, and emotions and the external context of the unfamiliar country, its culture, and the author's observable interactions with people in that culture. She looks at how the internal and external contexts work together to affect her styles and strategies for learning. For this introverted, reflective, and visual learner, learning by listening to lectures and actively participating in classroom conversations are not easy tasks, but her diary shows that she eventually manages the different aspects of her overall learning style and learns to use relevant strategies that make her a more active classroom participant.

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## 1. Introduction

Compared with interviews or questionnaires, learner journals or diaries as data collection instruments are often less structured and therefore might generate interesting data that will not usually appear in these other modes. Pavlenko (2001, 2002) points out that personal narratives (including diaries and autobiographies) provide important information about the experiences, difficulties, motivations, losses, and gains of language learners. Oxford (2011) writes that learner narratives, including diaries, allow us to understand two types of contexts, the observable or external context and the internal (attitudinal, motivational, emotional, and interpretive) context, as well as the complexity of the interactions between these contexts. In addition, learner diaries are perfect for uncovering learning styles and strategies and discerning the interaction between these factors (Oxford, Lavine, Hollaway, Felkins, & Saleh, 1996).

One purpose of this diary study is to report and analyze the complexity of the interactions between external and internal contexts that the first author (also known in this article as the researcher), who is an ESL learner in the US, experienced while trying to achieve her goal: to improve her English listening and speaking skills through academic courses and conferences. Another related purpose is to discuss the author's perceived difficulties and creative development during this process. Still another key purpose – the most important one – is to portray learning styles, learning strategies, and affective variables, such as motivation, through the lens of the author's diary.

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The next three sections present the research review, the theoretical framework, and the methodology of the present study. The subsequent sections offer results and interpretations, conclusions, and instructional implications.

## 2. Research review

This review begins with individual differences in general and then presents the research on particular individual differences: learning styles, learning strategies, learning strategies for listening and speaking, and the features of advanced ESL learners.

### 2.1. Individual differences

Given generally the same external learning environments and access to learning opportunities, why do various learners achieve different results with language learning? This question has led to the exploration of individual differences of second and foreign language learners. These differences not only differentiate language learners from each other but are also believed to have important effects on language learning (Benson & Gao, 2008; Bowden, Sanz, & Stafford, 2005).

Numerous studies focus on the effects of individual differences on learners' success in language learning (Ellis, 1994). Oxford and Ehrman (1990, 1993) explore individual differences such as gender, age, nationality, motivation, and academic or career orientation. Ehrman, Leaver, and Oxford (2003) discuss three major categories of learner differences – learning styles, learning strategies, and affective factors – while recognizing the existence of other influential individual differences. Benson and Gao (2008) divide learners' individual differences into two categories: (a) innate attributes such as gender, age, language learning aptitude, personality, and learning styles; and (b) acquired attributes such as attitudes, motivation, beliefs, and learning strategy use.

Oxford (2013a) discusses the influence of the following individual differences on language learning: (a) aptitude, seen as malleable through experience and instruction rather than a fully innate or static trait; (b) demographic factors of gender and age; (c) personal features of personality, self-esteem, self-concept, and self-efficacy; (d) culturally influenced concern for “face” (social impression) and self-construals of interdependence or independence; (e) affective variables, such as investment, motivation, emotions, and willingness to communicate; and (f) cognitive aspects, such as cognitive learning style, future time perspective, ability to manage cognitive load, and schema development. Many of these individual differences, says Oxford (2011, 2013a), influence learning strategy use. The study reported here focuses largely on the interaction of learning styles and learning strategies in a highly motivated, advanced English language learner in English-medium academic courses.

### 2.2. Learning styles

Kolb (1984, cited in Nel, 2008) argues that “Individual learners have particular strengths which form the basis of their preferred learning style” (p. 50). According to Keefe (1979), learning styles are rather stable behaviors or ways of functioning that indicate how learners perceive and interact with the learning environment. Learning styles have cognitive, affective, personality-related, and physiological characteristics (Ehrman et al., 2003; Keefe, 1979). Emphasizing the cognitive component, Reid (1997) describes learning styles as the individual's preferred, habitual ways of learning, i.e., of processing and retaining new information and developing skills.

Curry (1983) presents a metaphoric concept of learning styles as an onion with many layers, some variable and others more permanent. The first layer consists of instructional and environmental preferences, which are not fixed; the second layer is information-processing preferences; and the next, most permanent layer is comprised of personality characteristics of style. Oxford (2003) contributes a detailed list of learning style dimensions: sensory style dimensions (visual, auditory, and hands-on); cognitive style dimensions (concrete-sequential/abstract-intuitive [intuitive-random], closure-oriented/open, particular/global, and analyzing/synthesizing); and a social-interactional, personality-related style dimension (extroverted/introverted). Regarding the personality aspect of learning style, many teachers think it is closely related to student's performance in language learning (Ellis, 1994). Oxford and Ehrman (1995) report that the personality-related aspect of learning style has a strong relationship with learning strategy use, which in turn is often related to language outcomes.

Cohen, Oxford, and Chi (2002, in Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi, & Lassegard, 2006) add still other learning style dimensions drawn from educational psychology, such as metaphorical/literal, leveling/sharpening, deductive/inductive, field-independent/field-dependent, and reflective/impulsive. Learning styles are influenced not only by psychological factors but also by cultural values. Hale-Benson (1986), in talking about Black children's learning styles, points out that teachers must appreciate the role of culture in helping to shape learning styles. Nevertheless, neither culture nor nationality determines learning style.

Burke and Doolan (2006) assert that learners will learn “more, [and] more quickly” if they “use, rather than ignore their natural styles” and “with less frustration than they do when trying to use someone else's style” (p. 164). However, Sims and Sims (2006) describe the process of changing from the originally preferred learning style to an adapted learning style and to an optimal learning style, which is the most suitable style for attaining the learning goal. They also emphasize the importance of style switching for minority students. Somewhat similarly, the language field has more often promoted what Oxford and Lavine (1991) call style-stretching, which involves the learner's employing new learning strategies that might not fit his or her stylistic comfort zone or culturally preferred patterns. Oxford and Lavine contend that it might be difficult to change or switch

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