

The learner's side of foreign language learning: Where do styles, strategies, and tasks meet?

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Abstract

This article focuses on the links between general style preferences and specific strategy choices, and then relates these two variables to tasks, in the sense that different tasks may evoke the use of different strategies. The article starts by defining learning style preferences, language learning and use strategies, and language tasks. Then the intersection of styles, strategies, and tasks is considered from a theoretical perspective. After a brief review of research literature linking styles, strategies, and tasks, a series of four hypothetical task situations are described, suggesting ways that learners with different style and strategy preferences might respond. The purpose of the article is to suggest ways in which teachers can support learners in their efforts to be more effective at language learning and language use.

1. Introduction

There is a growing literature on learning style preferences among learners of a second language – in our case, ESL (Ehrman 1996; Leaver and Oxford 2001; Oxford and Anderson 1995; Reid 1995). There is also a growing literature on language learning and language use strategies (see Cohen 1998; McDonough 1999; Oxford 2001). Finally, there is a growing literature on the importance of tasks and how their very nature can highly influence the performance of language learners (Doughty and Williams 1998; Skehan 1998). So what is the connection interactively across these three – styles, strategies, and tasks?

2. Styles, strategies, tasks, and their intersection

2.1. Language learning styles

Language learning styles are general approaches to language learning, while strategies are specific behaviors that learners select in their language learning and use. So, style differences would include being visual, auditory, or hands-on; being more abstract and intuitive (creative and speculative, non-sequential

in thought) versus being more concrete and thinking in step-by-step sequence; being more global (viewing the big picture) versus more particular (detail-oriented, focused); being more synthesizing (assembling material in an integrative fashion) versus being more analyzing (performing logical analysis and contrast tasks); being more impulsive versus being more reflective; liking to keep all options open (tolerant of ambiguity, not concerned about deadlines) versus being closure-oriented (wanting clarity, organization, and rapid decisions); and being more extroverted versus being more introverted.

2.2. *Language learning and language use strategies*

Strategies can be of a number of types. Language *learning* strategies are the conscious or semi-conscious thoughts and behaviors used by learners with the explicit goal of improving their knowledge and understanding of a target language. The language learning strategy repertoire includes cognitive strategies for memorizing and manipulating target language structures, metacognitive strategies for managing and supervising their strategy use, affective strategies for gauging their emotional reactions to learning and lower anxieties, and social strategies for enhancing learning, such as cooperating with other learners and seeking opportunities to interact with native speakers. If learners have a well-functioning repertoire, then these strategies will facilitate the language learning process by promoting successful and efficient completion of language learning tasks, as well as by allowing the learners to develop their own individualized approaches to learning.

Language *use* strategies come into play once the language material is already accessible, even in some preliminary form. Whereas language learning strategies are used with an explicit goal of improving learners' knowledge of a given language, language use strategies focus primarily on helping students utilize the language that they have already learned to whatever degree. Language use strategies include strategies for retrieving information about the language already stored in memory, strategies for rehearsing target language structures, cover strategies for not looking stupid or unprepared in the language classroom, and strategies for communicating in the language despite gaps in target language knowledge (Cohen 1998). While some strategies for language learning and language use may appear similar (e.g., certain rehearsal strategies), other strategies are unique to one or the other (e.g., strategies for initial learning of new vocabulary relating to a health condition versus strategies for using the new vocabulary once it has been learned well enough to recognize the words in use and perhaps to produce some or many of them).

2.3. *Language tasks*

A language learning or language using *task* is an activity which, according to Skehan (1998), satisfies the following criteria: it is primarily meaningful but may also be intended to elicit certain grammatical forms, it has a goal which needs to be worked towards, it is evaluated by means of the outcome, and it has a link to the real world. In addition, tasks will vary depending on:

1. The complexity of the task content (e.g., dealing with concrete and immediate information versus that which is abstract and remote),
2. The stressfulness of the communication (e.g., whether planning and performing the task is timed or not, whether spoken or written, whether performed alone or with others, whether the task itself is considered important and the importance of errors in performing it, and the control the speaker has over changing the goals of the task),
3. The ease of interpreting the task goal,
4. The difficulty of the linguistic code itself (and whether the learners can avoid the use of language structures being targeted in the task),
5. The familiarity of the task type and the ease of performing it (e.g., one-way or two-way communication, open versus closed, fixed-answer responses).

The learners' performance on such tasks has come to be determined empirically in terms of degree of fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Fluency has been measured in terms of number of pauses, accuracy in terms of percentage of error-free clauses, and complexity in terms of level of subordination (Skehan and Foster 1997). Depending on the amount of planning time available for accomplishing the task, learners have been found to deal first with prioritizing accuracy and, to a certain extent, fluency. Only later do they plan for the use of more complex language (Skehan, Foster, and Mehnert 1998).

2.4. *The intersection of styles, strategies, and tasks*

Let us consider a visual representation of how styles, strategies, and tasks might intersect (see Figure 1). We start with a language task, which in the figure is described in terms of a series of contrasts from authentic to inauthentic, relevant to irrelevant, concrete to abstract, using difficult to easy language, and so forth. This task, then, is to be dealt with by a learner whose style preference is more visual, auditory, or hands on; more abstract-intuitive or concrete-sequential; more global or particular, and so on. In dealing with this task, the learner will draw on a series of strategies that are presumably consistent with his or her style preferences (see Figure 1).

In reality it is difficult to determine just how much weight style preferences will have in learners' selection of strategies for a given task. Other factors will undoubtedly play some role, such as the learners' age, their prior experience in learning this target language and other languages, their current and intended

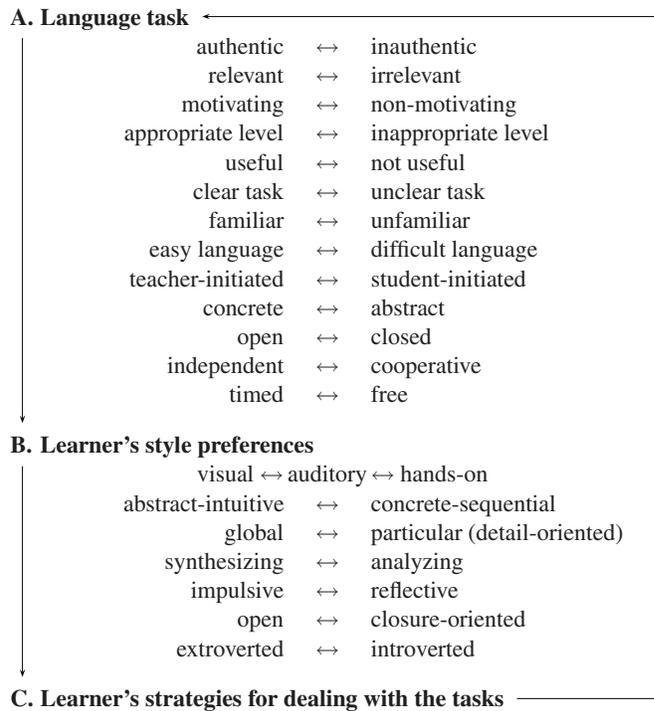


Figure 1. *The interaction of style, strategy, and task*

levels of proficiency in the target language, their language learning aptitude, their motivation to learn the language (e.g., for a grade, for sociocultural reasons, for career purposes), personality and gender characteristics, and contextual variables (in or out of class, teacher and peer variables, and so forth).

Consequently, no single strategy will be appropriate for all learners or for all tasks, and invariably individual learners will apply the very same strategies in different ways, both due to style preference differences as illustrated above by the strategy of looking for textual clues in an inferencing task and due to age, proficiency, motivation, and other factors noted above. Furthermore, language learning and language use strategies are not inherently “good” or “effective,” but rather need to be evaluated in terms of their effectiveness for individual learners possessing differing style preferences, in the completion of given language tasks with their specific configuration of task characteristics.

Let us now briefly review the research literature and then provide a series of examples of the intersection of styles, strategies, and tasks.

3. A brief look at the research literature

The literature linking specific learning styles to specific target language strategy use for a given task is not easy to find. The more typical target-language studies are those which have taken a broad pass at describing styles, a similar broad pass at describing strategies, and have arrived at broad conclusions over large numbers of subjects. We will first review two examples of the latter and then two of the former type.

Ehrman and Oxford (1990) conducted a study of seventy-nine foreign language learners at a large language institute run by a U.S. government agency. They administered to these learners Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (see Oxford 1990), which looks at the extent to which learners use cognitive, memory, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies, and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers 1962), which tests four dichotomous styles of functioning: introversion versus extroversion, sensing versus intuition, thinking versus feeling, and judging versus perceiving. They found that (1) extroverts reported using more social strategies than introverts; (2) sensing (concrete) learners liked memory strategies, while intuitive learners liked compensation strategies; (3) thinkers liked metacognitive strategies while feelers rejected them but liked social strategies; and (4) perceivers (open learners) liked affective strategies, which judges (closure-oriented learners) rejected.

Another example would be a self-report study conducted by Rossi-Le (1995), who investigated the relationship between the preferred learning styles of 147 adult ESL learners and their chosen strategy use. The study was conducted in the U.S. in two community college ESL environments, one in the Northeast and one in the Midwest. Rossi-Le used the Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (see Reid 1995: 202–207) and Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, and then correlated the results of the two. The investigator found that whereas learners who preferred the visual mode reported choosing visualization as a strategy, those who preferred tactile and kinesthetic perceptual learning styles reported themselves as engaging others in conversation and seeking out native English speakers, thereby becoming directly involved with the subject matter being learned. In addition, Rossi-Le found that students whose learning style preferences included "group study" also reported utilizing social and interactive strategies such as "working with peers", "requesting clarification", and "asking for correction".

Studies such as the two described above do not involve the collection of strategy use data on specific tasks. They limit themselves to student self-report data of strategy use – that is, to reports of what students think they might do when they perform any kind of language task.

Two recent studies looked at the relationship between styles and specific strategies on a given task. The first study focused on reading comprehension,

specifically of a short written passage excerpted from an autobiography (Gallin 1999). The research question for the study was “How might the relationship between learners’ language learning style preferences and their choice of certain types of reading comprehension strategies be characterized?” The sample was comprised of four Taiwanese students and one Saudi from two high-intermediate ESL classes at a large Midwestern U.S. university. The participants provided demographic and background language information. They all took the 80-item Strategy Inventory for Language Learning for ESL students (see Oxford 1990: 283–291) and Oxford’s Style Analysis Survey (SAS) (see Reid 1995: 208–215).

The participants were then trained in how to offer verbal report, and asked to perform a reading task – a one-page excerpt from an autobiographical account of using a microscope for the first time as a child. The subjects were to provide verbal report as they read the text. They also answered nine reading comprehension and vocabulary-in-context questions. In addition, they were asked to seek clarification for anything that was not clear in what they said during the recording. In the last session the learners heard how the investigator characterized their reading and were asked to respond. The research focused on the 15 items of the SILL that dealt with reading strategies. The analysis called for a comparison of interview data with data from the style inventory (SAS), the strategy inventory (SILL), and the reading task.

One general finding was that those with a visual learning style preference had a higher frequency of reading strategy use altogether. The study also showed a relationship between being more *intuitive* in cognitive style preference and being more likely to use the strategy of *inferencing* while reading. In other words, the three ESL readers in this case study who were better at inferring the gist were also more intuitive in terms of their style preference. And the one reader who was clearly not intuitive was good at some details, but was not so good at inferring the gist. So Gallin’s (1999) conclusion was that learner preferences for intuitive versus concrete-sequential learning styles might affect the strategies they use while reading in a second language.

The second study looked for relationships between learning style preferences and listening strategy use among 13 advanced ESL learners (9 females and 4 males, 10 from Asian countries, 1 from Russia, 1 from Tunisia, and 1 from Mali) at the English Center of a large Midwest university in the U.S. (Chi 2001). Most of these learners were highly motivated to learn better strategies for listening. The students took a Learning Style Preference Survey. The format of this survey and a number of the dimensions and items were drawn from Oxford’s Style Analysis Survey, found in Reid (1995: 208–215). Other key dimensions and some of the wording of items came from Ehrman and Leaver’s (2001) E & L Questionnaire. Participants also completed a Listening Strategy Use Survey (drawing item types and certain content from Oxford’s 1990

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, from Vandergrift 1997, and from Thompson and Rubin 1996). There was also a seven-minute video from CNN on car leases for respondents to watch (to encourage learners to link their style and strategy report to a specific task), a retrospective questionnaire, and a short comprehension quiz.

The retrospective questionnaire was designed to collect learners' retrospective report as to the strategies that they used most before watching the video, while watching it the first time, while watching the second time, when they did not know some vocabulary or did not understand something, and after watching the video. The quiz had seven short-answer and three multiple-choice questions focusing on the main ideas and details, and requiring the subjects to make inferences and notice visual aids. Six of the students were also asked to write briefly about two strategies that they used to help them listen better and why. The 62 listening strategies were grouped (following Vandergrift's 1997 model) into ten categories: planning, monitoring, inferencing, imagery-elaboration, summarization, repetition, resourcing, note-taking, social, and affective strategies.

The results indicated that the strongest relationship between style and strategies was between the style preference of *synthesizing* (i.e., summarizing material well, guessing meanings and predicting outcomes, and noticing similarities quickly) and summarizing strategies ($r = .70$, $p < .01$), planning strategies ($r = .74$), and social strategies ($r = .78$). Learners who had a more open style preference (i.e., enjoying discovery learning, and learning without concern for deadlines or rules) also reported using more social strategies ($r = .69$). Those learners who were more auditory and tactile-kinesthetic in style preference also reported using more social strategies. In addition, more concrete-sequential learners reported using fewer resourcing strategies (e.g., looking up unknown words in a dictionary) ($r = -.72$). It was also the case that learners who were more introverted used fewer summarizing strategies ($r = -.56$). Finally, those who were more random-intuitive (i.e., future-oriented, liking to speculate about possibilities, and enjoying abstract thinking) reported using more monitoring strategies in listening comprehension ($r = .68$).

Now let us take a look at four hypothetical examples of task, style, and strategy intersections in order to make the relationship among task, style, and strategy more real.

4. Examples of task, style, and strategy intersections

4.1. Example 1: A reading text and written open-ended questions

As illustrated in Figure 2, the instructor poses a task of reading a 500-word text about a new dot.com on the market and then completing three activities that accompany the text. The learners are to write out the main point of the passage in one or two sentences, respond to an inference item ("From what is reported

about the dot.com's weaknesses, what can be inferred about the rival dot.com's strengths?"), and summarize the key points of the passage. In this example, we might speculate arbitrarily that certain style variables are going to be activated more than others – let us say, for the sake of illustration, that they are the following style contrasts: concrete-sequential versus abstract-intuitive, analytic versus synthetic, and particular versus global. In this instance, we might expect that those learners who are more concrete-sequential are the ones who check the headings and subheadings to get a sense of the organization of the text, while the more intuitive learners skip around the text, looking for key words here and there but without a sequential pattern in their search. Both types of learners arrive at the main idea, but possibly using different strategic approaches.

With regard to the inferencing subtask, the learners with a more abstract-intuitive preference may take clues from the text, but be most comfortable relying on their own schemata and opinions to infer what is not stated in the text about the strengths of the rival dot.com (see Figure 2). The more concrete-sequential learners, on the other hand, may focus more exclusively on the clues in the text and remain somewhat frustrated that the answer to the question eludes them since it cannot be found in the text. Finally, the more synthetic and global learners may have a more enjoyable time on the summarization task because they are predisposed to using strategies that cater to such a task – namely, being global enough in their focus that they can distinguish essential from lesser points and then being able to pull together synthetically the relevant points that would contribute to a summary of the passage.

4.2. Example 2: Learning new oral vocabulary

The task is to learn new vocabulary from an oral context, namely, a class lecture on "Avid Rooting by Sports Fans." Learners who are both more *introverted* and also prefer the *auditory* (as opposed to the *visual* and *hands-on*) approaches to learning new vocabulary words and phrases might choose strategies associated with tape-recording the class presentation and playing it back several times out of class until they have understood the new vocabulary (e.g., "die-hard fan," "ardent," "avid," "obsession," "basking in a team's glory," and "catharsis").

More *extroverted* learners may prefer to engage the instructor or peers in conversation about the topic, in order to make use of certain vocabulary about sports fans as a means of learning the vocabulary. When certain words are not clear to them, they may use the strategy of repeatedly questioning until the form, meaning, and possible functions of the words in context have become clear. If these extroverted learners are also hands-on and visual in their style preference, they may, for example, have the words written down on flash cards and request that native-speaking interlocutors use each word in

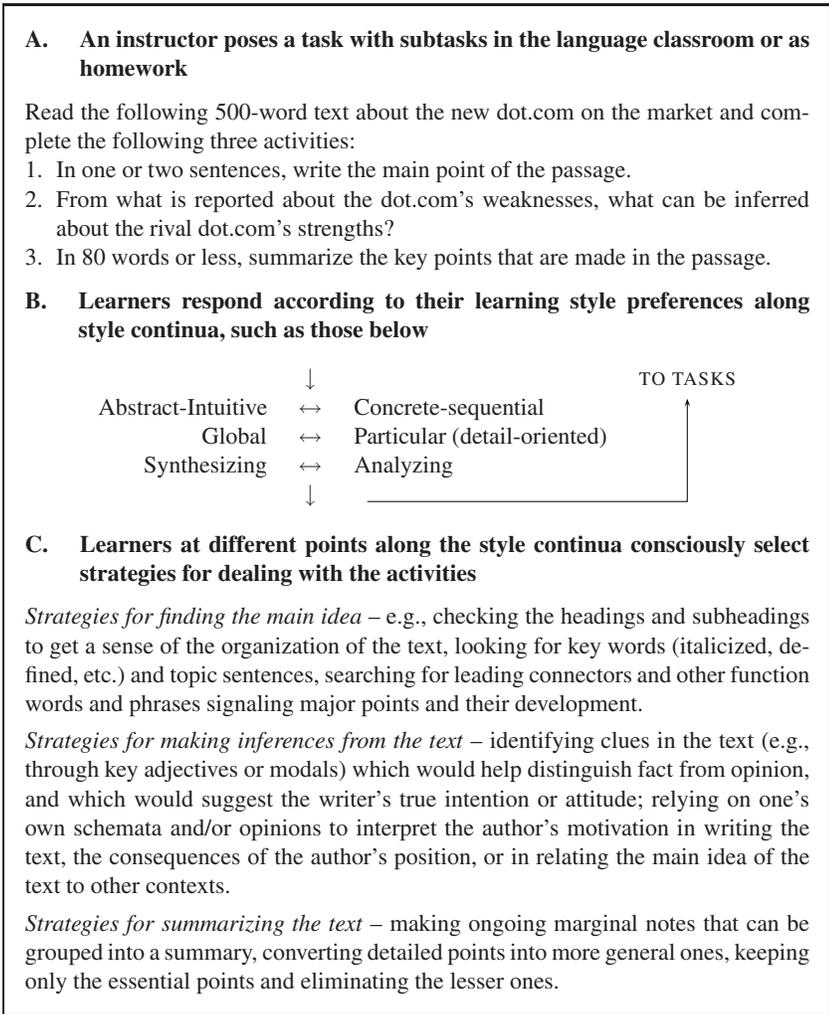


Figure 2. An example of the interaction of style, strategy, and task

a meaningful utterance, perhaps grouping several together in the same utterance.

4.3. Example 3: An oral retelling of a TV news story

For the purpose of this example, let us assume that eight learners are given the task of orally retelling an authentic TV news story read in an intermediate-

level English as a second language class (e.g., the miraculous survival of Elian González after three days at sea), learner #1 may be both concrete-sequential and visually oriented in terms of learning style. As a visual person, she may choose to create a series of mental pictures, each one at a different stage in the ordeal, to sketch out pictures in sequence, or to use pictures available from the newspaper. She might then refer to each picture in order.

Learner #2 is also visual, but he prefers to visualize words rather than images and chooses to remember the key words and phrases of the story using mnemonic devices (that he may write directly onto flash cards) or by taking notes that he can refer to in his story retelling. Learner #3 has a more intuitive and global approach than either of the other two learners. He chooses to utilize his background knowledge of a similar story that he has read and applies this knowledge in an attempt to retell the new story, not worrying about specific details – just sticking to the main thrust.

Continuing with this example, learner #4 is concrete-sequential in learning style, like learner #1, but she is also closure-oriented and so along with visual images, she may focus on rehearsing what she will say. In addition, she adds an affective strategy of trying to relax before performing the retelling task. She does this by using positive self-talk and deep-breathing exercises. For the purposes of this example, we will suppose that learners #5, 6, and 7 are essentially like learner #3 in being abstract-intuitive and global. The one difference is that they choose, with the teacher's permission, to collaborate with each other by pooling their resources. In this manner, they assist each other in putting together an adequately detailed account, since none alone has collected sufficient details. It is not in their learning style to pay close attention to the details when they read an article like this one.

Finally, we will have learner #8 being like learner #2 in choosing to build the story from a list of words and phrases. But he is not as extroverted as learner #2, and so feels very self-conscious when he makes errors in his oral delivery. Hence, he relies heavily on a self-monitoring of his performance throughout the task of storytelling, and after it is completed he reflects on areas in which he needs improvement, and even jots down some of his areas of weakness.

4.4. *Example 4: Giving a talk about flight rage*

Extroverted learners who are also hands on, visual, and closure-oriented might conduct out-of-class preparation for giving a talk about “flight rage” in the following manner. They have their set of vocabulary, gleaned both from a newspaper article about flight rage and from snippets of announcements that flight attendants make during flights: “flight rage,” “legroom,” “snack,” “head rest,” “reclining position,” “to refrain from,” “shifted during flight,” “air traffic congestion,” “clear air turbulence.” So they prepare flash cards with these words

and phrases, lay them out on a table, and ask a native speaker to use one or more of them at a time in meaningful utterances. The act of laying them out is a strategy catering to their style preference to be hands-on. The fact that the words are written on cards caters to their need to have a visual stimulus. The closure-oriented style preference has prompted the learner to use the strategy of finding a native speaker out of class to assist in confirming whether the learner has correctly understood the meaning of each word and phrase, and knows how to use them within this specific context.

Summing up across these four examples, we can see that the specific configuration of style preferences going into the task may, at least in some instances, either mandate or at least favor a certain set of strategies for accomplishing the task. Identification of actual style-strategy links, however, is in need of more empirical validation since, for the most part, this is still an area of unconfirmed predictions. While it would appear likely that the style preferences learners have will contribute to their selection of strategies, we need more descriptions of the actual links.

5. Discussion and conclusions

In an ideal world, all classroom instructors would somehow be cognizant of the learning style preferences of their students, the repertoire of strategies that they use in conjunction with their style preferences, and the manner in which they confront each and every language learning and use task they encounter in and out of class. In such an ideal situation, the instructors would also do what they could to accommodate these preferences where appropriate.

But given the impossibility of achieving this kind of instructor omniscience, it is valuable to have learners diagnose for themselves their own language learning and use style strategy preferences so that they will be perhaps more aware of the specific kinds of challenges which both classroom and out-of-classroom tasks pose to them as language learners. The place to start, if at all possible, is by having teachers administer style and strategy inventories to their learners (such as Oxford's *SAS* and *SILL*), followed up by explicit teacher-student conversations regarding styles and strategies. In addition, teachers may wish to consider conducting style and strategy training (see Weaver and Cohen 1999). Experiences with learner training have suggested that if there is an initial focus on style and strategy matters at the outset of a course, there is less need to do so subsequently. Learners get the message and then are more "at choice" for the remainder of the course. The key factor is to make the style, strategy, and task intersection a matter of explicit discussion early on, rather than to assume that learners know what to do in each instance (Chapter 4 in Cohen 1998).

If learners are made aware of the situation and given tools for dealing with it, they can explore their own style preferences and strategy preferences and

determine whether they should be doing any style stretching or to broaden their strategy repertoire given their observed difficulties in handling the tasks at hand. They will have the option to select strategies for given tasks on a more conscious and informed basis. Instructors can then perform the valuable role of language coach – assisting their learners in making the link between style preference and likely strategies associated with those styles. For example, when concrete-sequential students are grappling with having to draw inferences from an ambiguous text about global warming, this may provide an excellent instance for the classroom teacher to jump in and discuss “style stretching” with the students – that is, the advantages of shifting their style a bit to accommodate to a daunting language task, and selecting strategies commensurate with that style shift. One such strategy might be to rely on one’s own background knowledge to interpret the author’s motivation in writing the text.

While some students may choose not to monitor their strategy use extensively, others may derive solace and support from the style and strategy approach. Students also need to see that different tasks may call for different strategies, rather than attempting to use the “one strategy fits all” approach. In addition, teachers may benefit from varying the nature of tasks as much as possible so as to allow students with different style and strategy preferences to do their very best.

In conclusion, it is fair to say that the styles and strategies “movement” has progressed markedly in the last decade or two, from the modest rumblings of a few teachers, teacher trainers, academics, and administrators, to a full-blown effort, with its summer institutes, training manuals, numerous academic books, and wide-spread applications in the classroom. It remains to be seen how the movement will play itself out. At present, it would appear that more descriptive research regarding the intersection of task, styles, and strategies would be beneficial.

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