

THE ROLE OF STUDENT LEARNING PROFILES IN SUSTAINING FOREIGN LANGUAGE DIFFERENTIATED TEACHING

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ABSTRACT. This paper intended to yield relevant insight into the usefulness of creating student learning profiles in the context of delivering meaningful personalized instruction. In order to point out the applicability of such student learning profiles in differentiated instruction we have chosen the context of English language teaching as part of a Pre-service teacher training course. The quantitative research that has been conducted indicated that a student learning profile could provide the teacher with valuable insight into students' interest, motivation, learning styles and preferred type of intelligence.

Keywords: differentiated learning, student learning profile, content, process, product, learning styles.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG. *Die Rolle der Studenten Lernprofile in nachhaltiger Fremdsprache differenzierter Lehren.* Dieses Dokument soll relevante Einsichten in die Nützlichkeit der Erstellung von

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Lernprofilen für Studenten im Zusammenhang mit dem Erreichen eines sinnvollen individuellen Unterrichts vermitteln. Um die Anwendbarkeit solcher Lernprofile in differenzierter Ausbildung aufzuzeigen, haben wir den Kontext des Englischunterrichts im Rahmen eines Lehrerfortbildungskurses ausgewählt. Die durchgeführte quantitative Forschung weist darauf hin, dass ein Lernprofil für Studenten dem Lehrer wertvolle Einblicke in das Interesse, die Motivation, die Lernstile und die bevorzugte Art der Intelligenz dem Studenten vermitteln könnte.

Schlüsselwörter: differenziertes Lernen, Lernprofil der Studenten, Inhalt, Prozess, Produkt, Lernstile.

I. Introduction

The present paper comprises two parts. The first part includes a theoretical perspective of the multifold relevance of creating student learning profiles in the context of foreign language teaching. Moreover, we illustrate the multitude of factors that can influence the level of attainment of a foreign language. In addition, we provide details about some characteristics of differentiated learning that can be catered for by using a student learning profile. The second part of this paper reports the results of a quantitative research that has been conducted using a questionnaire having a Likert scale format. Students enrolled in the Pre-service teacher training course at the Faculty of Letters in Cluj-Napoca have provided feedback regarding the items that should be included in a student learning profile and the usefulness of creating such a profile in the context of achieving meaningful personalized instruction.

II. Theoretical underpinnings

There is a wide variety of perspectives that enable teachers to better understand how students process information in the classroom and the types of learning styles that students have. Some of the frames that are relevant to the directions presented in this paper make reference to *The Theory of Multiple intelligences* developed by Howard Gardner (1983), the *VAK Model* developed by Neil Fleming and the *Dunn & Dunn Model* developed in the late 60s by Rita Dunn and Ken Dunn.

The *Theory of Multiple intelligences* (Gardner, 1983) suggests that each individual has eight different types of intelligences (logical-mathematical, verbal-linguistic, musical-rhythmic, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic) some being more visible or practiced than the others. From a pedagogical point of view, this theory acknowledges the fact that, on the one hand, learners have a preferred approach to learning and, on the other hand, that learners should be involved in classroom activities that focus on various types of intelligence in order to expand their comfort zone. Likewise, the “classroom becomes a space in which students discover their abilities and preferences for a certain activity” (Petruş 2013, 15).

The *VAK Model* suggested by Neil Fleming claims that learners receive new information through one of the three senses: visual, auditory or kinesthetic” (Ryan, Cooper, Tauer 2011, 60). The *VAK Model* emphasizes the fact that the teacher has to acknowledge the diversity of preferred senses to be found in the classroom. In addition, the teacher should constantly vary the types of stimulus in order to increase attainment and provide learners with meaningful learning situations.

Rita Dunn's and Ken Dunn's model developed in the late 60s classifies learning styles inventory with regard to the learners' age, abilities and gender (Garnett 2005, 23). The model identifies various "environmental, emotional, sociological, physiological and psychological factors that affect a person's ability to learn" (Garnett 2005, 23). From a pedagogical point of view, this model embraces the acceptance that "everyone has different strengths" (Garnett 2005, 24) and that "attainment rises when teaching is matched to preferred learning style" (Garnett 2005, 24).

The perspectives provided above constitute premises for the development of differentiated learning and favour learning that combines a preferred learning style with a diversity of stimulus that challenge the learner in multiple ways. Therefore, the role of creating student learning profiles is sustained since these profiles contain many of the perspectives presented above. The student learning profile could be considered as a tool that provides professional observation of students' learning styles, learning preferences, cognitive styles, motivation, interests or cultural background. All these pieces of information that can be gathered with the help of a student learning profile enable the teacher to get better acquainted with each student and thus deliver meaningful and effective learning situations.

Differentiated learning

Carol Ann Tomlinson, an expert on differentiated instruction, states that teachers can differentiate three aspects of the curriculum: content, process and product (Ryan, Cooper, Tauer 2011, 63). The *content*

refers to concepts or skills that students have to learn, the *process* refers to activities that help students make sense of the knowledge that was taught and *products* constitute projects that students develop in order to demonstrate what they have learned. Differentiation “increases students’ capacities to grow and learn” (Ryan, Cooper, Tauer 2011, 63) because teachers give trainings in ways that expand students’ expectations about learning, makes them active learners and assessors of the knowledge they have gained. Student learning profiles can become a useful tool in all these three aspects. Likewise, in the content stage, student learning profiles could act as a pre-assessment tool because as Gregory and Chapman state “planning for individual needs is easier when one knows what a student knows, how the student feels about the topic” (2002, 37). In the process phase, student learning profiles provide the teacher with valuable information regarding the types of activities that would challenge academically the students and thus cater for “different avenues to acquiring content” (Tomlinson 2017, 1). In the product stage, student learning profiles can be filled in with relevant information regarding the students’ interest in working for a specific task, their motivation to demonstrate what they have learned or their learning progress.

At its core, differentiated instruction is a thoughtful teaching strategy that seeks to provide learners with diverse learning experiences and not deliver a ‘one size fits all’ perspective. From a linguistic, cultural or social point of view, students are diverse and “one size of learning could not possibly fit everyone in the classroom” (Gregory & Chapman 35, 2002). Therefore, the teacher should invest time to know the learners’ preferences and plan teaching activities in such a way as to offer a variety of ways to learn. To design separate learning activities for each student in the classroom is not an achievable goal. Rather than acting

likewise, differentiated instruction proposes a more feasible plan, namely to “implement a variety of activities that can be approached through a range of learning styles” (Ryan, Cooper & Tauer 2011, 62). Student learning profiles contain information about each student’s learning styles and preferences. Likewise, the teacher becomes more knowledgeable with regards to combining different learning preferences and styles in order to offer each student meaningful learning experiences.

Differentiated learning is a student centered “philosophy that a teacher embraces to reach the unique needs of every learner” (Gregory & Chapman 2002, Introduction). Every student in the classroom has his/her own motivation to attend a particular lecture. Therefore, a successful learning experience is one that engages the student in multiple ways and keeps him/her focused on the task. In consequence, in a differentiated learning context, “teachers monitor the match between the learner and learning and make adjustments as warranted” (Tomlinson 2017, 10). Thus, student learning profiles could be used to store valuable information about these adjustments.

Student learning profiles

A student learning profile represents a valuable tool for the teacher because it acknowledges the fact that all individuals “process information differently, and have distinct preferences about where, when, and how” to learn (Gregory & Chapman 2002, 19). The content, the process and the product stages of differentiation have as common core the need to know one’s students and their learning needs. The teacher can plan efficiently each stage if he/she has a sufficient amount

of valuable data regarding his/her students. Heacox (2002, 21) suggests that “a good way to enhance students’ chances for success is to get to know them and to understand how they differ from one another in interests, learning preference and pace, readiness and motivation”. Likewise, the ‘get to know’ activities that teachers usually perform the first time they meet with their students represent, in fact, opportunities to gather information about one’s learners. From this perspective, student learning profiles constitute such ‘get to know’ tools that can be used throughout the school year.

In view of the theoretical underpinnings and the perspectives presented above, a student learning profile should make reference to factors that are relevant to the complex process of foreign language learning. Therefore, first of all, it should comprise personal information (the student’s name, age, grade, school, and contact details). Lightbrown & Spada’s (2001, 31-36) research on learner characteristics indicate that the age of the learner is relevant in the field of foreign language learning. Thus, we included in this profile details about the age of the learner. Moreover, because this student learning profile targets a foreign language learning context, details about the student’s mother tongue, other known languages or cultural background represent relevant items of information. These can help the teacher identify elements of negative transfer between the mother tongue and the foreign language that is learnt or provide appropriate teaching resources in a multicultural classroom. Secondly, the profile should provide details about the student’s learning and cognitive styles and details about preferred types of intelligence because as Marton & Booth (1997 in Sternberg & Zhang 2011, Preface) suggest, “styles are of interest to educators because they predict academic performance in ways that go beyond abilities”. In addition, a teacher’s

responsiveness to styles can, according to Sternberg and Zhang (2011, Preface) improve instruction, assessment and sensitivity to cultural and individual diversity. Thirdly, the student learning profiles should include information about preferred grouping arrangements and about student's skills (reading, listening, speaking, writing, intercultural, digital skills). Some teaching activities are suitable for whole class instruction, others for group or individual learning. The student learning profile should include details about students' preferred interaction patterns conducive to "support growth for particular students in particular contexts" (Tomlinson 2017, 29). In order to cover all the targeted skills indicated above, the teacher should prepare a variety of instructional strategies and indicate what skills have been achieved by the students and what areas require further improvement.

In addition, the student learning profile should contain details about the student's interests and motivation because "interest, curiosity (...) have been shown to promote and sustain higher levels of learning" (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryans 1991 in Chapman & King 2005, 22). The relationship between attitudes and motivation in the context of language learning is intertwined. A motivated learner who has a positive attitude towards the foreign language and culture is expected to become a successful language learner (Gardner, 1985 in Lightbrown & Spada 2001, 33). In addition, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) suggest that increased motivation leads to better learning achievement and a positive attitude towards learning the language. Therefore, details about students' interests and motivation (intrinsic, extrinsic) represent valuable pieces of information that should be included in a student learning profile. Lightbrown and Spada's (2001, 31-36) research on learner characteristics indicate several other factors that affect foreign language learning: intelligence, aptitude,

personality and learner beliefs. This present student learning profile does not make reference to all these factors because it is intended to be a short and easy to handle observation sheet and not a lengthy one that comprises tools to measure intelligence, aptitude or personality.

In our view, the student learning profile could have the layout indicated in Appendix A. The teacher can use this profile in the following ways: check the empty boxes, use the arrow in order to make a mark where the student is positioned and fill in the blanks where needed. The teacher can add other pieces of evidence connected to the student's overall progress: result to tests, portfolios, projects etc.

The pre-service teacher training course

The respondents that volunteered to take part in this study were enrolled in the Pre-service teacher training course. Beginning with the 2st of October 2017 until the 19th of January 2018 students studied the Didactics of the English language. During these 14 weeks students were presented different topics related to teaching English as a foreign language. They were expected to acquire subject matter (content) knowledge, pedagogical knowledge (knowledge of instructional methods), and pedagogical content knowledge that, according to Lee Shulman (1986; 1987) who coined the term, refers to the process of relating teachers' pedagogical knowledge to their subject matter knowledge. The syllabus comprised topics such as: learners' learning characteristics, teachers' roles in the classroom, classroom management, lesson planning, differentiated instruction, teaching grammar and vocabulary, teaching the 4 skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing), teaching English using ICT resources or developing intercultural communicative competence.

III. Research

The details of the research are listed below:

Location: Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca

Span of time: December 2017

Respondents: 3rd year students enrolled in the Pre-service teacher training course, specialization: English minor

Number of respondents: 36

Recruitment: students volunteered to take part in this research after they had been informed about the details of the study.

Research tool

We have used a questionnaire with 15 items that were analysed in a quantitative manner. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix B. The questionnaire had a Likert scale format. We have chosen the 15 items based on the contents of the student learning profile that can be found in Appendix A. Respondents provided feedback regarding the items that should be included in a student learning profile and the usefulness of creating such a profile in the context of achieving meaningful personalized instruction.

Results

As regards the personal information included in the profile (questions number 1, 2 and 3), 72, 22 % of the students agreed that the student's name should be written in the profile and 66,67% of the students answered that details about the student's age are also relevant.

Still, there was a high standard deviation (1.16) for the second question and 16, 67% of the respondents stated that age should not be included in the student learning portfolio. 27, 78% of the respondents considered that information about the parents' or tutors' email address or telephone number is not needed.

As concerns question number four, 36, 11% of the respondents considered that details about the student's mother tongue were *important* and 33, 33% considered that were *very important*. Still 13, 89% replied that this information is not so important and 16, 67% were uncertain. Quite a large percentage (30, 56%) of respondents were not certain if data about student's knowledge of other languages were relevant or not for a student profile.

Table 1 presents the results obtained for question number 6:

Table 1. Respondents' perspective on including information about learners' cultural background

Value Label	Value	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cum Percent
not at all important	1.00	2	5.56	5.56	5.56
less important	2.00	3	8.33	8.33	13.89
neutral	3.00	9	25.00	25.00	38.89
important	4.00	14	38.89	38.89	77.78
very important	5.00	8	22.22	22.22	100.00
Total		36	100.0	100.0	

The results indicated that only 61, 11% of the respondents considered that it was relevant to include in a student learning profile information about learners' cultural background. Learning styles were regarded as valuable information to be included in a learning profile. 80, 56 % of the respondents viewed this detail to be *important* and *very important*.

A high score was obtained for including in the profile information about learners' multiple intelligences. 44, 44 % of the respondents stated that this detail was *important* and 33, 33% of the respondents stated that this detail was *very important*. For question number nine regarding learners' cognitive style, 77, 78% of the respondents agreed that it was *important* and *very important* to include in a profile.

More than 33 respondents (41, 67%) stated that it was *important* to include in the profile information about learners' skills and 50% considered that this piece of information was *very important*. Only 8, 33% of them were uncertain as to include or not this piece of information.

As regards students' preferred interaction patterns, 88, 89% of the respondents were confident that this piece of information should be included in a student learning profile.

High scores have been obtained for including in the profile information about students' motivation and interests. 58. 33% of the respondents considered that details related to students' motivation were *relevant* and 22, 22% that they are *very relevant*.

The prevalence of those who considered that details about students' interest should be included in the profile score 38.89% as *important* and 36.11% as *very important*.

A number of 29 respondents considered that the portfolio should contain information regarding the learner's overall progress. 30,

56% of the respondents considered that it was *important* to include the overall progress in a portfolio and 50.00% stated that it was *very important*.

Table 2 below renders the scores obtained on question number 15.

Table 2. Respondents' opinion related to creating a student learning profile in order to sustain differentiated instruction

Value Label	Value	Frequency	Percent
neutral	3.00	4	11.11
important	4.00	15	41.67
very important	5.00	17	47.22
Total		36	100.0

A number of 32 respondents agreed that a student learning profile could sustain differentiated instruction in multiple ways. Out of this total, 15 respondents (41, 67%) graded the profile's value as being *important* and 17 respondents (47, 22%) rated the profile's value as being *very important*. Only 4 respondents (11. 11%) chose to be neutral.

Discussion and concluding remarks

The findings of our study indicate that respondents evaluate personal information, the details about learning styles and learning preferences (skills or preferred seating arrangements) as being *important* and *very important* to include in a student learning profile. Still, quite a

significant percent of the respondents (16, 67%) stated that information about the students' age should not be included in the student learning portfolio. As indicated in the theoretical part of this study, Lightbrown and Spada (2001, 31-36) argue that age is a relevant factor that affects foreign language learning. If some respondents would not include in the profile details regarding the student's age, at least they should provide information referring to the student's level of English (beginner, intermediate, upper-intermediate etc.). Therefore, we included this option in the student learning profile in Appendix A.

Quite a large percent of the respondents (30, 56%) chose to be neutral as concerns the relevance of integrating in the profile data about student's knowledge of other languages. According to School Education Gateway, nowadays, multilingual classrooms are a reality in EU countries (<https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/resources/toolkitsforschools/subarea.cfm?sa=20>). Therefore, pre-service teachers should become more aware of the pedagogical implications this reality casts on the foreign language learning course. In addition, only 61, 11% of the respondents would include in the profile details about learners' cultural background. The large percent of neutral (25%) and negative answers (not at all important 5, 56 % and less important 8, 33%) indicate that respondents are not aware that cultural background (i.e. cultural behavior, cultural values, attitudes towards the target language etc.) can influence the learning of a foreign language. According to the Eurydice report, teachers say they have moderate or high levels of needs for Continuing Professional Development in areas such as: teaching in multilingual and multicultural settings or approaches to individualized learning (European Commission 2015, 3-4). Thus, even teachers who already work in this field lack, to some degree, knowledge and practice to deal with multilingual

and multicultural settings or individualized learning. We consider that the development of knowledge, attitudes and abilities to teach in a multilingual and a multicultural setting has a continuous aspect attached to it and is part of a lifelong learning process.

Analysis of TALIS data shows that at EU level, “teachers feel better prepared for the different aspects of their job if they have completed an Initial Teacher Education programme” (European Commission 2015, 3). Nonetheless, these teachers felt ‘very well prepared’ mainly in relation to the ‘content’ of teaching (subject knowledge) than to its ‘pedagogy’ (understanding of teaching and learning) and ‘practice’ (classroom-based training) (European Commission 2015, 3). As concerns the pre-service teachers that took part in our study, we consider that more study time is needed in order cover thoroughly the types of knowledge indicated above. An increase in the amount of practical training would allow these students to put in practice the subject knowledge they have already acquired.

The last question of the questionnaire required respondents to evaluate the role of student learning profiles in sustaining foreign language differentiated learning. The score obtained (88, 89% of the respondents rated the profile as being *important* or *very important*) indicates that respondents have understood that differentiated learning begins with knowing one’s students. A student learning profile of the type we have indicated in Appendix A could provide the teacher with valuable insight into students’ interest, motivation, learning styles and preferred type of intelligence.

Appendix A

STUDENT LEARNING PROFILE

Personal information		
Student's name:	Age/ Level of English	Parents'/Tutor's email address:
Mother tongue: Other known languages: Cultural background:		Parents'/Tutor's telephone number:
Learning style		
Visual ←—————→ Less More	Auditory ←—————→ Less More	Kinesthetic ←—————→ Less More
Learning profile		
Multiple intelligences	<input type="checkbox"/> Verbal-linguistic <input type="checkbox"/> Logical-mathematical <input type="checkbox"/> Visual/Spatial <input type="checkbox"/> Bodily/ Kinesthetic <input type="checkbox"/> Musical/Rhythmic	<input type="checkbox"/> Naturalist <input type="checkbox"/> Existential <input type="checkbox"/> Intrapersonal <input type="checkbox"/> Interpersonal
Preferred grouping arrangement	<input type="checkbox"/> Individual work <input type="checkbox"/> Whole classroom	<input type="checkbox"/> Group work <input type="checkbox"/> Pair work
Skills	<input type="checkbox"/> Reading skills <input type="checkbox"/> Listening skills <input type="checkbox"/> Speaking skills <input type="checkbox"/> Writing skills <input type="checkbox"/> Intercultural skills <input type="checkbox"/> Digital skills	<i>Comments/ Areas that require improvement:</i>

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Cognitive styles	Analytic	↔	Global
	Reflective	↔	Impulsive
	Field dependent	↔	Field independent
Students' interests and motivation			
Evidence of interest for the school subject		Interests outside classroom	
Evidence of intrinsic motivation		Evidence of extrinsic motivation	
Student's overall progress			
Comments:			

Appendix B

Questionnaire

The role of creating *Student Learning Profiles*

The questionnaire was created to measure your opinion about the content of a *Student Learning Profile (SLP)*. Based on your own preferences, please rate the following statements. Circle your answer:

1. The SLP should include information about the student's name	not at all important	less important	neutral	important	very important
	1	2	3	4	5
2. The SLP should include information about the student's age/level of English	not at all important	less important	neutral	important	very important
	1	2	3	4	5
3. The SLP should include information about the tutor's/parents' email and telephone number	not at all important	less important	neutral	important	very important
	1	2	3	4	5
4. The SLP should include information about the student's mother tongue	not at all important	less important	neutral	important	very important
	1	2	3	4	5
5. The SLP should include information about the student's knowledge of other languages	not at all important	less important	neutral	important	very important
	1	2	3	4	5

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6. The SLP should include information about the student's cultural background	not at all important	less important	neutral	important	very important
	1	2	3	4	5
7. The SLP should include information about the student's learning styles (<i>VAK</i>)	not at all important	less important	neutral	important	very important
	1	2	3	4	5
8. The SLP should include information about the student's multiple intelligences	not at all important	less important	neutral	important	very important
	1	2	3	4	5
9. The SLP should include information about the student's cognitive styles	not at all important	less important	neutral	important	very important
	1	2	3	4	5
10. The SLP should include information about the 4 skills	not at all important	less important	neutral	important	very important
	1	2	3	4	5
11. The SLP should include information about the student's preferred interaction patterns	not at all important	less important	neutral	important	very important
	1	2	3	4	5
12. The SLP should include information about the student's motivation	not at all important	less important	neutral	important	very important
	1	2	3	4	5

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13. The SLP should include information about the student's interests	not at all important	less important	neutral	important	very important
	1	2	3	4	5
14. The SLP should include information about the student's overall progress	not at all important	less important	neutral	important	very important
	1	2	3	4	5
15. It is useful to design a Student Learning Profile in order to sustain differentiated instruction?	not at all important	less important	neutral	important	very important
	1	2	3	4	5

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