ETHIOPIAN INSTRUCTORS' EXPERIENCE WITH

ACCOMODATING EFL STUDENTS' LEARNING

STYLES AT BAHIR DAR UNIVERSITY

By

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Dedication

For Sally Hinrich.
May you always fly where the answers to all Aviation English questions are known.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

People learn differently; this idea is venerable and is thought to originate with the ancient Greeks (Wratcher *et al.*, 1997). For many years, educators have noticed that some students prefer certain ways of learning more than others. These character traits, referred to as learning styles, form a set of student's unique learning preferences and can aid teachers in the planning of effective instruction (Kemp, Morrison & Ross, 1998). Grasha (1996) defines learning styles as "personal qualities that influence a student's ability to acquire information, to interact with peers and the teacher, and otherwise to participate in learning experiences" (p. 41). One of the most important things teachers can do to aid the learning process is simply to be aware that diverse learning styles in the student population do indeed exist and to make efforts to address such diversity in the classroom (Blackmore, 1996).

Information about students' learning style is important to both the teacher and the student for a host of reasons. According to Reid (1995), teachers with an understanding of their students' learning styles are better able to adapt their teaching methods appropriately. Teachers who introduce a variety of appropriate teaching methods into their classes are more likely to motivate and engage students into learning (Willing, 1993). Students who learn about their own style become better learners, achieve higher grades and have more positive attitudes about their studies, greater self-confidence, and more skill in applying their knowledge in courses (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995). Moreover, Oxford (1990) notes that information about learning styles can help teachers become

more sensitive to the differences which students bring to the classroom and can serve as a guide to the design of learning experiences that either match, or mismatch, students' style, depending on whether the teacher's purpose is efficiency of students' learning or developing skills with a style of learning in which the student is weak.

Proponents of learning style research commonly believe that instructors need to understand their students' learning styles in order to adapt their teaching methods accordingly. If an instructor's teaching style does not accommodate the learning style of many of her or his students, the instructor may need to make adjustments in how material is presented (Felder, 1993). Although many educators in the West may be aware that different learning styles exist and deserve consideration, it is a relatively new trend in the Ethiopian context, in which the present study is situated, that calls the attention of educators to the learning styles of their students. The following words speak volumes to the case of Ethiopia: "Most ideas about teaching are not new, but not everyone knows the old ideas." (Euclid, c. 300 BC).

Teaching and learning practices in higher education in Ethiopia urgently need improvement and actions are currently underway to do just that (Mekonnen, 2007). The concept of learning style is central to this movement, not only in informing teaching practices but also in bringing to the surface issues that help instructors think more deeply about their roles and the ways in which they carry out their responsibilities. In 2003, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education introduced the Teacher Education System Overhaul (TESO), a teacher development program, to bring about a "paradigm shift" (MoE, 2003b) in the system. The TESO objectives are: 1) to produce teachers who are academically qualified, professionally skilled, attitudinally and ethically committed to their profession,

and 2) to prepare teachers who can confidently promote active learning and the development of problem solving skills through a learner centered approach using a curriculum where content and methods are integrated.   In efforts to bring current teaching methodologies into the Ethiopian educational system, the Higher Diploma Program was introduced into the system to upgrade the professional capacity of teacher educators (trainers of future teachers).

The Ethiopian Ministry of Education and TESO have mandated the Higher Diploma Program for all university instructors with the goal of improving the quality of education in this developing nation. One of the programs' major components is accommodating students' learning styles through the implementation of active learning methods. A major goal of the Ethiopian education policy today is to move students from being passive recipients of information to motivated participants through more contextualized, hands-on teaching activities, as suggested by Claxton and Murrell (1987); hence, the role of the university instructor is dramatically changing from the lecture method/"chalk and talk" days of the very recent past.

The remainder of this chapter provides the background for the study by placing Ethiopian education in its geographical, sociolinguistic, and educational context. A brief overview of the research setting—Bahir Dar University and the Higher Diploma Program—are then followed by a brief description of how I decided to conduct the present study in Ethiopia. Finally, I present the problem and purpose of the research study.

Background

Ethiopia, officially the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, is a landlocked country situated in the Horn of Africa bordered by Eritrea to the north, Sudan to the west, Kenya to the south, Somalia to the east and Djibouti to the north-east. It is one of the oldest countries in the world and Africa's second-most populous nation. Ethiopia has yielded some of humanity's oldest traces, making the area important in the history of human evolution. Recent studies claim that the vicinity of present-day Addis Ababa was the point from which human beings migrated around the world (Li, 2002). Ethiopia's population has grown from 33.5 million in 1983 to 75.1 million in 2006 (Census, 2006). The country's population is highly diverse. Most of its people speak an Afro-Asiatic (Semitic, Cushitic, Omotic) language, but some Nilo-Saharan languages are also spoken. The Oromo, Amhara, and Tigray make up more than three-quarters of the population; however, there are more than 80 different ethnic groups within Ethiopia—each group having it own indigenous language (Gordon, 2005).

Amharic is the country's official language; English is the most widely spoken foreign language and is the medium of instruction in secondary schools and universities. Until 1991, Amharic was the language of primary school instruction; now Amharic has been replaced in many areas by local languages such as Oromifa and Tigrinya as the medium of primary school instruction. After the fall of the Derg regime in 1991, the new constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia granted all ethnic groups the right to develop their languages and to establish mother tongue primary education systems (Wagaw, 1999). This is a marked change to the language policies of previous governments in Ethiopia.

The Education System in Ethiopia

The Ethiopian educational system is organized into three major programs: general education, technical vocational education and higher education. Primary education involves 8 years, organized into 2 phases: 1st cycle primary (grades 1 – 4) and 2nd cycle primary (grades 5 – 8). Children generally start schooling at the age of seven. At the end of grade 8, it is mandatory to take a national examination to determine entrance into "high school". Secondary education is a 4 year program, organized into 2 phases: 1st cycle secondary (grades 9 – 10) and preparatory (grades 11 – 12). Grade 10 is the completion of the general education program; at the end of grade 10 students take a another national examination and are then channeled to continue further education in senior secondary (college preparatory/grades 11 and 12) program, technical vocational training programs, or teacher education programs.

Higher education institutions provide higher learning education including undergraduate and post graduate programs. Students who complete grade 12 and pass the entrance examination offered at the completion of grade 12 preparatory program are eligible to apply to the higher education program. Students who successfully pass the entrance examination are assigned based on their choices and preferences into various higher learning institutions. The duration of higher learning programs varies according to area of specializations from 3 – 6 years.

Bahir Dar University

Bahir Dar is the capital of the Amhara National Regional State found in northwestern Ethiopia; it is also one of the fastest growing towns in the country. It is situated at the southern end of Lake Tana, Ethiopia's largest lake, which is the primary

source of the Blue Nile River. The city is located approximately 578 km north-northwest of Addis Ababa. Based on figures from the Central Statistical Agency in 2005, this city has an estimated total population of 167,261. It is worth noting that, according to the 1994 census, its population was 96,140; the population came close to doubling in just eleven years, a trend that continues today throughout the country.

Until 2006 there were only eight universities in this country of approximately 76 million inhabitants; in 2007, however, seven new universities were opened within the year. Ethiopia now has fifteen official universities (functioning at various levels). Bahir Dar University is one of the biggest, and also one of the oldest, universities in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia; it has more than 30 thousand students and over 400 lecturers. The university began as Bahir Dar Teachers College which was established more than three decades ago. The college, then known as Academy of Pedagogy, was established in 1972 by the tripartite agreement of the Imperial Government, UNESCO and UNDP. Bahir Dar University was inaugurated in May 2001 when Bahir Dar Teachers College and Bahir Dar Polytechnic Institute joined together to become the Education and Engineering Faculties of the new university. The two faculties provide degree-level teaching and expertise in Education and Engineering. The university has recently added two faculties, the Faculty of Business and Economics, and the Faculty of Law with courses in subjects including Accounting, Economics, Business Management, Law and Ethics.

The Higher Diploma Program

The Higher Diploma Program was launched in 2003 to meet the identified needs of teacher educators and support the implementation of the TESO program. The HDP started in all Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) in Ethiopia in October 2003, as a new compulsory qualification for all teacher educators. The aim of the Higher Diploma Program for teacher educators is to improve the quality of education in Ethiopia through this licensing program that will develop the skills and professionalism of teacher educators. Since its launch in 2003, the Higher Diploma Program has been nationally coordinated and facilitated centrally by the Ministry of Education (MoE). Accordingly, the MoE has been involved in coordinating the program; placing international volunteers to establish the program; and moderating and evaluating the quality and standards. The Higher Diploma Program is seen as essential to the development of quality education in Ethiopia. It is for this reason that possession of the Higher Diploma Certificate has become a requirement for every teacher educator.

The program is based on practice, both in the TEI and in schools. The focus is on the learning process and teaching methodologies. It is designed to provide the opportunity and encouragement for instructors to apply their knowledge of teaching methodologies by practicing the implementation of active learning methods, thus moving the method of instruction away from lecture method only.

The HDP is a two semester program during which teacher educators are required to complete a number of curriculum research projects showing that their work for the diploma has had a significant impact on changing their own teaching practice. It is thought that reflection on their classroom practice and research will lead to continuing

and sustainable improvement in their teaching. Teacher educators carry out their full time teaching commitments at the same time as completing the Higher Diploma Program; most of the work for the HDP is based in their own teaching and other professional activities.

The HDP is delivered through the following four modules: 1) the reflective teacher education; 2) accommodating learning styles and developing active learning; 3) improving assessment; and 4) action research: making a difference. One of the primary objectives of the HDP is to encourage instructors "to use active learning and student centered teaching methods to accommodate a variety of learning styles" (Higher Diploma Handbook, 2003a, p. 3). All the information and materials required for the delivery and completion of the HDP are predetermined in the HDP Handbook.

Knowledge of and confidence to use student centered teaching, active learning to accommodate learning styles, and continuous assessment are considered the strengths of the HDP. Many candidates have effectively modified their curriculum to enable them to incorporate new teaching methods into their classrooms. The program has enabled candidates to address issues directly relating to TESO. According to the MoE, HDP candidates and graduates are now much better prepared to make the "paradigm shift" that is integral for improving the quality of education in Ethiopia.

Researcher's Role

I came to Ethiopia as a Teacher for Africa (TFA) volunteer through the International Foundation for Education and Self-Help (IFESH) in 2005 with the intention of collecting data for the study reported here. I chose to come to Africa because 1) I had

already spent an academic year teaching and/or studying on every other continent (apart from Antarctica) and I wanted to complete my circle, and 2) very little research has been done on the African continent on learning styles in an EFL context apart from Egypt and South Africa, so I wanted to begin efforts to fill that gap. I chose Africa and, based on my qualifications and the needs of local African communities in which IFESH operates, IFESH placed me at Bahir Dar University in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia.

My primary roles during my first year in Ethiopia were as Higher Diploma Program Coordinator and Leader at Bahir Dar University; I have continued to coordinate the program for the past three years. The Higher Diploma Program at Bahir Dar University works with 75 in-service instructors each year. The program requires these instructors to attend two sessions (classes) per week in two-hour blocks; the sessions are delivered to three groups with 25 instructors in each group. My role as Higher Diploma Leader was to facilitate one of the three groups. As Higher Diploma Program Coordinator, I coordinated the three groups at Bahir Dar University. As mentioned, the Higher Diploma Program is a teacher certification program for in-service university instructors; it is a mandatory two semester program comprised of four modules. One of the four modules is devoted to accommodating learning styles through active learning methods. Ethiopian university classrooms have, until recently, been conducted, by and large, only through the teacher-centered, lecture method. The Higher Diploma Program was introduced five years ago in order to move university instructors away from the lecture method toward active learning methods with the intention of being able to better accommodate a variety of learning styles. Active learning methods as being promoted by the HDP in Ethiopia may be seen as an umbrella term that refers to several models of

instruction that focus the responsibility of learning on learners as popularized by Bonwell and Eison (1991). The current movement toward the incorporation of active learning methods in Ethiopia has been driven, at least partially, by Bruner's (1961) suggestion that students who actively engage with the material, are more likely to recall information. The movement was further spurred in effort to attend to the dramatic lack of critical thinking skills of Ethiopian university students (Wagaw, 1999). The HDP's premise for the push toward using active learning methods as a way to accommodate students' learning styles is based on the following notion:

> Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in class listening to teachers, memorizing prepackaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p. 4).

At various times while conducting this research, I have struggled with the thought that I might, or this program might, be attempting to instill "Western" educational values and practices into a non-Western system. I recognize that it is not possible to objectively stand outside of my participants' experience and analyze it without my own identity and interpretations affecting what I write. Inevitably, the way their experiences are presented is affected by my own perceptions and by my interactions with participants. The Ethiopian educational system has a long history of looking to (or being looked at by) other nations for the answers to local problems. This habit, with its strengths and weaknesses, has made "experience sharing" a highly valued endeavor. Therefore, I believe that if the research is conducted carefully, my perspectives can contribute by way of sharing experience so that the local situation can be critically examined, reinterpreted and thereby contribute to the on-going debate in the area.

The Problem and the Purpose

This is a study of efforts to accommodate students' preferred learning styles as experienced by university instructors at Bahir Dar University. This study was motivated by the fact that very little research has been done on the African continent on learning styles in an EFL context apart from Egypt and South Africa. Investigation into the ways learning styles are perceived and treated was further motivated by my involvement with the Higher Diploma Program. This compulsory program requires university instructors to try to accommodate learners' various learning styles by implementing active learning methods into their classroom teaching. The program was mandated, however, without any tangible investigation into the learning style preferences of university students. This lack of background on learning styles in conjunction with the government mandated task requiring instructors to address their students' learning styles, understandably, resulted in varying degrees of willingness and/or skepticism in relation to the call to begin to accommodate learning styles in EFL classrooms at Bahir Dar University. After having run questionnaires with nearly a thousand students in an attempt to gauge their learning style preferences, I established a position for myself to conduct a more in-depth exploration into the ways in which instructors' efforts are experienced as they begin to radically transform their instructional approach.

English has been the medium of instruction in Ethiopian universities since their inception in 1950. The accepted explanation for this choice of English as a teaching medium is the need for access to published work. An additional explanation for this choice is the need for a less politically charged common language. University students and instructors come from a wide range of language backgrounds and the sheer number

of languages spoken by Ethiopia students makes provision of instruction in the L1 impractical beginning even in the primary levels. The logistical and financial difficulties of providing L1 instruction are exacerbated by the rapidly increasing number of students who are provided with access to school; thus creating a seemingly insatiable demand for English speaking teachers in Ethiopia. The use of English as the medium of instruction is seen as the best choice for both dealing with mixed-language classrooms and providing access to an adequate amount of published materials.

As a result of the policy requiring English as the medium of instruction, the demand on teachers to have proficiency in English is indeed great. Their training generally focuses on knowledge of subject matter and pedagogical theory without sufficient consideration given to English language ability or practical teaching methodology such as addressing the learning style preferences of students.

In response to the demands to provide education for all, the MoE launched TESO to meet the needs to not only increase the number of people having access to education, but also to simultaneously improve the quality of the education already being provided. One of the means advocated for doing this is to raise awareness and call teachers' attention to the learning styles of their students. Until quite recently, the concept of learning styles had no forum, at any level, within pedagogical studies at BDU. It is not uncommon to find university instructors who have years of experience teaching in an EFL context and are just now learning of the importance of considering the learning styles of their learners for the first time ever. That is not to say that all instructors have not been aware of the role of learning styles in their classroom; some were introduced to the concept during their MA degrees in Pedagogical Sciences. Given that addressing

learning styles has recently been put forth in the Ethiopian education sector as one of the ways to improve the quality of education in their EFL context, it is surprising that learning styles preferences of Ethiopian learners and ways to accommodate learning styles are very little discussed.

Connecting the literature on learning styles in an EFL context with an understudied Ethiopian population, this study aims to broaden our understanding of how instructors experience efforts to accommodate various learning style preferences in the classrooms at BDU and how instructors negotiate the demands and challenges while attempting to improve the quality of instruction they provide. Specifically, I examine how instructors consider learning styles in terms of relevance and practicality to their profession/context. To do so, I center this research around the following question: How do instructors experience their efforts to accommodate learning styles in their classrooms? In order to answer the above question, however, I must first I ask the following research questions 1) What are the preferred learning styles of Ethiopian EFL learners at Bahir Dar University? 2) What impact, if any, do variables like gender, field of study, and L1 have on the learning style preferences of these students? and 3) What is the extent of match or mismatch between the teaching styles and learning styles in the classrooms at Bahir Dar University?

I situate the examination of these questions on the basis of previous research which has reported that learning styles play an important role in the EFL classroom (e.g., Ehrman and Oxford 1990; Keefe 1979; Lawrence 1984; Reid, 1998; Willing, 1989). In addition, through ethnographic observation, I can account for some of the structural influences at work at the university, such as lack of familiarity with learning styles and

large class size, and consider how instructors respond to those influences. I focus on how the Higher Diploma Program helps to familiarize, encourage, and motivate efforts toward accommodating learning styles in the classroom; by doing so, I am able to see the multiple factors involved in these new efforts to describe how instructors' background knowledge, previous experience, their own education, attitude toward change (and the HDP) as well as their current interactions with their students play important roles in shaping their willingness (or lack thereof) to accommodate the learning styles of their students.

In this study, I present a global portrait of instructors' experiences with learning styles at BDU so that we may better understand the reality of what they face in the classroom. I further shed some light on the relationship between instructors' actual teaching practices and their desired practices so that we may better understand the need for continued efforts to improve the quality of education at BDU. By doing so, I hope to contribute to an understudied area of scholarly work that investigates learning styles in an EFL context and reveals the important roles that instructors play in their efforts to improve the quality of education in Ethiopia.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Research on learning styles has been reported extensively in the educational psychology literature (Claxton & Murrell, 1987; Schmeck, 1988) and there is a growing body of literature on learning style preferences among learners of a second/foreign language (Ehrman, 1996; Leaver & Oxford, 2000; Oxford & Anderson, 1995; Reid, 1995). Far less research has been reported, however, specifically on the learning style preferences of learners and users of English in EFL contexts. Moreover, no ostensible research has been conducted on the learning style preferences of Ethiopian learners in Ethiopia, nor do studies exist reporting on the experience of instructors' efforts to accommodate the learning styles of their students. The literature I review here first provides a background, including definitions, to learning styles in general and a brief overview of prominent studies conducted on learning styles. Next, I review research that deals with the relationship between learning styles preferences in EFL/ESL contexts and specific variables such as gender, field of study, and L1 backgrounds. Finally, I review literature related to the concept of matching teaching styles with learning styles.

Background to Learning Styles

During the past four decades, educational research has identified a number of factors that account for some of the differences in how students learn. One of the factors, learning styles, has been broadly described as "cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and

respond to the learning environment" (Keefe, 1979, p.4). Learning styles have been observed from various perspectives over time. Reid (1998) defines them as internally based characteristics, often not perceived or consciously used by learners, for the intake and comprehension of new information. Learning styles have also been defined (Ehrman and Oxford, 1990; Lawrence, 1984; Willing, 1988) as preferred or habitual patterns of mental functioning and dealing with new information. Stewart and Felicetti (1992) further define learning styles as those "educational conditions under which a student is most likely to learn." In general, learners are thought to retain these preferred learning styles despite the teaching styles and classroom atmospheres they encounter, although students may, over time, acquire additional styles.

A learning style is a student's consistent way of responding to and using stimuli in the context of learning and preferred or habitual patterns of mental functioning and dealing with new information. The numbers of learning style dimensions are vast and they come from at least three traditions: 1) study of perception and Gestalt psychology; 2) ego psychology; and 3) theories of Carl Jung (Oxford & Ehrman, 1990). Kinsella (1996) notes learning style is multidimensional. The concept of learning styles has typically included three aspects: cognitive (the way an individual processes, stores, and retrieves information), affective (emotional and personality attributes like motivation), and physiological (an individual's preferred sensory modes—visual, auditory, kinesthetic/tactile) (Reiff, 1992).

Learning styles theory is based on the notions that, as the result of heredity, upbringing, and/or cultural background, different individuals have a tendency to both

perceive and process information differently; a brief overview of some of the most prominent learning style(s) dimensions can be seen below.

At least thirty different dimensions of learning style have been identified (Guild & Garger, 1985; Jensen, 1987; Parry, 1984; Ehrman, 1996; Flaugher, 1971; Kolb, 1984; Oxford, 1990; Schmeck, 1988; Shipman & Shipman, 1985; Sternberg, 1995). A number of models have been developed to describe learning style dimensions (Guild & Garger, 1985). Among these are multiple intelligences, visual versus auditory learning preference, field independence versus field dependence, internal versus external styles, and reflective versus impulsive, to name a few. In an effort to provide a basis for research in learning styles, these models are discussed in further detail.

Gardner (1983) established seven distinct multiple intelligences that can be developed over time: *verbal/linguistic* being ability with and sensitivity to oral and written words; musical being sensitivity to rhythm, pitch, and melody; *logical/mathematical* being ability to use numbers effectively and to reason well, *spatial/visual* being sensitivity to form, space, color, line, and shape; *bodily/kinesthetic* being the ability to use the body to express ideas and feelings, *interpersonal* being the ability to understand another person's moods and intentions, and *intrapersonal* being the ability to understand oneself: one's own strengths and weaknesses. According to Gardner, intelligence is not a single construct, nor is it static. This has important implications in teaching in EFL contexts because it draws attention to individual diversity in the classroom and also to the many ways that educators can nurture these intelligences.

Reid (1983) developed and normed the *Perceptual Learning Style Preferences (PLSP)* survey which allows international students studying in the United States to self-

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identify their preferred learning styles among six categories: a *visual* learner learns more effectively through the eyes (seeing); an *auditory* learner learns more effectively through the ears (hearing); a *tactile* learner learns more effectively through touch (hands-on); *kinesthetic* learners learn best through complete body experience, *group* learners learn more effectively through working with others; and an *individual* learner learns more effectively through working alone. Reid's (1988) large-scale study of nearly 1,300 students revealed, among other things, that learners from different cultural backgrounds often differ significantly in their choice of preferred learning styles.

Sternberg (1995) defined such styles simply as, "preferred modes of thinking, of using one's abilities" (p.265). He developed the theory of mental self-government which describes the following six learning styles: *global* (individuals who prefer to deal with relatively large and abstract issues), *local* (individuals who prefer concrete problems which require working with details), *internal* learners prefer to work alone, *external* learners prefer to work in groups, *liberal* learners prefer to go beyond existing rules and procedures, while *conservative* likes to adhere to existing rules.

Field independence and field dependence has been one of the most widely researched dimensions of learning style (Hansen & Stansfield, 1981; Chapelle & Roberts, 1986). In general terms, *field independent* people learn more effectively sequentially, analyzing facts, whereas *field dependent* people learn more effectively in context (holistically) and are sensitive to human relationships. Research indicates advantages for the field-independent learner, for example, in analytic tasks (Brown, 1994; Ehrman and Oxford, 1990).

Witkin *et al*. (1975, 1977) pioneered cognitive-style research in the area of visual perception, which employs the bipolar global categories of field-independence and field-dependence to refer to the ways in which individuals process and structure in formation in the environment. People characterized as *analytic* learn more effectively individually, sequentially, linearly whereas those categorized as *global* learn more effectively through concrete experience and through interaction with other people. This framework has been useful in studying culturally and linguistically diverse populations (Anderson, 1988; Hale-Benson, 1986; Ramirez & Castaneda, 1974; Shade, 1989) in regard to learners' potential to work willingly and productively in a group with other classmates.

David Kolb's *Experiential Learning Theory* (1984) identifies four basic learning styles. Those characterized as *converger* learn more effectively when able to perceive concretely and to process reflectively, *divergers* learn more effectively when able to perceive concretely and to process reflectively, *assimilators* learn more effectively when able to perceive abstractly and to process reflectively, and *accommodators* learn more effectively when able to perceive concretely and to process actively. With this system, students may self-report their learning style(s), but it is important to keep in mind that the inventory may be geared toward one or more learning styles; it is not intended to stereotype a student as one rigid unalterable learning type. Due to the fact that all learners use a wide variety of learning tactics, and that learners may change their learning orientation over time, this system is most useful in terms of its key concepts which can be used by teachers in planning lessons to have a positive impact on all learning types (Graham, 1997).

The *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)* (Myers & McCaulley, 1985) adds

further information from which to infer FI styles. This system divides learning styles into

the following four groups: *extraversion-introversion, sensing-perception, thinking-

feeling, and judging-perceiving. Extraverted* learns more effectively through concrete

experience, contacts with and relationships with others, *introverted* learns more

effectively in individual, independent learning situations, *sensing* learns more effectively

from reports of observable facts, *intuition* learns more effectively from meaningful

experiences, *thinking* learns more effectively from impersonal and logical circumstances,

feeling learns more effectively from personalized circumstances, *judging* learns more

effectively by reflection, deduction, analysis, and processes that involve closure,

perceiving learns more effectively through negotiation, *feeling*, and inductive processes

that postpone closure (Myers & McCaulley, 1985).

In the study reported here, I focus on physiological dimensions of learners'

preferred sensory modes—visual, auditory, kinesthetic/tactile—as discussed by Fleming

and Mills (1992a). *Visual learners* here are said to have two subchannels - linguistic and

spatial. Learners who are visual-linguistic like to learn through written language, such as

reading and writing tasks. They remember what has been written down, even if they do

not read it more than once. They like to write down directions and pay better attention to

lectures if they watch them. Learners who are visual-spatial learn more effectively with

charts, demonstrations, videos, and other visual materials. They visualize information

when retrieving it. *Auditory learners* may talk to themselves, or move their lips when

they read, and/or read out loud to better attain information. They often learn better when

talking and/or hearing are involved. *Kinesthetic learners* learn more effectively when

they are able to touch things and/or move around. Although many learning styles

instruments use two separate categories to measure and discuss kinesthetic and tactile

learning, these two fall under one category—kinesthetic—in Visual Auditory Kinesthetic

(VAK) assessment tools. Hence, kinesthetic learners are also said to use two subchannels

- kinesthetic (movement) and tactile (touch). They tend to lose concentration if there is

little or no external stimulation or movement. When listening to lectures they generally

take notes that often include the use of color and drawing pictures, diagrams, or doodling.

When reading, they tend to scan the material first to 'get the big picture first', and later

focus in on the details. My primary motivation for concentrating on these aspects of

learning style preferences (which I explain more fully in the instrumentation section of

Chapter III) was that they seemed to be the most in line with what the Higher Diploma

Program is doing in Ethiopia in terms of encouraging university instructors to consider

the learning styles of their students in their EFL teaching-learning environment.

The way individuals learn things in general and the particular approach one

chooses when solving problems is thought to depend on a somewhat mysterious link

between personality and cognition; this link is referred to as cognitive style. When

cognitive styles are related to an educational context, they are generally referred to as

"learning styles," cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable

indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning

environment (Keefe, 1979).

In theory, there may exist as many learning styles as there are learners, and the

practical implications of learning styles for teaching-learning interaction are numerous

(Chapelle 1995). Learning styles theory emphasizes the fact that individuals perceive

and process information in very different ways and implies that how much individuals learn has more to do with the degree to which their educational experience provides the opportunity for their particular style of learning to be accommodated than their level of intelligence or aptitude (Huitt, 2000).

Learning styles theory impacts education on several fronts, namely, curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In terms of curriculum, it has been noted that educators should place emphasis on intuition, feeling, sensing, and imagination, in addition to the traditional skills of reasoning, analysis, and sequential problem solving (Asher, 1982; Claxton & Murrell, 1987; Oxford & Ehrman, 1993; Kroonberg, 1995). Regarding instruction, Willing (1993) notes that teachers should design their methods of instruction keeping a variety of learning styles in mind. By using various combinations of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation, and by introducing a wide variety of experiential elements into the classroom, such as sound, visuals, movement, experience, and even talking, a wider variety of learning styles may be accommodated than if instruction is delivered primarily through one mode (Ballinger & Ballinger, 1982). Additionally, teachers should employ a variety of assessment techniques, focusing on the multiplicity of different learning styles (Huitt, 2000).

Although learning styles have received much positive attention in recent years, this review of the literature would be incomplete without acknowledging the problems in this area of study and the fact that many educational psychologists and cognitive scientists reject the notion of learning styles (Denzine, 2005). Curry (1990) has identified the general problems associated with learning style theory as follows: confusion in definition of "styles"; weakness in reliability and validity of assessment instruments; over

- generalized identification of characteristics in learners. Davidman (1985), as another example, further demonstrates one of the arguments against the relevance of learning styles in stating, "Ironically, learning style inventories, tools designed to facilitate personalized education, may in fact undermine this process…[they may] lead teachers to believe that they possess a body of deep, significant, personal knowledge when in fact the information provided by the inventory is fairly superficial" (p. 641).

Moreover, even if researchers and educators successfully develop learning style assessment procedures, specify learning outcomes, and relate educational experience to them, the actual impact on classroom teaching may be limited unless teachers begin to move in the direction of actually using that knowledge (Grasha, 1984). One solution to this problem might be to educate teachers about the possible impact of teaching and learning styles—as the current efforts underway in Ethiopia discussed in this research— and at the same time to develop a culture-sensitive pedagogy (Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, 1986).

While the literature does basically indicate that there is wide acceptance of the concept of learning styles and has long recognized the need for innovative instructional activities that relate to the diverse learning styles of learners, there is disagreement on how to best measure learning styles (Coffield, *et al*., 2004). That is, most researchers agree that we do have various learning styles and preferences, and while there may not be a mutual understanding of learning styles as it stands, it certainly does not follow that we all learn the same way (Downes, 2006).

It has also been noted that no finite number of learning style dimensions could ever encompass the totality of individual student differences; moreover, the dimensions

have not been shown to be fully independent, and validated instruments to assess individual preferences on all of them do not exist. Noting all the above, however, does not limit the usefulness of learning styles models when used for the right purposes. Although it can be beneficial for an instructor to know the general distribution of learning style preferences or tendencies in a class, the point is not to categorize all students and then attempt to teach each student exclusively to her or his preferred style. In line with Felder and Henriques (1995), I suggest that the goal should be one of a balanced teaching style, which aims to accommodate a variety of learning style preferences; in other words, instructors who adapt their instruction to encompass a variety of learning style preferences should come closer to creating a positive learning environment of the majority of students in a class.

Learning Styles Studies in EFL/ESL Contexts

Research on learning styles in relation to ESL and EFL has been conducted from several angles (Ballinger & Ballinger, 1982; Ramirez, 1986; Wong Fillmore, 1976). Variables such as age, gender, field of study, language (and by extension culture backgrounds), strategy use, level of education, and English language proficiency have been shown, in varying degrees, to impact learning style preferences. In an early, age-related study, for instance, Dunn and Dunn (1979) found that school age children differ from post-secondary students in their preference for visual, auditory, and tactile/kinesthetic learning styles. Dorsey and Pierson (1984) conclude that age and prior work experience influence learning styles, and their data indicate that the adult, especially after age 33, learns better by doing (kinesthetic learning). In the same vein, Fourier (1984) suggests that more mature students "learn intuitively to adjust to instructor

cognitive styles" (p. 153). In the United States, as another example, a number of research

studies have examined the relationship between learning styles and foreign language

attainment (Ehrman, 1996; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Felder & Henriques, 1995; Oxford,

1990; Oxford & Ehrman, 1993).

Learning styles and strategy use have also been thought to have a strong

relationship. Ehrman and Oxford (1990), for example, have suggested that successful

learning is, at least in part, reliant upon the use of learning strategies thought to be linked

to one's learning style preferences. Similarly, Oxford, Ehrman and Lavine (1991) claim

that learners who are able to employ strategies that suit their learning styles and learners

who engage in "style-flexing" or adapting different modes of learning, are generally able

to reach a higher level of proficiency in the target language.

Gender

The various studies on the relationship between gender and learning style

preferences have been shown to reveal mixed results; many studies have found this

relationship to be positive. Reid's (1983, 1987) large scale, seminal works involving

over 1,000 participants, as an example, found that males preferred visual and tactile

learning significantly more than females. Another study in learning style research

indicates that males tend to prefer traditional analytical learning and classroom

environments and are most prevalent in the assimilator learning style (Philbin *et al.,*

1995). Females, on the contrary, prefer more nontraditional learning and classroom

environments in the concrete experience learning mode. Sheorey's (2006) study of

Indian learners revealed that although both male and female students displayed major

preferences for the same three modes (authority-oriented, communicative, and

analytical), the means for females for each of the three categories were significantly higher than for males; the mean differences were also significant with regard to group learning preference. The results of his study reveal, not that Indian female students have very different preferences when learning English, but rather that the preferences they have seem to be stronger than those of male students. Additionally, Lincoln and Rademacher's (2006) (N = 69) study of learning styles preferences among Mexican and El Salvadoran students using the VARK Learning Styles Questionnaire found that females chose auditory learning and multimodal learning styles, while males significantly differed in their preference for note taking. These studies confirm what several other studies (e.g., Melton, 1990; Oxford, 1993; Reid, 1987) have also found; that is, that male and female learners differ significantly in both their choice and degree of preference of the various learning style modes when learning English in ESL contexts.

In contrast to the studies above, other studies have found no significant differences between gender and learning styles. For instance, Park's (2000) study found no significant gender differences in preferences for individual and group learning styles among Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese learners; likewise, Jones *et al.* (2003) found no significant differences related to gender and learning style preferences in their (N = 105) study which was aimed at determining learning mode orientations based on Kolb's: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Field of Study

Learning style preferences have also been studied in relation to students' field of study. Jones *et al.* (2003), for example, found significant differences in learning style preferences (N = 105) across disciplines of English, mathematics, science, and social studies. They found that students were least likely to prefer learning through active experimentation when learning English and social studies, and most likely to prefer learning through active experimentation when learning science. Students in this study were found to "style-flex" and/or change their styles based on what they were studying; their findings, as a result, revealed that learning styles may be subject-specific. Reid's (1987) work mentioned above, found few significant differences in terms of field of study. Her study did find that all six fields of study (humanities, natural sciences, engineering, medicine, computer science, and business) indicated that kinesthetic learning was a major learning style preference and that group learning was considered a negative learning style by all fields of study except computer science. In addition, visual learning was preferred as a major learning style only by students in the natural sciences; humanities were least oriented toward visual learning; auditory learning was preferred by students studying computer science, natural sciences, business, and medicine and engineering and computer science students were significantly more tactile then students in the humanities. In another study, which also employed Reid's survey, Chew, *et al.* (1999) examined the learning style preferences of 318 students studying English at a university in Singapore. Results indicated that Singaporean college students preferred kinesthetic and tactile learning, regardless of their major field of study.

Culture/L1 Related Studies

Much research has focused specifically on the cultural learning styles of various ethno-linguistic groups. An early study on ethnic background and learning styles indicated that members of industrialized societies and members of non-industrialized societies respond to visual stimuli quite differently (Glick, 1975). Similarly, Witkin (1976) found differences in the global and abstract functioning of different cultures and purported that different modes of thinking are characteristic of different cultures.

ESL learners from different countries and cultural groups have also been shown to have different learning preferences in a number of more recent studies. According to Willing (1993), such preferred ways of learning may be the result of, among other things, an individual's sociocultural background and educational experiences. Reid's (1983, 1987) large scale studies, mentioned above, involving learners from more than nine L1 groups consistently found Japanese L1 speakers significantly different from other groups in their preferences. Additionally, she found that of all language backgrounds, Koreans were the most visual in their learning style preferences while Arabic and Chinese speakers were significantly more auditory than Japanese speakers; Japanese speakers were also significantly less kinesthetic than Arabic, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, and Thai speakers while native speakers of English had the second lowest preference mean in terms of kinesthetic learning style.

As English has continued to become increasingly the language of educational access, researchers have continued to examine how students from different ethnic groups and sociocultural/language backgrounds approach learning. Research on the learning preferences of U.S. minority populations has consistently shown striking differences in

learning style preferences among African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans (Anderson & Adams, 1992; Dunn, 1991; Jacobs, 1990; Moore, 1988). Park (2000), like Willing, found significant ethnic group differences in their preferences for individual and group learning styles among Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese learners; additionally, Park's (2002) study found differences in learning style preferences of secondary school ESL students from a variety of cultural backgrounds, including Korean, Mexican, and Armenian.

In another study mentioned by Reid (1995), learners from different countries (Egypt, Spain, Hungary, and Russia) are shown to favor different and multiple learning styles, with a strong preference for the kinesthetic and tactile learning styles. Willing also found, like Reid, that different cultural groups preferred different modes of learning. For example, in his sample, whereas the Chinese students preferred their English teacher to explain everything, Polish and Arabic students' major preference was for practicing English sounds and pronunciation.

Africa Based Studies

As can be seen in the above reviewed literature, studies on learning styles in ESL/EFL contexts tend to revolve around learners from Asia, Europe, and/or South and Central America, and many of these studies have been carried out in English-speaking countries. Far less research in this field can be found with learners from African countries, a gap which this study hopes to begin to address. Of the few studies I can mention, Hudson (1960 cited in Glick, 1975) reported that different subcultural groups in West Africa differed from each other in their ability to perceive depth cues in two-dimensional representation. Glick also cites Mundy-Castle's (1966) report that similar

findings were observed in Ghana. Dawson's (1967) analysis of Hudson's and Mundy-Castle's work concluded that their findings were due to the field dependence or independence of those particular African subgroups. In more recent research on the African continent, Dreyer and Oxford (1996) examined a number of learning style dimensions of Afrikaans and Setswana/Sesotho-speaking students (N = 299) and their teachers (N = 29) and found that there were significant disparities between these students and their teachers; students expressed a preference for classroom interaction and linear structure whereas teachers were found to be introverted and prefer the lecture method of teaching and, as a result of the mismatch, described their students as 'incompetent' and 'disruptive.' Dreyer (1999) examined the relationship between learning styles and strategies of ESL students at a university in South Africa (N = 200); he reported that the learning styles of both the successful and less successful students determined the learning strategies they used.

Matching Teaching Styles and Learning Styles

Learning styles are a student's natural, habitual, and preferred ways of absorbing and processing new information. As seen above, learning style preferences vary widely based on a host of variables. Teaching styles also vary. Some instructors lecture, others demonstrate or aim to lead students to self-discovery; some focus on theory and others on applications; some emphasize memory and others understanding, still others tend to combine some of these instructional methods.

Studies show that when there is a match between teaching styles and learning styles, academic achievement, student attitudes, and student behavior can be significantly enhanced (Griggs & Dunn, 1984; Smith & Renzulli, 1984) and specifically in foreign

language instruction (Wallace & Oxford, 1992). Learning style research has also indicated that students have higher academic success rates in learning environments that match their learning styles (Border & Chism, 1992; Entwistle, 1981; Sims & Sims, 1995). Students whose learning styles are compatible with the teaching style of a course instructor tend to retain information longer, apply it more effectively, and have more positive post-course attitudes toward the subject than do their counterparts who experience learning/teaching style mismatches (Bialystok, 1985; Dunn & Dunn, 1979; Felder, 1993; Parry, 2004).

In the same vein, several studies have reported that if there is a mismatch between learners' learning styles and methods of instruction or the curriculum, it can adversely affect foreign language achievement (Ehrman, 1996; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Felder & Henriques, 1995). Similarly, Reid's (1987) study found that a mismatch between teaching and learning styles causes learning failure, frustration, and demotivation.

Peacock's (2002) study investigated Reid's (1987) hypothesis that a mismatch between teaching and learning styles causes learning failure, frustration, and demotivation. Data collected through Reid's questionnaire, interviews, and tests using 206 EFL students and 46 EFL teachers at a Hong Kong university found that learners favored kinesthetic and auditory and disfavored both individual and group styles, while teachers favored kinesthetic, group and auditory styles and disfavored tactile and individual styles. In addition, his study found a mismatch regarding group and auditory styles among students' learning styles and instructors' teaching styles; interviews revealed that 72% of the students were frustrated by a mismatch between teaching and

learning styles; 76% said it affected their learning, often seriously; and 81% of the teachers agreed with Reid's hypothesis.

In research with secondary students (Hodges, 1982) demonstrated, for instance, that "approximately 90% of traditional classroom instruction is geared to the auditory learner. Teachers talk to their students, ask questions, and discuss facts. However, only 20% to 30% of any large group could remember 75% of what was presented through discussion" (p. 30-31). Hodges' work accurately mirrors a problem of the way that education has traditionally been provided in Ethiopia. As a way of improving percentages such as these, however, some learning style theorists suggest matching teachers' and students' styles in such a way that students are exposed to teaching styles that are consistent with their learning styles (Barbe, Swassing, & Milone, 1979; Dunn, 1984; Dunn & Dunn, 1979; Dunn, Dunn, & Price, 1978; Gregorc, 1979; Hunt, 1979). For three decades, researches like Gonzalez (1977) have urged teachers in bilingual/ESL classrooms to identify individual variables and determine various approaches to achieve interaction; yet, this is a notion that has only quite recently surfaced in Ethiopian pedagogy.

Felder and Henriques (1995) warn that when mismatches exist between learning styles of most students in a class and the teaching style of the instructor, students may become bored and inattentive in class, do poorly on tests, get discouraged about the courses, the curriculum, and themselves, and in some cases even drop out of school. They recommend that in order to overcome these problems, educators should strive for a balance of instructional methods (as opposed to trying to teach each student exclusively according to his or her preferences.) If the balance is achieved, all students will be taught

partly in a manner they prefer according to their learning style, which leads to an increased comfort level and willingness to learn. At the same time, students will also receive information partly in a less preferred manner, which provides practice and allows them to flex or strengthen their less preferred learning styles as well.

Just as we saw disagreement above in the best ways to measure learning style preferences, so too are there diverging remarks among scholars regarding the best ways to create a match between teaching styles and learning styles. Davis (1993) warns teachers not to try to match their teaching styles to all their students' learning styles, but rather to help students become more aware of their own learning strategies; McKeachie (1995) asserts the same argument. There is also debate over the effectiveness of mismatching learning style and instructional style purposely so that students may be provided the opportunity to strengthen their weaker learning style preferences. In this regard Matthews (1991) argues that:

> "While mismatching is appropriate for developmental reasons, students have more positive attitudes towards school and achieve more knowledge and skills when taught … through their natural or primary style rather than a style that is secondary or undeveloped, particularly when adjusting to a novel and new situation that creates stress such as beginning experiences in higher education" (p. 253).

This finding is supported by Dunn, Deckinger, Withers and Katzenstein (1990), who found that teaching students based on their diagnosed learning style did not only significantly increase their achievement level, but also reduced their level of stress.

Perhaps coming the closest to what should be more strongly advised by the Higher Diploma Program in Ethiopia, Sternberg (1990) calls for recognizing the diversity of individual learners within a framework that takes into account the propensities of learners and instructors to think and learn differently. He suggests not that teachers necessarily change their styles to match the style preference of each and every individual student, but that instructors should expand their styles to meet the needs of the greater proportion of the students.

Conclusion

Whether educators are designing a course or curriculum, refining their instructional approach, writing a textbook, forming cooperative learning teams, or helping students develop interpersonal, leadership, and communication skills, students will benefit from educators' using learning style preferences as the basis of their efforts LeLoup and Ponterio (1997).

The terms "learning styles" in conjunction with "active learning methods" are being used more and more frequently in educational discussion in Ethiopia. The current shifts in educational philosophy, wider access to education, increased provision and easier availability of education in English make research into learning styles increasingly important to informing present practice. Much remains to be done, however, particularly if the nation-wide Higher Diploma Program continues to stress that the learning styles of students are to be taken into account by university instructors and if the practice of "accommodating students' learning styles" is to be situated and understood within the reality of the Ethiopian educational system.

Finally, research studies substantiate the need for identifying students' preferred learning style and for teaching in ways that compliment that style. Confirmation from research findings report that academic achievement is elevated when students are instructed, at least to some degree, through their preferred learning style (Dunn & Bruno, 1985; Foriska, 1992). Research supports the notion that the teacher is the critical change agent in paving the way to educational reform and that teacher beliefs, and thus experiences, are precursors to change (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Battista, 1994; Crawley & Koballa, 1990; Pajares, 1992). It is therefore the aim of the present study to shed some light on how university instructors at Bahir Dar University in Ethiopia experience their efforts to begin to adapt and flex their methods of instruction so that a wider variety of learning style preferences may be addressed.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

This chapter explains the methods and design of the study in term of its objectives, participants, instrumentation used for collecting data, and provides details about how the data were collected and analyzed. It begins by describing the context in which the research took place.

Research Context

The vast majority of teachers in Ethiopia today were educated in a system which used nothing other than the traditional lecture method. Understandably, a considerable number of Ethiopian teachers are reluctant to use teaching methods other than those by which they were taught. It is therefore thought that perhaps by sharing some of the experiences of teachers entering a new realm of teaching, by incorporating active learning methods into the classroom in efforts to accommodate learners from a wider variety of learning style preferences, that we may make the transition easier for other teachers to follow this lead.

The educational system and educational reform have long been based largely on *outside* notions of how education should be conceptualized and practiced. It seems problematic that we do not more often focus on local needs as perceived by local people as opposed to transplanting programs that work well elsewhere into a context where they need drastic modification, at best, in order to function. In hopes of attending to this gap, I wanted my dissertation research to be a place to begin to see the experience of learning

styles from instructors' perspectives, allowing for a collaborative process of authorizing those perspectives in an effort to improve current educational practice, re-inform existing conversations about educational reform, and point to the discussions and reforms yet to be undertaken (Cook-Sather, 2000).

The Higher Diploma Program at Bahir Dar University. As mentioned earlier, the Higher Diploma Program has been functioning across all eight universities in Ethiopia for the past five years. The program was designed in 2000 by a team of two English volunteers and three Ethiopians from the Ministry of Education as part of a wider movement: TESO, the Teaching Education System Overhaul. Although one of the major components of the program requires university instructors to "accommodate the learning style preferences of their students through the inclusion of active learning methods," (HDP Handbook, 2003a, p. 27) this was mandated without any tangible research into learning styles in the Ethiopian context in the first place.

I began this research with the idea that I would conduct a one year ethnographic case study exploring learning styles of EFL students at Bahir Dar University with particular focus on the three questions below:

- What are the preferred learning styles of Ethiopian EFL learners at Bahir Dar University?

- What impact, if any, do variables like gender, field of study, and L1 have on the learning style preferences of these students?

- What is the extent of match or mismatch between the teaching styles and learning styles in the classrooms at Bahir Dar University?

Over the course of collecting data during my first weeks in Ethiopia, however, I began to see that the efforts of the Higher Diploma Program to encourage university

instructors to accommodate the learning style preferences of their students needed more attention. How can we encourage and motivate instructors to pay special attention to the learning styles of their students, when we do not even know what those learning styles are? While student responses to questionnaires shed interesting light on the above questions, I found no avenue to offer practical recommendations without deeper exploration into instructors' experience of the effectiveness of the "new" methods being used/encouraged as a way to attend to learning style preferences. As coordinator and leader of the Higher Diploma Program at Bahir Dar University, I began to see an area ripe for research when I discovered that there tended to be four overarching and overlapping categories into which the university instructors/ HDP candidates of the program fell, namely:

1. I'd like to accommodate the learning style preferences of my students…but how?

2. I feel as though I am doing everything within my capabilities to create a learning environment which accommodates the learning style preferences of my students.

3. I understand the importance of trying to accommodate the learning style preferences of my students, but it is not realistic in the context of Bahir Dar University.

4. I don't fully agree that it is necessary to try to accommodate the learning style preferences of my students…my learning style preferences were never considered in my schooling and I learned the required material without problem.

The above categories led me to my fourth and central question:

- How are efforts to accommodate a variety of learning styles *experienced* by university instructors?

Research Method

Case study. By employing a case study methodology, I was able to gain a thorough understanding of a situation and the experiences of those involved in that setting, both of which were at the heart of my research. To gain a deeper understanding how instructors experience their efforts to accommodate the learning style preferences of their students, I drew also from ethnographic methods. The distinguishing line between ethnography and case study, as we know, is often blurry. Indeed some researchers tend to see the case study as a limited kind of ethnography (Bartlett, Kremmis and Gillard, 1982). Nunan (1992) argues that while the case study resembles ethnography in its philosophy, methods, and concern for studying phenomenon in context, case studies tend to be more limited in their scope. Wolcott (1988) extends this notion to include that ethnography is essentially concerned with the cultural context and cultural interpretation. Finally, while the case study, like ethnography, can utilize qualitative field methods, it can also employ quantitative data and statistical methods (Nunan, 1992).

This study is a case study based on Yin's (2003) definition of being, "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (p. 23). I drew in the following characteristics of ethnographic research based on Nunan (1992):

- Contextual—I carried out the research in the context in which the participants normally live and work.

- Unobtrusive—I avoid manipulating the phenomena under investigation.

- Longitudinal—the research was conducted over a relatively long period of time.

- Collaborative—the research involves the participation of stakeholders other than the researcher.

- Interpretive—I carried out interpretive analysis of the data.

- Organic—there was interaction between questions/hypotheses and data collection/interpretation.

Stenhouse (1983) might call this study a neo-ethnographic case study in that it is an in-depth investigation of a single case by a participant observer. Based on Ellis (1990) the detailed, ethnographic observation of classroom behaviors is an appropriate method for understanding of how the "social events" of the classroom are enacted, such as in this study.

This study lacks the sociocultural interpretation of the data that might be expected in a pure ethnography. I chose not to do this kind of interpretation because this study it not focused on answering *why* instructors at BDU experience the way they do; rather, a more appropriate starting point is to simply focus on *what* they experience and then to look at those experiences in terms of what kinds of recommendations could be made.

Characteristics, Problems, and Benefits of the Method

This case study involves a combination of semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and questionnaires. As with any research method, there are strengths and weaknesses contained in each of these tools, and these will be considered in this section.

The advantages of semi-structured interviews are that the participant does most of the talking, while the researcher introduces topics, asks general questions and then guides the discussion by asking more specific questions or probing answers given. This kind of

interview is most useful when the aim of the research is to shed light onto a puzzling or unexamined question (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), as in the present study. By seeking to constrain the answers as little as possible, and by allowing the participants to answer at length when they wished, a rich and spontaneous discussion could be generated as opposed to short answers to specific questions. One of the weaknesses of this method is often found to be the asymmetrical relationship between the researcher and the participants. The researcher is often viewed as somehow senior or more powerful than the participant; additionally, the researcher is the one directing the interview and, therefore, has more control. Ways to deal with the imbalance of power are to ensure that the interviewee has the freedom to change or redirect the topic, and also to ensure that the researcher has "member's competence" (Woods, 1996), which comes from being accepted as part of the interviewee's community, or at least as having earned the right to participate in it. In this study I made every effort to approach my research slowly. I made it clear to the interviewees that I was interested in improving the quality of education in Ethiopia, just as they were; I was a teacher, just as they were; therefore, we were all working in the same direction and had similar concerns. This factor is also recognized by Rubin and Rubin (1995, p. 172) in their suggestion that researchers "learn the language" of their participants. My slow approach with all instructors involved in the Higher Diploma Program won me acceptance by them as a peer who spoke the same language, rather than as an outsider who had come to "tell them what to do."

Another potential problem with semi-structured interviews is that respondents may say what they think the researcher wishes to hear, or say what is the accepted line of thought in the profession, or say whatever will cast themselves in a good light. The

present study uses a phenomenographic perspective (Marton, 1981) in that it was less interested in establishing whether what the instructors said was closely linked to their actions in their classrooms, and more interested in the instructors' *experience* of their interaction with learning styles (both theirs and their students).

Although qualitative research of this nature does not attempt to conform to scientific standards of reliability, validity, or generalizability, it must still display the rigorous critical standards demanded of all credible research (Silverman, 1993). I am not attempting to establish a causal relationship between variables; therefore, the issue of internal validity is less problematic than if the contrary were true. Moreover, given the unique nature of this study based on its cultural and situational contexts, I am aware that the findings of this research can not be generalized to other sites even within Ethiopia; therefore the question of external validity is of little concern. Although I am not particularly concerned with the issue of replication, I do attempt to squelch threats to the external reliability of this study by being explicit about the following five aspects of the research: the researcher's status/role, the choice of participants, the social situations and conditions, the analytic constructs and premises, and the methods of data collection and analysis. In addition, although this study relies on the use of high inference descriptors, an attempt has been made to increase the internal reliability by seeking collaboration from the HDLs, inviting peer examination from colleagues within the English department, and by mechanically recording all data collected.

More appropriate to this study, however, are the efforts to follow Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestions for establishing *credibility, transferability, dependability,* and *confirmability* when conducting naturalistic inquiry such as this study. *Credibility* can be

established through evidence of long-term experience of the context under study, as in my relatively long experience of conducting this study at Bahir Dar University. *Transferability* is dependent on the richness of description and interpretation offered, while rigorous and transparent documentation of the research steps can establish *dependability,* and *confirmability* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985)

Participants

Secondary research participants. Secondary research participants for this study included 628 (154 female and 474 male) university students who completed learning style questionnaires during Phase I of the study. Of these student participants, 201 were first year students, 192 were second year, 160 were third year, and 75 were fourth year students. These students were selected on a voluntary basis. I sought to distribute the questionnaires to a representative sample of the university students with the aid of "student assistants" hired through the Student Welfare office. Demographic information such as language group and department of study of the secondary research participants is provided in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1.

Secondary Participants by Language Group

Language group	Number of participants
Addis Ababa	130
Afar	45
Amhara	153
Oromia	131
Somalia	47
SNNPR	43
Benshangul	27
Harar/ Dire Dawa	35
Gambela	17
Total	628

Table 2.

Secondary Participants by Field of Study

Field of Study	Number of participants
Journalism & communications	36
Physical education	20
English	44
Amharic	36
Economics	36
Mathematics	34
Biology	42
Chemistry	36
Physics	36
Accounting	53
Geography	36
Pedagogical science	62
Management	70
Law	36
History	21
Marketing	4
Business education	26
	628

A note on the fields of study, all departments involved in this study (pedagogical sciences, English, Amharic, as well as, Mathematics, Chemistry, and Physics, etc.) are under the Faculty of Education. Bahir Dar University began as, and essentially still is (though this is changing and this will not be the case next year) a Teacher Education Institute. All students receive some pedagogy and all students are streamed to become high school or, as a research assistant, university teachers upon graduating from university. Additionally, all student participants in this study are enrolled in content based classes and not strictly EFL classes. Due to their relatively low levels of English proficiency and the fact that all students do continue to *learn* English in their university classes, I refer to them as EFL students throughout this study.

Primary research participants. Primary research participants for this study were four instructors from Bahir Dar University who volunteered to participate. The four instructors were candidates in my class of Higher Diploma during 2005 – 2006. I introduced my study to the entire group during the first weeks of class and all twenty five instructors completed the VAK learning styles questionnaire (see Appendix A). I also obtained verbal and written consent from all twenty five in the group to use any information I collected in my field notes while carrying out the required tasks of the program (e.g., interviews and observations). The first round of interviews and observations with the candidates sparked my interest in looking at learning styles at Bahir Dar University from a different angle than originally intended—these candidates, some of whom had more than twenty years of teaching experience, were suddenly required by a government mandated program to change their teaching methods, to incorporate active learning methods into the classroom and to accommodate the learning styles of their students. For some this would require a more drastic change than others and all candidates, understandably, shared varying degrees of enthusiasm and/or skepticism during our initial informal "getting to know you" interview. This made it seem reasonable then to focus on the experience surrounding efforts to accommodate students' learning style preferences in EFL classrooms.

By the end of the 2005 – 2006 academic year, after having completed four rounds of classroom observations including pre and post-observation discussions and five interviews with each of the, by then twenty four, candidates, we had become quite a close group of colleagues. It was at the end of the program (June 2006) that I expressed my interest in continuing to "shadow" or follow some of them during the 2006 – 2007

academic year. I explained that I would like to continue with the classroom observations

and interviews at regular intervals during the next year for three primary reasons: 1) the

instructors having become familiar with me might feel freer both in their willingness to

try out new methods in their classrooms with me as an observer and in their

openness/frankness during our interviews in which they would be asked to share their

experience, 2) the instructors' having completed the Higher Diploma Program and

received their certificates might not feel the compulsion to "perform" for me in order to

fulfill the requirements of the program, and 3) my not being a Higher Diploma Leader

(HDL) during 2006 – 2007 would allow me to focus my research more closely on a

smaller number of instructors who were interested in participating in my research on a

voluntary basis.

The criteria I set for the participant instructors were 1) that they be willing to be

observed, given advance notice on a regular basis, four times during the academic year,

2) that they be willing to conduct pre and post observation discussions, 3) that they be

willing to conduct interviews to answer questions related to their experience of their

"efforts to accommodate the learning styles of their students through the incorporation of

active learning methods into their classrooms" and 4) that they *not* be planning to leave

the university during 2006 – 2007 to continue their education. Of the twenty five

instructors from my Higher Diploma group, five volunteered to participate in Phase II of

my research. Three of the five instructors came from the social sciences and two from

the natural sciences; two were female and three male. One of the female volunteers, as it

turned out, left the university temporarily on a Fulbright Scholarship before Phase II

began—leaving four instructor participants. It is also noteworthy to mention that of the

twenty four instructors who completed the program in my group during 2005 – 2006, fourteen of them left Bahir Dar University at the beginning of 2006 – 2007 to pursue Master's degrees and PhDs at Addis Ababa University and abroad—this is a trend which continues today. I again obtained verbal and written consent from the remaining four instructors who expressed interest and willingness in participating in the study. Further information on the instructor participants is presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3.

Instructor/Primary Participants

Instructor	Department	Years teaching experience	Sex	Age	Highest degree
1. Mulu	Pedagogical Science	3	F	~32	BA
2. Desta	English	9	M	~42	MA
3. Fanta	Chemistry	15	M	~48	MA
4. Mogus	Mathematics	3	M	~31	BA

Collaborators. Three of my close colleagues also participated in this study as collaborators. Each of the three collaborators graduated from the Higher Diploma Program in the year prior to the beginning of this study; they were each acting as Higher Diploma Program Leaders (teachers) during the three years of the study. Their knowledge and experience of how the program functions, and of the challenges that the programs' candidates face, added invaluable insight to the study. We worked closely together both in running the Higher Diploma Program and in collaboratively conducting research, on various fronts, in efforts to improve the ways in which the program functions.

Instrumentation

In conducting this study, I used multiple data sources for purposes of triangulation. The three main sources of data came from individual interviews with instructors, classroom observations, and questionnaires. Additional sources of data included Higher Diploma assignments, field notes, and instructors' lesson plans. The research questions and data sources are listed below in Table 4, which is later followed by a more detailed description of what the data sources entailed.

Table 4.

Research Questions

Main and Sub Research Questions	Instrument Used
Q1: What are the preferred learning styles of Ethiopian EFL learners at Bahir Dar University?	- Questionniare
Q2: What impact, if any, do variables like gender, field of study, and L1 have on the learning style preferences of these students?	- Questionniare
Q3: What is the extent of match or mismatch between the teaching styles and learning styles in the classrooms at Bahir Dar University?	- Classroom observation - Instructor interviews - Student interview - Collaborator interview

Central question:
 How are efforts made to accommodate a variety of learning styles through the incorporation of active learning methods *experienced* by university instructors?
• How do instructors attempt to accommodate the learning styles of their students?
• How important do instructors feel it is to try to accommodate the learning styles of their students?
• How has their perception of learning styles changed over the past three years?
• How do teachers view their efforts to accommodate the learning styles of their students?
• How do instructors view the success/participation of their students now?
	- Questionnaires
	- Classroom observations
	- Instructor interviews
	   o past experiences
	   o current experiences
	   o outlook for future
	- field notes
	- informal discussions with teachers / students
	- teachers' lesson plans

VAK Learning Style Questionnaire. The VAK learning styles questionnaire used

in this study is a self-reporting questionnaire that was developed on the basis of an

existing VAK, with modifications suggested by Ethiopian directors at the Ministry of

Education, specifically to be used in the Ethiopian context and in conjunction with the

Higher Diploma Program (MoE, 2002). This survey has been used (as one of three learning styles surveys) and printed in the handbook in the Higher Diploma Program since its inception in 2002 along with Kolb's (1984) the Learning Style Inventory and Gardner's (1985) Multiple Intelligences Questionnaire. The survey, which was constructed and validated for an Ethiopian context, consisted of three sets of 12 statements on each of the three learning style preferences to be measured: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.

The decision to use the VAK learning style questionnaire was based on its accessibility, applicability, and availability. Of the three learning style preference questionnaires included in the Higher Diploma Handbook, the VAK is far more accessible—to one being introduced to learning styles preferences for the first time—in terms of its categories (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) than the other two above mentioned questionnaires. It follows, then, that ways to accommodate learners, who report themselves to prefer those modes of learning, are also more easily applied. Additionally, the VAK used in the HDP (see Appendix A) is the only learning style preference questionnaire that had already been translated into and used in Amharic. Although the medium of instruction at Bahir Dar University is English, based on my informal assessment of students' level of English, I deemed using the Amharic version of any questionnaire necessary and appropriate. I felt that by using one of the least complicated learning style preference questionnaires and one that has already been translated into Amharic, I could greatly increase the chances that at least some Ethiopian educators will read this research and so begin to at least consider, and at best assess, the learning styles that students bring to their classrooms and that it may help to inform/improve their

teaching practices. Drawbacks of this questionnaire are discussed in detail in the

Limitations section of Chapter V.

Individual interviews. During this study, I conducted multiple individual

interviews with four university instructors. For all individual interviews, I used Patton's

(1980, p. 206) "Interview Guide Approach," where topics and issues are determined in

advance, but the interviewer decides the sequence and wording of questions during the

course of each interview. By using this approach, data collection was somewhat

systematic for each participant, but interviews were also able to remain conversational in

nature (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000).

All instructor participants (4) were interviewed five times each during Phases I

and II and twice during Phase III; each instructor was interviewed twelve times over the

course of three years. Each of them participated additionally in informal group

discussions during Phase II. The instructor interviews averaged 30 minutes; all

interviews focused on the experience surrounding the efforts made by instructors to

accommodate the learning styles preferences of their students. All interviews were

conducted in my office with me sitting side-by-side the interviewee and were audio taped

and later transcribed for analysis. For a sample list of individual interview questions, see

Appendix D.

A note here on the transcription of instructor interviews. I personally transcribed

interviews word for word. As I wrote the findings (Chapter IV), I attempted to maintain

the authenticity of their statements as much as possible. That said, at times certain

grammatical problems were corrected to make their statements read easier (i.e., changing

verb tense). If an instructor used descriptor words such as the word "therefore" multiple

times in a statement (i.e., "and so therefore it might therefore be harder for me to concentrate therefore…), I might omit the word to make the statement more readable. If a participant had a lengthy comment and I only wanted certain key sentences in the comment, I omitted parts of the dialogue by using "…" to show breaks in between the data. I bracketed all data where I inserted words other than the participants' words in efforts to better help the reader understand the context of what was said. Finally, when participants added a great deal of stress or emotion to certain words in their comments, I italicized that word. If I chose to italicize the word in order to draw the reader's attention to it, I reveal that the stress is my emphasis within the quote.

Observations. From October 2005 to January of 2008, I observed classes as they were being taught by the participant instructors. Each observation was scheduled according to the convenience of the instructor and included pre and post-observation discussions. Each of the classes I observed were from 50 – 70 minutes in duration; pre-observation discussions averaged 10 minutes and post-observation discussions were generally 15 – 20 minutes in length. During each of the observations, I wrote detailed field notes describing the environment, atmosphere, student activities, instructor's role, and my own activities and thoughts in as much detail as possible. Additionally, I filled out a lesson observation form and gave it to the instructors during the post-observation discussion.

Observations allowed me to understand the nature of the instructors' experience (Patton, 1990), establish rapport with instructors and students, and to see the instructors' efforts to accommodate the learning styles of their students. As a participant-as-observer (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993), I was neither a complete observer nor a complete

participant. While I maintained distance most of the time in order to observe the dynamics of the classroom, the instructors and students, the contexts, etc., I was also engaging regularly with students by joining in class, small group activities and even helping the instructor to explain and "set up" active learning activities from time to time.

Written lesson plans of the instructors. I collected written lesson plans from the instructors during the pre-observation discussion immediately prior to conducting a classroom observation. Analyzing these lesson plans allowed me to see what the instructors intended to do in terms of "accommodating learning styles" and to then ask questions prior to the observation on which learning styles the instructor thought a particular activity would reach and how.

Data Collection

Data for this study were completed in three major phases. Over the course of three academic years, students and instructors at Bahir Dar University completed questionnaires; instructors were also interviewed and observed in their teaching-learning environments. The study began in the 2005 – 2006 academic year (Phase I), continued during the 2006 – 2007 academic year (Phase II), and was completed during the 2007 – 2008 academic year (Phase III).

Phase I of the study began by running the VAK (visual auditory kinesthetic) questionnaire (discussed in greater detail in the following section) with 25 BDU instructors in the Higher Diploma Program. I then ran the VAK learning style preference questionnaire with one thousand fifty university students at the beginning of Phase I (first semester, 2005). The questionnaires were run with the assistance of four student

assistants who received two two-hours training/discussion sessions before distributing

and collecting the questionnaires. After their training, the student assistants distributed

one thousand fifty questionnaires at or around the student dorms to students willing to

participate by completing the survey on a voluntary basis. Each assistant generally

gathered a group of approximately thirty students, gave them a briefing and instructions

(in Amharic) to the questionnaires, collected consent forms and a background

information sheet (see Appendix C) from each student, and stayed available to the

students to make clarifications when necessary until all questionnaires were collected. A

total of 628 *fully completed* (that is, without omissions) questionnaires were returned

from students representing 9 language-group backgrounds (over 40 languages) and 17

major fields of study. During the same year, I worked closely with 25 university

instructors who were candidates in the Higher Diploma Program. The 25 instructors

attended four hours a week (in 2 hour blocks) of HDP sessions and as partial fulfillment

of the program, I interviewed each of them individually on five separate occasions (each

interview averaged 20 minutes in duration), and observed each of them teaching a 50 –

70 minute class on 4 different occasions throughout the academic year. Each instructor

and I conducted pre and post-observation discussions each averaging 15 minutes and

written (and verbal) feedback was given. In total, 100+ hours of classroom observation

and 120 interviews with instructors were completed.

During Phase II, I followed four instructors who participated in the study (and

completed the HDP) during Phase I; two instructors were from the social sciences and

two from the natural sciences. These four instructors were again interviewed individually

on 5 separate occasions (each interview averaged 30 minutes in duration), and observed

teaching a 50 – 70 minute class on 4 different occasions throughout the academic year. For each observation, pre and post-observation discussions were conducted (each averaging 15 minutes) and written (and verbal) feedback was given.

Phase III involved the same four instructors who participated in both Phase I and Phase II of the study. During this phase, instructors were again interviewed individually on 2 separate occasions (each interview averaged 30 minutes in duration), and observed teaching a 50 – 70 minute class on 2 different occasions throughout the first semester of the academic year. For each observation, pre- and post-observation discussions were conducted (each averaging 15 minutes) and written (and verbal) feedback was given.

Data Analysis

Questionnaires. The individual student variables and the responses from the questionnaires were statistically analyzed in terms of frequencies and modes. Although this type of statistical analysis may be considered unconventional, it was important to examine which questionnaire items were reported as preferred by the largest group of students in order to reveal an overall picture of strategy use as categorized by the VAK (visual auditory kinesthetic) questionnaire.

Interviews and observations. Data analysis was ongoing beginning during Phase I. I focused on *experience* of the instructors by looking for themes across the data primarily among interview and observation data. The interview data was transcribed word-for-word, and the 100+ interviews yielded 300+ pages of data. I began transcribing within the first week of interviewing in 2005 and, for the sake of ease and accuracy, I generally transcribed interviews in the evening on the same day that the interview was

conducted. I found that the less time that elapsed between the actual interview and the transcription, the easier it was to accurately transcribe the recording. The data were analyzed by repeated readings from which tentative themes emerged. Progressive re-readings were followed by listening again to the recordings in search of any extra-linguistic factors such as vocal stress or hesitation which might be relevant. From this process two themes emerged which were particularly regular in recurring: practicality and importance. These two key themes form the primary data set for this study.

Once the key themes were established, the data were then mined several times and excerpts of the interviews relating to these themes were collated and then extensively analyzed to further categorize and code participant comments. This process was collaborative; after I had coded the data on my own, I ask my three collaborators to look at subsections of the data and to code it based on the themes I had given them.

Summary

This study was aimed at contributing to the body of research on learning styles in EFL contexts by considering the experiences of university instructors when efforts are made to accommodate learners' learning style preferences in an EFL context, a topic which does not appear to have been addressed heretofore in a systematic way in Ethiopia.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In this chapter, I first present the preferred learning styles of the 628 student participants of this study according to their responses on the VAK learning style questionnaire. I then show the impact of gender, first language, and field of study on their learning style preferences. Thereafter, the relationship between the preferred learning styles of the students and the prevalent teaching styles used at Bahir Dar University is presented. Finally, I explore how four Bahir Dar University instructors experience the recently initiated efforts to accommodate a variety of learning styles in the classrooms. The two themes—practicality and importance—which emerged from the data are presented. Thereafter, the findings of the instructors' experiences are organized around four case studies in which the instructors share their experiences. Instructors share stories related to experience of how they were taught and their current teaching practices. They then described differences in their classes taught through traditional lecture method and those classes taught through methods seeking to address the preferred learning styles of their students. Instructors also shared their beliefs regarding the importance of learning styles in an EFL context.

Additionally, I compare and discuss the ways in which the instructors are attempting to accommodate their students' preferred learning styles and how they relate their experience to the Higher Diploma Program. Collaborator experiences are also shared to validate or provide an additional lens through which to view the other experiences and narratives. Furthermore, collaborator experience helps us to better

understand the process of developing the confidence, attitude, and motivation to implement new or different teaching methods.

Learning style preferences of students at BDU

As mentioned earlier, the primary goal of this study is to examine the experience of Bahir Dar University instructors regarding their efforts to accommodate the learning style preferences of their students. However, in order to do that, I had to first find out the perceived learning style preferences of students at Bahir Dar University based on their responses to the VAK learning style questionnaire. The results of the survey are based on the responses of 628 BDU students. In examining the learning style preferences among these students, I used the mode of each questionnaire item to determine which strategies the majority of the students reported themselves to prefer. While focusing on modes may be considered an unconventional method of data analysis for surveys of this sort, it was useful in this study to reveal an overall picture of student preferences. For a complete list of questionnaire response frequencies see Appendix A.

As Table 5 shows, students report themselves as preferring strategies associated with visual, auditory, *and* kinesthetic learning styles preferences according to the VAK questionnaire.

Table 5.

VAK responses: Modes (N = 628)

	Questionnaire item	Almost never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost always
V1	I learn better when I take lots of notes.		213 (33.9%)			
V2	When talking to someone about a class, I find it hard if they do not maintain good eye contact.			282 (44.9%)		
V3	I make lists and notes because I remember things better if I write them down.				230 (36.6%)	
V4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to pictures, tables, figures, diagrams, etc.				185 (29.5%)	
V5	I need to write down instructions to a project so that I remember them			218 (34.7%)		
V6	I need to see the teacher in class in order to keep my attention focused.				172 (27.4%)	
V7	When reading a book or printed material for the first time I notice the page layout, visual characteristics, and style of print first.	163 (26%)				
V8	When I am studying in a group, I like to stand back and observe others.			199 (31.7%)		
V9	When recalling information I can see it in my mind and remember where I saw it.			220 (35%)		
V10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer to receive that information in a written handout.		221 (35.2%)			
V11	For extra practice in English, I am most likely to read or watch television.			230 (36.6%)		
V12	If the teacher has extra information for me, I prefer it if he/she gives me a handout or writes it on the blackboard.				315 (50.2%)	

	Questionnaire item	Almost never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost always
A1	I learn better when I read out loud or move my lips to hear the words in my head.			171 (27.2%)		
A2	When talking to someone about a class, I find it hard with those who do not talk at least as much as me.			248 (39.5%)		
A3	I do not take a lot of notes but I still remember what was said.			211 (33.6%)		
A4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to passages involving conversations, talking, speaking, dialogues, etc.				250 (39.8%)	
A5	I like to talk to myself or a classmate when solving a problem or writing.				192 (30.6%)	
A6	I can understand what a teacher says, even if I am not able to see the teacher.		252 (40.1%)			
A7	I remember things more easily by repeating them again and again.			247 (39.3%)		
A8	In class, I like to talk about the subject; I want the chance to discuss.				224 (35.7%)	
A9	To get new information, I prefer a radio program to a newspaper.			196 (31.2%)		
A10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer to discuss/talk about it.				188 (29.9%)	
A11	For extra English practice I am most likely to listen to music.				232 (36.9%)	
A12	If the instructor has extra for me, I prefer him/her to tell me in class.				319 (50.8%)	
K1	I am not good at reading or listening to instructions; I would rather just start working on the task or project at hand.			212 (33.8%)		

	Questionnaire item	Almost never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost always
K2	When talking to someone in class, I have the hardest time with those who do not show any kind of emotional support.		248 (39.5%)			
K3	I take notes and doodle or draw pictures but I rarely go back a look at them.			218 (34.7%)		
K4	When reading a textbook, I try to think of an action that matches the text.				212 (33.8%)	
K5	When I am reading, I follow the words on the page with my finger.			206 (32.8%)		
K6	I use my hands a lot when I am trying to remember the right thing to say.			231 (36.8%)		
K7	To learn something new, I try to make a project or physically act something out.			175 (27.9%)		
K8	In class, I wish that I could move around more.				188 (29.9%)	
K9	I like to move around. I feel trapped when sitting for a long time in class or at a desk.			248 (39.5%)		
K10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer the chance to actually try demonstrating it.				204 (32.5%)	
K11	For extra practice in English, I am most likely to walk with a friend while speaking English.				164 (26.1%)	
K12	If the teacher has extra information for me, I prefer to be given a project to learn about it.			213 (33.9%)		

V = visual; A = auditory; K = kinesthetic

The above table indicates that students report preferences in all three learning styles categories—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Of the 36 items on the questionnaire, modes occur as "sometimes" in 14 items, as "often" in 14 items, and as "rarely" for only two items. "Almost never" and "almost always" do not appear in viewing modes for each item.

An overall picture of participants' most strongly preferred strategies—those marked "often" by the mode—can be seen in Table 6 below:

Table 6.

Responses to VAK: Most strongly preferred strategies (by mode)

V3	I make lists and notes because I remember things better if I write them down.
V4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to pictures, tables, figures, diagrams, etc.
V6	I need to see the teacher in class in order to keep my attention focused.
V12	If the teacher has extra information for me, I prefer it if he/she gives me a handout or writes it on the blackboard.
A4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to passages involving conversations, talking, speaking, dialogues, etc.
A5	I like to talk to myself or a classmate when solving a problem or writing.
A8	In class, I like to talk about the subject; I want the chance to discuss.
A10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer to discuss/talk about it.
A11	For extra English practice I am most likely to listen to music.
A12	If the instructor has extra for me, I prefer him/her to tell me in class.
K4	When reading a textbook, I try to think of an action that matches the text.
K8	In class, I wish that I could move around more.
K10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer the chance to actually try demonstrating it.
K11	For extra practice in English, I am most likely to walk with a friend while speaking English.

The above table shows that the strongest preferences reported by item (those items with modes occurring as "often") by the largest number of students are visual (4 items), auditory (6 items), and kinesthetic (4 items). The above findings reveal that

students strategy preferences based on the VAK learning style questionnaire do not neatly fit into categories of, for example, "auditory learners" or "visual learners"; rather, students are shown to prefer a variety of strategies from each category. In short, students seem to prefer some strategies linked to visual, auditory, *and* kinesthetic learning styles. This information can be useful for instructors to understand the necessity of teaching in such a way that enables students to use their most strongly preferred learning strategies and, in turn, their strengths according to their learning style preferences.

The impact of field of study on learning styles preferences

The second research question was intended to investigate if there were any variations in styles preference according to participants' gender, L1, and field of study. Because no remarkable trends were found in terms of gender and L1 variables, this sections focuses only on the impact of field of study on learning style preferences. Of the 17 fields of study represented in this study, English, Mathematics, Chemistry, and Pedagogical Science were selected as focal groups for they represent the fields of study of the four instructors presented in the case studies below. Again, modes were used to determine which strategies were preferred by the largest number of students within each group (field of study). Of the 36 questionnaire items, modes were identical across the four fields of study mentioned above for 21 items; variation in where the mode falls occurred in 15 items as presented in Table 7 below.

Table 7.

Variation in responses according to field of study (by mode)

V=visual A=auditory K=kinesthetic	Questionnaire item	Almost never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost always
V1	I learn better when I take lots of notes.		M,P	E,C		
V4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to pictures, tables, figures, diagrams, etc.		M,C,P		E	
V6	I need to see the teacher in class in order to keep my attention focused.	E,M		C	P	
A1	I learn better when I read out loud or move my lips to hear the words in my head.			M,C,P	E	
A2	When talking to someone about a class, I find it hard with those who do not talk at least as much as me.			E,C	M,P	
A4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to passages involving conversations, talking, speaking, dialogues, etc.			C	E,M,P	
A5	I like to talk to myself or a classmate when solving a problem or writing.				C	E,M,P

E=English; M=Mathematics; C=Chemistry; P=Pedagogical Science

V=visual A=auditory K=kinesthetic	Questionnaire item	Almost never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost always
A9	To get new information, I prefer a radio program to a newspaper.			E,P	M,C	
A10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer to discuss/talk about it.		M,P		E	C
K3	I take notes and doodle or draw pictures but I rarely go back a look at them.			E,C,P	M	
K6	I use my hands a lot when I am trying to remember the right thing to say.		M,C	P	E	
K7	To learn something new, I try to make a project or physically act something out.		E,C	P	M	
K8	In class, I wish that I could move around more.		M,C		E, P	
K10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer the chance to actually try demonstrating it.				E,M,C	P
K12	If the teacher has extra information for me, I prefer to be given a project to learn about it.	M	C	E,P		

E=English; M=Mathematics; C=Chemistry; P=Pedagogical Science

The above table shows that although some variation across fields of study does occur, the variation seems to occur somewhat randomly; that is, no strong conclusions can be drawn in terms of one group preferring more strategies associated with, for example, visual learning than another.

It is also revealing to view students' preferences specifically in light of which particular strategies associated with the VAK questionnaire are most strongly and/or least strongly preferred within each field of study in focus. Tables 8 – 15 below show students' most strongly preferred and least strongly preferred strategies according to English, Chemistry, Mathematics, and Pedagogical Science fields of study.

Table 8.

English: Most preferred strategies

V4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to pictures, tables, figures, diagrams, etc.
A1	I learn better when I read out loud or move my lips to hear the words in my head.
A4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to passages involving conversations, talking, speaking, dialogues, etc.
A5	I like to talk to myself or a classmate when solving a problem or writing.
A10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer to discuss/talk about it.
K6	I use my hands a lot when I am trying to remember the right thing to say.
K8	In class, I wish that I could move around more.
K10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer the chance to actually try demonstrating it.

Table 9.

English: Least preferred strategies

V6	I need to see the teacher in class in order to keep my attention focused.
K7	To learn something new, I try to make a project or physically act something out.

Table 10.

Chemistry: Most preferred strategies

A5	I like to talk to myself or a classmate when solving a problem or writing.
A9	To get new information, I prefer a radio program to a newspaper.
A10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer to discuss/talk about it.

Table 11.

Chemistry: Least preferred strategies

V4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to pictures, tables, figures, diagrams, etc.
K6	I use my hands a lot when I am trying to remember the right thing to say.
K7	To learn something new, I try to make a project or physically act something out.
K8	In class, I wish that I could move around more.
K12	If the teacher has extra information for me, I prefer to be given a project to learn about it.

Table 12.

Mathematics: Most preferred strategies

A2	When talking to someone about a class, I find it hard with those who do not talk at least as much as me.
A4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to passages involving conversations, talking, speaking, dialogues, etc.
A5	I like to talk to myself or a classmate when solving a problem or writing.
A9	To get new information, I prefer a radio program to a newspaper.
K3	I take notes and doodle or draw pictures but I rarely go back a look at them.
K7	To learn something new, I try to make a project or physically act something out.
K10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer the chance to actually try demonstrating it.

Table 13.

Mathematics: Least preferred strategies

V1	I learn better when I take lots of notes.
V4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to pictures, tables, figures, diagrams, etc.
V6	I need to see the teacher in class in order to keep my attention focused.
A10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer to discuss/talk about it.
K6	I use my hands a lot when I am trying to remember the right thing to say.
K8	In class, I wish that I could move around more.
K12	If the teacher has extra information for me, I prefer to be given a project to learn about it.

Table 14.

Pedagogical Science: Most preferred strategies

V6	I need to see the teacher in class in order to keep my attention focused.
A2	When talking to someone about a class, I find it hard with those who do not talk at least as much as me.
A4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to passages involving conversations, talking, speaking, dialogues, etc.
A5	I like to talk to myself or a classmate when solving a problem or writing.
K8	In class, I wish that I could move around more.
K10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer the chance to actually try demonstrating it.

Table 15.

Pedagogical Science: Least preferred strategies

V1	I learn better when I take lots of notes.
V4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to pictures, tables, figures, diagrams, etc.
A10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer to discuss/talk about it.

Some of the above findings are surprising such as students of Chemistry and

English reporting "to learn something new, I try to make a project or physically act

something out" as a least preferred strategy. While such responses may be attributed to

the ways in which students interpret the survey items, they also point again to the need for instructors to establish an open dialog through which they can help students explore strategies through which they most effectively.

In sum, the above findings serve as an important reminder to instructors that students learning style preferences may be most easily determined by first discovering which strategies linked to visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles students most strongly prefer. These findings further serve to reinforce the notion that research into learning styles, particularly classroom based research, is not intended to box students into fixed categories of learners; rather, such research should highlight the fact that students generally have a wide variety of learning preferences that may be more effectively met when instructors become aware of what the strongest preferences in their classrooms actually are.

Match or mismatch in students' learning styles and instructors' teaching styles?

The above findings show that although BDU students have a slightly stronger preference for auditory learning, their preferences for kinesthetic and visual learning styles are not altogether weak. Given these findings, we can say that in order to accommodate the learning style preferences of BDU students, instructors would need to do more than provide information to their students through the traditional lecture method alone.

Let us assume that the traditional lecture method, one in which the instructor stands at the front of the room and speaks to the students on a given topic with relatively little or no interaction among the students or with the instructor, might accommodate the

auditory learner. We can also assume, then, that if the instructor adds written notes (e.g., on the blackboard), then both visual and auditory learners may have their learning styles attended to. In the case of Bahir Dar University, however, this research argues that often the typical instructor, using the traditional lecture method, is not effectively reaching even those students with visual and/or auditory learning styles preferences, let alone learning styles beyond visual and auditory. Through classroom observation of teachers who had not yet taken the HDP and teachers very new in the program, student and teacher interviews, and in depth discussion with my collaborators, I learned that the most common method of teaching has involved the instructors finding whatever written material is available on their subject and basically reading it to their class; teachers often copy the material onto the blackboard as they read. Many classes I observed that were conducted in this way were reduced even further in the quality of delivery by the facts that the reading was uninflected, monotonic, and often simply inaudible in the back half of the room, and the use of the blackboard was ineffective, in most cases, due to illegible handwriting even for those sitting in the front of the room. Instructors rarely present questions to the students and when they do, the amount of wait time provided to the students for their response is insufficient; the instructors simply answer the question themselves and then continue reading. Along the same lines, students are not encouraged to ask questions. There is almost no evidence at all that the students are challenged to synthesize information or think critically in any way at all.

It is not my intention here to focus on or draw attention to the fact that the overall quality of teaching, from my observation, is poor. That is a fact that has already been widely acknowledged and a fact that led to the establishment of TESO and the HDP. The

point is that there is unquestionably a mismatch between the learning styles of the students and the teaching styles through which they are taught. Even if students' auditory and visual learning style preferences are being met, at least to some degree, by the traditional lecture method through which the vast majority of instructors (who have not yet completed the HDP) deliver their lessons, the kinesthetic learning style preference— not to mention the host of other learning style preferences—is clearly not being attended to.

Likewise, it is not my intention to blame the instructors for teaching in the ways that they do; they teach the way that they were taught. The instructors are generally aware that their teaching styles could be more effective, but they have never seen teaching being done in any other way. The following quote from an instructor on the first day of the HDP supports this:

> *I am using more of a chalk and talk method with a minimum of interaction with students. We do not use discussion. I expect that this [Higher Diploma] program will give me some clue [how to] use a more active teaching style. I hope that it will not be similar to my Bachelor program in which it was simply said, "use active teaching style" but nothing was ever modeled and we never discussed **how** to do it. I know the theories, but I need to see the practice.* Mebratu, HDC, Pedagogical Sciences

There seems to be a false belief among BDU instructors who are not yet involved in the HDP that teaching to learning styles is impossible due to large class size. I can say that this belief is false based on the many lessons that I observed of HDCandidates successfully implementing various active learning methods that would indeed reach more of the students' preferred learning styles than the traditional lecture method. It is based on the above findings and the notions that instructors can and should teach in ways that accommodate the learning styles of their students in an EFL context that the need for a

more comprehensive exploration of instructors' efforts to move beyond the traditional lecture method became apparent. The following section presents four mini-case studies on the experience of instructors who, for the first time, were moving toward a more eclectic approach of teaching so that the learning styles of their students' learning styles may be addressed.

Instructors' Experience of Accommodating Students' Learning Styles

This study was designed, in part, to help instructors at BDU become more aware of the role of learning styles in their EFL classrooms. First, I looked briefly at what the students perceive their preferred learning styles to be and at whether students learn differently according to their gender, first language, and/or field of study. Next, I investigated whether there was a match or mismatch between the learning styles of students and the teaching style of instructors. Finally, based on the findings that a) students prefer a mixed array of learning styles (i.e., most students like to learn through visual, audio, ***and*** kinesthetic modes of learning) and b) the traditional lecture method alone does not necessarily accommodate the learning style preferences of students, this study explores the experiences of four instructors in their efforts to change their teaching styles in ways that may better accommodate the learning styles of their students. By sharing their experiences—the successes and shortcomings, the triumphs and pitfalls—it is hoped that other instructors, not only at Bahir Dar University but all over Ethiopia, may begin taking steps to teach to the learning styles of their students and so continue to improve the quality of education provided in the EFL context of Ethiopia.

Practicality and Importance

When I began interviewing and observing instructors with the focus of their experience of their efforts to accommodate the learning styles of their students, nearly all of them began their discussion by talking about the practicality of their efforts. For example, when discussing what the instructors were trying out that was new or different from before in their classrooms, participants often opened with how their efforts felt "impractical" or "out of context." Instructors described themselves as "burdened", "overloaded", or "not taken seriously by their students." Whether they were from a natural science background or the social sciences, whether they had twenty years of experience or five, participant instructors described concerns of practicality and context in their efforts—a concern seemingly overlooked by the HDP. The following are examples of their sentiments in their own words:

1. *Trying to teach to the learning styles of my students has its own problems; if I take the time to worry about their styles, I worry that I will never be able to cover all the required material by the end of the semester.* Mulu, Pedagogical Science instructor
2. *Maybe if I only had one or two classes to teach I could manage to be concerned with the learning styles of my students, but with my workload— teaching four different courses—it may not be realistic for me to be concerned [with my students' learning styles].* Mogus, Mathematics instructor
3. *I'm afraid that trying to teach to the learning styles of my students doesn't take the Ethiopian context into account. Our classes are overcrowded and we lack the resources to really consider the learning styles of our students.* Desta, English instructor
4. *My students want me to teach them, not make them play games. If I try to do something other than lecture in my classroom, my students will respond in a negative way. They think that if I make them play a game, I do so because I haven't properly prepared a lecture…they expect me to lecture them.* Fanta, Physics instructor

Instructors were not the only ones who began talking about issues of practicality very early in the discussion of their experience. The collaborators confirmed having had

similar perceptions when they were first introduced to the task of accommodating the

learning styles of their students. Along this line, one shares:

> *I remember thinking that it would be impossible for me to address my students'*
> *styles; I was so loaded, I didn't have time to add another dimension to my*
> *teaching. After some time with the HDP, though, I managed to really change my*
> *mode of delivery in the classroom.* Tesfahun, Collaborator

Using words like "impractical" and "burdensome" to describe BDU instructors'

experience of their efforts to teach to the learning styles of their students, we see that the

same language is used not only by the instructors themselves, but also by the students and

even by the collaborators. I probed each instructor and collaborator about their reasons

for using such negative words to describe attempts to shift the traditional method of

instruction to one in which the students become active participants in their learning

environment. Often, one of the first explanations given was related to the vastness of

what the HDP asks its candidates to do. Instructors explained that if they were only

being asked by the HDP to do *one* of the four major changes/additions that were being

asked of them, then efforts toward accommodating the learning styles of their students

might not seem so "impractical." However, since they were not only being asked to

begin, for the first time, to consider the learning style preferences of their students, but

also to incorporate continuous assessment, conduct action research, and become a

reflective teacher all at the same time—the demands of addressing their students'

learning styles began to feel overwhelming and, therefore, "impractical." One instructor

notes his feelings of being overwhelmed by all that was asked of him by the HDP:

Already I am loaded. I am teaching 14 credit hours and I was assigned to take the HDP. Now we are trying to do continuous assessment and begin our action research projects. At the same time, I should do active learning methods for my students so that they can use the learning styles they like. For me, I think it is too much. It makes me too busy. And being heavily loaded like this doesn't make it practical for me to do good in my job. Desta, English instructor

In this quote we see a specific example of how instructors tend to feel overwhelmed by all that is required of them.

The collaborators voiced understanding of the vastness of the HDP and shared how challenging it was for them to meet the requirements of the program when they were candidates. Ato Tesfahun, with 25 years of teaching experience coming from a pedagogical science background, admitted that he indeed felt overwhelmed himself by the intensity of the program when he was a candidate. He emphasized that if he, who was already familiar with most of the concepts introduced/transitions proposed, struggled with feelings of impracticality, then he understood that those same feelings of impracticality with regard to the program requirements must be even more intensely felt by instructors who had little teaching experience or for whom concepts such as learning styles were altogether new. He said, "When I remember all the work that I was given when I was a candidate, I thought, 'Why are they trying to make us do this all at once? Why don't they give us more time to try to implement some of these changes?' I know, and knew the answers to my own questions—that this is really the only way to try to implement radical change into the system. At the same time, it is a lot. It's a lot to ask of loaded instructors—especially those who don't have much experience yet." Because of the vast demands placed upon the instructors during their participation in the HDP, they are not able to focus solely on one area of their continuous professional development such as addressing learning style preferences, using continuous assessment, conducting

action research, or developing the ability to reflect; instead, they are asked to do all of these things, more or less, at once. Of course, each of these concepts is introduced in a separate module and over the course of two semesters; however, the candidates are asked to continue practicing what they learned (or begin implementing) during the first two modules while the second two modules are being conducted. Therefore, it can tend to "pile up" toward the end of the program.

Given the compulsory nature of the HDP, I would argue that some candidates enter the program already feeling a bit overwhelmed—even before they are asked to change anything about the way they teach. Desta, a HDCandidate during 2005 – 2006, commented, "I'm here because the Head of the Department told me to be. I already know pedagogical theory and if you ask me any question about it, [pedagogical theory], I can tell you the answer now. I need this certificate because it's required." Seen as "impractical" due to the vastness of the requirements of the program, instructors sometimes have sentiments of frustration at the *thought* of having to change their methods or alter the way they have become accustomed to running their classes.

After describing how they worried about the requirement or the need to begin addressing the learning styles of their students being impractical, however, instructors' talk would, generally, become much more positive and optimistic when they began to speak of the *importance* of addressing learning styles in an EFL context; for most of the instructors, their talk also remained equally positive and optimistic when they began describing what they are actually doing in the classroom in effort to teach to the learning styles of their students. Furthermore, once the discussion changed from focusing on *practicality* to a focus of *importance* and *relevance* the negativity heard before in relation

to practicality, in many cases, actually began to disappear. It is interesting to compare the following quotes about instructors' discussion of the *importance* of addressing learning styles to the earlier quotes about being "burdened" or "out of context" while discussing of the *practicality* of addressing learning styles:

> 1. *When learning styles are paid attention to, it increases the understandability of the subject. Students vary in their interest to learn—to address these needs by incorporating the different teaching styles in the lesson is important because if we approach students as individuals we will lead them to learn more.* Mogus, Mathematics instructor.

> 2. *Since we know that there exists individual differences we must establish a fertile environment that can enhance students' style of learning—this is of paramount importance. When the needs of the students with different learning styles are met, the students will be more interested to learn.* Fanta, Physics instructor.

Case Study 1: Mulu

Discovering the Concept of Learning Styles

Mulu is 32 year old[1] female instructor with a BA in pedagogical science; she has three years[2] of teaching experience in the "Peda Sci" (pedagogical science) department. She was first introduced to the concept of learning styles during the Higher Diploma Program. From our first interview and observation, she was highly interested in the notion that instructors should attempt to teach to the learning styles of their students and she was receptive to the assignment that she should begin efforts to accommodate her students' styles. She remained motivated in her efforts throughout the three year study, as will be seen in more detail throughout this section.

Upon reflection on her own education, she remembers being taught solely through the traditional lecture method; she recalls no time during her primary, secondary, or

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[1] All ages in this study are approximate as most Ethiopians do not have record of their actual date of birth.
[2] The number of years of experience at the *beginning* of this study.

tertiary education when a lesson was delivered in any way other than through a lecture. She was never assigned to a group for any part of a lesson, nor was she ever asked to discuss any concept with a classmate or do any activity with the material that was being presented through lecture. During our second interview, I asked her to describe the methods that she uses that might help different types of learners, she responded that she had never used any methods other than the traditional lecture method and that she had never considered teaching to the learning styles of her students. The following quote explains why:

> If I don't know what the learning styles of my students are and I didn't really even know anything about learning styles in the first place, how can I teach in a way that my students like because of their learning styles?

The VAK styles questionnaire revealed the she has a strong preference of kinesthetic learning style (54), followed by visual (49) and auditory (43). See scoring procedures in Appendix B. When asked what she had learned about herself as a learner during the first semester of the HDP she responded:

> I learnt about myself that I mostly prefer to conceptualize and have insight on a topic with help or discussion with others! I also know that I like to proceed with practical tasks very soon and see their ends very soon, rather than step by step, gradual development of the tasks' components. I like to be given some kind of task to activate my thinking.

After the first three sessions of Module II: Accommodating students' learning styles through the use of Active Learning Methods, I conducted my third round of interviews and observations. I asked Mulu what she had learned about her teaching style in relation to the learning styles of her students, she replied:

> I've learnt that I waste many opportunities that could have been turned active to help learners who have different learning styles and make the coming lesson expected eagerly without boredom and with enthusiasm even to do more.

During the same interview, I also explicitly asked how she thought her students'

preferred learning style relates to her teaching style, she responded:

> *Unfortunately, they don't relate much in the actual sense because I have only been lecturing. But with using active learning methods they will [relate] because more of my students can become engaged in the lesson. Kinesthetic is good for everyone. But I used to feel it was a luxury.*

At the end of the first year of this study (also the end of the HDP) in our fifth

interview, I asked Mulu what it means "to teach to the learning style preferences of her

students". She commented:

> *It's a method of teaching which facilitates students' learning by making them responsible for their own learning through varieties of activities which helps students develop discovering of critical thinking abilities through sharing ideas and knowledges. When students can do more than sit and listen to me, when they are given practical tasks…then I am teaching to their styles.*

We also discussed ways that she has tried to make her teaching more student centered

and active in order to better reach a wider variety of her students' learning styles during

this academic year. She listed the following three things that she has done in an effort to

change her teaching style:

> 1. *I make students evaluate the teaching-learning process and made modifications on it. This can help for reflective styles. But, unfortunately, they got "tensioned" because it was unfamiliar to them.*
> 2. *I've tried to make the lecture interactive, even if group only through presentations. This can reach all that learning styles that I know of.*
> 3. *I've made my lesson to be perceived easily by students. Formerly I do not bother about using simple, slow English, but [now] I do!*

Mulu's Actual Practice

In our first interview, as mentioned above, Mulu revealed that she teaches

primarily through the traditional lecture method. The first time I observed Mulu teaching

her Teaching Methodologies class, she opted to try one of the active learning methods

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presented to her in the HDP. The choice of her first attempt at using a "new to her"

method was *brainstorming* (see Appendix E). At the beginning of her class rather than

diving into her lecture as usual, she divided the class into groups and gave them all a

topic (the same topic) to briefly discuss; she asked them to generate as many ideas related

to the topic as they could within an 8 minute time limit, groups were instructed to write

the ideas they had generated down as quickly as possible and share them with the class by

posting their ideas on the blackboard. Mulu was excited to share her experience at the

end of class:

> *This is the first time for me to see my students become engaged to such a high
> level in my classroom. They all eagerly participated, even the females [became]
> involved. I think with this brainstorming I can really make opportunities for all
> the learning styles. I used to think that if I didn't lecture the full period that I
> wasn't doing good…now I think that my students, if I make them work, can be
> more interested by [addressing] their own style.*

Mulu planned and implemented a new method into each of the four consecutive

observations I conducted in her classrooms for the remainder of the first year of this

study. She maintained her high level of enthusiasm and excitement about what she was

doing and exclaimed about the learning that she could not only see but *feel* taking place

in her classroom.

In our fourth interview, I asked Mulu to tell me about one method that she had

learned about in the HDP that she had incorporated into her teaching that she thought

really made a difference in whether or not her student's learning style preferences were

being attended to. She shared the following:

> *The method that I liked from the HDP class and have been using during the
> semester is one that keeps candidates bodily active, i.e, those who have similar
> ideas go to one side, they discuss, they write something, they present it, and they
> come back to their original position with a mind that has not gone dizzy. I intend
> to keep using it this semester by making students read the chapter [about*

Ethiopian curriculum] which they can get ample info about by themselves, and make them present it turn by turn actively focusing on questions to be posed by students.

When I asked Mulu to share a reflection of her lessons taught through the traditional lecture method in comparison to her lessons planned explicitly to address the learning style preferences of her students, she reflected:

I learnt something from the lesson, i.e., students cannot be always at their highest of attention, so it will be necessary sometimes to make them more active so to increase their attention capability. Even [though] all learning methods are not always applicable in my context, I learnt that it is not fair for my students when I take the [entire] class period for myself. When I implement lecture only, I cannot keep their interest because I am not teaching according to their styles.

In further probing Mulu's thoughts for methods that she could use, but hadn't tried yet, to help different types of learners more, her comments are related to a section that she was teaching on "setting objectives" as part of good teaching practice:

I know that there is unlimited possibility for what I can do…I could have made students think of objectives as examples to each level instead of giving my own. I could have used group discussion which tries to discuss on one level at a time (something like buzz-group) and listen to and modify their explanations and examples at last. Balloon game could have been used successfully in ranking good objectives.

Mulu's Beliefs about the Importance of Learning Styles in an EFL Context

Mulu maintained an open and positive attitude toward the HDP's challenge for instructors to adapt their teaching in ways that would address the learning style preferences of their students. At the beginning of this study, she viewed the task of creating a better match between her teaching style and her students' learning style preferences as important, relevant, and, for the most part, practical. She persisted in her efforts, without falter, in each class that I observed, to change and adapt; evaluate and reflect; and change and adapt again her teaching styles in order that she might

continuously come closer to effectively accommodating the learning styles of her

students.

At the end of the study, I asked Mulu to reflect on how her teaching had changed

over the course of the past three years and as a result of her experience in the HDP. She

said:

> *It [the HDP] challenged me to think about what I do; it is changing behavior of*
> *teachers in our university. We are moving from teacher-centered to student–*
> *centered and this helps us to respond to the learning styles of our students. Not*
> *only are we are much better lesson planners now, my teaching now produces a*
> *positive response from students. I used to use only blackboard and chalk; now I*
> *use students.*

She added:

> *I have found the new methods that involve the students' learning styles so*
> *interesting and am able to apply it in the classroom. I used to stick to one way of*
> *teaching and now I try different techniques involving the students more.   The*
> *HDP is also useful to think about ourselves – who am I, where am I going, what*
> *have I learnt, what can I do? Self assessment is useful at enabling us to see*
> *ourselves. I used to lecture…now I think about what my students need.*

Mulu's concluding remarks on why learning styles are important show that she

has truly developed an appreciation for considering the style preferences of her students.

She came a long way from not really knowing what learning styles were in the beginning

of this study, to fully committing herself to adapting her teaching style in order to reduce

the mismatch between teaching styles and student's learning style preferences at BDU.

Her professional development can be seen in her final quote:

> *Giving attention to learning styles is the one and only method of teaching to address*
> *all the students in the class. Trying to teach in such a way that there is provision for*
> *individual [style] differences will make the teaching learning process more effective.*
> *Students learn at their own pace and according to their own preferences; we must*
> *help students to understand things and tackle challenges through different means. It*
> *[attending to students' learning styles] not only keeps the interest of the student, it*
> *also fosters student participation; boosts the confidence of students for independent*
> *learning; it improves time management and increases productivity/efficiency.*

Case Study 2: Desta

Discovering the Concept of Learning Styles

Desta is a 42 year old instructor with an MA in English; he has nine years of experience teaching "Spoken English" at Bahir Dar University. He first learned of learning styles and the importance of considering the learning styles of his students during his MA studies. Although he was aware of the value of learning styles in a theoretical sense, he had not altered his teaching methods to try to accommodate the learning styles of his students in any way before he began the Higher Diploma Program. Desta agreed with the notion that efforts to address the learning styles should be made; he felt that this idea was certainly relevant; he struggled, however, to find the confidence that eventually led him to believe that such efforts are actually practical in an Ethiopian EFL context as will be seen in greater detail below.

Upon reflection on his own education, he remembers most of his teachers using the traditional lecture method. His English classes, however, during two years of his high school education were delivered by British and Canadian VSO (Volunteer Services Overseas) volunteers. He recalls those two particular classes as being "more lively" and "more fun" than all of his other classes throughout his entire education. He acknowledges that that was probably due in part to those teachers being "ferenji" (foreigners) which certainly had an appealing novelty. He further notes, though, that he was addressed by those instructors by his name—something that never occurred in his Ethiopian taught classes—and that he was required to "participate" or actually speak in those classes, was unlike in other classes. He was not aware of the concept of learning

styles at such a young age, but upon reflection, he thinks that perhaps one of the reasons

he particularly enjoyed those two years of VSO taught English class is because he was

allowed to get out of his seat and "move around a bit" during some of the activities—

something that was definitely not allowed in his other classes. He now believes that that

was most likely so attractive to him because his kinesthetic learning styles preference was

being met.

During our first interview, I asked him to describe the methods that he uses that

might help different types of learners, he admitted that apart from students practicing

their English in pairs, he had generally considered teaching to the learning styles of his

students an "impractical endeavor given his situation." This notion is further illustrated

in the following quote:

> *I know that it is important to try to accommodate a variety of learning styles in*
> *the teaching learning process but due to large class sizes, time constraints, I*
> *found [it] difficult to address some of them—especially the kinesthetic types…my*
> *class revolves around students practicing scripted conversations with one another*
> *in pairs. I know that this kind of learning environment is better for getting at*
> *their learning styles than their other [subject specific] classes, at the same time, I*
> *know that there is a lot more that I could be doing to make my classes better for*
> *my students' individual learning styles if the conditions were ideal.*

He reluctantly admitted that he had never really considered what the VSO volunteer

teachers did in the classroom, even though those classes were also large, as something

upon which he could model his own teaching styles. He enjoyed those classes when he

attended them, but he was not necessarily envisioning himself as becoming an English

teacher while attending those classes. He put forth that perhaps being "inundated" by the

lecture method from *all* other teachers throughout his education, made that—a more

traditional lecture method—a more practical reality to him than any other teaching style.

The VAK styles questionnaire revealed that Desta's strongest style preference is also kinesthetic (51), followed by visual (43) and auditory (39). When asked what he had learned about himself as a learner during the first semester of the HDP he responded:

> *I have learned that I prefer a variety of teaching methods to be used in the classroom. I know that when the same method is used day in and day out that I lose interest and am not nearly as stimulated as I am when I am kept somewhat on the edge of my seat in terms of wondering what might be coming next. I knew that I was not an auditory learner because I can't learn new vocabularies just by hearing them said, but I had no idea that my learning style was so heavily dependent on kinesthetic activities.*

After the first three sessions of Module II: Accommodating students' learning styles through the use of Active Learning Methods, I conducted my third round of interviews and observations. I asked Desta what he had learned about his teaching style in relation to the learning styles of his students, he replied:

> *I try to vary my methods of teaching and give opportunities to students to reflect what they feel about the lesson. But I think that just by using different methods like group/pair discussion, debate, etc isn't fair in terms of really reaching all the learning styles in my classrooms.*

During the same interview, I also explicitly asked how he thought his students' preferred learning styles relate to his teaching style, he responded:

> *Actually, I do already know enough about learning styles to know that my teaching style does not reach all of my students' first choice of learning style. Again, I think that my classes do better at relating to my student's styles than most of their other classes, maybe that's why I don't take the effort to change in ways that I know would be better. At least my students get to speak during class, that's more than can be said for classes in other subjects, but I do still need my own amount of time for lecturing specific concepts.*

At the end of the first year of this study (also the end of the HDP) in our fifth interview, I asked Desta what it means "to teach to the learning style preferences of his students". He commented:

Before I began each courses [in the second semester of this year], I usually tried to study my students learning styles through questionnaire. Then, I design different tasks that address the students learning preferences. In this way, I attempt to fulfill their needs as much as possible. I still meet problems, however, because I have five sections of roughly 80 students per section. How can you expect me to teach to the learning styles of 400 individuals?

In our interviews, I reiterated to Desta that in suggesting that teachers adapt their teaching styles in ways that may better accommodate the learning styles of their students, the HDP was not necessarily suggesting that instructors must use individualized instruction. Rather, by doing more in the classroom than solely lecturing (i.e., adding various types of activities) students with styles other than auditory and visual could also have their needs met to a greater degree. Later, we discussed ways that he has tried to adapt his teaching in order to better reach a wider variety of his students' learning styles during this academic year. His focus in effort to change his teaching style has been:

The main thing I did was to make my own research on my own students to see how their learning styles are. I found the same thing that you did, more or less. I think that my classes already address auditory learners through the use of audio cassette activities. The kinesthetic style, from the beginning, until now causes a problem for me because of the fixed seating in my room.

Desta's Actual Practice

In our second interview, as mentioned above, Desta revealed that the vast majority of his class time still involved him lecturing the students; however, some time was allowed each week of his 3 credit course (meeting in one hour slots on three days a week) for a) rehearsing scripted conversations in pairs, and b) listening to audio cassettes and completing gap-fill exercises. By the third time I observed Desta teaching his Spoken English class, at the end of the first year of this study, he was willing to try one of the methods that had been presented in the HDP in place of his usual lecturing. He decided to use *Spider diagram* and *Gallery walk* (see Appendix F) with the objectives for

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his students to be able to define idioms and to distinguish idioms from figures of speech and proverbs. Students, using a model as a guide, created their own spider diagram with "idiom" and "proverbs" as central definitions, surrounded by examples. They had been pre-assigned to come to class with some example of idioms and proverbs in English. They worked in groups of fours. Students then posted their work on the walls and had 10 minutes to walk around viewing the gallery and evaluate their peers' work. Finally, Desta led a whole class discussion and corrected the few errors that had been made. He was pleased to comment on the success of the activity at the end of class:

> *That was definitely more successful, more fun, and more engaging for the students than the lecture that I have given on that topic in the past! I know, by seeing that kind of participation, that students' learning styles were reached by not having to sit and just jot down notes from my lecture.*

After observing Desta successfully incorporate "new" methods into his teaching on three following occasions, he offered that he had realized:

> *…that I can better reach my students best styles in two ways: by giving roles and assigning tasks in group activities, and the second strategy is by showing the students different strategies they can use according to their styles. I am adapting myself with different teaching methodologies that can entertain the different learning styles by using different methods of teaching and using a variety of resource materials and teaching aids.*

I asked Desta to tell me about one method that he had learned about in the HDP that he had incorporated into his teaching that he thought really made a difference in whether or not his student's learning style preferences were being attended to. He shared the following:

> *A fruitful thing from the students' point of view is that now they are working and trying to express themselves as before they never had the opportunity to talk and use the blackboard. I have learned that assigning students to do some of the work that I used to do on the blackboard is very helpful for them. It not only gets at more kinds of learning styles, but they need to practice…they will all be teachers one day and need to develop their skill [in using the blackboard effectively]. They*

will be very strong students when they finish at college because of this new method in my classroom.

He added:

I really benefited from interviewing my students about their own learning styles– it has informed my practice and it informed me of students needs and interests. It has motivated me to solve barriers of communication between my students' understanding and my presentation of a lesson. I am encouraged that by trying to give due attention to my students and their learning styles, I can bring about change in self confidence and achievement.

Desta's Beliefs about the Importance of Learning Styles in an EFL Context

At the end of the study, I asked Desta to reflect on how his teaching had changed over the course of the past three years and as a result of his experience in the HDP and his efforts thereafter. He said:

I came a long way! There is a change in my teaching particularly in attention to learning styles. I have been trying to make students learn [by] giving them different materials and topics for unscripted discussion in groups and pairs. The other change is on self reflection. I am trying to see myself after each period. I try to write small notes and remember what I have been doing, what questions I have raised, how the students participated, and what was the students reaction to the teaching learning process. I am planning my teaching now for next session based on my self reflection.

According to Desta's concluding remarks at the end of the study on the importance of learning styles, his initial skepticism in terms of *practicality* has fallen way to a new dedication to his ability to improve the quality of education he provides. This can be seen in the following quote:

If we are able to present our lessons according to our students' needs, we can increase their motivation for the lesson; in addition, we can also maximize their level of understanding and ability to speak in English. Using methods that reach different learning style preferences gives equal opportunity to all students in the class. Furthermore, students learn more if I organize my lessons in such a way that students with different learning styles can be satisfied and so become engaged in the lesson being taught.

Case Study 3: Fanta

Discovering the Concept of Learning Styles

Fanta is a 48 year old male Chemistry instructor with 15 years of teaching experience. He holds a Master's in Chemistry from Addis Ababa University. He first learned about learning styles and the importance of considering the learning styles of his students during the Higher Diploma Program. At the beginning of this study he unabashedly forwarded his displeasure in being asked to change his teaching methods for any reason. He had been teaching without problem for fifteen years and saw no point in altering his styles so that he might better accommodate the learning styles of his students. In our early interviews, he drew attention again and again to the fact that no teacher had ever concerned himself with Fanta's learning styles and he had managed to earn a Master's degree with high marks. Why, then, should he bother himself with the learning styles of his students? He was, after all, a lecturer. His job was to give lectures in Chemistry; his students' jobs were to take notes and learn.

Upon reflection on his own education, he remembers almost always feeling that he knew more than his teachers. He recalls virtually all of his lessons being delivered through the traditional lecture method; he did participate in an occasional lab session, but only on a very limited and "crude" basis. He remembers never feeling challenged. He listened to the lectures and very seldom took notes; he simply remembered what was said (or more often read) during the lecture and that was how he learned. During our second interview, I asked him to describe the methods that he uses that might help different types of learners. He responded that apart from students' lab sessions, he only lectured. He

boldly claimed that he did not really find it necessary to try to accommodate the learning

styles of his students in the following quote:

> *Call it Darwinism. I lecture. The strong students succeed; the weak students fail. It's simple. From my standpoint, it is not my job to* help *the students. My job is to provide them with the necessary information to learn the subject. They should adapt themselves, if they can't…maybe university is not the place for them.*

The VAK learning styles questionnaire revealed that Fanta's strongest style

preference is auditory (53), followed by visual (41) and kinesthetic (37). Unlike the other

three case studies presented in this study, Fanta shows quite a strong auditory learning

style preference. When asked what he had learned about himself as a learner during the

first semester of the HDP he responded:

> *I am strongly an auditory learner and I do not like to reflect. All the "reflective activities" in the handbook have become tedious work for me. I like to be provided concrete, black and white information—give me that and I can learn something.*

After the first three sessions of Module II: Accommodating students' learning

styles through the use of Active Learning Methods, I conducted my third round of

interviews and observations. I asked Fanta what he had learned about his teaching style

in relation to the learning styles of his students, he replied:

> *It seems that if my students have strong auditory learning style [preference] as your study found…then by my lecturing, I am meeting their needs.*

During the same interview, I also explicitly asked how he thought his students' preferred

learning styles relate to his teaching style, he responded:

> *It is obviously time taking and in this university where you have maybe 70 students in a class, it even is not possible to know your students' names let alone knowing their learning style. The problem is with kinesthetic learners because they need to move which needs spaces, time, and the like. From what I have seen so far, I think that most of the methods being promoted [by the HDP] are designed for social sciences, not natural sciences.*

At the end of the first year of this study (also the end of the HDP) in our fifth interview, I asked Fanta what it means "to teach to the learning style preferences of his students". He commented:

> *I have recently started trying to be more receptive to the idea that even natural science instructors can, as you say, teach to the styles of our students. It is a new concept and I do not fully see why my labs don't count enough [in terms of addressing learning style preferences] without me being forced to changed my method from lecture to something I am unfamiliar to.*

Although Fanta revealed his skepticism without reserve from the beginning of this study, something about the idea of altering his teaching styles in ways that might lessen the mismatch with regard to student's learning style preferences intrigued him enough to volunteer to continue as a participant in the longer term of this study. It was not until our seventh interview (much later in the study than the other instructors) that we discussed whether he had tried to make his teaching more student centered in order to better reach a wider variety of his students' learning styles. His effort to change his teaching style became focused on increasing the participation of students; he began to see that if his students were at least asking their own questions that that would be a step in the right direction:

> *My teaching is now much more student centered and there is much more student participation. At least I acknowledge the students as individuals now. I used to lecture and then ask, "Do you have any questions?" "No ? OK", then I would leave the class. Now they ask many questions and if they say, "no" I ask, "why not?"*

Fanta's Actual Practice

In our first interview, as mentioned above, Fanta revealed that until recently he taught by using the traditional lecture method. The first time I observed Fanta teaching his Mathematics II class, he very hesitantly agreed to try two of the "new" methods that

had been presented in the HDP. He decided to try *brainstorming* and *ranking* (see

Appendix E and G) in his class on "atom size." His lesson plan showed that he intended

to first allow students to come up with a definition of "atomic size" in pairs and then to

give small groups sets of elements to rank; compare their rankings with the periodic

table; and finally, students would present their rankings to the class. In our pre-

observation discussion, I praised him for his efforts in planning this lesson that appeared

would do more for his students in terms of their learning style preferences than his usual

lecture. Unfortunately, his lesson was a "flop." His instructions did not come across to

the students nearly as clearly as they appeared on his lesson plan; perhaps the lack of

prefacing the activity (e.g., "today we are going to do things differently.") in combination

with simple unfamiliarity on Fanta's part were contributors to the "chaos" that resulted

from the students being instructed to "begin brainstorming." His frustrated comments in

our post-observation discussion included:

> *This is what happens when I ask my students to play games…they don't take such*
> *activities seriously…they expect to be lectured and when I don't [lecture them]*
> *they don't take me seriously.*

This experience resulted in Fanta's refusal to try to use any methods other than lecture in

the second and third observations I conducted with him.

It was not until my fourth observation with him, after three interviews/coaching

sessions, that he was ready to try again. This time he opted to use *crossover* (see

Appendix H) with a different Chemistry class on the topic "classification of matter." The

objective of the *crossover* was as a warm-up for a lesson in which students would learn to

classify matter into subgroups. First, the class was divided into ten groups of about eight

students each. They then were instructed to write as many examples of matter, as quickly

as possible, as they could. Then one person from each group moved counter clockwise to the next group so that the newly formed groups could share/compare ideas. This process was repeated twice before three students were selected (or volunteered) to present their work (sets of matter) to the class as a whole.

This time during our pre-observation discussion not only did I praise Fanta again for finally becoming willing to try something new again, but we also rehearsed giving the instructions for this activity. In addition, Fanta and I agreed (as had been repeatedly stressed in the HDP) that the students might benefit in receiving some kind of explanation and/or prefacing before the instructions were given; something about *why* they were going to be given such an out-of-the-ordinary activity to carry out. After the lesson, Fanta conceded that there might be more to teaching than just lecturing as his words below indicate:

> *I admit that this kind of game playing was not attractive to me before. Today I could see the classroom as capable of [allowing students to use their preferred] learning style. Today they moved from their location, they spoke to classmates, and they made visual aids regarding matter. I have not thought this kind of game to be educational before now.*

I later asked Fanta to tell me about something that he had gained from the HDP that he had incorporated into his teaching that he thought really made a difference in whether or not his student's learning style preferences were being attended to. He shared the following:

> *I began to use different visual teaching aids to try to satisfy the visual students and I use methods such as crossover small group discussion so that the kinesthetic and auditory learners are addressed. I have also learnt to assess my students; I use more assignments, group work, exercises, reports of fieldwork and laboratory sessions – not just two examinations—like before.*

When I asked Fanta which ideas from the HDP he thought might be plausible for

him in the future, he commented:

> *As a teacher educator, I will try to identify the different learning styles in my*
> *classroom and then I will also try to design various active learning methods as*
> *per the demand of each learning style, then I will implement it accordingly.*

When I asked Fanta to share a reflection of his lessons taught through the

traditional lecture method in comparison to his lessons planned explicitly to address the

learning style preferences of his students, he reflected:

> *Using independent learning, groups discussion, allowing the students to talk more*
> *than me…this is all a whole new game for me, but I can begin to see the*
> *results…my students are more motivated, interested, and have higher levels of*
> *commitment than they did during my lectures.*

Fanta's Beliefs about the Importance of Learning Styles in an EFL Context

Fanta was the least receptive of the four participant instructors at the beginning of

this study to the assignment of adapting his teaching styles in ways that would allow him

to begin to consider the learning style preferences of his students. While the other

instructor participants readily and willingly made great efforts to change their teaching

styles by implementing methods introduced in the HDP, Fanta took a little longer to

become convinced that such efforts were really necessary and, more importantly,

practical in his context.

At the end of the study, I asked him to reflect on how his teaching had changed

over the course of the past three years and as a result of his experience in the HDP and

his efforts thereafter. He showed a tremendous change in the following comments:

> *You know that at first I thought that the ideas [of accommodating the learning*
> *styles of students] could not be applied in Ethiopia. But I have changed. I used to*
> *not give much thought to methods; I just prepared lecture notes and lectured from*
> *them. But the HDP made me think differently about my approach, which is*
> *important. Before I used to express all things myself to the students, I simply told*

them what I thought they needed to know… I never had the students express things themselves, as I was never exposed to this kind of thing. It means that I ignored their capabilities and thought it was only me that had the authority to speak in the class. It was not teaching, it was like a riddle. I simply confused them and then left them to work things out themselves. I did not check their understanding. It is a good change for me. Now I have a smooth relationship with my students. All the students can express themselves and share ideas. I am also becoming more creative. I realize now that you don't need expensive teaching aids you can simply use low cost local materials. I graduated in Chemistry; this training [the HDP] has been the best opportunity for me to have knowledge of ways for me to be able to address the learning styles of my students.

Fanta added his opinion on the importance of learning styles in the comments below:

Since we know that there exists individual differences we must establish a fertile environment that can enhance students' style of learning—this is of paramount importance. When the needs of the students with different learning styles are met, the students will be more interested to learn. They will be also active in the teaching learning process. Effective learning is not a one method result; rather, it is the result of the cumulative effects of many methods.

Case Study 4: Mogus

Discovering the Concept of Learning Styles

Mogus is a male with 31 years of age; he is a mathematics instructor with 3 years of experience teaching at the university. His highest degree is a Bachelor's degree in Mathematics. He was first introduced to the concept of learning styles and the importance of considering the learning styles of his students in the Higher Diploma Program. Given the initial assignment to begin to change his teaching style so that his method of delivery would come closer to accommodating the learning style preferences of his students, he felt excited and challenged. Mogus was the most eager of the four case studies to embrace this challenge with the utmost of his capabilities.

Upon reflection on his own education, he remembers being bored; he recalls all of his education being delivered through a monotone lecture during which he was expected to compulsively copy problems from the blackboard into the notebook. He remembers

never even being allowed to attempt a math problem on his own before the teacher began

solving the problem on the blackboard. During our first interview, I asked him to describe

the methods that he uses that might help different types of learners, he responded that,

apart from occasionally allowing his students to attempt a problem on their own before he

provides the solution, he teaches how he was taught. He lectured and his lectures

consisted primarily of him working problems on the blackboard while his students were

expected to learn by copying the problems that he worked in front of them into their

notebooks. He sheepishly admitted that he had never considered teaching to the learning

styles of his students in the following quote:

> *Well, now that I know about learning styles being important for my students, I do*
> *not like to say that I don't ever pay attention to this [students' learning styles],*
> *but because I was never introduced to this idea before… I can say that I have not*
> *done anything for my students before in terms of their learning styles.*

The VAK styles questionnaire revealed that Mogus's strongest style preference is also

kinesthetic (45), followed by visual (41) and auditory (37). When asked what he had

learned about himself as a learner during the first semester of the HDP he responded:

> *…I have been reminded that I do not like to sit through a lecture doing nothing*
> *but copying problems or notes into my notebook. I like to be made to interact*
> *with my colleagues/classmates and I like to have some kinds of activities so that I*
> *don't just get bored from listening to one person speak for an hour…*

After the first three sessions of Module II: Accommodating students' learning

styles through the use of Active Learning Methods, I conducted my third round of

interviews and observations. I asked Mogus what he had learned about his teaching style

in relation to the learning styles of his students, he replied:

> *I have learned that students in a class have different learning styles. Hence, I ask*
> *myself, "did I consider these different learning styles before?" Hence, I*
> *convinced [myself] to look at the dominant learning style of my students and try*

to prepare myself according to that. Actually, I have to try all my best to address all the learning styles in order to make my objectives achieved.

During the same interview, I also explicitly asked how he thought his students' preferred learning styles relate to his teaching style, he responded:

Really I have found some very important new teaching methods to be used that can help to address different learning styles of students to achieve the objective. Yes! I got convinced to use always some variety in the future to help my students not suffer from the same problem that I did as a student...being bored because the teacher was not doing anything to help me in terms of my learning styles.

At the end of the first year of this study (also the end of the HDP) in our fifth interview, I asked Mogus what it means "to teach to the learning style preferences of his students". He commented:

For me, teaching with the learning styles of my students in mind involves a process oriented activity where students are active participants with full responsibility for the learning… where different active learning methods are implemented to achieve the objectives of the lesson by addressing different learning styles of students…doing more than just standing in front of the classroom and writing math problems on the board.

We also discussed ways that he has tried to make his teaching more student-centered and active in order to better reach a wider variety of his students' learning styles during this academic year. His focus in effort to change his teaching style has been:

Making students more active participants and encouraging them to take responsibility for their learning by devoting some time to discuss the idea of learning styles with my students, telling them what they are, why they are important, and why I am trying to teach them in different ways than I did before now. Also by applying different teaching methods/activities to address different learning styles of students by allowing students to be more involved.

Mogus's Actual Practice

In our first interview, as mentioned above, Mogus revealed that until recently he taught by using the traditional lecture method. The first time I observed Mogus teaching his Mathematics II class, he decided to try one of the active learning methods that had

been presented in the HDP. His first attempt to do something with his students other than

lecture involved *group problem solving* (see Appendix I). His objectives for the lesson

were for students to identify increasing and decreasing sequences; identify bonded

/unbonded sequences; and evaluate a particular sum of sequences. Instead of simply

working these problems on the board in front of the students, he divided the class into

groups of 5-6 students each, he posted the problems on the board and then let the students

work collaboratively in solving the problems. He then asked for volunteers to post and

explain their solutions on the board while their seated classmates were assigned to check

the presenters' calculations and reasoning. Mogus's pride at the end of his lesson is

apparent in his reflection:

> *Finally, I see a way to let my students move during my class without wasting time.*
> *Even [though] only four students got the chance to write on the board and present*
> *calculations, I can use this way by giving chance to different students each time.*

Much later in the first year of the study, I asked Mogus to tell me about one

method that he had learned about in the HDP that he had incorporated into his teaching

that he thought really made a difference in whether or not his student's learning style

preferences were being attended to. He shared the following:

> *Group discussion: in my course that I am teaching by now, I've tried to use*
> *group discussion. I tried to allocate each group to a certain topic to get prepared*
> *and discussed at home and one of the members of the group will present about*
> *that topic. Then after, the group will prepare not less than 3 questions that will*
> *help other groups in the class and share ideas about the question. Hence, I [have*
> *become] convinced to use group discussion together with presentation on a*
> *certain topic.*

Mogus added some other methods that he has been using which he feels help

different kinds of learners.

> *Now also I am using buzz group; it is helpful to address those who are auditory*
> *and kinesthetic; I and the students also really like jigsaw groups; it helps to*

address those who are visual and kinesthetic as well as auditory. I think I have become a facilitator for my students to [be] able to learn in their best style.

When I asked Mogus to share a reflection of his lessons taught through the traditional lecture method in comparison to his lessons planned explicitly to address the learning style preferences of his students, he reflected:

> *It is like night and day. I can remember avoiding to look at my students because I could see the boredom in their eyes. I knew that they were as bored sitting in my class as I was when I was in their seats. I have asked them to evaluate their learning and groups were presenting in a very interesting way—every group was attending the discussion. Both the teacher and the students involved actively during the period. Group presentation and discussion in groups changes positively in environment for their learning styles.*

In further probing Mogus's thoughts for methods that he uses or plans to use to help different types of learners more, he commented:

> *For auditory learners, I always use explanation of things presented; for kinesthetic there will always be group discussion and presentation of the points; for visual learners I give notes to read and/or I prepare a handout. Through planning and implementing variety of activities such as reading, writing, listening, presenting, and discussing, I use a variety of methods and available resources to make my students comfortable for the way they learn.*

Mogus's Beliefs about the Importance of Learning Styles in an EFL Context

Mogus was enthusiastic about the challenge to alter his teaching style in ways that would lessen the gap between his students' learning styles and his teaching style from the beginning of this study. He openly and willingly tried new methods, considered how those new methods were reaching the learning styles with his students, and adapted his styles based on open discussions with his students. His classes that I observed in the last year of the study revealed that the traditional lecture method had been reduced to only a fraction in his new style of teaching.

At the end of the study, I asked him to reflect on how his teaching had changed over the course of the past three years and as a result of his experience in the HDP and his efforts thereafter. He said:

> *A teacher should be like a lighted candle, teachers should be agents of change. I now focus on methodology as well as content in my [mathematics] lesson. Now when I am planning a lesson, I consider the learning styles of my students. I was convinced that there is more to teaching than just lecturing and I was convinced that my students learn much, much more when I require them to do more than copy my work from the blackboard. I, the teacher, am not the only source of knowledge; it should be knowledge exchange with students who can do better when I pay attention to their learning styles. My teaching is now quite different. Teaching to reach all learners is a new theory, but for us, actually how it is carried out…no one knew. The HDP has shown us how to do it. Now when I go to teach the curriculum I will never go back to the old way of teaching.*

Mogus firmly believes that learning styles are important to address when teaching in an EFL context because:

> *When learning styles are paid attention to, it increases the understandability of the subject. Students vary in their interest to learn—to address these needs by incorporating the different teaching styles in the lesson is important because if we approach students as individuals we will lead them to learn more. It is necessary for the teacher to learn about his/her students learning styles since there are different styles with different learning preference. The pedagogical implication of studying students' learning styles is to match the teaching style with the learning styles.*

When asked about his plans for trying to continue addressing the learning styles of his students, Mogus commented:

> *Next year I plan to learn even more about the individual learning style preferences of the students I teach. I usually try to encourage the shy and quiet students. It helps if you know about their learning styles. You can see they really like that and are more attentive next lesson if they are treated as individuals. There is a shift in position in our society. It affects the way we relate to students. I can see it in my home. I never used to even eat with my father and now my children play on my head.*

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter looks first at the learning styles of Ethiopian students at Bahir Dar University as they compare to previously conducted studies on learning style preferences in other ESL/EFL contexts. It then examines mismatch between the widely used traditional lecture method and the preferred learning styles of BDU students in light of historical methodologies, instructors' actual practices, and their beliefs. Thereafter, instructors' experiences of adapting their teaching styles in efforts to accommodate students' learning styles is discussed in terms of how their experience can play an important role in shaping future efforts of the Teacher Education System Overhaul (TESO) and the Higher Diploma Program.

Synthesis of Findings

About thirty years ago, second/foreign language researchers began calling for more of a focus on the learner in the classroom (Hosenfield, 1979). Current literature on the role of learning styles in EFL contexts tells educators to teach in ways that would best meet the learning styles preferences of their students. This command can often leave teachers, especially in developing nations with limited access to teaching materials and literature, with one glaring, yet valid, question: How? The Higher Diploma Program in Ethiopia, the context of the present study, was mandated for all university instructors five years ago by the Ministry of Education in Ethiopia to help instructors begin to answer

questions like the one above. While the HDP offers a brief overview of learning styles, provides three learning styles surveys in the HDP Handbook, and presents a list of more active/student-centered methods that should replace instructors' traditional lecture method, the HDP seems to have missed a step along the way. Before we insist that university instructors in Ethiopia address the learning style preferences of their students, we must first pause to find out more about what students' preferred learning styles actually are.

This study found that students at Bahir Dar University most strongly preferred to learn through an *auditory* mode. This is not surprising given the combination that learning style preferences are thought to be shaped, at least to some degree, by educational background (Willing, 1993), and the fact that these students have received the vast majority of their education, if not the totality, solely through the traditional lecture method. While the students (N=628) in this study reported to have the strongest preference for auditory learning, the findings also reveal that their preferences for visual and kinesthetic learning are not altogether weak; they tend to show a preference for learning through mixed styles, similar to the findings of, for example, Lesser (1976), Reid (1987), and Willing (1993).

When Bahir Dar University students' learning style preferences are viewed in relation to gender, field of study, and first language background, surprisingly, the impact of these variables is shown to have little significant difference. The VAK learning style preference questionnaire results seem to suggest that the sample in this study is fairly homogenous in terms of their learning style preferences. In terms of gender, unlike studies such as Reid (1983), Philbin *et al.,* (1995), Lincoln and Rademacher's (2006),

Sheorey (2006), Melton (1990) and Oxford (1993), yet more in line with Park (2000) and Jones *et al.* (2003), this study found no significant difference. In contrast with some studies (e.g., Jones *et al.*, 2003, Reid, 1987; Chew *et al.,* 1999) which found significant differences among students according to their field of study, the present study found students to have similar learning style preferences regardless of the department they were studying in.

Ethiopia's recent population explosion in combination with her continuous goal of developing the nation has brought increased interest in and accessibility to instruction in English; this fact, coupled with the current instructional policy requiring university instructors to accommodate the learning styles of their students, is radically changing the instructional approach in Ethiopian classrooms. We see a dramatic increase in the numbers of students being provided access to education through the English medium. Yet most teachers are ill-prepared to fulfill the needs of students learning in an EFL context. While a few instructors may have received some instruction in the methods that are thought to attend to diverse learning styles, most Ethiopian teachers, at all levels, have received little or no preparation in delivering instruction in any way other than the traditional lecture method. Even those instructors who do try to remain current with the literature in the field of current teaching methodologies, can find little research to actually guide their classroom practice in this area. The research that is available to Ethiopian instructors often leads to confusion due to the not necessarily consonant definitions of terminology in learning styles and the lack of any substantial discussion on ways to practically accommodate the learning styles of their students in the classroom. This difficulty is further exacerbated by another missing link: research suggesting learning

styles through which university students prefer to learn. Consequently, teachers in this EFL context are urgently in need of assistance and guidance to resources that will enable them to work with this new and challenging movement toward changing their instructional methods (Negash, 1997). Although the Higher Diploma Program is certainly moving in a positive direction in terms of filling that gap, this research aims to move one step further by sharing the experience of instructors who are currently actively engaged in transforming the provision of education in Ethiopia.

For decades, the prominent, if not sole, method of instruction in Ethiopia has been the traditional lecture method. The findings of this study show that students at Bahir Dar University prefer to learn through a mixed-style approach or a combination of visual, auditory, *and* kinesthetic learning modes, thus revealing a mismatch in the instructors' teaching styles and the preferred learning styles of the students. Research on student learning suggests that a lecture, even an entertaining one, is not necessarily the most efficient way of teaching in terms of reaching learners' style preferences (LeLoup & Ponterio, 1997). Despite being entertained, students may not learn nearly as effectively through receiving a lecture as they can through deeper approaches to learning. Such an approach may involve a combination of the instructors' attention to students' learning styles and the ability to employ certain communicative features (Jackson & Prosser, 1995). These qualities include the instructor's ability to interact with students in ways which encourage involvement, commitment, and interest (Bliss & Ogborn, 1977). Other important factors in matching teaching styles to learning styles include the instructor's ability to act from a student-centered position, to respect students and to treat students as individuals with a unique set of style preferences (Ramsden, 1988).

The findings of this study reveal that much of the success in implementing "new"/active learning methods designed to reach a wider array of learning style preferences appear to be directly related with the instructors' ability to a) give instructions, and b) establish open communication with their students. A classroom in which a variety of activities are used requires the instructor to relinquish at least some of her/his authority; students must necessarily begin to take some responsibility for the outcome of the lesson. This is difficult for some instructors, as seen with Fanta (Case Study 3), perhaps because the notion of an instructor as anything less than an absolute authority has been, at least until only very recently, extremely foreign. Yet when an instructor is able to clearly give the necessary instructions, as Mulu (Case Study 1) has, to actually carry out an unfamiliar method, the results are perceived as successful. Likewise, when an instructor such as Desta (Case Study 2) creates an open dialogue with students about what learning styles are and why it is important to conduct the class in ways thought to address those preferences, we see that not only are the students more receptive to participating in a new activity but that the instructors gain both confidence and achieve a sense of success.

Success or the willingness to "convert" also appeared to be determined by the outcome of the first attempts in using "new" methods. The findings of this study suggest that when the instructor is able to implement a new active learning method into her/his teaching style, that instructor, understandably, was then willing—excited even—to try out other unfamiliar methods. When the instructor did not meet relatively immediate success (e.g., Fanta), however, he became frustrated or discouraged to the point of not wanting to continue trying to work outside his comfort zone of the traditional lecture

method. The lesson that other instructors and the Higher Diploma Program can learn from this kind of experience is that adapting one's instructional strategies in order to create a more positive relationship between teaching styles and learning styles should not be expected to be accomplished immediately. This kind of change can come only through a trial-and-error process in which instructors plan a lesson which includes activities designed to stimulate learners; the instructor must then implement the plan and, thereafter, evaluate the process carefully in order that she/he might further adapt new methods to match their particular learning environment.

Implications

It is not my intention to simply report the benefits of instructors' efforts to adapt their teaching styles toward the learning styles preferences of their students in an EFL context, nor to evaluate the effectiveness of the Higher Diploma Program. Does the HDP offer all the support necessary for instructors to effectively meet the learning style preferences of their students through implementation of new-to-the-Ethiopian-educational-system active learning methods? Perhaps not. But I believe there are several implications of this study that Ethiopian educators can use in order to improve the quality of education provided in their EFL context.

To begin with, instructors must first recognize that they have the power to stretch their teaching styles in ways that meet a wider variety of their students' learning style preferences and that by doing so they play an important role in improving the quality of education in Ethiopia as urged by TESO (2003b). TEFL methodologies have long been viewed as the forerunners to teaching methodologies employed in other fields. TEFL instructional practices can inform educators teaching in fields other than EFL about how

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to more effectively provide education in EFL contexts. Given that students are studying in a context in which EFL is the medium of instruction, all classes at Bahir Dar University from social sciences to natural sciences could benefit from using, at least to some degree, TEFL methodologies such as altering teaching styles to reach a wider variety of learning styles by attending to the preferences of students. Findings from this study should serve as a glimpse into the process of how instructors can begin to improve the quality of education they provide in the practical sense.

As the participants of this study demonstrated, the concept of learning style preferences in their EFL context is relatively new. The fact that students learn in different ways and the possibility that instructors can adapt their instructional modes has come both as a surprise and a relief to many educators at BDU. Instructors whose previous education differed radically from the ways they are now being encouraged to teach in the Higher Diploma Program may benefit particularly from this deeper understanding of learning styles, styles assessment instruments, and experience with alternative teaching styles that will help them function better as teachers in their university classrooms. Moreover, the deeper understanding and use of different teaching styles by the instructors, as well as the awareness of individual learning styles by the students, may further influence success in the classroom.

The findings show that while instructors may generally agree that it is an important and worthwhile endeavor to address the learning styles of their students, the concern of *practicality* is a very real worry for many instructors who are now being directed to change their approach in the classroom. This is a finding that must be addressed in the Higher Diploma Program and in all professional development efforts

concerning the issue of learning styles that instructors are required to engage in once they have completed the HDP. By listening to the voices of concerned, yet willing, instructors facing this new challenge, we can see the need for redressing the approach of the HDP in its push for the learning styles of students to be addressed. Not only does this finding point to the need for a continued and improved open forum for discussion and further research on what the learning style preferences of students actually are, but it should also highlight the need for the HDP to create the space within the program to provide practical solutions to the concern of practicality. As seen in each of the case studies, instructors commonly fear that the notion of accommodating students' learning style preferences may be impractical in their context given the large class sizes, lack of resources, etc. Although this fear may be a hindrance to instructors' efforts in the beginning stages of addressing the learning style preferences, that fear is also shown to subside through practice and building the confidence to experiment with change. This experience, until now, has not received attention in the HDP. The experience of the instructors described in this research, then, should serve as an important reminder that no one should expect the teaching styles of instructors to completely and successfully change immediately. However, in viewing some of the successes that are presented in each of the case studies, we can see that with determination and dedication even large class size and lack of resources—often viewed as obstacles—can be overcome.

Limitations

The research reported here was conducted in the natural environment of the participants over a three year period; my being in the environment afforded me opportunities to conduct multiple interviews and observations with each of the primary participants. While interviewing and observing participants on multiple occasions provided me with a plethora of thick data, there was certainly much that I missed in relation to their experience of accommodating the learning style preferences of their students during the majority of their classes that I did not observe. A much richer description of each case study could have resulted from more frequent observations of the participants throughout the course of each academic year. Furthermore, my sample did not include participants who flat out reject the Higher Diploma Program and its efforts to bring attention to students' learning style preferences, and such instructors certainly do exist at Bahir Dar University; nor did the study involve instructors who are already consistently, successfully, and even eloquently—perhaps due to their experience in the HDP in its first two years running—meeting the learning style preferences of their students through a variety of instructional strategies. As a result, in the four case studies presented in this research, we see somewhat of a middle-of-the-road instructor without hearing the experience of instructors who fall at the more extreme ends of the spectrum. While I believe there is much to be learned from the participants who chose to participate and what they chose to share, the data must be viewed within the context they were gathered. Additionally, students' experience in relation to the change they feel in the classroom as their instructors adapt their teaching styles would certainly have added a rich dimension to this study. By doing so, I might have been better able to analyze how

well students' learning styles preferences were actually accommodated by their instructors' efforts.

Also of importance here is the fact that research that identifies and measures perceptual learning styles relies primarily on self-reporting questionnaires by which students select their preferred learning styles (Dunn, Dunn, & Price 1979; Kolb 1976) which may not be completely reliable. In addition to the problem of the complexity of identifying learning styles, Corbett and Smith (1984) examine the problem of the reliability of such learning style instruments. Their study showed that individual variation tended to be consistent and, therefore, suggestive of external reliability but that group variation lacked consistency and, therefore, tended to be less reliable. Along the same lines, Gregorc (1979) lists three shortcomings of existing self-assessment instruments: (a) The instruments are exclusive (i.e., they focus on certain variables); (b) the students may not self-report accurately; and (c) the students have adapted for so long that they may report on adapted preferences. Finally, McLaughlin (1981), in discussing the problems of analyzing inventory data, states that research has "tended to identify people on the basis of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or IQ, rather than functional characteristics such as cognitive style, motivation, and temperament. Perhaps the most important future development is the determination of those functional characteristics that, interacting with specific treatments, influence learning" (p. 345). For all of these reasons, both teachers and students involved in identifying and using information on learning styles should certainly be aware that no single learning styles assessment tool can be used to answer all the questions about how students prefer to learn or how instructors should teach.

The VAK learning styles questionnaire used in this study could have been adapted to strengthen its reliability. As previously explained in the instrumentation, however, I chose to use the VAK learning styles questionnaire as it appears in the Higher Diploma Program's Handbook for the sake of availability, accessibility, and applicability; at the same time, I chose not to alter it because I did not want to send the message that it was "not good enough" or that the instructors could not/should not use it with their students as it is for fear of perpetuating the myth that attending to the students' learning style preferences is an impractical endeavor in the Ethiopian context.

Although this study and the questionnaire used in this study are not solely focused on the teaching of English as a Foreign Language, this study is inextricably linked to our field in that it takes place in an EFL context where English is the medium of instruction. TEFL has been seen as one that has guided or been a forerunner of pedagogical practices for other fields; therefore, it makes sense to view the ways in which education is provided in an EFL context through a TEFL lens—that is using some TEFL based assumptions (e.g., learning styles deserve the attention of teachers and awareness of students) may be a way to improve the quality of education being provided in Ethiopia.

There are, of course, dangers in the misuse of learning style assessment, diagnosis, and prescription. First, turning questionnaire results into stereotypes used to pigeonhole individuals or cultural groups denies students the opportunity to develop fully. Moreover, the variables that affect learning in general education, and in second language learning in particular, are complex. A multiplicity of interacting factors must be taken into account: the compensating role of motivation, the nature of the learning task, the relationship between teacher and student, and other situational variables (Doyle &

Rutherford, 1984). In short, learning style preferences of students cannot be the sole basis for designing instruction (Gregorc, 1979a).

Suggestions for further research

In general, the Higher Diploma Program has good intentions, yet it is a poorly-studied form of educational reform (Alemayu, 2006). The program targets many important areas for improvement in university instruction without providing the necessary background for some of its components (e.g., addressing the learning styles of university students) to realistically come to fruition (Mazrui, 2003). While this study provided an in-depth look at the experience of four university instructors and their efforts to adapt their teaching styles in ways that would meet a broader range of learning style preferences, it would be meaningful to continue to study instructors' experiences across the country in order to draw fair comparisons among them.

Additionally, some Higher Diploma Graduates are now successfully implementing a variety of instructional strategies that do accommodate learning style preferences better than the traditional lecture method. These instructors' progressive efforts should be studied from the perspectives of the students, the instructors themselves, and the university departments. For example, more research should be conducted adding the students' experience to the framework to gain a clearer picture of what really happens to their learning when their preferred learning styles are addressed as opposed to when their learning style preferences are not given any attention.

Finally, this study focused on only four instructors each from a different department within the university. It would therefore be interesting to look for trends

based on fields of study/departments. Are instructors and students from social science backgrounds somehow more inclined, as seems plausible by opinions relayed by HDP candidates, to use and accept new methods in order to reach a wider variety of learning styles? It also seems relevant to investigate further whether instructors new to teaching are more easily able to adapt their teaching to incorporate methods that might accommodate a variety of learning styles. Perhaps less experienced instructors are more open to using unfamiliar methods.

Recommendations

This study does not try to argue that Ethiopian instructors should strive for completely individualized instruction; that would be an impractical goal, especially given the extremely large class sizes in which instructors teach. It does suggest, however, that educators at all levels can and should adapt their teaching to better meet the learning style preferences of the majority of their students.

Recommendations for instructors. Friedman and Alley (1984) suggest that teacher guidance can initially motivate students to identify and utilize their preferred learning styles and to take deliberate advantage of those preferences. If teachers can show students the variety and versatility of learning styles by providing experiences in different teaching styles, the resulting awareness and expansion of student learning styles may better allow students to meet the demands of their tertiary education (Grasha, 1972).

Thus, one goal of instruction could be to help students identify and assess their individual learning styles. The Higher Diploma Program advocates action research, in addition to attention to students' learning styles, as one of the program's major components. This aspect of the program could create an ideal platform for instructors to

overlap requirements of the program by simultaneously conducting research on and addressing their students' learning styles. Another goal should be allowing students to sample unfamiliar teaching and learning styles. Indeed, a teacher who can "purposefully exhibit a wide range of teaching styles is potentially able to accomplish more than a teacher whose repertoire is relatively limited" (Smith & Renzulli, 1984, p. 49). Another achievable goal for BDU instructors is to continuously devise alternative instructional situations to accommodate the variations in learning styles that may exist in a classroom. Of course, designing and implementing such curricular alternatives require skills in a variety of teaching styles as well as the ability to manage the complexities of such a classroom; continuous support for these endeavors should be provided through the Higher Diploma Program's continuous professional development committee.

Instructors should also be constantly reminded that students can enhance their learning power by identifying style areas in which they feel less comfortable, working on the development of their weaker style preferences and thus, creating new opportunities to foster their intellectual growth (Eliason in Kang, 1999). Similarly, teachers can identify strong style patterns in their classes and make effective use of such information by devising lesson plans which accommodate individual learning style preferences (Wyss, 2002).

Instructors may feel burdened by the above recommendations and ask: "How can we do all that and still get through the syllabus?" Felder (1993) offers some very practical advice as follows: put most of the material usually written on the board into handouts, go through the handouts quickly in class, pausing occasionally to allow time for thinking and formulating questions and use the considerable class time saved for activities like those

suggested in the Higher Diploma Program. By not spending the entire class period

frantically writing an entire lecture on the blackboard, you may create the opportunity to

implement a variety of activities thought to address your students' learning styles and at

the same time notice a consequent gain in quantity and quality of the resulting learning.

A final suggestion is to talk to students about their learning styles; create an open

dialog in which you can explain why your teaching style may be something like they

have never experienced before. Many of them have been coping with mismatches

between their learning style and their instructors' teaching styles during their entire

educational experience and attributing their difficulties to their own inadequacies.

Discussing learning strengths, weaknesses, and educational needs with the students

themselves may be the best way to improve your teaching style and, as a result, your

students' learning (Tobias, 1990).

Recommendations for the Higher Diploma Program. In order for teachers to

implement a variety of instructional strategies, they need ongoing opportunities to build

their understandings and abilities (NRC, 1996). These ongoing opportunities may include

attending HDP workshops, observing model classrooms conducted by HDP graduates, or

studying and engaging in research. Each of these experiences should give teachers the

chance to plan and work with colleagues in order to facilitate change. For example,

teachers could be given encouragment to study and engage in collaborative research and

share with colleagues what they have learned. This necessary support will require only

minimal revision to the HDP Handbook and great attention in planning by the soon-to-

be-launched HDP Continuous Professional Development Team.

Conclusions

Given the increasing number of Ethiopians entering university and the consequent near insatiable demand for university instructors, there is an urgent need for current and prospective instructors to continue to learn how to best meet the academic needs of their students by addressing the students' learning style preferences. By placing the knowledge and experiences of Ethiopian instructors at the center of this inquiry, I hope that my research has begun to fill part of the research gap, providing much-needed information about a seldom studied EFL population and yielding important implications for teaching and teacher preparation across *all* fields of education in Ethiopian universities. I hope that my research will serve educators to better understand both the importance and the practicality of attending to students' preferred learning styles and to shed some light on the kinds of experiences instructors' face when embarking on the ambitious endeavor of improving the quality of education they provide. Additionally, I hope that this study will shed further light on how instructors can decrease the barriers learners face at Bahir Dar University by demonstrating constructive ways to alter instructors' teaching styles so that students' preferred learning styles are accommodated. Ultimately, I hope that this research, by highlighting some triumphs and pitfalls in instructors' experiences, has helped to fill a void in the Higher Diploma Program's initiative to improve the quality of education provided by university instructors in Ethiopia and will continue to remind us that:

The HDP is a program that continually leads to teacher improvement by encouraging us to see our students, all over Ethiopia, as individuals with their own learning styles. It is a re-birth of learning for teaching professionals.

This is the start of our professional development, not the end.
                                                                —An HDP candidate, 2006

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Appendix A: VAK Response Modes

V=visual A=auditory K=kinesthetic	Questionnaire item	Almost never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost always	Median
V1	I learn better when I take lots of notes.	103 (16.4%)	213 (33.9%)	158 (25.2%)	97 (15.4%)	57 (9.1%)	2
V2	When talking to someone about a class, I find it hard if they do not maintain good eye contact.	37 (5.9%)	113 (18%)	282 (44.9%)	120 19.1(%)	76 (12.1%)	3
V3	I make lists and notes because I remember things better if I write them down.	78 (12.4%)	89 (14.2%)	169 (26.9%)	230 (36.6%)	62 (9.9%)	3
V4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to pictures, tables, figures, diagrams, etc.	86 (13.7%)	184 (29.3%)	144 (22.9%)	185 (29.5%)	29 (4.6%)	3
V5	I need to write down instructions to a project so that I remember them	80 (12.7%)	120 (19.1%)	218 (34.7%)	129 (20.5%)	81 12.9(%)	3
V6	I need to see the teacher in class in order to keep my attention focused.	159 (25.3%)	98 (15.6%)	129 (20.5%)	172 (27.4%)	70 (11.1%)	3
V7	When reading a book or printed material for the first time I notice the page layout, visual characteristics, and style of print first.	163 (26%)	135 (21.5%)	152 (24.2%)	88 (14%)	90 (14.3%)	3
V8	When I am studying in a group, I like to stand back and observe others.	132 (21%)	161 (25.6%)	199 (31.7%)	113 (18%)	23 (3.7%)	3
V9	When recalling information I can see it in my mind and remember where I saw it.	112 (17.8%)	135 (21.5%)	220 (35%)	132 (21%)	29 (4.6%)	3
V10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer to receive that information in a written handout.	67 (10.7%)	221 (35.2%)	140 (22.3%)	88 (14%)	112 (17.8%)	3
V11	For extra practice in English, I am most likely to read or watch television.	47 (7.5%)	113 (18%)	230 (36.6%)	86 (13.7%)	152 (24.2%)	3

V =visual A=auditory K=kinesthetic	Questionnaire item	Almost never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost always	Median
V12	If the teacher has extra information for me, I prefer it if he/she gives me a handout or writes it on the blackboard.	38 (6.1%)	168 (26.8%)	49 (7.8%)	315 (50.2%)	58 (9.2%)	4
A1	I learn better when I read out loud or move my lips to hear the words in my head.	111 (17.7%)	100 (15.9%)	171 (27.2%)	137 (21.8%)	109 (17.4%)	3
A2	When talking to someone about a class, I find it hard with those who do not talk at least as much as me.	22 (3.5%)	69 (11%)	248 (39.5%)	210 33.4(%)	79 (12.6%)	3
A3	I do not take a lot of notes but I still remember what was said.	41 (6.5%)	111 (17.7%)	211 (33.6%)	85 (13.5%)	180 (28.74%)	3
A4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to passages involving conversations, talking, speaking, dialogues, etc.	10 (1.6%)	96 (15.3%)	223 (35.5%)	250 (39.8%)	49 (7.83%)	3
A5	I like to talk to myself or a classmate when solving a problem or writing.	14 (2.2%)	96 (15.3%)	139 (22.1%)	192 (30.6%)	187 (29.83%)	4
A6	I can understand what a teacher says, even if I am not able to see the teacher.	18 (2.9%)	252 (40.1%)	127 (20.2%)	92 (14.6%)	1394 (22.13%)	4
A7	I remember things more easily by repeating them again and again.	23 (3.7%)	78 (12.4%)	247 (39.3%)	184 (29.3%)	96 (15.3%)	3
A8	In class, I like to talk about the subject; I want the chance to discuss.	14 (2.2%)	149 (23.7%)	122 (19.4%)	224 (35.7%)	119 (18.9%)	3
A9	To get new information, I prefer a radio program to a newspaper.	43 (6.8%)	158 (25.2%)	196 (31.2%)	171 (27.2%)	60 (9.6%)	3
A10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer to discuss/talk about it.	66 (10.5%)	138 (22%)	75 (11.9%)	188 (29.9%)	161 (25.6%)	4
A11	For extra English practice I am most likely to listen to music.	30 (4.8%)	80 (12.7%)	220 (35%)	232 (36.9%)	66 (10.5%)	3
A12	If the instructor has extra for me, I prefer him/her to tell me in class.	18 (2.9%)	65 (10.4%)	142 (22.6%)	319 (50.8%)	84 (13.4%)	4
K1	I am not good at reading or listening to instructions; I would rather just start working on the task or project at hand.	63 (10%)	139 (22.1%)	212 (33.8%)	86 (13.7%)	128 (20.4%)	3

V=visual A=auditory K=kinesthetic	Questionnaire item	Almost never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost always	M
K2	When talking to someone in class, I have the hardest time with those who do not show any kind of emotional support.	28 (4.5%)	248 (39.5%)	168 (26.8%)	146 (23.2%)	38 (6.1%)	3
K3	I take notes and doodle or draw pictures but I rarely go back a look at them.	83 (13.2%)	140 (22.3%)	218 (34.7%)	138 (22%)	49 (7.8%)	3
K4	When reading a textbook, I try to think of an action that matches the text.	63 (10%)	148 (23.6%)	119 (18.9%)	212 (33.8%)	86 (13.7%)	3
K5	When I am reading, I follow the words on the page with my finger.	74 (11.8%)	110 (17.5%)	206 (32.8%)	119 (18.9%)	119 (18.9%)	3
K6	I use my hands a lot when I am trying to remember the right thing to say.	25 (4%)	124 (19.7%)	231 (36.8%)	156 (24.8%)	92 (14.6%)	3
K7	To learn something new, I try to make a project or physically act something out.	97 (15.4%)	139 (22.1%)	175 (27.9%)	105 (16.7%)	112 (17.8%)	3
K8	In class, I wish that I could move around more.	43 (6.8%)	120 (19.1%)	107 (17%)	188 (29.9%)	170 (27.1%)	3
K9	I like to move around. I feel trapped when sitting for a long time in class or at a desk.	74 (11.8%)	59 (9.4%)	248 (39.5%)	129 (20.5%)	118 (18.8%)	3
K10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer the chance to actually try demonstrating it.	36 (5.7%)	119 (18.9%)	123 (19.6%)	204 (32.5%)	146 (23.2%)	4
K11	For extra practice in English, I am most likely to walk with a friend while speaking English.	108 (17.2%)	113 (18%)	132 (21%)	164 (26.1%)	111 (17.7%)	3
K12	If the teacher has extra information for me, I prefer to be given a project to learn about it.	157 (25%)	129 (20.5%)	213 (33.9%)	117 (18.6%)	12 (1.9%)	3

VAK LEARNING STYLE QUESTIONNAIRE

Read each statement carefully. To the right of each statement, write the number that best describes how each statement applies to you as follows:

almost never 1   rarely 2   sometimes 3   often 4   almost always 5

There are no right answers; respond as quickly as you can to each statement.
Once you have completed all 36 statements, total your score in the spaces provided.

Section One - Visual

no	Statement	Score
1	I learn better when I take lots of notes.	
2	When talking to someone about a class, I find it hard if they do not maintain good eye contact.	
3	I make lists and notes because I remember things better if I write them down.	
4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to pictures, tables, figures, diagrams, etc.	
5	I need to write down instructions to a project so that I remember them	
6	I need to see the teacher in class in order to keep my attention focused.	
7	When reading a book or printed material for the first time I notice the page layout, visual characteristics, and style of print first.	
8	When I am studying in a group, I like to stand back and observe others.	
9	When recalling information I can see it in my mind and remember where I saw it.	
10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer to receive that information in a written handout.	
11	For extra practice in English, I am most likely to read or watch television.	
12	If the teacher as extra information for me, I prefer it if he/she gives me a handout or writes it on the blackboard.	

   Total For Visual _____ (note: the minimum is 12 and maximum is 60)
Section Two - Auditory

No	Statement	Score
1	I learn better when I read out loud or move my lips to hear the words in my head.	
2	When talking to someone about a class, I find it hard with those who do	

No	Statement	Score
	not talk at least as much as me.	
3	I do not take a lot of notes but I still remember what was said.	
4	When reading a textbook I pay a lot of attention to passages involving conversations, talking, speaking, dialogues, etc.	
5	I like to talk to myself or a classmate when solving a problem or writing.	
6	I can understand what a teacher says, even if I am not able to see the teacher.	
7	I remember things more easily by repeating them again and again.	
8	In class, I like to talk about the subject; I want the chance to discuss.	
9	To get new information, I prefer a radio program to a newspaper.	
10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer to discuss/talk about it.	
11	For extra English practice I am most likely to listen to music.	
12	If the instructor has extra for me, I prefer him/her to tell me in class.	

Total For Auditory _____ (note: the minimum is 12 and maximum is 60)

Section Three - Kinesthetic

No	Statement	Score
1	I am not good at reading or listening to instructions; I would rather just start working on the task or project at hand.	
2	When talking to someone in class, I have the hardest time with those who do not show any kind of emotional support.	
3	I take notes and doodle or draw pictures but I rarely go back a look at them.	
4	When reading a textbook, I try to think of an action that matches the text.	
5	When I am reading, I follow the words on the page with my finger.	
6	I use my hands a lot when I am trying to remember the right thing to say.	
7	To learn something new, I try to make a project or physically act something out.	
8	In class, I wish that I could move around more.	
9	I like to move around. I feel trapped when sitting for a long time in class or at a desk.	
10	If I had to learn a new procedure or technique, I would prefer the chance to actually try demonstrating it.	
11	For extra practice in English, I am most likely to walk with a friend while speaking English.	
12	If the teacher has extra information for me, I prefer to be given a project to learn about it.	

Total For Kinesthetic _____ (note: the minimum is 12 and maximum is 60)

SCORING PROCEDURES
Total each section and place the sum in the blocks below:

VISUAL		AUDITORY		KINAESTHETIC	

The area in which you have the highest score represents your preferred learning style. Note that you learn in ALL three styles, but you normally learn best using one style.

My preferred learning style of these three is_____

There are many different types of questionnaires to identify learning styles.
You can try the Learning Styles Inventory and / or the Multiple Intelligence activity
if you have time.

Higher Diploma Handbook, 2003, pp. 76-77

Appendix C: Student Questionnaire

Student Questionnaire
Background Information:

1. **Questionnaire #:**_____   **Age:**_____

Department:_____

2. **What is your year in university?   Circle one: 1   2   3   4**

3. **Where were you born?** _____

4. **Where did you grow up?** _____

5. **What are your first, second, third, etc. languages (in the order that you learned**

   them? _____

6. **Which language did you use most often at home?** _____

7. **Which language do you use most often with friends?**_____

Previous Schooling Experiences:

8. **Describe where you have gone to school throughout your life:**

_____

_____

_____

9. **In which language was your primary school taught?** _____

10. **In which language was your secondary school taught?** _____

11. What are your plans after you graduate from BDU?

_____

_____

What kind of student are you?

14. How would you describe yourself as a student?

_____

_____

15. What are you are most successful at?

_____

_____

16. What is difficult for you?

_____

_____

17. Do you like to work in groups or study together with other students? If so, why?

_____

_____

Please write your name here if you would like to be contacted about your participation in an interview:

_____

Thank you for completing this questionnaire!

Betam amesegenallo!

Appendix D: Individual Interview Questions for Instructors

Individual Interview Questions: Instructors

Prior experiences

1. Tell me about your educational background.

    Prompts: Where did you attend primary school, secondary school, and tertiary school? What were your facilities like at each level? Was there a blackboard? Electricity? Did you have your own supplies? Your own book? What kinds of teaching methods do you remember your teachers using? What do you remember about your attitude toward school? Did you ever work in groups? Did you ever write on the blackboard? Did you ever do activities in your classes? What was your favorite subject? Why? Who was your favorite teacher? Why? What are your first, second, third, etc. languages? What was the medium of instruction at each level of your education? Do you remember any differences in the ways that your classes were delivered in, say, your English class as compared to your math or science classes?

2. I know that instructors have varying opinions about the mandatory nature of the Higher Diploma Program. What was your initial reaction when you were told that you were assigned to participate in the program this year?
    a. What do you hope to gain from the program?
    b. What are your concerns about the program?
    c. What area of your teaching/profession would you like to focus on improving during the program?
    d. In what areas do you feel you could use extra support from the HDP?

3. Describe your teaching experience.
4. Let's talk about your instructional approach in the classroom.
    a. What methods are you currently using in the classroom?
    b. Do you think that those methods are effective?

  c. Is there anything that you would like to change about your teaching?

5. Let's talk about your first experiences your first encounters with the concept of learning styles

  a. When was the first time you heard of learning styles?

  b. How would you define learning styles?

  c. What experience do you have with learning styles?

   - Do you know what your own learning style preferences are?

   - What do you know about the learning styles of your students?

   - Do you think that your teachers considered your learning style preferences when you were a student? At what level in you education?

   - Do you make efforts to consider the learning styles of your students? If so, how? If not, why?

  d. What does it mean to you to "teach to the learning styles of your students?"

Current experiences

6. I'd like to start with some follow up questions from our last interview…

Today we're going to focus on your current experiences in terms of learning styles.

  a. What have you learned in the HDP about learning styles in the past weeks?

  b. Are you making efforts to consider the learning styles of your students now? If so, how? If not, why?

  c. What does it mean to you to "teach to the learning styles of your students" now?

  d. How important/relevant do you feel it is to adapt/stretch your teaching styles in ways that might better accommodate the learning styles of your students?

Current experience continued…

7. You've been participating in the HDP for a couple months now.

a. How is your approach to teaching different than before?

b. Are you making efforts to consider the learning styles of your students now? If so, how?

c. What are the benefits you can see in these efforts?

d. What challenges are you facing in terms of accommodating the learning styles of your students?

8. What kind of response are you getting from your students when you implement new methods?

a. Are they receptive?

b. Are there any confusions/problems that you've encountered?

c. Can you see any differences in your classes (positive or negative) from the beginning of the program?

9. Last time we met you told me about some of your experiences with "teaching to the learning styles of your students." How do these experiences compare with your experiences teaching only through the lecture method?

a. How often do you do something other than lecture in the classroom?

10. Is there a difference in the way you interact with students now? Is there any difference with the ways your students interact with one another?

a. Are your students participating?

b. Do you notice anything different about the *feel* of your classroom environment?

c. Which learning styles do you think you are reaching the most?

11. Are you planning to try out any other new methods in you upcoming classes? What will you do? Which learning styles do you think that will benefit? How?

12. How are you planning to continue your efforts to address your students' learning styles?

13. How has your teaching over the last year? Over the last two years? Over the last three years?

Outlook for the future

14. I'd like to begin by asking you some follow-up questions from our last interviews…Recall your first impression of being instructed to "accommodate the learning styles of your students.

    a. Has it changed much from that initial impression?
    b. Would you like to your efforts along these lines?
    c. What has been most challenging for you in terms of addressing your students' learning styles?
    d. How have you benefited from your adapted approach? How have your students benefited?
    e. How do you see yourself teaching in five years? In ten years?
    f. How do you plan to reach these goals?
    g. Do you feel the Higher Diploma Program has helped you to achieve those goals?
    h. Is there anything that worries you about achieving your goals?
    i. What kinds of things could a continuous professional development program do for you?
    j. If you could implement a change to better the educational experiences of BDU students, what would you like to see happen at this university? In secondary/primary schools?

Appendix E

BRAINSTORMING

This is when the students generate as many ideas as possible about a topic – an idea storm! It can be a great way to start a class on any given topic. It may be done in a number of different ways: in groups – recording their ideas on chart paper, in pairs, or as a whole class, with the teacher (or a student) writing the ideas on the board or chart paper! It is a great way of finding out what the students already know on a subject as well as an excellent review activity!

Higher Diploma Handbook, 2003, Appendix B

SPIDER DIAGRAM

A spider diagram is a visual form of a brainstorm. Divide the class into groups and give each group a piece of paper and a marker. Next, give the students a topic, and they must think up as many ideas related to that topic. They will write the topic in the middle of the paper, and then as they think of each idea, they write it down and draw a line connecting that idea to the central idea. It is called a spider diagram, because in the end it should look like a multi legged spider – with a round centre (main idea) and many lines running off into different directions to each sub-idea.

Higher Diploma Handbook, 2003, Appendix B

RANKING TASKS

A ranking task is when you give the students a number of statements or ideas written on cards, and then they have to "rank" or order them in terms of what is most important to least important.   This is a great group activity, although it also works wonderfully as a pyramiding activity. This activity promotes hot discussion. The students discuss how they would rank each idea and have to justify their views.

Ranking can be done with the cards in a straight line – from most important to least, or it can be in a diamond shape, with the most important idea at the top of the diamond and the least at the bottom, with the middle two in the middle.

After each group has ranked their cards, it is good to have them share their justifications with the rest of the class. This again will promote great discussion!

Higher Diploma Handbook, 2003, Appendix B

Appendix H

CROSSOVER GROUPS

Students are divided into groups to discuss a specific topic (in any subject). After 5 minutes, 2 members of the group move to another group to share ideas from their original group. From their sharing, more discussion is developed. After 5 minutes, they will cross-over or "move" to another group. This will ensure that the information you want the students to learn, travels through the entire class. This avoids the need for a lot of feedback.

Higher Diploma Handbook, 2003, Appendix B

Appendix I

PROBLEM SOLVING

Problem solving activities involve students finding solutions to problems. Problem solving is an essential skill as it creates students who are able to think for themselves – independent thinkers who look for solutions rather than become trapped in problems.

 Problem solving can be done individually or in groups. The answer is not the focus. Instead, students are encouraged to explore different strategies and processes to find the answer.

Higher Diploma Handbook, 2003, Appendix B

VITA

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Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: ETHIOPIAN INSTRUCTORS' EXPERIENCE WITH
                ACCOMODATING EFL STUDENTS' LEARNING STYLES AT
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Major Field: English (TESL-Linguistics)

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   Education: Graduated from Stillwater High School in Stillwater, Oklahoma in
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              from the Pennsylvania State University, State College, Pennsylvania in
              May, 1997; received Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics from Curtin
              University, Perth, Western Australia in 2002; will have completed the
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   Experience: Taught English for Business Purposes (EPB) in multinational
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              EPB, EAP, and conversational English at DCLC in Tokyo, Japan (2002
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Name: Emily Joy Boersma   Date of Degree: December, 2008

Institution: Oklahoma State University   Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: ETHIOPIAN INSTRUCTORS' EXPERIENCE WITH
                ACCOMODATING EFL STUDENTS' LEARNING STYLES AT
                BAHIR DAR UNIVERSITY

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Major Field: English (TESL-Linguistics)

Scope and Method of Study: There is a trend sweeping across Ethiopia to move the
            method of instruction away from the traditional lecture method, which has been
            employed for the last half a century, toward a more student-centered approach
            thought to better accommodate learners with varying learning style preferences.
            This study looks at the experience of instructors in their efforts to accommodate
            the preferred learning styles of Ethiopian EFL students at Bahir Dar University.
            Four university instructors were followed, during the academic years 2005 to
            2008 to explore how instructors first become aware of the concept of learning
            styles, their actual practice of implementing new methods to address their
            students' learning style preferences, and their beliefs about the importance (or
            lack thereof) of learning styles in an EFL context. In order to "set the stage" for
            exploration into instructors' experience, 628 university EFL students from
            various backgrounds completed a VAK (Visual Auditory Kinesthetic) learning
            style questionnaire (MoE, 2003a).

Findings and Conclusions: The survey revealed that although an auditory learning style
            is the most strongly preferred by students are also inclined toward visual and
            kinesthetic learning styles. Survey results, classroom observations, and
            interviews revealed a mismatch between students' learning style preferences
            and instructors' teaching styles when instruction is delivered solely through the
            traditional lecture method. This study sought to gain a clearer picture of
            whether instructors at Bahir Dar University find lessons taught through student-
            centered methods more effective and in line with students' learning style
            preferences than lessons taught through a more traditional lecture method. The
            findings show a distinctly mixed array of perceptions towards the necessity and
            effectiveness of incorporating new methods into the classroom in order to
            accommodate learning style preferences. The findings also reveal that, over
            time, all instructors show greater determination and find greater practically in
            their efforts to accommodate students' learning style preferences.

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