

## **Whole Language, Learning Styles, and Multiple Intelligences in EFL: Adapting Traditional Texts to Meet All Learners' Needs**<sup>1</sup>

*Irma K. Ghosn, Lebanese American University*<sup>2</sup>

Whole language, learning styles and multiple intelligences are all buzzwords that have flooded the educational market with seminars, conferences and instructional materials that claim to cater to these theories. This article does not claim to present “the way to do whole language with learning styles and multiple intelligences”, but attempts, by presenting selected strategies, to raise readers’ awareness of the many possibilities that may exist and that may facilitate students’ language learning, especially within the constraints that EFL teachers often operate.

### **Whole language**

Whole language has been a buzzword for a number of years now and many language arts teachers describe themselves as “doing whole language” while they may not have a clear understanding of the whole language philosophy (Hudson 1994). That is hardly surprising as a number of definitions exist. “Whole language” here is defined as a philosophy about language learning and teaching, not a method or a set of strategies or materials. This philosophy views language learning as a complex process where the learners are actively engaged in using the language in meaningful situations.

The following points are essential in the whole language philosophy:

- ◆ listening, speaking, reading, and writing are not fragmented into separate skills, but kept “whole”. (Rigg 1991)
- ◆ language functions as a vehicle for communication and sharing of ideas in authentic contexts. (Rigg 1991)
- ◆ language learning is viewed as a product of an interactive process and thus learners must have opportunities to share and discuss ideas. (Newman 1985)
- ◆ the learner is in the center of the curriculum and has choices while the teacher is a facilitator and a “collaborator”. (Rigg 1991)

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<sup>2</sup> The author can be reached at the Lebanese American University, Byblos, Lebanon c/o 475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1846, New York, NY 10115. Fax: (USA) (212) 8702762 (Lebanon) (961) 09-944851. E-mail: ighosn@lau.edu.lb.

Whole language has found its way to many ESL classes as is evident from the numerous publications in educational journals, and some recent textbook series even claim to be whole-language-based. There is also some evidence that whole language philosophy might work even in EFL settings. (Ghosn 1994) “Going whole language” is not, however, simple, and we should not be fooled into believing that we can switch instantly from a more traditional approach to a whole language approach just as easily as we might change the daily schedule or decide to adopt a new textbook. The switch is slow, and, at times, painful, even in L1 settings as has been reported by several teachers. In the EFL setting, it is likely to be more so, because the whole language philosophy essentially calls for a student-centered approach to teaching and learning where the teacher is prepared to provide authentic experiences for language learning and is tuned to student interests and needs. In a truly whole language classroom, the teacher is ready to take advantage of the real learning situations that occur throughout the year—holiday preparations, field trips, school plays—and follow student interests (Snowball 1994), which may range from dinosaurs to career options and politics.

### **Learning Styles**

Learning style is concerned with the ways we perceive and gain knowledge, the ways we think and form ideas and values, and the ways we act when we process information. Some of the learner types identified by the learning style theorists include, amongst other things, the extrovert and the introvert (Myers and Briggs 1977); dynamic, analytic, commonsensical or innovative (McCarthy 1982); global or analytical (Carbo, Dunn, and Dunn 1986); and most recently mastery or self-expressive styles (Silver, Strong and Perini 1997). In addition to the styles, we have different preferred modalities: visual, auditory or kinesthetic (Carbo, Dunn, and Dunn 1986).

Despite the differences in interpretation, learning style theories are concerned basically with the processes of learning and relate the processes to individual personality. (Silver, Strong, and Perini 1997). Learning style theorists argue for instructional strategies that allow learners to use their preferred style—and since several styles can be expected to be present in any given class, the instructional strategies used should vary accordingly.

### **Multiple Intelligences**

The fundamental difference between the learning styles theory and the Multiple Intelligence theory developed by Howard Gardner (1983, 1993) is that while the learning style theory suggests that each individual has a preferred mode of approaching all learning tasks, the M. I. theory proposes that (because of our different “frames of mind”) individuals respond and react to different content in different ways. (Gardner 1997). For example, an auditory learner, as assumed by style theories, will prefer that mode in all situations and will presumably not do as well if required to engage in learning activities that are based on movement or manipulation of materials; an individual who is an analytic learner type will prefer to tackle all learning tasks analytically rather than, for example, by being immersed in an experiential learning task. In contrast, the M. I. theory

proposes that individuals have different intellectual capacities that facilitate our learning of certain types of content. For example, people high in interpersonal intelligence find it easy to understand the feelings of other people and can act upon that understanding. It is not synonymous to being an extrovert learner type, a common misconception, as Gardner (1995) has pointed out.

The significance of the multiple intelligence theory in the EFL class lies in the fact that foreign language learning (at least in instructional settings) requires a certain amount of linguistic intelligence. Obviously, since eight intelligences have been identified, not all learners can be expected to be high in linguistic intelligence, but have many other capacities that may be more developed. One of the myths about the M. I. theory is that all concepts or subjects can be taught using all the intelligences. This, in effect would imply that language teachers can teach their mathematically intelligent students language by using mathematics, or musically intelligent students through music. This has resulted in learners counting letters in words, listening to music while reciting grammar rules, or doing group work, supposedly to accommodate the students high in interpersonal intelligence. (Ghosn 1997) It is, however, a waste of time to try and use *all* the seven or eight ways in all situations. (Gardner 1995) This is where learning styles can help the EFL teacher. By accommodating to the different styles, teachers can provide a learning environment where the learners not high in linguistic intelligence can draw on their strengths, their individual preferred process of learning.

### **Sample Lesson Sequence**

Thematic units are ideal for whole language and learning styles-based instruction and enable the teacher to present a variety of entry points into the key concepts. Yet, they may not be feasible in EFL classes because of the rigidly regulated materials and curriculum sequences common in many ELT contexts. Developing thematic units within the various restrictions would require creativity and energy beyond what can be reasonably expected. There are, however, some relatively simple ways teachers can use to adapt traditional textbook lessons and make them more learner-centered while tapping into learning styles and multiple intelligences.

*World in Danger*<sup>3</sup> is a reading passage in a fairly typical EFL text, used in grades 4-6, with vocabulary introduced at the beginning, followed by reading and comprehension questions. As the presentation of new structures and the review of previously presented ones are not clearly tied in with the reading passage, the result is a fragmented lesson that does not involve the students in any truly meaningful activities. It can, however, be made much more learner-centered using the following plan. The lesson components are organized around McCarthy's 4MAT Model and the suggested activities attempt to address as many intelligences as feasible within the given context. The format and activities presented can easily be adapted to any lesson and age / proficiency level.

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 2A.

**Step 1. Motivational Experience (Innovative learning style)**

Put the title on the board, or on a flip chart, and ask students to predict what they think the passage is going to be about. Here students may use their L1, if necessary. If that happens, use “reflective listening” and re-phrase, and model appropriate target language. (Language teachers often underestimate the learners’ prior knowledge simply because it exists in L1—yet this is all potential language material!) Ask students to justify and elaborate on their predictions.

Write all the predictions on the board.

Next, display the illustrations from the passage and ask students what they now think the passage will be about, and whether they would like to revise any of their predictions. Cross out those that students want to eliminate. (Do not allow students to eliminate another student’s predication.) Put a question mark next to those that cause disagreement or hesitation. Discuss students’ rationale for wanting to change their predictions.

Elicit questions by asking “What would you like to know about these fires?” Put the questions on the board.

(This pre-reading activity allows the teacher to introduce some of the key vocabulary in a meaningful context, but more importantly, it provides the students with a motivation to read: they will be checking for the accuracy of their predictions. It also activates the background knowledge and thus facilitates meaning making. Many language teachers like to use videos as a stimulus for an upcoming lesson. I find, however, that viewing a film usually is, without very careful structuring and extreme regulation of “dosage”, a rather passive activity. The prediction activity presented above is more useful in getting all students actively involved. It also draws more on the students’ imagination and curiosity. A film could be used later as an additional resource for report writing, for example. )

**Step 2. Formulation and examination of facts. (Analytic learning style)****a. Reading / Discussion.**

Have students read the passage to check for their predictions and to find answers to the questions raised during the previous activity. After reading, discuss the predictions that were confirmed and those that were not. Then proceed to discuss the answers students found and guide them to discover relationships between the issues. Allow student interests to guide the discussion, and validate all comments and concerns. During the discussion, reinforce target vocabulary and structures.

**b. Vocabulary.**

Proceed to teach the target vocabulary and structures using pictures, models, flash cards and so on. Ideally, student interest determines the vocabulary you will emphasize (within the constraints of your syllabus).

Once vocabulary has been introduced and practiced, have students sequence sentences from the passage. For example: "Today elephants are like the dodos were three hundred years ago. Around the world, around 200 elephants are killed every day. Man kills elephants to get the ivory from their tusks. Soon elephants may die out altogether."

Give a group of 4 students 4 sentences, a sentence each, printed on 7-8 cm wide posterboard strips. (Give the class duplicates of the strips, but in smaller size, one set for every two students. This is to keep the class on task.) Students arrange themselves in a line facing the class, so that the sentences can be read from left to right. When the task is completed, the class compares the group's results with their own.

If you write the sentences so that more than one logical order is possible, you can generate a discussion that will require students to justify their decisions, and engage them in more authentic language use. This activity works especially well as an introduction to paragraph writing if the sentences provided will include a possible topic sentence, supporting detail and a possible concluding sentence.

By varying the order of the sentences, students will also begin to see the subtle differences in emphasis that result from the difference in the order of sentences in a paragraph. For example, the different emphasis in *Man kills elephants to get ivory from their tusks. Around the world 200 elephants are killed every day. Soon elephants may die out altogether* compared to *Soon elephants may die out altogether. Around the world 200 elephants are killed every day. Man kills elephants to get ivory from their tusks.* This particular text is quite simplified, but the simplicity can be capitalized on when teaching organization of ideas.

Next, allow students to examine the concepts by one of the following: categorizing the vocabulary words; developing diagrams of erosion, and classifying man's behavior in the selection as beneficial or harmful. Relate the issues to students' experience and environment. Teach students how to create a Venn Diagram to show relationships.

### ***Step 3. Practice and personalization of the concepts (Commonsense learning style)***

Omit the textbook questions and the so common teacher prepared cloze exercises. Instead, have students prepare worksheets and write questions for each other. Show them how simple factual questions can be answered directly from the text and encourage questions that require careful re-reading of the selection and critical thinking. Involve students in language activities that allow them to practice the vocabulary and structures of the lesson. Allow students to select from the following assignments:

*a. Write a letter to an elephant hunter, telling him what you think about elephants / his job, and ask him to stop hunting elephants.<sup>4</sup>*

(This would work in pairs, too.) When students have finished, they trade letters with other students. Now everyone becomes an elephant hunter whose task is to respond to the letter they received:

*You have just received a letter from a student in [your country], asking you to stop killing elephants. Write a reply letter, telling the student why you hunt elephants and explaining why you cannot stop.*

Have students take turns reading the letters aloud, and their replies. The change of roles in this activity will help students realize that there are different view points to issues. Depending on the resources available, you may want to encourage students to carry out research to find out more about the issue before they write their reply letters.

*b. Imagine that you are a sailor who has just visited the island of Mauritius and your ship is now heading home. Write a letter to your family telling about your experiences on the island.*

Both letter-writing assignments offer a natural context for introducing the basic format of letters. You will need to have some samples available for students who choose these activities.

*c. Imagine that you are the last Dodo. Write a diary entry where you express your feelings as you spend your days in the zoo in England.*

This assignment is not as simple as it may seem. It requires the student to re-read the text carefully to establish the facts, and then, by using sophisticated inferential thinking, to imagine what feelings may have been involved in the context.

*d. You are a newspaper reporter. Write a report about the death of the last Dodo.<sup>5</sup>*

Students choosing this assignment will need to view some newspapers to identify the basic characteristics of news reports. (In an integrated curriculum this activity would involve study of the historical context, and the methods and styles used to pass information to the general public at the time.)

*e. You are a TV reporter. Prepare a short report about the problems related to burning forests. You may want to use visuals and music / sound effects to make your report clearer to your audience.*

Invite students to form a team to work on this, with different students taking on a different part of the project.

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 2B.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 2C.

*f. Your mother has just told you that she is planning to buy a beautiful table she saw at the gift shop, a table made of ivory and precious wood. Write a dialogue (and present it to class, if you wish) between your mother and yourself about the issue.*

Invite students to pair up to write and present the dialogue.

***Step 4. Application of the concepts to a new personal experience. (Dynamic learning style)***

Ask the students if in [your country or area] there are problems similar to those mentioned in the passage. List the suggestions on the board.

Students now select from the local problems one they are interested in and set up a simulation or debate. Should you be fortunate enough to teach in a context where no environmental problems exist (or if the existing issues are politically too sensitive to tackle in class), have students choose from those presented in the passage the one they find most interesting.

Next, students will draw their roles from a hat. For example: an elephant hunter, an ivory merchant, a conservationist, a government official, or a farmer living at the edge of the rain forest, a member of a tribe living in the rainforest, a timber merchant, an environmental activist in another country.

Provide students with informational books and newspaper and / or magazine articles about the topics. Encourage students to interview people knowledgeable about the issues (other subject area teachers are ideal resources!), and show a film related to the topics.

If your situation is like that in many EFL settings where no additional resources are available, guide students to reflect and develop a personal understanding of the topic through a class discussion. Arrange for a class discussion where students examine the issues (e.g., burning of forests) and attempt to identify who may be involved in, and affected by it, either directly or indirectly. You will need to remain objective and not allow personal judgments to influence the course of discussions. (Much harder to do than you might believe!)

During the discussion students will be using the target vocabulary and structures, but the language used is likely to extend beyond that expected by the text as students may need additional language to deal with the topic at the cognitive level desirable.

After the discussion, students prepare for a debate, a simulated press conference, or a town meeting.

This may sound like a very ambitious task, and something that is beyond the students' capability at the age and proficiency level expected by the text book. However, the goal is not to produce "teacher-perfect" performance, but to engage the students in active, meaningful language use through a highly motivating activity.

You may also invite students to prepare booklets about endangered species, or demonstrations and models about erosion and its effects, and so on. Some students might be interested in working on producing a pantomimed, narrated presentation describing the relationships of man and nature. Again, they can use visuals and sound effects and compose a song, a poem, or a rap to accompany their presentation. These activities could also be used to support the simulation.

Naturally, a lesson such as the one described, cannot be covered in two or three sessions, but will probably take several days, depending on how often the class meets and for how long at a time. The idea, however, is not for the teacher to plough through all the suggested activities, but to select the ones that meet the needs and interests of the students and that support the objectives of the given program. This is important to keep in mind since there cannot really be any “whole language lesson plan” as the lessons will take shape based on the learners and their needs, and the teacher acts as the facilitator of their learning. Thus in each given class, the above lesson will proceed in its unique way, different from any other.

## Conclusion

What is different here from the typical EFL approach is that students have a more central role. Their interests and experiences are taken into consideration when planning the activities, they are frequently invited to generate ideas, the discussion follows their interests and concerns rather than those of the teacher or the text, and they have *choices*. Language here is not fragmented into skill exercises, but kept “whole” and relevant. When students communicate ideas, share experiences and debate issues, their language is embedded in a meaningful context and very relevant to them. The variety of activities will assure that all students will have an opportunity, at least to some extent, and at least part of the time, to learn in their preferred modality.

The organization of the activities follows the learning styles cycle developed by McCarthy, assuring that the concepts, vocabulary and structures of the lesson are accessible to learners with different styles.

In all the steps, linguistic intelligence is cultivated through the variety of activities that enable students to draw on their personal strengths. Several of the activities help develop interpersonal intelligence, an intelligence that is very important in the increasingly global world. Logical intelligence is also developed, but no attempt has been made here to access English language through visual / spatial, musical or bodily-kinesthetic intelligences. However, one might say that Gardner’s eighth intelligence, the “naturalist” intelligence (Gardner 1997) can be fostered in the context of this particular lesson through the activities that require students to examine the relationship between man and nature.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For language activities that help foster the seven intelligences, see Appendix 1.



### Final cautionary note

Whole language, learning styles, and Multiple Intelligences should not be seen as the panacea, or cure for all the problems in language teaching, but they can offer the teacher insight into how to structure their teaching to better meet the needs of all the learners. These theories can help the teacher cultivate desirable capabilities and skills (for example, cultivation of inter- and intrapersonal intelligence can serve peace education aims). They remind the teacher that concepts and subject matter can, and should, be approached in a variety of ways, and that key concepts can be examined from a variety of angles. What is fundamentally important, however, is that teachers respect the learner differences and have as their goal the maximizing of each learner's individual potential.

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