CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

MAJOR ARTICLES

JOKES

SHORT ARTICLES

CORPORA IDEAS

LESSON OUTLINES

STUDENT VOICES

PUBLICATIONS

AN OLD EXERCISE

COURSE OUTLINE

Earl Stevick (1923-2013)

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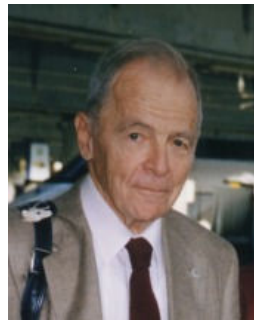
The continuing relevance of Earl Stevick's seven learning categories by Adam
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'Earl Stevick – a great scholar, humanist and guide.'
Scott Thornbury, 2010

If I were to ask you to reel off a list of names of those that you feel have had the greatest
influence on language teaching and learning over, say, the last century, there is one
name that would more often than not be conspicuous by its absence. Earl Stevick may
not be the first name to trip off the tongue, but his life's work has nonetheless had
considerable influence on our profession.

On top of a career that saw him undertake pioneering teaching work in Africa, as well as
being a key player in developing the communicative approach (and learning fourteen
languages along the way), Stevick published four groundbreaking books which
addressed the significance of the human being in the process language learning and
acquisition. One of these, '*Success with Foreign Languages: seven who achieved it and
what worked for them*' was based on research investigating the factors which led to the
success of learners in acquiring a second language.

Published way back in the 1980s, this title saw Stevick placing his research subjects into

different learning categories according to their preferred learning environment. While three decades have passed since its publication, and with consideration of the changes that have occurred in education in that time, what I'd like to do in this article is to show that Stevick's categories are still as relevant today as they were when first published. Furthermore, I will propose a list of strategies for catering to Stevick's learner categories in the contemporary classroom.

1. Stevick's seven learning categories

As we look into Stevick's categories, which I shall briefly explain here, I'd like you to think about your learners. Remember: I consider these to still be relevant and will be suggesting ways to work with each of these categories when we meet such learners. Consequently, I'd like you to imagine which category you think each of your learners would fall into, so that you can join me in starting to think about which strategies you might apply in class to address their needs.

1.1 The Intuitive Learner

Earl Stevick's *Intuitive Learner* was a well-educated woman, learning Norwegian with the intention of later moving to Oslo. For this learner oral perception is vital. Hearing the sound and vocalizing it aloud are important in order to interpret the language. Furthermore, visual exercises are not an important part of her learning process. Intuitive learners rely on repetition to acquire a near-native like their pronunciation errors to be corrected.

1.2 The Formal Learner

Stevick's *Formal Learner* was a diplomat who studied Chinese, primarily using the audio-lingual approach, preferring to repeatedly listen and gradually absorb the language. Formal learners practice pronunciation through repetition. Therefore, they tend to like repeating after the teacher and using newly acquired language first in simple

sentences and later in more advanced utterances.

1.3 The Informal Learner

Stevick's third student, an *Informal Learner*, was a young secretary studying Portuguese and German. She preferred to live in a country that speaks the foreign language as a first language; therefore, she lived for a while in Brazil and then Germany. An important facet of informal learners is that, by being forced to use the language while living in a country they acquire it, rather than learning it formally.

1.4 The Imaginative Learner

Stevick's next student was a middle-aged executive who was learning German, Russian and Finnish. This student, categorized as an *Imaginative Learner*, exhibited a high degree of originality and imagination. Stevick thus noted that imaginative learners employ what is known as the 'cognitive audio-oral bilingual' method, the fives steps of which are identification, reproduction, understanding, manipulation and application.

1.5 The Active Learner

The fifth student was categorized as an *Active Learner* and was a young military officer studying Swahili. This learner typified active learners, in that he was eager to learn and preferred to read texts aloud in order to improve general language comprehension.

1.6 The Deliberate Learner

Stevick's sixth student was a young woman learning Arabic and Hebrew. This student was seen as a *Deliberate Learner* due to the strategy she used when learning dialogues and grammar. Deliberate learners are characterized as being highly dependent on the course material and like to have the chance to look through class material before class.

1.7 The Self-aware Learner

Stevick's final student was categorized as a *Self-aware Learner* and was professional linguist and supervisor of language instruction learning Japanese. She practiced her oral skills with a native family, thus developing her grammatical and oral skills. Stevick's self-aware learners are characterized as the type of learners who incorporate grammatical rules when explained to them and put these rules in practice.

2. Are these categories still relevant?

I'm sure that while you were reading through these categorizations, particular students started springing to mind. Were you able to think of a certain student that you would label as a formal learner, for example? Perhaps you consider another of your students to be a classic example of a deliberate learner? Reflecting back on more than a decade of teaching, I can ascribe pretty much all of the people I've taught as belonging to one of these categories. Nevertheless, it is useful to look at each category and really consider if the characteristics they represent are all still relevant in the modern learning environment.

2.1 Students base language learning assumptions on previous experiences

At the time of Stevick's research, he encountered students with previous language learning experiences that were influencing the way they were approaching their current studies. Stevick's original intuitive and formal learners stated that they were learning the language of study in the same way as they had learned English, starting with basic dialogues based on repetition. Now, as then, people are learning more than one additional language in similar ways, hence the continuing prevalence of short, repetitive dialogues in course books. Indeed, the similarity in design of course books as a whole, while not solely attributable to Earl Stevick, can nonetheless be seen as confirmation of the way that many types of student set out on their language learning journey.

2.2 Students have ideas about language learning that are based on what works for them

As time has passed, certain methodologies have moved in and out of fashion. One defining characteristic of Stevick's formal learner was the dependence on and trust in the audio-lingual method. Furthermore, drilling was an important part of this person's language learning. Such techniques have become less popular in the decades following Stevick's research almost certainly to the detriment of some language learners. Stevick's endeavor of categorizing students according to how they learn was an important acknowledgment that not all learners go about learning in the same way. When we see student unrest in the classroom, it often stems from having to work with course materials that are based on learning philosophies that go against their preferred methods. Having previously noted that, in general, course books do a good job in setting students off on their journey, it is wrong to adopt a 'one course book fits all' philosophy: Stevick showed us that people learn in different ways and that is still something we need to appreciate.

2.3 Some students have preference for visual stimuli, while others don't

Stevick's categorization of learners arrived right between Kolb's experiential learning model of the early 1970s and Fleming's Visual Auditory Kinesthetic (VAK) model of 2001. Very few issues stir the blood of language teachers as much as the notion of learning styles. With this in mind, it is nice to view Stevick's learner categories as a mid-point of sorts, not only chronologically, but also in terms of labeling a student as having only one particular kind of learning style. Whereas other models have attempted to pigeonhole learners according to one manner of learning, Stevick's categorizations often merely suggest a preference for a particular method. Informal learners, for instance, are said to benefit from visual stimuli, thus fitting quite comfortably into the visual learner category. Imaginative learners, however, are classified as gaining from both auditory and visual input, thus making them more difficult to categorize according to other learning style models. Stevick showed us that, although each learner will have

preferences as to what form of input they receive, it should never be a clear cut case of using the same type of materials all the time.

2.4 Every part of a course book is important to someone

The genius of the contemporary language course book is, unfortunately, also its curse. Hopefully, even my brief description of the learner categories in the first part of this article was enough for you to be able to see how certain course book activities are of greater importance to particular learners than to others. While intuitive learners will enjoy pronunciation guides and tasks that look at the phonetic alphabet, for instance, self-aware learners will hone in on grammar explanations. All in all, there are always things that appeal to some students and not others. Indeed, modern course books have perhaps taken Stevick's work too much to heart by trying to please all of the categories all of the time. Nevertheless, an awareness of these seven learning categories will give all of us more of an appreciation as to how and why course books have been influenced by Earl Stevick, and are still put together the way they are.

3. How to work with these categories in class

While Earl Stevick is not alone in being a major influence on the way we think about language teaching in the early 21st Century, we can hopefully now see that his work is most certainly still as relevant as ever. As such, we also probably recognize why it is such a challenge to try and create a classroom environment that is stimulating and motivating for a diverse range of students. There are, however, a number of fundamental principles that we can all apply to try and facilitate an effective learning environment for each category of learner in our classes. Here are some suggestions that can be quite easily implemented.

3.1 Intuitive learners

Such learners place great importance on pronouncing words in as near a native-like way

as they can.

- Teachers might incorporate exercises on phonetics to familiarize learners with phonetic transcriptions. Phonetic transcription enables students to learn the correct pronunciation of words and therefore acquire a native-like pronunciation.

Simplifying a conversation or text does not necessarily benefit the intuitive learner.

- Such learners thrive on cognitive and oral challenges in the form of authentic input; understanding might be facilitated through the use of accompanying pictures or symbols. Consider supplementing course book texts with something a little more difficult

Intuitive learners employ the 'bottom-up' technique and prefer to work with a complete text rather than isolated sentences or phrases.

- Such learners can be encouraged to supplement class work with texts and resources of their own choosing. Individual analysis might take place as homework outside of class, with findings shared with peers.

3.2 Formal learners

Formal learners like to start with basic dialogues and then progress to more advanced examples.

- The key is to do short listening activities often – perhaps every lesson - and work up to longer tasks, which can be done on a less regular basis

Such learners wish to be corrected when pronouncing words or sentences incorrectly.

- Consider different ways of correcting pronunciation without placing too much

pressure on the student. They might be encouraged to use recording devices and send you digital samples, for instance.

Drills are beneficial to the formal learner.

- In order to make this beneficial to all, repeat drills of things covered from the previous lesson(s).

Formal learners like to use vocabulary cards.

- Develop – or, even better, get students to do this - a vocabulary bank of cards whenever new words or phrases are introduced in class. Use these to revise on regular occasions.

3.3 Informal learners

These learners tend to acquire, rather than learn, the language.

- Acquisition can be facilitated by encouraging discussion through blogs, chat sites and by inviting native speakers or other English speakers to class.

Informal learners are risk-takers that enjoy being placed in situations that might make other students uncomfortable.

- Create opportunities for informal learners to show what they can do. Again, inviting guest native speakers to class or finding such people for them to interview will be very motivating.

Such learners don't, however, feel comfortable speaking in a larger group.

- Small groups are ideal for enabling informal learners to participate in

conversations in class. Think about this when designing group activities.

Informal learners don't enjoy analysing longer texts and are challenged by reading literature.

- Be flexible about policies that require students to read graded readers, although such learners should be encouraged to make the most of reading from their course books in class.

3.4 Imaginative learners

Imaginative learners like both a visual and oral input.

- Provide exercises that are both of a visual and oral nature. Video clips with subtitles facilitate such needs.

Such learners are not stimulated by sticking to a prescribed curriculum.

- Although a curriculum is there to be followed, the imaginative learner will enjoy creative ways of interpreting learning objectives, such as role plays, posters and presentation tasks.

3.5 Active learners

Like imaginative learners, active learners are both a visual and oral learners.

- Again, provide exercises that are both of a visual and oral nature. PowerPoint presentations supported oral delivery of information work well with such learners.

Active learners prefer the focus to be on their strengths rather than weaknesses.

- Provide opportunities to develop their strengths rather than weaknesses. Give such students a task where they are able to achieve a high mark, such as yes/no response questions to a challenging text.

Focusing on pronunciation and text work, rather than grammar, benefits such learners.

- When doing reading and listening activities, tasks should focus on comprehension of the text instead of exploiting the material to examine its grammatical features.

3.6 Deliberate learners

Deliberate learners are organised and require a clear structure to lessons.

- Aim to provide rough lesson plans, or at least an outline of what will be done, either at the end of the previous day's classes or at the start of a lesson.

Deliberate learners require a more 'traditional' learning style, with lists, rules and strict routines.

- Diagrams are important for the deliberate learner, so exercises involving such visual stimuli will go down well. Also, establishing patterns for things such as homework will be helpful.

Such learners want to know as much as possible about the native speakers of the language.

- Teachers might aim to provide culturally focused materials and tasks for the

students

3.7 Self-aware learners

Such learners want opportunities to use what they have recently learned.

- Use tasks that incorporate the acquired knowledge in conversations or other activities. This is an opportunity to do review activities to emphasize that what has been learned will now be put into action.

Self-aware learners might be too confident in their ability to master grammatical terms.

- Exploit those 'grammar boxes' in course books with such learners specifically in mind. Provide supplementary gap-fill exercises to develop use of new grammar.

Lessons that are less teacher-led will go down well with self-aware learners.

- Where possible, look for opportunities to hand over control of certain parts of lessons, such as in deciding how a group activity might proceed. Assign self-aware learners as the head of a group and give minimal instructions about how to complete an activity, placing the initiative on them to decide the best course of action.

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◄ Back ▲ Back to the top