



Cognitive Styles and their Effect on Learning Processes: A Study of One Learner

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Abstract

A considerable number of research has been conducted into the area of individual differences in second language acquisition in order to understand the psychology of the learners and investigate the effect of these variables on language learning. Some of these variables are language aptitude, personality, motivation, learning strategies and learning styles. The main aim of this paper is to investigate one of the individual variables and attempts to explore the effects of this variable on learning procedures of a single language learner of English. The variable which is under investigation is cognitive style. A quantitative and a qualitative research method were employed to collect the data for this study. The results showed that the participant is a wholist learner where she prefers to look for the general picture in order to understand and complete the learning task in hand. This tendency, however, appears to be true with receptive skills only (i.e. listening and reading). On the other hand, the participant seems to change her preferred style (i.e. be more analytic) to finish the tasks that relate to productive skills (i.e. speaking and writing). Some pedagogical recommendations were proposed at the end of this article such as the application of multimodal approach in classroom is widely recommended to maximize students' potential and achieve the desired teaching effect by combining their learning styles and teaching tasks.

Key words: Cognitive style, Second Language Acquisition, Analytic, Wholist.

الأنماط المعرفية وأثرها في عمليات التعلم: دراسة لمتعلم واحد

مؤخرا تم إجراء عدد كبير من الأبحاث في مجال الفروق الفردية في اكتساب اللغة الثانية من أجل فهم سيكولوجية المتعلمين والتحقيق في تأثير هذه المتغيرات على تعلم اللغة. بعض هذه المتغيرات هي الكفاءة اللغوية والشخصية والتحفيز واستراتيجيات التعلم وأساليب التعلم. الهدف الرئيسي من هذه الورقة هو دراسة إحدى هذه المتغيرات الفردية ومحاولة استكشاف آثار هذا المتغير على إجراءات التعلم لمتعلم للغة الإنجليزية. هذا المتغير هو الأسلوب المعرفي. تم استخدام أسلوب البحث الكمي والنوعي في هذه الدراسة. أظهرت النتائج أن الطالبة المشاركة في البحث هي متعلمة شاملة حيث تفضل البحث عن الصورة العامة لفهم وإكمال مهمة التعلم في متناول اليد. ومع ذلك، يبدو أن هذا الاتجاه صحيح مع مهارات الاستيعاب فقط (أي الاستماع والقراءة). من ناحية أخرى، يبدو أن المشاركة قد غيرت أسلوبها المفضل (أي أن تكون أكثر تحليلياً) لإنهاء المهام المتعلقة بالمهارات الإنتاجية (أي التحدث والكتابة). تم اقتراح بعض التوصيات التربوية في نهاية هذه المقالة مثل تطبيق نهج متعدد الوسائط في الفصل الدراسي وذلك لتعظيم إمكانات الطلاب وتحقيق التأثير التدريسي المرغوب به من خلال الجمع بين أسلوب التعلم ومهام التدريس. **الكلمات الأساسية:** الأسلوب المعرفي، اكتساب اللغة الثانية، المتعلم التحليلي، المتعلم الجامع.

1. Introduction

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Cognitive styles are one of the factors that influence learners' second language acquisition (SLA). The significance of this construct has been the concern of many researchers. They found that students who employ or adopt one or more styles in a particular situation result in greater classroom success as they will be more productive in the learning process. Furthermore, cognitive styles are indispensable for the students to maximize their individual potential and the learning process in the classroom. They often serve as a student's learning modalities as it represents "the easiest way that individuals have in absorbing, organizing, and processing information received" (Pratiwi & Triastuti, 2019, p. 94).

The significance of the cognitive style also lies in the fact that this particular variable has provided many explanations which could be directly linked to other psychological constructs such as cognition and personality. In fact, as Sternberg and Crigorenko (1997) state "cognitive styles represent a bridge between what might seem to be fairly distinct areas of psychological investigation: cognition and personality" (p.701).

This paper aims to a) identify the learning characteristics of a single student of English in connection to the cognitive style and b) to find out if the participant's cognitive style affects her learning process.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Framework

Cognitive styles can be defined as "an individual's preferred and habitual modes of perceiving, remembering, organising, processing and representing information" (Dörnyzei, 2005, p. 125). Cognitive style is also known as cognitive mode or cognitive model. Generally, it is a consistent style which shows the mode of the information processing (including receiving, storing, transformation, extraction and use). It also includes the differences in the cognitive processes such as memory and thinking and the differences in the learner's personality, individual attitudes and motivation (Grossmann, 2011). Cognitive styles have many classifications: it is classified into field-independent style and field-dependent style, analytic style and global or wholist style, reflective style and impulsive style, and tolerance and intolerance of ambiguity. (Shi, 2011)

In the literature of second language research, the terms of cognitive styles and learning styles are often used interchangeably to mean the same thing. However, some researchers tend to keep a distinction between the two concepts. Dörnyzei and Skehan, (2003) for example, have provided a clear distinction of the concepts arguing that cognitive style can be referred to as "a predisposition to process information in a characteristic manner" whereas they define learning style as "a typical preference for approaching learning in general" (p.602). Liu (2008 pp. 130-131: cited in Shi, 2011) defines cognitive style as an "individual's habitual way of organizing and processing information", while learning style is a broader concept. Besides information processing, "learning style also contains individual's feelings and psychological behaviors" (ibid).

In the current study, the distinction between cognitive and learning style will be maintained and discussed from Dörnyzei and Skehan's perspective. Cognitive styles, in general, are bipolar, forming a continuum between two poles. Some of the main constructs that have

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been studied under the term of cognitive styles were field dependence/field independence, wholist/analytic, verbal/imagery, and reflective/impulsive. Having said that it should be made clear at this point that within these divisions, there is no 'good' or 'bad' stylistic preference. In other words, styles only reflect how "different people interact with the world and with the ways in which they perceive and organise information" (Skehan, 1998, p.239).

The first application of cognitive styles in the field of second language learning was through the concept of field dependence and field independence (FD/I), suggested by Herman Witkin since the 1940s and 1950s. This concept refers to the degree to which learners rely on the 'perceptual field' or external environment when organising and analysing information (Sternberg & Crigorenko, 1997; Dörnyzei, 2005).

The most widely known instrument used to measure FD/I dimension is the Group Embedded Figures Test (GEFT) where the subjects are asked to locate a simple figure embedded in a more complex one. However, the validity of FD/I construct has continuously been subject to a lot of criticism due to the fact that the measurement of FD/I dimension is found to be a measurement of learners' ability and intelligence rather than their cognitive styles (e.g. Skehan, 1998; Dörnyzei & Skehan, 2003). In addition, and because of the nature of the test, field independent learners are expected to perform successfully than field dependents, allowing for unreliable judgement (Dörnyzei, 2005; Sternberg and Crigorenko, 1997).

The unsatisfactory results, which associated with the nature as well as the measurement of these two dimensions, have led scholars to develop a new taxonomy. One of these taxonomies is proposed by Riding and Cheema in 1991 which its main advantage is that "it focuses on cognitive styles rather than learning styles" (Dörnyzei, 2005, p.134). Moreover, contrary to FD/I, low correlation have been found between Riding's scales and intelligence (Sadler-Smith & Riding, 1999). The approach comprises two main constructs which distinguishes between a wholist-analytic (W/A) dimension of style and a verbaliser-imager (V/I) dimension. The focus of this study will be on the former.

The W/A style dimensions suggest "whether individual tend to organise information as integrated whole or in discrete parts of that whole" (Dörnyzei, 2005, p.127). In more details, individual described as analytics tend to structure and process information into its component parts, whereas individuals described as wholists tend to maintain a global view of information. The W/A construct are assessed using a computer-based instrument which based on judging geometric figures. This will be discussed in more details in the section of instrumentation.

It has been suggested that cognitive styles can have an influence on an individual's task in terms of its focus and type (Riding, 1994; cited in Sadler-Smith & Riding, 1999). In addition, cognitive styles have been found to affect the way learners' approach of learning tasks. Analytics, for example, when approaching a task will tend to follow a structured path, building details into the understanding and prefer information that is presented in an organised way. Wholists, on the other hand, their approach tend to be personalised and unstructured (Sadler-Smith & Riding, 1999). Riding and Sadler-Smith (1997) also point out that "the effect of style on performance will be either positive or negative" (p.200).

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When approaching a reading task, analytics tend to break down the task into its parts, allowing them to find out the main points of the task. Wholists, on the other hand, prefer to have the title prior to the text itself which will provide them with the overall picture that matches their stylistic preference (Dörnyzei, 2005). This is believed to help them perform and finish the task more effectively.

With both dimensions, there are some problems which might affect learners approach and understanding of the task. For wholists, there is a danger that they might disvalue the details and get unclear understanding of the task, and for analytics there is the danger that their focus on one aspect will affect their performance to get a 'balanced view' (Dörnyzei, 2005). Moreover, this restricted focus on one aspect will result in exaggerating its overall importance on the expense of other aspects (Sadler-Smith & Riding, 1999). Drawing on what has been said so far, this study aims to explore such effects and see if they are applicable to the participant when learning English.

2.2. Previous studies

Few studies have been carried out which exclusively focused on these two particular dimension. Ellis (1989), for example, carried out a study which aimed to find out the effects of cognitive styles of two adult classroom learners of L2 German on their learning. Using data collected in a variety of ways, the paper aims to explore to what extent and in what ways the learners' cognitive style varies, whether one learner's learning style results in more effective learning than the other's and the effect of the instructional style on the subjects' learning outcomes. The results indicate that the two learners differed in their cognitive orientation to the learning task, that one learner might have abandoned her own preferred learning style in order to cope with the type of instruction provided and that the learning outcomes reflected what the learners set out to learn.

Littlemore (2001) conducted an empirical study in which she investigates the relationship between learners' cognitive styles (i.e. wholist-analytic) and their use of communication strategies. Learners were asked to describe a picture for which vocabulary was not given. The results have revealed that the participants appear to employ the communicative strategies that significantly reflect their cognitive styles. In other words, learners who have been categorised as wholists tend to use wholist strategies (i.e. comparison-based strategies), whereas analytics employ more analytic strategies (i.e. description-based strategies).

A more recent study has examined the relationship between metalinguistic knowledge and learners' W/A stylistic preference. Ziętek and Roeher (2011) administered a metalinguistic knowledge test to 20 Polish learners of English. The test required the participants to correct the highlighted errors and attempted to explain the correction. According to the authors' hypothesis, these kinds of tasks require an analytic processing so it was expected that analytics will perform better than wholist learners. However, the findings contradict their assumption; high level of L2 metalinguistic knowledge correlates with wholist cognitive styles ($\rho=0.64$). The authors interpret this strong correlation as it relates to description/explanation task not on the correction task.

3. Methodology

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4.1. Research questions

In order to achieve the purpose of this study, the following research questions were proposed:

- 1- What are the characteristics of Sara's learning in connection to her cognitive style?
- 2- Does Sara's cognitive style affect her learning process? If so, how?

4.2. Research Design and Instrumentation

As mentioned above, this paper aims to study the cognitive styles and examine their effects on the participant's learning processes. For this purpose, a mixed of quantitative and qualitative research design was carried out to obtain a detailed description of the subject and learning characteristics in relation to her cognitive style. The instruments employed in this study are described briefly below.

(1) *Cognitive style test*. The measurement of the participant cognitive styles on the W/A dimension was employed using the Extended Cognitive Style Analysis-Wholist/Analytic test (E-CSA-WA). The test is computer-administered which comprises two subtests with 40 pairs in total. In the first subtest, the participants are presented with a pair of geometrical shapes and they are required to judge whether these two shapes are the same or different. The second subtest is not dissimilar of FD/I GEFT, the participants are required to judge whether or not a simple figure is located in a more complicated pattern.

(2) *A questionnaire*. The participant completed a questionnaire designed to provide background information about the participant and her learning experience of English (see Appendix B).

(3) *An Interview*. Qualitative research design involves the participant responding to a number of questions in order to gain more information about the actions the participant takes when learning a language and try to observe any links between such actions and her cognitive style. To achieve this, an interview (adapted from Grossmann, 2011) was also administered. The interview consisted of fifteen questions and lasted for about forty four minutes (see Appendix C for questions). The questions aimed to draw back on Sara's past experience when she started learning English in the secondary school and in the university. Throughout the interview, I tried to make Sara think about certain situations where she has to finish a task for example, a reading or a writing task. The reason for choosing an interview is the fact that it is the appropriate method to seek detailed information on the ways Sara has learnt English.

4.3. Participant

Table (1). Background information about the Participant

Participant	Gender	Age	Number of Years Studying English	Other languages	Number of Hours spending learning English
Libyan learner of English at the Department of English, Sirte University (7 th semester)	Female	23	About 10 years	French (described as basic)	From 2 to 4 hours per day

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The participant was given a consent form prior to the instrumentations to assure that the information obtained from her will be kept confidential and anonymous. (See Appendix A).

4.4. Data analysis

The scores gained from the Extended Cognitive Style Analysis-Wholist/Analytic test (E-CSA-WA) is automatically calculated where the computer calculates the response times and present them in a form of a W/A ratio; a ratio up to 0.97 can be accounted for wholist preference, a ratio of 1.25 or above can be accounted for analytic preference and a ratio that is between 0.97 and 1.25 can be labelled as neutral.

The cognitive style of the participant is determined based on the scores given from E-CSA-WA test. In general, the results will be thematically analysed by providing general descriptions and interpretations of the participant's learning characteristics and practices and try to observe any links between such actions and her cognitive style.

4. Results

On the W/A dimension, the result was 0.94; drawing on the descriptions of the dimension mentioned above this score indicates that Sara is a wholist learner. Her responses to the questions clearly reflect her wholist style. For example when asked how would she approach or finish a reading or listening task, she answered that I would try to understand the main idea of the text. She adds that it is not necessary to know the meaning of every single word as long as she understands the general meaning. Moreover, the focus on the general idea of the passage appears to help Sara to familiarise herself with the task before moving on to look for details:

"I just began reading it and in fact I don't focus on words I don't know, I mean I don't feel...em they form any kind of obstacle in front of me understanding the passage.....so.....i just try to grasp the...just....the theme or the main idea of the passage".

"with reading and listening....em...I just focus on understanding, I think...em as long as I understand what I'm reading or listening to.....it is not necessary to look for specifics".

"I think this way is more effective because it help me to familiarise myself with the topic or.... the...the general message of the passage before jumping into the conclusion".

Sara might look for details if knowing that detail is necessary to complete the task. However, even when looking for details, it is clear that the tendency to look for the big picture is eventually required to gain an overall understanding of the text:

"if the question ask for a number I just look for numbers or a name I just look for names I don't waste that much time looking or reading the whole passage".

"I try to breakdown by presenting information and looking at smaller bits then go up to the bigger picture".

The focus on the big picture appears to cause some problems with other skills, for example with speaking and writing. In other words, it seems to hinder the flow of speaking and writing:

"Sometimes I feel that this cause me a problem to carry on the speaking...em I tend to make a lot of pauses and think how to put the sentence in the right order following the rule"

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“And I think because I don’t focus on every single word or the structure being used and I em.....just look for the whole image I find it difficult to speak easily keep thinking before speak or write immediately em..... or straight away”.

The results also show that Sara seems to prefer to be presented with the rules first in order to help her understand and complete the task. Providing her with the rules first assist her to perform well in a way that she uses these rules as a reference in her learning to complete the taskeasier and effectively:

I think, for example, when the rule is given it would be easier for me to just follow the rule....all what I should do is to follow the rule

Em.... especially when I started learn English I find it easier to start with the rule and then move to write examples following this rule.

5. Discussion

Cognitive style seems to affect learners’ performance negatively and positively, confirming the claim rose by Riding and Salder-Smith (1997). This effect appears to vary and depend on the task the learner is involved in. In other words, being a wholist seems to be effective with some tasks or skills such as reading and listening and it can be viewed as a helping factor which eases the process of learning. More specifically, it facilitates learning as the learner appears to associate new information with past experiences and knowledge. However, this focus on the big picture forms an obstacle and has a negative effect. In other words, it appears to hinder the progress in other tasks for example the ones that are related to the skills of speaking and writing to an extent that might prevent learners from completing the task. This could be explained as that these two particular skills need an analytic processing and a precise examination of the structure of the sentences and vocabulary in more details in order to produce accurate sentences. This is clearly reflected in Sara’s replies when asked about speaking tasks, for example, she stated that “this cause a problem because I kept making a lot of pauses and think how to put the sentence in the right order following the rule”.

Ellis (1989) pointed out that learners might abandon his or her preferred style because of the nature of the learning task he or she is performing. He also added that this might happen as a result of the instruction given prior to the task. This actually was the case with the participant under study. Sara stated in the interview that she does not find it difficult to answer some questions because of the instruction of the question itself. [...especially in reading. I just look at the question and immediately find the relevant or the exact information, because for example if the question ask for a number I just look for numbers or a name I just look for names I don’t waste that much time looking or reading the whole passage]. Such links between cognitive styles provide us with further evidence that successful performance of learning tasks might require a combination of more than one stylistic preference in order to be effectively completed.

Sara’s replies indicates that she prefers to attain an overall picture as a first stage of approaching a learning task and then she moves to look for more detailed information when necessary.

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Wholists' approach to learning activities could be described as going through systematic stages. In other words, the initial approach employed by wholists is the tendency to attain an overall comprehension of the central purpose of the passage and see how the information presented relates to prior knowledge. Looking for details came at a later stage which helps them to promote longer term retention of the information (Riding & Sadler-Smith, 1997). This way of structuring and organising information helps in remembering and familiarising the learners with the new materials.

Wholists appear to rely excessively on understanding rules; they prefer to be introduced with the rules first in order to be able to extract the principles and generalise them to further examples. This was quite obvious with my participant. This way appears to help her expand her knowledge and progress in a fast and an easy mode. This finding is somehow expected if we consider that the W/A construct is originally built on the concept of FD/I mentioned above, for example, research has suggested that field-independents perform better in deductive lessons (i.e. principles to rules) whereas field-dependents perform better in inductive ones (i.e. rules to principles) (Nel, 2008). This movement from rules to principles could be explained as a way of integrating past knowledge to the task the learner is performing. In other words, wholists need to draw back to these rules, which serve as a reference, in order to produce an infinite number of sentences.

Another main finding of the study is that the participant seems to employ some strategies that could be argued to match her stylistic preference. These strategies emerged as a result of the nature of learners' styles (i.e. wholists or analytics) and the requirements of the task itself. They could be viewed as a way of compensating for the restrictions created from focusing on the whole picture. Ziętek and Roehrer (2011) point out that "person and task knowledge serve to develop strategy knowledge, i.e. knowledge of strategies which are likely to be effective in completing the task at hand" (p. 424). The results of this study give rise to some of these techniques which could be described as being personalised. For example, as a technique of remembering the details of new information, Sara tends to relate them, even the abstract concepts, to some personal experiences like persons, places or concrete things. With speaking, she tends to form a visual imagery of the sentence structure before uttering it. In performing writing tasks, she is more likely to start writing through a global strategy of drafting and redrafting rather than directly outline what she wants to say.

choose appropriate learning strategies if they know their own cognitive styles, which can promote their autonomy and help them become successful learners" (p. 63). In addition, there should be training concerned with cognitive and learning styles. Some students might have been aware of their own cognitive styles, but they might not be able to use it to learn effectively.

One of the main limitations of this study is that it only reflects on the experience of a single learner. Further studies should include more participants in order to generalise the results to larger populations. In addition, cognitive styles and their effect on learners' choice of learning strategies is also open to further investigation. Moreover, researchers might investigate whether students' cognitive styles have an effect on learners' learning outcomes specifically in terms of whether a certain learning preference results in better

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learning or not. Other individual differences for example language aptitude, personality, motivation, and learning strategies might also be studied in order to find out their roles and effects to learn a second language.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the characteristics and learning process of a single learner of English and find out any correlation between these practices and her cognitive style. The main findings of this research have revealed that the participant under study is a wholist learner. This tendency of approaching learning seems to help her with reading and listening tasks whereas it hinders the progress with other tasks like writing and speaking. Moreover, it was found that the participant under study prefers to be introduced with rules before completing a learning task. Knowing and understanding rules assist her build up her knowledge of a language. The findings also revealed that the effect of learner's cognitive style appears to vary in accordance to the type of the task itself.

Based on the findings gained from this study, some pedagogical recommendations might be suggested. Teachers should pay attention to students' cognitive and learning styles in their teaching, and adopt relative teaching methods (such as Multimodal approach) that are consistent with most students' styles. They should help students recognize their strengths, so that they can take advantage of ways they learn best. Moreover, by being aware of the style areas students do not use and so developing them, students can enhance their learning and working power. Dealing with tasks that do not seem quite suited to students style preferences will help them stretch beyond their comfort zone and expand their learning and working potential, which is definitely beneficial to students themselves. Ma (2003) stated that "On one hand, after learning students' different learning styles, teachers can adopt relative (corresponding) teaching methods and strategies; on the other hand, students can

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Appendix A**Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form**

Department of English, University of Sirte

Researcher: Alya Abu Dirbala

What is the project about?

The project is about how cognitive styles relates to your learning of English.

What does participating involve?

It involves participating in the cognitive style measurement test, questionnaire plus taking part in an interview.

Participation will not take more than three hours maximum.

Please tick the appropriate boxes

Yes No

Taking Part

I have read and understood the project information given above.

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

I agree to take part in the project. Taking part in the project will include being interviewed and audio-recorded.

I understand that my taking part is voluntary; I can withdraw from the study at any time and I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part.

Use of the information I provide for this project only

I understand my personal details such as name, email address and phone number will not be revealed to people outside the project.

I understand that my words may be quoted in the coursework assignment which will report

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on this project.

_____ Name of participant	_____ Signature	_____ Date
_____ Researcher Alya Abu Dirbala	_____ Signature	_____ Date

Contact details for further information:

Researcher:

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Appendix B**Background information questionnaire**

I am conducting a research into cognitive styles and their effects on your learning of English. I would be most grateful if you would complete this background information survey. Please note that all the information collected for my research will be treated in the strictest confidence and will not be disclosed under any circumstances.

Name: _____

Age: _____

1. How many hours a day on average did you spend studying English?

less than 1 hour 1 to 2 hours 2 to 4 hours more than 4 hours

2. What is your mother tongue?

3. Apart from your mother tongue, please mark below to show the languages that you speak and mark how well you speak them on the scale by putting a cross on the line for those languages.

English—	basic/get by	intermediate	advanced	fluent
German—	basic/get by	intermediate	advanced	fluent
French—	basic/get by	intermediate	advanced	fluent
Spanish—	basic/get by	intermediate	advanced	fluent
Italian —	basic/get by	intermediate	advanced	fluent
Other Which? ___	basic/get by	intermediate	advanced	fluent

4. How important is it for you to learn English?

Essential very important quite important
unimportant

5. How much do you use English in your everyday life?

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Daily	once a week	once a month	rarely	never
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6. Why are you learning English?

Many thanks for your help

Appendix C
(The interview questions)

Q1- Do you think of yourself as a good language learner?

Q2- What are the main things that you think would help you in your learning?

Q3- What do you usually do in order to finish a reading task?

Q4- What do you usually do to approach a writing task?

Q5- What do you usually do to approach a listening task?

Q6- What do you usually do to approach a speaking task?

Q7- What do you usually do to finish a grammar task?

Q8- Are you always able to find out what is important in a learning task?

Q9- Do you believe that your way of approaching learning tasks is effective or not?

Q11- Do you prefer to make links and relationships between what you already know and new things you learn in English? Why/ why not?

Q12- How do you usually remember new information?

Q13- What is your methodology to learn new words in English?

Q14- Do you prefer to have instruction prior to the task?

Q15- Do you prefer to have detailed and explicit information about the task? Or do you prefer to begin the task immediately without reading or listening to all of the directions?