

Perceptual Learning-Style Preferences of Iranian EFL Learners in Relation to Their Proficiency Level

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Abstract Learning style is the way in which you characteristically acquire, retain, and retrieve information. It is a must for learners and especially teachers to be aware of learning styles of learners. Accordingly, the current paper was, in fact, an attempt to see does the ability level of EFL language learners significantly affect their learning styles. It also investigated the learning styles which are preferred and common among beginning, intermediate, and advanced-level learners. To achieve such objectives, a TOEFL test (as a homogeneity pre-test to divide 120 selected Iranian EFL learners into three beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels) and a learning style questionnaire was used. The results of the study revealed that first, the proficiency level of learners have a significant impact on learners' learning style preferences. The study also revealed that sensory styles are the most preferred learning styles for beginning learners, personality styles for intermediate learners, and finally, degree-related styles for advanced-level learners. Conducting studies like the present one may contribute effectively on the better teaching of language to learners.

Keywords Perceptual Learning Style Preferences, Proficiency Level, Iranian EFL Learners

1. Introduction

Learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”, [1]. Individuals use learning to adapt to and manage everyday situations, giving rise to different styles of learning. Therefore, learning is determined by learning styles where students who are able to employ multiple learning styles acquire a greater learning outcome [2, 3, 4]. Since learning styles play a crucial role in the learning process, lecturers should not neglect the importance of choosing the appropriate teaching method. Once lecturers become aware that students learn differently they will determine students' learning style and try to accommodate for them. According to [5], the amount students learn in the class is partially determined by the students' ability and prior preparation, the capability of his or her learning style, and the lecturers teaching style. Many researchers have stated that effective teaching is the main predictor of student success. In the past, most educators advocated that students, not teachers, were the central factor in academic success, and many argued that teachers played a great role in students' academic performances.

The recent studies in education are very often idealized from the administrative and pedagogical perspectives.

However, when one looks deeply into the teaching practices of the lecturers, it is possible to conclude that the majority of the instructors are not aware of their learners learning styles. Learners' learning styles have been ignored and have been considered an insignificant factor in the learning process. [6] reports that teachers cannot recognize learners' styles without using a variety of instruments. Without evaluation, even seasoned teachers may misinterpret students' behaviors as hyperactivity or inattentiveness. Hence, the need to evaluate the learning styles of learners becomes apparent in order to accommodate different learners. Accordingly, instructors should keep in mind that learners learn differently, which should make them aware that they have to approach teaching from different perspectives.

Given the above-cited remarks, it can be claimed that teaching and learning styles should be of the most basic attention to educators, specifically the relationship between the two. However, one of the weak points of learning style research is the lack of adequate study about the matching of teaching and learning styles. Theoretically, many factors involve in educational literature reviews, but very few studies deal with the matching of teaching and learning styles. [7] is one of the significant and influential researchers who investigated the matching of teaching and learning styles in real settings. He concluded that serious disparities exist between the learning styles of the students and the teaching styles of the teachers. Matching teaching and learning in the classroom means that teachers should try to accommodate the different learning styles of students. To be

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able for a teacher to do such a matching is to know about the different learning styles of learners in relation to their proficiency level; that is, the topic of the present study.

However, there is no adequate published study that describes the perceptual learning style preferences of learners in EFL contexts including the present study context (Iran). Iranian EFL learners, with their variety of cultural backgrounds and their differences in age and level of proficiency, often come together in English language programs in which they are taught homogeneously by teachers who have little knowledge of learning styles. Further, instructors often use methods and materials that have been developed with the general learning needs of learners in mind. In many cases, neither learners nor teachers are aware that difficulty in learning class material, high frustration levels, and even failure may not rest solely in the material itself. The present study, therefore, tries to provide basic data on the learning style differences among the EFL learners so that, teachers will be able to employ the methods and materials which are more suitable for the specific learners with specific learning styles.

2. Background Knowledge

During the past decade, educational research has identified a number of factors that account for some of the differences in how students learn. One of these factors, learning styles, is 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[8].

Language learning styles are amid the factors that play significant role in determining how well learners learn a language. Learning styles are the general plans like global or analytic, auditory or visual, feeling or thinking that learners employ in getting a language or in learning any other issue. These styles are the overall patterns that give general direction to learning behavior[9]. Learning style is also defined as the biologically and developmentally imposed set of characteristics that make the same teaching method wonderful for some and terrible for others[9]. Learning styles should not be considered as dichotomous, rather, they generally work on a continuum. As an example, an individual may be more thinking-oriented than feeling, or more closure-oriented than open, or equally visual and auditory but with lesser kinesthetic and tactile involvement. Few if any people could be classified as having all or nothing in any of these categories[10].

Besides, given that no single L2 Instructional methodology fits all learners, the more the instructors know about their learners' style preferences, the more effectively they can orient their L2 instruction. In other words, some learners may need instruction presented more visually, while others might require more auditory, kinesthetic, or tactile types of instruction. Without having enough knowledge about their learners' style preferences, instructors cannot effectively provide the needed instructional variety.

In addition, learners obviously need to make the most of their style preferences. However, sometimes they must also extend themselves beyond their style preferences. By providing a wide range of classroom activities that provide different learning styles, teachers can help L2 students develop beyond the domain determined by their usual style preferences. The key is basically suggesting a variety of activities within the class; so that learners would get familiar with different styles.

Styles can help ascertain a learner's ability and willingness to work within the framework of assorted instructional methodologies. It is wrong to think that a single method and approach could fit a whole class including learners who have a range of different stylistic and strategic preferences. Instead of choosing a specific instructional methodology, teachers would do better to use a wide instructional approach which fits most of learners' styles. Such an approach permits for flexible, creative variety to meet the needs of all or at least majority of learners in the class.

All these statements verify the point that many teachers, instructors, and educational institutions are recently moving towards more emphasis on learning style preferences. Instruments for recognizing learning styles are now available for use and training. The advantage of identifying students' learning style preferences is to help the teachers design tasks that can facilitate students' learning depending on their proficiency level, gender, age, etc.

As with types of learning styles, assorted categories have been mentioned. Here in this study, two of them; that is, [11] and Oxford's one (1996) are touched upon.

[11] has demonstrated that learners have four basic perceptual learning styles:

- 1). Visual learning: reading, studying charts
- 2). Auditory learning: listening to lectures, audiotapes
- 3). Kinesthetic learning: experiential learning, that is, total physical involvement with a learning situation
- 4). Tactile learning: "hands-on" learning, such as building models or doing laboratory experiments

[12] also offers a more comprehensive taxonomy for learning styles. The first offered type is sensory styles which refer to the physical, perceptual learning channels with which the student is the most comfortable and can be broken down into four main areas: visual, auditory, kinesthetic (movement-oriented), and tactile (touch-oriented). The second type is personality styles which consists of a set of sub-types like extraverted vs. introverted; intuitive-random vs. sensing-sequential; thinking vs. feeling; and closure-oriented/judging vs. open/perceiving. Personality type of styles is also known as psychological styles. Finally are degree-related styles which involve global (holistic) and local styles. Holistic learners like socially interactive, communicative events in which they can emphasize the main idea and avoid analysis of grammatical minutiae. They are comfortable even when not having all the information, and they feel free to guess from the context. Analytic students tend to concentrate on grammatical details and often avoid

more free-flowing communicative activities.

In line with the above categories, [13] found that only 20-30% of school age children appear to be auditory learners, that 40% are visual, and that the remaining 30-40% are tactile/kinesthetic, visual/tactile, or some other combination. Price, [13] found that very young children are the most tactile/kinesthetic, that there is a gradual development of visual strengths through the elementary grades, and that only in fifth or sixth grade can most youngsters learn and retain information through the auditory sense. [15], investigating the perceptual styles of readers, found that good readers prefer to learn through their visual and auditory senses, while poor readers have a stronger preference for tactile and kinesthetic learning.

There are also many studies concerning learning styles and their usage in teaching methods, and there are many tutoring systems without a pedagogical method [16]. However, since it is not the focus of the present study, it is not touched on in detail.

All in all, the following four research questions are to be addressed in this study:

- 1) Does the ability level of learners significantly affect their learning style preferences?
- 2) What learning styles are more prevalent among the beginning-level learners?
- 3) What learning styles are more common among intermediate-level learners?
- 4) What learning styles are more frequent among advanced-level learners?

Finally, it should be noticed that due to the limited space and scope of the present study, all types of learning styles was not possible to be taken into account. Rather, the most common ones were considered in the study. From the sensory types, the auditory, visual, and kinesthetic styles were chosen. From the personality types, the introvert/extrovert, and thinking/feeling types were selected. And lastly, for the degree-related type, the two main styles (global and local) were considered in the study.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Altogether 120 Iranian students took part in the study. They were both male and female students and were taking courses in one language institute in Shahrekord, Iran. The participants, ranged from 19 to 33 in age, were divided into three beginning, intermediate, and advanced level groups based on their scores on an old version of TOEFL test (as a placement test) given to them. After giving the test, it turned out that 42 of the participants were placed in the low, 48 in the intermediate, and finally, 30 of them in the high level of ability groups.

3.2. Instruments

Two types of instruments, a TOEFL test and a learning style questionnaire, were utilized to gather the required data.

As to the TOEFL test, as it was a ready-mentioned, it was a modified test of old version of TOEFL test. The test consisted of two sections: vocabulary and reading section which involved 30 items, and a listening test involving 10 items. The author of the study, considering the study context conditions, removed some of the original test items and added some simplified ones instead. Finally, the test was piloted on 30 language learners exclusive of the study participants. The pre-test showed that the test reliability index, using Cronbach alpha, was almost .77, and for the content and face validity of the test, it was looked over by some seasoned professors of Shahrekord University and was confirmed by them to be valid for the present study purpose.

As with the second instrument, it was a learning style questionnaire developed by the author to get knowledge about the learners' learning style preferences. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: the first section pertains to demographic information of the learners (name, age, gender, etc.), and the second section involves 40 item on different learning styles. The items of the questionnaire were in the five-point Likert-format ranging from (1) never, (2) rarely, (3) sometimes, (4) often, and (5) always. This questionnaire was also piloted on above-mentioned group of learners. The reliability of the questionnaire turned out to be 0.73 using Cronbach alpha formula. In order to check its content validity, the test was examined by the above-cited professors and was confirmed to be valid.

3.3. Data Collection

At the beginning of the study the TOEFL test was administered among the participants. The purpose of this test was to divide all the participants into three low, intermediate, and high groups in terms of their reading proficiency level. To do so, the mean and standard deviation of the gained scores, which ranged from 6 to 40 out of 40, were calculated. Those who scored more than one standard deviation above the mean were placed into the high-level group. Those who scored between one standard deviation below and above the mean were considered in the intermediate-level group, and finally, those students whose score were one standard deviation below the mean were placed into the low-level group.

In the next stage of the study, the learning style questionnaire was distributed among the participants and they were asked to respond the items. They were informed that there was no time limitation; so that, they would read the items carefully; hence, the reliability of their responses would increase.

3.4. Data Analysis

Having gathered the data and in order to analyze them, the author ran statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 16 in general, and an independent t-test, and descriptive statistics and frequency programs in particular. The purpose of running these methods of analysis was to ascertain the prevalent learning styles of Iranian EFL learners in relation to their proficiency level.

Table 1. Independent T-Test of the Proficiency Level Impact on Learning Style

	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Learning Style Preferences	-17.58	60	.000	-14.66	0.83	-16.33	-12.99

Table 2. Learning Styles of Learners in Relation to Their Proficiency Level

	Auditory	Visual	Kinesthetic	Extrovert	Introvert	Thinking	Feeling	Global	Local
Beginning-level	6%	24%	34%	12%	3%	2%	3%	11%	5%
Intermediate-level	13%	8%	4%	10%	13%	18%	17%	7%	10%
Advanced-level	13%	4%	1%	10%	13%	13%	11%	19%	16%

4. Results and Discussion

This section of the study deals with the results obtained after running the SPSS on the collected data.

4.1. The Effect of Level of Proficiency on Learners' Learning Style Preferences

As with the first research question of the study which seeks the existence or lack of existence of any effect on the part of level of proficiency of learners on their learning style preferences, Table 1 reflects the independent t-test findings.

The table reveals that the difference between the level of proficiency of learners and their learning style preferences is significant. ($t = -17.58, p < 0.001$). Therefore, it can be stated that depending on the level of ability of learners different learning styles are also preferred.

4.2. The Common Learning Styles of Learners with Different Level of Proficiency

Regarding the three other research questions of the study which are about the preferred learning styles among beginning, intermediate, and advanced-level language learners, Table 2 clearly shows the answer.

As it is conspicuous from the table, the beginning learners mostly prefer sensory learning styles. To clarify the point, the most preferred learning style for beginning-level learners are the kinesthetic (24%), and visual styles (12%). Besides, beginning language learners are remarkably more extrovert (12%) than introvert (3%). They are more energetic and like to actively take part in the class activities. It means that they like to touch things while learning. Finally they are more likely to use the language globally rather than focusing on its different aspects like grammar, pronunciation, etc.

Some justifications may be made for the findings obtained for the beginning-level learners. For example, as [16] rightly reports, children and beginning learners and young learners are more likely to play with language in comparison with adults and advanced-level learners. Besides, they use their

senses like touching sense, hearing, and sight more often than other individuals. Therefore, they prefer those learning styles which are somehow related to their senses.

As with intermediate-level language learners, as it is clear from the table, the most prevalent learning styles among them, unlike the previous case, are personality-related styles and specifically thinking (18%) and feeling (17%) styles. It means that intermediate language learners more tend to focus and think on the language. They like to be sensible and then emotional. Another evidence for this claim is that, as it is obvious from the table; intermediate learners are more local than global. That is, they prefer activities that focus on a specific, separate aspect of language such as grammar.

One reason for Intermediate preferences of personality styles may be due to their English learning experiences in institutions of Iran. In other words, because the education system is examination-oriented most learners, especially in intermediate and higher levels learn English through intensive courses and sample examination papers. Therefore, they need to think more deeply on the lessons and be more deliberate with different aspects of language. Besides, the responsibility of learning in this kind of educational system is more on themselves than on class and teachers.

Finally, the table indicates that advanced-level language learners have more preference over degree-related learning styles and specifically global learning style (19%) and local style (16%). It means that unlike intermediate learners, advanced language learners like to consider language as a whole entity. They do not like for example to focus just on grammar aspect of language. Rather they like to use language for communication and for an authentic purpose.

One justification which may be made with regard to this finding can be due to the point that that in advanced-level learners' perspective not being able to use language like a native speaker (after so many years of study) is annoying and they may feel uncomfortable about their not fluent, accurate, and complete. Thus, they try to use language authentically and consider it as a whole rather than analyzing its different

aspects separately.

5. Conclusions

The present study aimed at shedding light on the points that first, does the ability level of language learners have any meaningful, significant level on their preferences as far as learning style is concerned; and second, what learning styles are common among each of beginning, intermediate, and advanced-level language learners. To achieve the intended purposes, a TOEFL test and a learning style questionnaire, as the instruments of the study, were developed and distributed among the Iranian EFL learners divided into three groups of beginning, intermediate, and advanced-level learners. Having analyzed the data, the following findings were obtained:

- The proficiency level of learners significantly affects the learning style preferences of language learners. That is, depending on the ability level of language learners, different learning styles are preferred.

- Beginning language learners prefer sensory styles, degree-related styles, and personality styles respectively.

- Intermediate learners are more oriented towards personality-oriented styles, and then degree-related learning styles and finally sensory styles.

- Finally, the degree-related styles are most common among advanced-level learners. After that, personality styles and finally sensory styles are favored by them.

Finally, the study suffers from some limitations. The first limitation and maybe the most noticeable can be ascribed to the point that just a limited number of styles were considered in the study. Therefore, to complement the present findings it is a need to do further studies taking into account other types of learning styles too. Besides, another limitation can also be ascribed to the participants of the study. In other words, in order to gain much more reliable information and findings about the study variables there should be carried out other studies with more participants in different contexts. Finally, this study focused on the learning styles language learners in terms of proficiency level of learners. However, more studies need to be carried out with regard to other variables like gender, learning strategies, etc. so that, more comprehensive conclusions and findings can be made with regard to the differences among language learners.

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