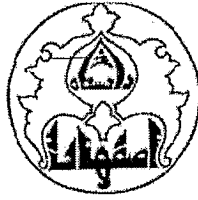


In the Name of God

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University of Isfahan
Faculty of foreign language
Department of English

M.A. Thesis

**Field-dependence/independence as a factor affecting performance
on listening comprehension sub-skills: the case of Iranian EFL
learners**

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To my parents with heartfelt gratitude

For their love and support

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if field- dependence/ independence (FDI) cognitive style was related to the performance of Iranian EFL learners on listening comprehension sub-skills. More specifically, the study attempted to focus on three listening comprehension sub-skills, namely listening for main idea, listening for specifics, and making inference. The choice of this sub-skills was based on Weir' (1993) taxonomy. The study also tried to investigate the effect of FDI on listening comprehension in general.

In the first stage of the study eighty five freshmen students majoring in English literature in Isfahan University took the First Certificate of English (FCE) test, the listening section of this test. To homogenize the subjects based on the mean score, fifty two students were selected as the sample group of this study. To determine the degree of FDI, the Group Embedded Figures Test (GEFT) was run and based on the results of this test the subjects were divided into two groups, FD and FI.

The scores on FCE listening section and GEFT were entered into SPSS. Four t-tests and a one-way ANOVA were run to analyze the data.

The results of the t-tests and ANOVA showed that there was no difference in the performance of FD and FI students on general listening comprehension; furthermore, no difference was observed in the performance of the two groups, FD vs. FI, considering the listening comprehension sub-skills which were the focus of this study. In other words, the two groups were similar in performance on listening comprehension sub-skills.

Key words: field-dependence, field-independence, listening comprehension sub-skills, listening for specifics, listening for main idea, making inference

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

FD: Field-dependence

FI: Field-independence

FCE: First Certificate of English

GEFT: Group Embedded Figures Test

SLA: Second Language Acquisition

L2: Second language

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ESL: English as the Second Language

L1: First Language

Chapter One:

Introduction

1.1. Introduction and Background

Students bring different cognitive styles with them to their learning experience. These styles may play an important factor in how effective they learn the language. Kang (1999) believed that students can enhance their learning power by being aware of style areas in which they feel comfortable and by working on the development of these areas, they can foster their intellectual growth. He also believed that teachers should identify strong style patterns in their classes and devise lesson plans which accommodate individual learning style preferences. Of many different cognitive styles defined by researchers, the purpose of this study is to focus on field-dependence/independence and its effect on listening comprehension sub-skills. Witkin *et al.*, (1962) stated that a field-independent person tends to experience his surrounding analytically, with objects experienced as discrete from their backgrounds, while a field-dependent person tends to experience his surroundings in a global fashion. These characteristics of field-

dependent/independent learners are the base of making hypotheses in this study.

In the introduction chapter of this thesis the following sections will be explained respectively. Statement of the problem (see section 1.2), significance of the study (see section 1.3), research questions and research hypotheses (see section 1.4), definition of the key terms (see section 1.5), and the outline of the thesis (see section 1.6).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Listening comprehension skill has always been a mind boggling concern of EFL learners. They seem to fail to cope with the listening tasks in most cases because most EFL learners start learning the second language through reading different textbooks. Nunan (1989) believed that listening is the Cinderella skill in second language learning and all too often, it has been overlooked by its elder sister speaking. He claimed that for most people being able to claim knowledge of the second language means being able to speak and write in that language, so listening and reading are secondary skills- means to other ends rather than ends in themselves.

Graham (2006) mentioned that all learners face difficulties when listening in the target language; nevertheless, the type and the extent of difficulty differs and much listening comprehension research must be conducted to investigate the differences. He also believed that before teachers can hope to improve learners' listening skill, they need to be aware of the beliefs learners hold. In his study, he found that many learners see themselves less successful in listening than in other language areas. To be aware of and find

about the differences among learners, one may focus on individual differences, one aspect of which is the differences in their cognitive styles.

1.3. Significance of the Study

Listening as stated by Nunan (2003) is arguably the most important of all four skills. In the first place, it is the gasoline that fuels the acquisition process and in the second place, we do more of it than anything else. As it was mentioned, one of the factors that may help students and teachers is knowing the cognitive styles. During the last decade, a significant amount of attention has been focused on individual learner as the central element in the complex process of learning another language. In search of individual characteristics related to foreign or second language acquisition, researchers have investigated the relationships of cognitive, personality and sociocultural variables to performance on different aspects of language learning. Of such variables, field-dependence/independence (FD/I) is suggested as potentially important in second language acquisition (Naiman *et al.* 1978; Seliger 1977).

Keefe (1987) stated:

The benefits of cognitive styles diagnosis can be innumerable both for classroom teacher and, more importantly, for the learners. Through cognitive styles diagnosis, the classroom teachers are exposed to a deeper and more profound view of students both as an individual and as a learner. This knowledge can assist classroom teachers in deciding the form and presentation of materials, as well as the

activities and means of assessment. Being aware of the students cognitive styles gives educators the most effective tool available to analyze, motivate, and assist him or her in learning environment. It opens the door to personalizing education (p; 18).

As for learners, Ngeow (1999) summarized three main benefits of knowing cognitive styles:

1. Learners who are conscious of their style make better use of their learning opportunities.
2. Learners learn better when they are provided with learning opportunities that enhance and extend their learning preferences.
3. Learners work better with new learning styles when they are given guided opportunities to practice them.

These principles suggest that learning is enhanced and enriched when cognitive styles are properly addressed both before and during instruction.

Chapelle (1995) believed that with the advent of learner-centered approaches, future teachers have the responsibility of training students to be capable of deciding what their best learning path is. They should be ready to assist and guide students through the process of reflecting on how they learn best. "Teachers should make learners aware of the need of strategic, autonomous learning and should train them in the effective use of those strategies" (p; 161).

1.4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Considering the aforementioned problems, the present study was an attempt to provide plausible answers to the following research questions:

1. Is there any difference in the performance of field-dependent/independent students on FCE listening test?
2. Is there any difference in the performance of field-dependent/independent students on listening for the main idea?
3. Is there any difference in the performance of field-dependent/independent students on listening for the specifics?
4. Is there any difference in the performance of field-dependent/independent students on making inferences?

Based on the aforementioned research questions and the related literature, the following research hypotheses were made:

1. There is no difference in the performance of field-dependent/independent students on FCE listening test.
2. Field-dependent students outperform field-independent students on listening for main idea.
3. Field-independent students outperform field-dependent students on listening for specifics.
4. There is no difference in the performance of field-dependent/independent students on making inferences.

1.4. Definition of Key Terms

Field-dependence (FD):

It is an educational construct referring to a mode of perceiving and retrieving new knowledge or skills in the learning process. This style of learner tends to view the world in a global, gestalt way. Generally, field-dependent learners use external cues as primary guides in processing information (Witkin, 1977).

Field-independence (FI):

It is an educational construct in which the learners tend to view the world in an analytical and differentiated way. They generally use internal cues as guides for processing information (Witkin, 1977).

Group Embedded Figure Test (GEFT):

GEFT is the measure of learners FD/I cognitive style in terms of the ability to find simple geometrical forms hidden in complex figures. It contains 18 complex figures within which simple geometrical figures are embedded. The subjects are asked to find the given simple figure in each complex figure of the test. The subjects' score ranges from zero to eighteen which indicates the degree of FD/I (Witkin, 1977).

Listening for main idea:

It is the ability to get the general message of the conversation or lecture. The main idea is what is important about the topic according to speaker (Gallagher, 2006).

Listening for specifics:

The ability to get the specific pieces of information such as facts, descriptions, definitions, reasons and examples form a message (Gallagher, 2006).

Making inference:

The ability in using available information to guess the meaning of the new items, predict outcomes or fill in missing information (Brown, 2000).

1.5. Outline of the thesis

Below is the summary of the chapters of the thesis.

Chapter two: the review of the related literature on the cognitive styles and different classifications, the historical background of listening comprehension and some empirical studies in this regard and other related issues which, on the whole, establish the rationale for carrying out the current study will be taken into account.

Chapter three: in this chapter, the instrumentation of the study, the participants as well as the procedure for data collection and data analysis will be presented.

Chapter four: the results and findings of different tests will be presented in different tables.

Chapter five: and finally in this chapter, the problem along with the research hypotheses will be restated, the results will be discussed, and some implications based on the findings of the study will be provided.