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Title

The Relationship between Iranian EFL Learners' Multiple
Intelligences and their Reading Comprehension Ability

Supervisor

Dr. Amir Reza Nemat Tabrizi

Reader

Dr. Manoochehr Jafari Gohar

By

Fariba Movlanzadeh

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IN the Name of God

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Abstract

In the new age, in regard to human success in education in the globalizing world, one can consider English proficiency and individual differences as two important issues. In EFL settings, reading skill plays an important role in education. It seems that using Multiple Intelligences Theory in EFL classes which values individual differences by tapping different intelligences, can be rewarding. As such, the present study aimed at investigating the strength of the relationship between Iranian senior English majors' Multiple Intelligences and their reading comprehension ability in English. Therefore, at the end of the academic year, May 2011, after randomly selecting a sample of 159 Iranian senior English majors, and by using two instruments including Persian Version of MIDAS Adults (Shearer, 1996) and IELTS Academic Reading Section (2007), the researcher attempted the survey. On the basis of Pearson correlation coefficients, the findings of the study revealed that four types of intelligences, namely Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Linguistic, and Spatial had statistically significant correlation ($p < .05$) with subjects' reading comprehension. Also, on the basis of multiple regression through stepwise method, the results showed that Intrapersonal Intelligence ($R = .21$; $p = .007 < .05$) is the most significant predictor of the participants' reading comprehension ability. The findings of the study are considered as context-based and not universal.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Purpose of the Study

Viewing education, one can see that on the one hand, with the challenge of globalization, technological development and the related changes and its impact on international communication, English language has become a bridge across many borders (Chen, 2005).

Teachers know that language plays a vital role in education. Language is not only the means of communication and expression, but also the medium of thought and a central tool for learning. English is the dominant international language in many fields of development such as trade, research, technology, commerce, and tourism (Chen, 2005). Most first-hand, current information for many of these areas is available only in English. Advanced English proficiency not only benefits many people during their studies, but later also helps with promotion and career development. All of these factors make English teaching crucially important. This makes a big challenge for English teachers, especially in non-English speaking countries as that of the researcher's, where English is considered as a foreign language and the students' main exposure to English is restricted to their classroom settings.

On the other hand, the second half of the twentieth century can be called the age of individualization, when individual values and differences were recognized and respected. After a prolonged preoccupation with the physical aspects of man, the tide turned and attention focused on the human being as a totality of physical, cognitive, and affective variables. Man became *man* in the real sense of the word. This shift of attention has left its mark on the way education was viewed and practiced. Individual differences now occupy an important position in any debate related to teaching/ learning and the professional literature is filled with terms and phrases which try to

capture the elusive concepts that distinguish one person from another (Fontana, 1988; Lefrancios, 1991; Crozier, 1997; cited in Akbari & Hosseini, 2008).

Intelligence is among the various aspects of individual differences which affect education and language learning. The interest in the effect of intelligence in especially foreign language learning can be attributed to the advent of a new intelligence theory, namely, Multiple Intelligences Theory (MIT) of Howard Gardner (1983). According to Gardner (1999), intelligence is more than IQ, as it was considered traditionally, because a high IQ in the absence of productivity does not equate to intelligence. Gardner defined intelligence as "the ability to find and solve problems, the ability to respond successfully to new situations and the capacity to learn from one's past experiences" (1983, p. 21). Consequently, instead of intelligence being a single entity described psychometrically with an IQ score, in this view intelligence is viewed as being a composite of different abilities or aptitudes. The theory right now includes nine intelligences which encompasses a wide range of human potentials and abilities. Gardner's theory divides human intelligence into Musical, Linguistic, Logical-Mathematical, Spatial, Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Naturalist, Bodily-Kinesthetic, and Existential.

This theory has been readily embraced by those involved in educational settings, among which are included language teaching/learning educators, since with the essence inherent in it about human intellectual abilities, MIT could have very useful pedagogical implementations for language teaching/learning education. The Multiple Intelligences theory suggests that no one set of teaching strategies will work best for all students at all times (Shearer, 2006).

It seems that from among language proficiency skills, reading skill plays a determining role in EFL settings. Reading comprehension is the process of

understanding and constructing meaning from a piece of connected text that forms coherent thoughts. The reading goal is to read for meaning or to recreate the writer's meaning. Reading is an active process because the reader focuses attention on the reading material and integrates previously acquired knowledge and skills to comprehend the written material (Chastain, 1988).

Reading is an active process in which the reader must actively participate. A good reader is one who can apply various reading skills independently and flexibly in a variety of reading situations. An organized and inviting classroom environment provides an atmosphere that encourages students to have a desire to learn and read. A failure to provide an environment that is conductive to motivate reading will result in students who do not want to read.

Since reading is an activity which takes place as a function of the brain, if it is to recognize its nature, one should construct theoretical models of what might take place when the mind gets meaning from what the eyes see on the printed page. Researchers are convinced that reading is a multifaceted process that goes beyond the description of any single facet (Celce-Murcia, 2001).

As a teacher, during her teaching career both in university and high school, the researcher realized that some students seem to have little desire for reading; it seems that students are not interested in reading classes, the utilized materials, methods of teaching, and even the assessment procedures. Motivation is also a factor, which influences students' comprehension. Many factors affect students' motivation to work and to learn: interest in the subject matter, perception of its usefulness, and general desire to achieve. Along with the stated factors, self-confidence and self-esteem are important characteristics of one's character to maintain motivation. As it was stated,

on the other hand, MIT focuses on a motivating leaner-centered instruction by providing at least eight different pathways to teaching/learning process.

This is why the researcher tried to set out the present study in order to find out whether there is statistically any significant correlation between EFL learners' Multiple Intelligences as theorized by Gardner (1983) and their reading comprehension ability. If the findings of the study reveal such a significant relationship, then the teachers can utilize MI-inspired activities and strategies to provide motivating and a more rewarding reading class environment through which the learners not only can enhance their comprehension and understanding of the reading material and enjoy the collaborative and cooperative learning environment, but also will know more about their own unknown strengths and abilities.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

As it was stated in the previous section, one of the major goals of English education in the researcher's country can be considered to be reading skill. The English teachers have to develop approaches or methods suitable for diverse students to improve their reading skill.

On the basis of the researcher's educational experiences, both as a student and as a teacher, it seems there are some problems in regard to English education in her country, or at least in those settings that she has learnt and taught, among which are the followings:

- Methods used in English classrooms such as Audio-Lingual and Grammar Translation, do not cover all learner related aspects and their individual cognitive and affective differences. Mostly meaning is taken at the word and sentence level, and less attention is taken to the meaning of the text as a whole.

Hence, meaning is often constructed via the first language, Persian, and not directly from the target language, English. However, reading should be an interactive process between the reader and the reading materials. She believes that some students equate reading as translation, that is to say that less proficient learners usually tend to focus on reading as a decoding process on the surface level. Therefore, it may be possible that students become word by word translators in English but they do not become fluent readers in English, just as the way that the researcher has been taught English reading. However, students can become fluent readers in English when they can create meaning of the text as a whole in English.

- English education is too teacher-centered. Richards (1990) has suggested that a teacher's role should include organizing, motivating, counseling, providing accurate language models, developing materials, evaluating, and finally acting as a friend. However, in many classes, the teacher's role is mainly to act as an instructor, explainer, and corrector of errors. The students' role is to do as the teacher says. Consequently, students tend to be over-dependent on their teachers in their learning and usually think of teachers as knowledge givers.

- The classes are very large. Therefore, it is difficult for a teacher to manage a class of over 30 students and design a teaching strategy that will meet each student's needs, interests, and preferences in learning and demonstrating what has learnt. So, a teaching method should be found to enable teachers to better meet individual differences and make them more responsible for their own learning.

- One of the critical individual needs of students in learning, specifically learning a foreign language, concerns their attitudes. They have different

attitudes toward EFL learning. Specially, on the researcher's teaching career experiences, in non-English subject areas, as English is considered as a required course, whether students are interested in it or not, they need to take English courses. Thus, students of different English proficiencies are often placed in the same class. Therefore, teachers should seek teaching methods that create an appropriate environment in regard to teaching, assessing, and evaluating activities that enhance a positive attitude to their learning.

- Another problem is with regard to assessment system which makes teachers evaluate all of their students who may have very different abilities and strengths and weaknesses, with the same frame. The teachers should use a system of assessment that is fair in regard to the students' abilities.

The researcher assumes that one possibility to address such problems in regard to reading classes can be the use of an MI-inspired method that focuses on learners' individual cognitive differences and engaging the students in their learning and making them responsible for how they demonstrate their knowledge.

Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences suggests that intelligence is not a single and solely inborn capacity, rather a multiple construct which is "partly genetic and can be crystallized or paralyzed over one's life time" (Fahim, Bagherzadeh, & Alemi, 2010, Abstract section).

Intelligence as a cognitive capacity of the brain can be hypothesized to influence language learning. Since 1983, Gardner's theory of MI has been embraced by a ready audience among a host of educators, including language educators and teachers in need of educational program which addresses a wide variety of ways people learn (Morrise, 2010).

MI is proposed and put into practice in a way to call an alternative classroom design to traditional classroom setting. In an MI-inspired classroom, the small social group and learner-centered activities enable the students to share information and get a better understanding of what is learnt. In such a relaxed and non-threatening learning environment learners receive comprehensive input by working collaboratively.

Today, one of the greatest challenges for teachers is to provide curriculum which can effectively cater to the needs of diverse groups of students and the MI framework can provide more options for those students who are not linguistically strong in English to demonstrate their knowledge. MI-inspired construction and curriculum and the use of strength-based (on the basis of their MI profiles) learning activities can be used to further students' success and enhancement in reading comprehension because such a curriculum and learner-centered activities serve as the basis for personalized planning.

By a balanced attention paid to their students' different intelligence types and individual differences in learning styles and strategies, and the various ways of demonstrating their abilities, the teachers can use the students' strong and more flourished intelligence types in an effective use of MI-based materials and activities to enhance their learning while strengthening their weaknesses.

The way of teaching reading is very important. Students need to enjoy reading. They also should be offered opportunities to understand the learning process and taught the MI theory so that they can effectively choose techniques by which to learn. Teachers can design activities and projects around the eight/nine intelligences and allow their students to choose their learning activities based on their strengths. Students read better when they expect to do so, and it is up to the teacher to access

their individual expectations through their multiple intelligences. Using MI as a tool also creates a pleasant and an interesting atmosphere in the classroom so that students enjoy reading task.

Therefore, it seems that multiple intelligences can be a more effective method in facilitating students' achievements in reading comprehension. MI-based method can provide opportunity for students to express and demonstrate their inner potentials and talents in many different ways. MI-based reading activities can help teachers to train effective readers who will be able to demonstrate good reading habits, understand the author's tone, comprehend different ideas, read critically, and summarize what they have read (Shearer, 2006).

According to the stated problem in regard to reading comprehension classes and the associated difficulties that teachers and students face through the teaching and learning process, the present study aimed at investigating the hypothetical relationship between the Multiple Intelligences of the subjects and their performance on the academic reading section of IELTS. If the results of the study show that there is such a significant correlation between the two variables, then those people involved in EFL teaching, learning, materials providing, and assessment designing, could benefit and utilize MIT through the curriculum in order to be able to make educationally more satisfying and rewarding decisions.

1.3. Research Questions

On the basis of the above mentioned problem including lack of the interest on the part of the most EFL students in English reading classes and hence their difficulties in reading comprehension ability, this present study enquires into the hypothesized interaction between subjects' multiple intelligences and their

performance on reading comprehension. The researcher believes that the results of this study can be important, especially in university settings where students rely most on their reading comprehension in order to fully understand the present-day resources in their study areas and their teachers to assess their learners' strengths, weaknesses, and interests in order to be able to provide motivating classroom environment and use effective educational techniques and activities which are more rewarding for their learners to be effective readers and communicators

To come up with the satisfactory result, the researcher proposes the following research questions:

Q_1: Is there statistically any significant relationship between Logical-Mathematical Intelligence and reading comprehension ability among Iranian senior English majors?

Q_2: Is there statistically any significant relationship between Linguistic Intelligence and reading comprehension ability among Iranian senior English majors?

Q_3: Is there statistically any significant relationship between Interpersonal Intelligence and reading comprehension ability among Iranian senior English majors?

Q_4: Is there statistically any significant relationship between Intrapersonal Intelligence and reading comprehension ability among Iranian senior English majors?

Q_5: Is there statistically any significant relationship between Musical Intelligence and reading comprehension ability among Iranian senior English majors?

Q_6 Is there statistically any significant relationship between Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence and reading comprehension ability among Iranian senior English majors?

Q_7: Is there statistically any significant relationship between Visual-Spatial Intelligence and reading comprehension ability among Iranian senior English majors?

Q_8: Is there statistically any significant relationship between Naturalistic Intelligence and reading comprehension ability among Iranian senior English majors?

Q_9: Which type of intelligence or combination of intelligences is the best predictor of Iranian senior English majors' reading comprehension ability?

1.4. Research Hypotheses

In order to investigate the above mentioned research questions, the researcher formulated the following null hypotheses:

$H0_1$: There is no relationship between Iranian senior English majors' Logical-Mathematical Intelligence and their reading comprehension abilities.

$H0_2$: There is no relationship between Iranian senior English majors' Linguistic Intelligence and their reading comprehension abilities.

$H0_3$: There is no relationship between Iranian senior English majors' Interpersonal Intelligence and their reading comprehension abilities.

$H0_4$: There is no relationship between Iranian senior English majors' Intrapersonal Intelligence and their reading comprehension abilities.

$H0_5$: There is no relationship between Iranian senior English majors' Musical Intelligence and their reading comprehension abilities.

$H0_6$: There is no relationship between Iranian senior English majors' Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence and their reading comprehension abilities.

$H0_7$: Tere is no relationship between Iranian senior English majors' Visual-Spatial Intelligence and their reading comprehension abilities.

$H0_8$: There is no relationship between Iranian senior English majors' Naturalistic Intelligence and their reading comprehension abilities.

$H0_9$: None of the multiple intelligences or combination of them can predict Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension ability.

1.5. Significance of the Study

According to Campbell (1997), centuries ago, Plato had put in words what is now considered the drift of MI theory in education: "Do not train youth to learning by force and harshness, but direct them to it what amuses their minds so that you may be better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of the genius of each" (qtd. in Fahim, et al., 2010, p. 3).

Learners vary enormously in how successful they are in learning a foreign language. It is obvious that some individuals learn a foreign language easily and some with more difficulty. Among so many factors contributing to foreign language learning success, including motivation, attitude or personality types, it seems that one important factor which accounts for success in language learning is the degree of intelligence that individuals possess.

During classes nearly all college students still experience an hour or two of pure lecture or presentation and discussion as the way they encounter course material in the college classroom. Though those teaching methods are effective, they may be only reaching a fraction of students who have much linguistic strength. Students' learning potentials are multifaceted and multidimensional; therefore instruction should be as well. This is the main reason why so many instructors of different subjects, at different levels have turned toward Gardner's MIT (Dillon, 2006).

One of the most remarkable features of the theory of Multiple Intelligences is how it provides eight differently potential pathways to learning. If a teacher has difficulty improving a student's performance in the more traditional linguistic or logical ways of instructions, MIT suggests several other ways in which the material can be presented to facilitate effective learning. Whatever one is teaching or learning, s/he must see how s/he might connect it with words, numbers, pictures, music, self-

reflection, a physical experience, a social experience, or an experience in the natural world. The theory of MI is so rewarding because it expands teachers' horizon of available teaching-learning tools beyond the conventional linguistic and logical methods used in most traditional schools (Armstrong, 1994).

As cited in Fahim, et al. (2010, p. 4), Wilson (1998), an enthusiastic proponent of MI, talks of the immense popularity of the theory among educators: "much like a grassroots at the bottom of the educational pyramid". She states six reasons for this wide spread acceptance among teachers and researchers: (a) the proliferation of the published work and presentations on the theory, serving to raise awareness of the virtues of its application in the classroom; (b) its adaptability for a broad range of instructional experiences and curricular applications; (c) empowering learners, providing them with supportive scaffolds, and enhancing their metacognitive and study skills; (d) fostering levels of personal, interpersonal, professional, and cultural understanding; (e) creating a state of psychological flow; (f) validating teachers insightful and qualitative assessment of learners' natural faculties; (g) broadening the conception of giftedness and providing teachers with a more comprehensive view.

Therefore, according to the stated problem in regard to reading comprehension among EFL learners, the researcher assumes that by understanding the relationship between their MI profiles and reading comprehension abilities, it can be possible to motivate the students to be active readers and improve their reading ability and the most rewarding, enjoy their reading classes.

1.6. Limitations of the Study

As any other study, the present study, too, has some limitations.