

In the Name of God

*Dedicated to my dear
Parents*



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**The Relationship between Preference
for focus on Form, Forms, and
Meaning and Experiential Learning
Style among Iranian EFL Learners**

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Abstract

This study was designed and conducted to find out if there is any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' preference for one of the three degrees of obtrusiveness in foreign language instruction (focus on form, focus on forms, and focus on meaning) and their preferred experiential learning style. Moreover, an attempt was made to explore the relationship between the learners' gender and their preference for the degree of obtrusiveness as well as their preferred experiential learning styles. To collect the data, two questionnaires were utilized. The first one on the degree of obtrusiveness was devised based on the theoretical and practical works of some notable researchers in the field. The second one, the Learning Style Inventory, an already established questionnaire, was adopted and translated into Persian. The analysis of the data rejected the first hypothesis to show that there is significant relationship between the two main variables, degree of obtrusiveness and experiential learning styles. The failure to reject the second null hypothesis ruled out the possibility of a significant relationship between learners' gender and their preferred learning styles, but the third hypothesis was rejected and it indicated that gender and preference for a degree of obtrusiveness have a significant relationship. The findings, as presented and discussed in chapters four and five, have a number of applications and implications for foreign language teaching and materials development.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

For a couple of decades and mainly under the influence of Krashen's Monitor model (1981), it was believed that meaning-focused instruction was more instrumental in promoting second language learners acquisition. This extensively undermined the use of almost all methods and techniques that somehow aimed at teaching certain forms to enhance second or foreign language learning (Long, 1991). In 1983, Long began to cast serious doubt on this position and argued that we should decrease the amount of meaning-based activities in favor of more attention to the problems that language learners face in dealing with forms of language. This opinion which later came to be known as focus on form position has been widely investigated in various setting and using large spectrum of participants (Nassaji, 2000; Loewen, Basturkmen, & Ellis 2001; Loewen & Ellis, 2002; Poole, 2005).

This controversy on the role of focus on meaning and form almost coincided with another debate in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) about whether or not formal instruction is effective (Long & Robinson, 1998), initially polarizing researchers into two major camps of pro-instruction and anti-instruction. While some researchers strongly claim that SLA automatically takes place in any environment where the learner is exposed to input, there are those who believe that a conscious attention to form is necessary. Thus, while scholars

such as Krashen (1981) and Prabhu (1987) have argued that formal instruction is not useful for SLA because learners acquire their second language (L2) through a subconscious process, others, such as Schmidt (1983) and White (1989), have supported the necessity of instruction and an explicit focus on form to activate psycholinguistic processes.

Ever since its inception, the issue of focus on form versus meaning has continued to recursively appear in different ways. A short look at the contents of the most widely published books and journals makes it clear that the issue of focus on form is a key theme in many empirical and descriptive research articles. As a result, this idea which was mainly suggested by Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998), has been a source of great interest for English language teachers and researchers. However, this enthusiasm has to be approached cautiously because studies of focus on form instruction give us a confusing picture of its ability to promote L2 grammatical acquisition (Poole, 2005). According to Poole (2005), a large number of language teachers, educators, and researchers "praised it as if it were the miracle method they had always been searching for" (p.5). A large number of studies have tried to prove that it is more effective than the older method known as focus on meaning or meaning-focused instruction. Some of these investigations have said that focus on form is effective because it is performed in a specific way and it is better affected by personality factors (Poole, 2005).

As there has been a confusion over the distinction about focus on form and focus on forms, it should be mentioned that focus on form instruction is a type of instruction that, on the one hand, holds up the importance of communicative language teaching principles such as authentic communication and student-centeredness, and, on the other hand, maintains the value of the occasional and overt study of problematic L2 grammatical forms, which is more reminiscent of noncommunicative teaching (Long, 1991). Furthermore, Long and Robinson (1998) argue that the responsibility of helping learners attend to and understand problematic L2 grammatical forms falls not only on their teachers, but also on their peers. In other words, Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998) claim that formal L2 instruction should give most of its attention to exposing students to oral and written discourse that mirrors real-life, such as doing job interviews, writing letter to friends, and engaging in classroom debates; nonetheless, when it is observed that learners are experiencing difficulties in the comprehension and/or production of certain L2 grammatical forms, teachers and their peers are obligated to assist them to notice their erroneous use and/or comprehension of these forms and supply them with the proper explanations and models of them. Moreover, teachers can help their students and learners can help their peers notice the forms that they currently lack, yet should know in order to further their overall L2 grammatical development.

As briefly stated above, focus on form, focus on forms and focus on meaning have been the target of numerous studies, investigating a myriad of variables that

might make a difference in the effectiveness of these three different pedagogical intervention, or a combination of them. No study, however, to the best of the researcher's knowledge has attempted to look at the degree of effectiveness from the viewpoint of the learners. Almost all studies have devised certain designs in which participants have been divided into focus on form, focus on forms and focus on meaning groups whose performance has been measured after varying amounts of treatment in the respective method. This study, however, takes the preference of learners into consideration for being taught through one of these pedagogical procedures.

As soon as we start to look at the issue from the perspective of the learner, the learner-related factors begin to attract our attention. So, if certain learners choose to learn through one of these procedures, the logical question is why this procedure has been chosen and not another one. Traditionally, one of the determining factors in such decisions has been the learners' cognitive or learning styles. Students preferentially take in and process information in different ways: by seeing and hearing, reflecting and acting, reasoning logically and intuitively, analyzing and visualizing, and so on depending on what inventory of learning style is being used for assessment and which theory serves as the basis of such assessment.

What happens then if we find matches or mismatches between learning styles of most students in a class and the type of focus on the learning materials? The students may make good progress or even achieve more than expected or

conversely become bored and inattentive in class, do poorly on tests, get discouraged about the courses, the curriculum, and themselves, and in some cases change to other curricula or drop out of school. Professors, confronted by low test grades, unresponsive or hostile classes, poor attendance and dropouts, know something is not working. They may become overly critical of their students (making things even worse) or begin to wonder if they are in the right profession. Most seriously, society loses potentially excellent professionals. As a result, we can realize that an attempt to find possible matches or mismatches between our specific focus on form, forms or meaning and the learners' preferred learning styles can bring about great benefits to the individual and the society as a whole.

Generally, the term learning style is used to encompass four aspects of the learner: cognitive style, i.e., preferred or habitual patterns of mental functioning; patterns of attitudes and interests that affect what an individual will pay most attention to in a learning situation; a tendency to seek situations compatible with one's own learning patterns; and a tendency to use certain learning strategies and avoid others (Lawrence, 1984). Learning style is inherent and pervasive (Willing, 1988) and is a blend of cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements (Oxford & Ehrman, 1988). At least twenty dimensions of learning style have been identified (Parry, 1984; Shipman & Shipman, 1985).

One of the most interesting innovations in the field of learning style is one called the Kolb Learning Style Inventory. This inventory differs from other tests of learning style and personality used in education by being based on a

comprehensive theory of learning and development (Kolb, 1999). Experiential learning theory (ELT) draws on the work of prominent twentieth century scholars who gave experience a central role in their theories of human learning and development-notably John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, William James, Carl Jung, Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers, and others-to develop a holistic model of the experiential learning process and a multi-linear model of adult development.

ELT defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb 1984: 41). The ELT model portrays two dialectically related modes of grasping experience-Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization(AC)-and two dialectically related modes of transforming experience-Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation(AE). Experiential learning is a process of constructing knowledge that involves a creative tension among the four learning modes that is responsive to contextual demands. This process is portrayed as an idealized learning cycle or spiral where the learner goes through all modes: experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting and this is done in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned. Immediate or concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn. These implications can be actively tested

and serve as guides in creating new experiences. ELT proposes that this idealized learning cycle will vary by individuals' learning style and learning context.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

As it was implied in the short introduction above, in SLA we can identify two almost opposing positions with regard to the role of consciousness in teaching forms of a language. One of these positions views it as a necessary component of learning a foreign or second language while the other one looks at it as having a subsidiary role in promoting a person's command of language. For instance, Krashen (1981,1985) claimed that a second language is acquired by a subconscious process and he distinguished language 'acquisition,' such as implicit knowledge of the language, and language 'learning,' such as explicit knowledge about the language. According to Krashen, language acquisition is developed subconsciously through comprehending input while language learning is developed consciously through deliberate study of the L2 ." Prabhu (1987) also emphasized that language acquisition takes place not through attention to form but through the exposure to the adequate input. On the contrary, researchers such as Swain (1985) and Schmidt (1986) claim that merely exposure to language input is not sufficient for second language acquisition (SLA).

First of all with regard to the positions stated above, the decision to adopt one of the procedures should be made by taking into account a number of variables which are definitely different in different situations. Secondly, this study looks at

this decision from a new perspective: that of the learners. Naturally, when we allow learners to express their preference for one the three main pedagogical interventions, we should also take into account the main determining factors in such decisions. This study takes the position that the most important factor that shapes and directs a learner's choice is his or her dominant learning style.

Shortly, this study aims at identifying learners' preference for one of the three well-known pedagogical interventions which can be graded as the most to the least obtrusive with regard to attention to form, that is, focus on forms, focus on form and focus on meaning. Moreover, the present study intends to find out if there is any significant relationship between the learners' choice for one the three procedures and their dominant learning styles.

1.3. Research Questions and hypotheses

To achieve the goals mentioned above, the following questions will be answered:

1. Does a learner's preference for focus on form, forms or meaning have a significant relationship with his/her experiential learning style?
2. Does a learner's gender have any significant relationship with his or her preference for the degree of obtrusiveness and his or her preferred experiential learning style?

Based on the above questions the following null hypothesis will be tested. The hypotheses are formulated in null form because the existing literature does not clearly present conclusive generalizations.

H₀1. There is no significant relationship between an EFL learner's preference for focus on form, forms or meaning and his/her experiential learning style.

H₀ 2. There is no significant relationship between a learner's gender and his or her preferred experiential learning style.

H₀ 3. There is no significant relationship between a learner's gender and his or her preference for degree of obtrusiveness.

1.4. Significance of the Study

Why should such a study be carried out? A short look at any books or papers on the factors involved in the success or failure of language learning and teaching programs reveals that numerous factors are involved in this process. Among these factors, one of the most interesting one is whether we should teach language and especially the syntactic component implicitly or explicitly. One of the most innovative techniques that have tried to find a midpoint between explicit focus on forms and implicit focus on meaning is known as focus on form. This technique is designed to help learners develop accuracy while maintaining a primary focus on meaning. Long and Robinson (1998) define it this way:

It entails a prerequisite engagement in meaning before attention to grammatical forms can be expected to be effective, that is, the meaning of an utterance must be evident to learners before their attention is drawn to the grammatical features embedded in that utterance. It constitutes an