

In the Name of God



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**Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)**

**A Comparative Study of Language Learning Style Preferences of Bilinguals
and Monolinguals with Regard to Anxiety and Self-Efficacy**

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January, 2011

*Proudly dedicated to my wife for her steady support,
permanent patience and ebullient encouragement.*

Acknowledgements

Completing this project and achieving an MA degree would not have been possible without the contribution of several individuals to whom I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude.

I would like to thank, first and foremost, my supervisor Dr. Babaii for her availability, support and guidance throughout the study.

I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Ataii for reading the thesis and giving useful comments.

I also thank my wife for being my friend, counselor, proofreader, and for the support and strength that she has displayed during my studies.

I would also like to express my appreciation to all my professors of the MA program at Tarbiat Moallem University, who offered me much needed guidance, expertise, advice, contributions and motivation.

Thanks also go to the staff of Iran Language Institute especially Dr. Nick for allowing me to conduct the study in their departments and I also thank the students of this institute for their participation in the study.

Finally, this work is offered to the precious memory of my mother who went too soon and I miss her very much.

Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the possible interaction between EFL learners' cognitive and affective variables, i.e. learning style preferences, anxiety and self-efficacy and their linguistic background. It was an attempt to see whether bilingual and monolingual language learners differ significantly in their style preference, levels of anxiety and self-efficacy.

To this end, 180 adult advanced learners of English studying at Iran Language Institute took part in the study. The participants were selected from three groups of Kurdish-Persian, Turkish-Persian bilinguals, and a group of Persian monolinguals (60 subjects for each group). A General English Proficiency Test (Michigan) and three other standardized questionnaires measuring the aforementioned variables were administered to the participants. Statistical analyses showed that there were no significant differences between three groups regarding their English proficiency, anxiety and self-efficacy. By contrast, significant differences existed between the three groups with regard to their learning style preferences. The findings also revealed that the most frequent learning styles preferred by all groups were visual and sensing and the least one preferred was verbal learning style.

Keywords: Bilingual, language learning anxiety, learning style, monolingual, self-efficacy

Table of Contents

Contents	Page
Dedication.....	I
Acknowledgements.....	II
Abstract.....	III
List of Tables.....	VIII

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Overview.....	1
1.2 Statement of the Problem.....	2
1.3 Significance of the Study.....	4
1.4. Research Questions and Hypotheses.....	6
1.5. Definitions of the Key Terms.....	7
1.6. Limitations and Delimitations of the Study.....	8

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

2.1 Overview.....	11
2.2 Bilingualism.....	12
2.2.1 Bilingualism and Monolingualism.....	13
2.2.2 Bilingualism and Other Research Fields.....	15
2.2.3 Dimensions of Bilinguality.....	16
2.2.4 Cognitive Consequences of Bilinguality.....	18
2.2.5 Bilingual Measurement.....	23
2.2.6 Problems With Measuring Bilingualism.....	25

2.2.7 Bilingual Education Programs.....	26
2.2.8 Theories of Second Language Acquisition.....	28
2.2.8.1 Acculturation/Pidginization Theory.....	29
2.2.8.2 Linguistic Universal Theory.....	30
2.2.8.3 Interlanguage Theory.....	30
2.2.8.4 Discourse Theory.....	31
2.2.8.5 Cognitive Theory.....	31
2.2.8.6 The Monitor Model.....	32
2.2.9 L2 versus L3 Acquisition (Empirical studies).....	33
2.3 Language Learning Styles.....	35
2.3.1 Kolb’s Learning Style Model.....	37
2.3.2 Categorization of Learning Styles.....	40
2.3.2.1 Cognitive Learning Styles.....	40
2.3.2.2 Perceptual Learning Styles.....	40
2.3.2.3 Environmental Learning Styles.....	41
2.3.2.4 Personality Learning Styles.....	41
2.3.3 Importance of Learning Styles in Language Learning and Teaching.....	42
2.3.4 Learning Styles and Teaching Styles.....	44
2.3.5 Learning Style and Culture.....	44
2.3.6 Learning Style and Learning Strategy.....	47
2.3.7 Research on Learning Styles.....	48
2.4 Anxiety.....	50
2.4.1 Classification of Foreign Language Anxiety.....	51
2.4.2 Anxiety and FL/SL Research.....	53
2.5 Self-Efficacy.....	55
2.5.1Dimensions of Self-Efficacy.....	55

2.5.2 Self-Efficacy and FL/SL Research.....	57
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Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1. Overview.....	63
3.2. Participants.....	63
3.3. Instrumentation.....	64
3.3.1. The General English Proficiency Test.....	64
3.3.2. Learning Style Questionnaire.....	65
3.3.3 A Scale of Foreign Language Learning Anxiety.....	66
3.3.4. A Scale of Self-Efficacy.....	67
3.3.5 A Self-Report Questionnaire for Assessing Bilingual Students' Degree of Bilingualism.....	67
3.4. Procedure.....	69
3.5. Design.....	69
3.6. Data Analysis.....	70

Chapter Four: Results and Discussion

4.1 Overview.....	72
4.2 Restatement of the Problem.....	72
4.3 Results.....	74
4.3.1 Results of the Language Learners' English Proficiency.....	74
4.3.2 Results of the Language Learners' Foreign Language Anxiety.....	76
4.3.3 Results of the Language Learners' Self-Efficacy.....	77
4.3.4 Results of the Language Learners' Learning Style Preferences.....	79
4.4 Discussion.....	86

Chapter Five: Conclusion, Implications, and Suggestions for Further Research

5.1 Overview.....	94
5.2 Summary of Findings and Conclusion	94
5.3 Theoretical and Pedagogical Implications.....	96
5.4 Suggestions for Further Research.....	99
References.....	101
Appendices.....	123

List of Tables

Tables	Page
Table 4.1 Means for groups in homogeneous subsets.....	74
Table 4.2 One-way ANOVA for English Proficiency.....	75
Table 4.3 Means for groups in homogeneous subsets.....	76
Table 4.4 One-way ANOVA for Anxiety by L1 Background.....	77
Table 4.5 Means for groups in homogeneous subsets.....	78
Table 4.6 One-way ANOVA for self-efficacy by L1 Background.....	78
Table 4.7 Descriptive statistics for learning style subparts.....	80
Table 4.8 Tests of within-subjects effect.....	81
Table 4.9 Tests of Between-Subjects Effects.....	82
Table 4.10 Pairwise Comparisons among the three L1 backgrounds.....	82
Table 4.11 Pairewise Comparisons of style preferences for the groups.....	84

1.1 Overview

Insights from nearly two decades of research in second and foreign language development in natural as well as formal setting have made us aware that language learning is primarily a learner and learning oriented activity (Brown, 2001; Nunan, 1988; Wright, 1990). Consequently, in recent years there has been more emphasis on the role of the learner in the language learning. In the curricula based on a learner-centered approach learners have greater roles in teaching/learning processes (Makarova, 1997). Therefore understanding learner variables and the characteristics that make them different is a fundamental concern for those involved in second language learning. There are numerous learner variables which play important roles in language learning and there have been several studies on learners' cognitive and affective variables. Learners' linguistic background, anxiety, self-efficacy, motivation, learning styles and strategies, etc, are some of these variables.

With the emergence of bilinguality and multilinguality, several studies have argued that learning a foreign language has the potential to increase the general cognitive ability and test scores of students. Hakuta (1990) claimed that "Bilingualism can lead to superior performance on a variety of intellectual skills" (p. 7). Supporting this claim Klein (1995) stated that "learners who are already bilingual appear to acquire an L3 relatively more easily and perhaps more proficiently than monolinguals acquiring an L2" (p. 424).

Research also emphasizes the positive effects of bilingualism on the following metalinguistic abilities: early word distinction; sensitivity to language structure and detail; detection of ambiguities; correction of ungrammatical sentences and detection of language mixing and control of language processing.

Research has shown that there is difference between monolingual and bilingual language learners regarding their preferences for learning styles. Moreover, studies on language learning styles (as a cognitive variable) have shown that appropriate styles are useful in the development of communicative competence, improved proficiency, and learner autonomy (Oxford, 1990). Different learners, whether as a result of heredity, educational background, situational requirements, age, or other factors, understand and process information differently (Lawrence, 1993). Some learners, for instance, prefer to hear information (auditory learners). Such learners gain knowledge through listening. They learn best through verbal lectures and discussions. But some other learners learn more through watching. These learners (visual learners) need to see the teacher's body language and facial expression to fully understand the content of a lesson.

Furthermore, it is also well accepted that a number of other variables in affective domain such as anxiety and self-efficacy influence success in second language acquisition (Naiman *et al.*, 1978; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Interest in anxiety and self-efficacy in educational contexts is not new but has gained importance with the evolution of humanistic psychology in the 1960s when the purely cognitive theories of learning were rejected and the integration of cognition and affect was emphasized (Arnold & Brown, 1999).

1.2 Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

Some studies have found that people with multiple language skills have been generally assumed to be individuals with 'notable facility' in language learning (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Ramsay 1980). Bilingualism affects learners' proficiency and their cognitive abilities. It is said that bilinguals are more advantageous than monolinguals in the process of language learning because they are intrinsically motivated. The source of this motivation may be the previous success at

acquiring or learning other languages. Similarly, Wharton (2000) stated that “Bilinguals’ use of strategies has been reinforced by previous success at acquiring or learning other languages” (p. 230). Bilinguals show a greater use of strategy when compared with monolinguals. This might be due to the success at learning previous languages and experience of learning more than two languages. Moreover, bilinguals have an advantage like employing cognitive and metacognitive skills while learning a language which suggests that bilinguals are more advantageous in the learning process. According to some studies it can be claimed that there is a positive correlation between the strategy use and bilingualism (Nayak, *et al.* 1990). It is said that bilinguals show a greater overall use of language learning strategies compared to monolinguals.

However, as cited in the literature, there have also been controversial results on the differences between bilinguals and monolinguals concerning their cognitive and affective variables. Beyond these studies, there is little additional empirical research that proves the advanced expertise of the bilingual/multilingual learner. In addition, limited studies on contrasting language learning behaviors and thoughts of monolingual and bilingual learners are available (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2007). Furthermore, little comparative analyses have been conducted to explain how bilingual and monolingual Iranian EFL learners differ in their language learning style preferences.

In the last decades a considerable amount of research into learners’ variables such as anxiety, learning styles and strategies, self-esteem, language proficiency, self-efficacy and the relationship between them has been carried out (Clément, *et al.*, 1994; Onwuegbuzie, *et al.*, 1999; Çubukcu, 2008; Anyadubalu, 2010). The point is that most of the studies have focused on the relationship among these variables and language learning strategies and in fact there is no

firm resolution with regard to above-mentioned variables along with learning styles in foreign language learning.

The other problem is that most studies in this trend have been conducted among East Asian participants such as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean language learners and there is dearth of research thereof in Iran.

Hence the primary purpose of this study is to identify the differences between two groups of Iranian bilingual and monolingual students learning English as a foreign language regarding their learning style preferences, anxiety and self-efficacy to see whether these groups of language learners differ significantly in the abovementioned variables.

1.3 Significance and Justification of the Study

In the past few years there have been preliminary researches on language learners concerning their bilinguality. Bialystok (1999) for example points to the positive role of bilingualism on cognitive ability. Some other studies have found that bilinguals had a greater facility for learning a third language, were more flexible in seeking and utilizing strategies appropriate to the task, and knew more readily than monolinguals which learning approach would work best for them in different language learning situations (Lerea & Kohut, 1961; Thomas, 1988; Nayak, Hansen, Krueger & McLaughlin, 1990).

Although there is much anecdotal evidence that people who have previously learned many languages are better at language learning than are linguistically native subjects, there is very little empirical research on this topic (Nayak, *et al.*, 1990).

As stated by Oxford (1989), affective variables are among the variables that affect language learning, and, anxiety as an affective variable influences learning behavior. Anxiety is quite

pervasive in foreign/second language classrooms and can negatively affect learners' achievement in the target language. Given the number of foreign/second language learners in the world, this issue needs further exploration with various groups of learners in different contexts. These learners often do not have much access to or chance to speak/use the target language. When learning/using the target language, they often become unconsciously anxious or nervous, which usually negatively affects their learning outcomes. Oxford contends that anxiety "ranks high among factors influencing language learning, regardless of whether the setting is informal or formal" (Oxford, 1999, p. 59). Given its powerful influence on second language acquisition (SLA), efforts need to be made to address and manage anxiety, in other words, to reduce the affective filter (Krashen, 1982) in order to prevent anxiety interfering with the process of language acquisition.

Another determining affective factor is learners' self-efficacy which has proved to be a much more consistent predictor of behavior than any of the other closely related variables (Bandura, 1986). To quote Bandura, "many students have difficulty in school not because they are incapable of performing successfully, but because they are incapable of believing that they can perform successfully, that they have learned to see themselves as incapable of handling academic skills" (p. 390). This view is supported by Graham and Weiner (1996) who observed that the acquisition of new skills and the performance of previously learned skills have been related to efficacy beliefs at a level not found in any of the other expectancy constructs.

Based on the literature justifying the significant role of affective variables, here anxiety and self-efficacy, and regarding the role of linguistic background as important contributors to effective EFL learning, the researcher made an attempt to conduct a comparative study of

language learning styles preferences of bilinguals and monolinguals with reference to their anxiety and self-efficacy.

The reason to choose these contexts is the fact that the area of affective factors along with learning styles with respect to learners' linguistic background is one of the least investigated areas of TEFL, particularly in Iran.

1.4 Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study set out to find answers to the following questions:

RQ1. Are there any significant differences between advanced monolingual and bilingual learners of English regarding their degree of anxiety (scores)?

RQ2. Are there any significant differences between advanced monolingual and bilingual learners of English regarding their degree of self-efficacy (scores)?

RQ3. Are there any significant differences between advanced monolingual and bilingual learners of English regarding their learning styles preferences?

Based on the research questions the following hypotheses were proposed:

RH1. There are not any significant differences between monolingual and bilingual learners of English regarding their degree of anxiety (scores).

RH2. There are not any significant differences between monolingual and bilingual learners of English regarding their degree of self-efficacy (scores).

RH3. There are not any significant differences between monolingual and bilingual learners of English regarding their learning styles preferences.

1.5 Definition of the Key Terms

Bilingual: in *Longman Dictionary of Language and Applied Linguistics* (Richards & Schmidt, 1985) bilingual is defined as “a person who knows and uses two languages. In everyday use, the word bilingual usually means a person who speaks, reads and understands two languages equally well (a balanced bilingual), but a bilingual who usually has a better knowledge of one language than of the other . “For example this person may be able to a) read and write in only one language b) use each language in different types of situation, one at home and the other at work and c) use each language for different communicative purposes, one language for talking about school life and the other for talking about personal feelings” (p. 51).

Language Learning Anxiety or Language anxiety: “Anxiety is a psychological construct, commonly described by psychologists as a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object and that is both debilitating and facilitative in language acquisition” (Hilgard, Atkinson & Atkinson, 1971 cited in Scovel, 1991, p. 18).

Learning style: learning styles are the general approaches and overall pattern preferred by students “when learning a subject, learning a language or dealing with a difficulty” (Oxford, 2003, p. 273). The link between personality and cognition while learning things in general or attacking a problem is referred to as cognitive styles. “When cognitive styles are specifically

related to an educational context, where affective and physiological factors are intermingled, they are generally referred to as learning styles” (Brown, 2000, p. 113).

Monolingual: Longman Dictionary of Language and Applied Linguistics defines *monolingual* as 1) “a person who knows and uses only one language 2) a person who has an active knowledge of only one language though perhaps a passive knowledge of others”(Richards & Schmidt, p. 339).

Self efficacy: “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required for attaining designated types of performances” (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). Basically, it concerns the answer to the question: “Can I do this task in this situation?” Schunk (2001) defines it as “beliefs about one’s capabilities to learn or perform behaviors at designated levels” (p. 126).

1.6 Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Generally speaking, there are some difficulties inherent in any research on individual learner variables in acquisition of a FL/SL. This study due to having an ex-post facto design has certain methodological limitations that must be kept in mind in the interpretation of the results. The first point is the question of generalizability. The subjects of the study were Persian, Kurdish-Persian and Turkish-Persian learners. Thus the findings can be generalized only to those with similar characteristics.

Some of the problems are the result of the quantitative research methods and the type of instrumentation used in conducting this type of research. One potential problem with research

where participants rate themselves is the extent to which individuals can objectively rate themselves, especially in a subjective area such as anxiety and self-efficacy. Some participants may over or underestimate their feelings in these aspects.

Another limitation concerns the use of questionnaire as data elicitation instruments and the ambiguities of the interpretation inherent in using Likert scale data. More qualitative approaches based on interviews and introspection can be used in addition to questionnaire to obtain more trustworthy and reliable results.

