



Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

Title

*Field-Dependence/Independence Cognitive Style and
Performance on the IELTS Listening Comprehension*

By:

Shiva Zeynali

Supervisor:

Dr. Ebrahim Khodadady

A thesis submitted to the English Department, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the M.A. Degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

Mashhad, Iran

Sep, 2011

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



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We hereby certify that we have read this thesis written by *Shiva Zeynali*, entitled, *Field-Dependence/Independence Cognitive Style and Performance on the IELTS Listening Comprehension Test* and that it is satisfactory in scope and quality as a thesis for the degree of M.A in teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

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اظهارنامه

اینجانب شیوا زینلی، دانشجوی دوره کارشناسی ارشد رشته آموزش زبان انگلیسی، دانشکده ادبیات و علوم انسانی، دانشگاه فردوسی مشهد، نویسنده

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Dependence/Independence Cognitive Style and Performance on IELTS Listening Comprehension

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List of Abbreviations

FD: Field-Dependent, Field-Dependence

FI: Field-Independent, Field-Independence

FDI: Field-Dependent/Independent, Field-Dependence/Independence

GEFT: Group Imbedded Figure Test

IELTS: International English Language Testing System

Abstract

The present study explored the relationship between field-dependence/independence cognitive style and listening comprehension ability. Participants were 200 (152 female and 48 male) English students enrolled in universities and language institutes in Mashhad, Iran who responded to the Group Embedded Figures Test (GEFT) and the IELTS listening comprehension. They were divided to field-dependent and field-independent groups according to the scores gained in the GEFT. 122 participants labeled field-dependent and 78 ones labeled field-independent. The results of the study suggested that test-takers' cognitive styles resulted in statistically significant difference in listening test and task performances. Field-independent participants outperformed field-dependent participants on the IELTS listening comprehension and all the listening tasks. The finding also indicated that field-independency correlated more positively with the successes on IELTS listening comprehension than field-dependency. More specifically, field-independency correlated more significantly with fill-in-the-gap questions, i.e., form-completion, note-completion and sentence completion, than field-dependency. Field-dependency, however, correlated more significantly with multiple choice and matching questions than field-independency. The implications of these findings are discussed with a foreign language testing context. Since the type of listening task has considerable effect on the performance of field-dependent and field-independent participants in different ways, the result of this study can help the test takers to choose the most appropriate test considering their

cognitive styles and also the test designers to provide a test, involving both cognitive styles.

Keywords: Field-Dependence/Independence; Cognitive style; Listening Comprehension; the IELTS; Listening tasks.

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

1.1.1. Field-Dependence/Independence

Cognitive styles are defined as ‘information processing habits representing the learner’s typical mode of perceiving, thinking, problem solving, and remembering’ (Messick 1984, p. 61). Human cognition, including cognitive styles is highly relevant to many important educational concerns involving teaching and learning. Although a variety of motivational and environmental factors influence learning, cognition represents the core of learning process. Compared to variables such as the affective or physiological factors, cognitive styles seem to be the most relevant to those associated with academic achievement (O’Brien, Butler & Bernold, 2001). But the influence of cognitive styles go beyond learning to include the interpersonal, social and psychological functioning of individuals (Kahtz & Kling, 1999).

As a cognitive style, the field dependence-independence (FDI) construct is among the most widely studied constructs. The FDI describes two contrasting ways of information processing. Individuals are positioned along a continuum running from extreme field-dependence (FD) to extreme field-independence (FI). Those located towards the FD end of the continuum have difficulty in separating information from its contextual surroundings whereas FI individuals have less difficulty in accomplishing the same task (Guisande, Paramo, Tinajero & Almeida, 2007). The educational

implications of field-dependence/independence (FDI) have been explored mainly in the areas of second- language acquisition, mathematics, natural and social sciences (Coffield, Moseley, Hall & Ecclestone, 2004). Field-dependence/independence cognitive style is assessed by Group Embedded Figures Test (GEFT) developed by Witkin, Dyk, Faterson and Goodenough (1971). The test requires learners to outline a simple form in larger complex figure.

Bunch of researches have been done to explore the effect of field-dependence/independence cognitive style on foreign language learning. These studies reveal some interesting points about field-dependent/independent students and their differences in mastering language skills and components. It seems that field-independence correlates positively and significantly with success in language classrooms (Chapelle & Robert, 1983; Brown, 2000; Salmani-Nodushan, 2009). But field-dependence may not be necessarily a disadvantage because field-dependent individuals can perform better in social aspect of language learning (Dornyei, 2005; Salmani-Nodushan, 2006)

1.1.2: Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension ability as an integral component of language lies at the very heart of all growth, from birth through the years of formal education. The better those listening skills are developed, the more productive learning efforts become. It is one of the most fundamental and also one of the most complicated language skills. Comprehending the spoken form of the target language is a difficult task for the language learners. The major difficulty is that of

understanding what one hears because while a speaker can control what he wants to say, the listener has no control on what is said to him. Furthermore, listening precedes speaking and is a prerequisite for it. Nevertheless, the task of comprehension is cumbersome compared to reading and writing since in listening comprehension the opportunity to go back or think again is not possible (Chastain, 1988; Farhady, Ja'farpur & Birjandi, 2004). The special problems in constructing listening tests arise out of the transient nature of spoken language. Listeners cannot move backwards and forwards over what is being said in the way they can on a written text. Furthermore the human brain's limited capacity for storing information does not allow absorbing the whole of oral stimulus. Therefore, listening comprehension test items often combine listening with reading or writing. As such these items are more complex than those testing other skills (Hughes, 2003).

Few research projects have been done to explore the role of cognitive style on listening comprehension. Genesee and Hamayan(1980) reported significant and positive correlation between FI and French listening comprehension skills. In another study, Richards, Fajen, Sullivan, and Gillespie (1997) examined the effect of FD/ FI cognitive style on the use of listening and reading comprehension strategies. Results showed that FI and FD participants use different strategies. Ahmady (2002) also studied the effect of FD/ FI on the use of listening comprehension strategies and he concluded that FD and FI learners benefited from different strategies; for instance, FD students made more use of social strategies than FI students.