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**The Relationship among EFL Learners' Learning Style Preferences, Use  
of Language Learning Strategies, and Autonomy**

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# **In The Name of God**

## DEDICATION

*This Thesis Is Dedicated To My Dear Husband*

*and*

*My Lovely Daughter*

*For All Their Love, Encouragement, and Support*

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the current study was to investigate the relationship among EFL learners' learning style preferences, use of language learning strategies, and autonomy. A total of 148 male and female learners, between the ages of 18 and 30, majoring in English Literature and English Translation at Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran were randomly selected. A package of three questionnaires was administered among participants: the Perceptual Learning Style Preferences (PLSP) by Reid (1987), the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (1990), and a questionnaire of autonomy (ACT) by Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan (2002). The relationship among learners' learning style preferences, use of language learning strategies, and autonomy was investigated using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. The results of Pearson correlation indicated that there is a significant and positive correlation between EFL learners' learning style preferences & use of language learning strategies ( $r = 0.83, p < 0.05$ ), learning style preferences & autonomy ( $r = 0.78, p < 0.05$ ), and use of language learning strategies & autonomy ( $r=0.90, p < 0.05$ ). Also, there were significant and positive correlations among different language learning strategies and learning style preferences, different language learning strategies and autonomy, and different learning style preferences and autonomy. Running multiple regression showed that learners' learning style preferences and learning strategies predicted autonomy. Visual style predicted 62.4 percent of scores on autonomy, while group style increased the predictive power to 68.3 percent, and auditory learning style added up the percentage of prediction only to 71.9 percent. Also, among language learning strategies, cognitive strategies predicted 70.4 percent of scores on autonomy, memory strategies increased the predictive power to 79.2 percent, affective strategies added up the percentage of prediction to 84.8 percent and finally the metacognitive strategies leveled the prediction to 85.1 percent. Regarding the findings of the study, the obtained results may help EFL teachers, educators, and material developers to possess a broader perspective and bear in mind the benefits of developing EFL learners learning style preferences and language learning strategies when dealing with promoting autonomy and take practical steps toward the attainments of the desired objectives in profession.

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# **CHAPTER I**

## **BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE**

## 1.1 Introduction

Since learning second language is regarded as an essential component in the educational system at different levels, the field of second language education has witnessed a gradual but significant shift from "teacher-centered to more learner-centered approaches"(Riazi, 2007, p.433) within the recent decades. Accordingly, Wenden and Rubin (as cited in Sarabchian, 2013) state that researches on language teaching have shifted its focus away from different teaching methodologies to learner characteristics and their possible influence on the process of acquiring a second language.

One line of research in this regard has been how learners attempt to learn a second language considering their individual differences(Riazi, 2007), and using various types of their learning style preferences (Oxford, 2003; Reid, 1987; 1995; Wang, 2007) and learning strategies(Anderson, 2005; Cohen, 1995; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Wenden & Rubin, 1987). At the same time, the other shift of attention has been the importance of helping learners to become more autonomous in their learning (Benson, 2001) and providing the situation in which the learner is responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his/her learning (Dickinson, 1987). Autonomy should be taken as a goal of all education, as general "to help people think, act and learn independently in relevant area of their lives" (Littlewood, 1996, p. 434), and particularly in second and foreign language acquisition (Dafei, 2007).

In this point, autonomy to Holec (1981) is "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (p.3). An autonomous person, according to Little (1995), sets up directions in the planning, monitors, and evaluates the learning process. Through this process,

eventually, the autonomous learner establishes "a personal agenda for learning" (Chan, 2003), in which learning is more focused and purposeful, and thus more effective both immediately and in the longer term (Balcikanli, 2010; Dam, 1995; Little, 1991).

Learner autonomy is based on the idea that if learners are involved in the decision-making process regarding their own language competence, "they are likely to be more enthusiastic about learning" (Littlejohn, 1985, p. 285). Additionally, the notion that "learners have the power and right to learn for themselves" (Smith, 2008, p.2) is considered as an essential aspect for learner autonomy. Little (1999, as cited in Dalbani, 2011) argues that the practice of learner autonomy requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others.

An obvious reason for promoting learner autonomy is that a teacher may not always be available to guide or instruct. Therefore, increasing the level of autonomy will increase the level of self-determination and general motivation in the development of learner autonomy (Chan, 2001), so that "the autonomous learner will be able to say what they want to say rather than producing the language of others" (Macaro, 2008, p.60).

Since the development of learner autonomy, according to Benson (2005), implies better language learning, it can be achieved through learner training and strategy training (Benson, as cited in Dafe, 2007). Furthermore, as Paiva (2005) believes, learning strategies are regarded as one of the factors which might interfere positively in the degree of learners' autonomy and may therefore be considered as one goal of the

researches in second language learning which lead to more effective language acquisition (Wong&Nunan, 2011).

As mentioned above, the other important feature concerning language learning is language learning strategies (LLS) which represent concepts and processes that can be taught and learned to have successful learning (Cohen, 1998; Hsaio& Oxford, 2002;Wenden, 1987).

Language learning strategies, according to Skehan (as cited in Fourough, 2008), are among individual difference variables that play a significant role in second language learning. Several studies have investigated the relationship between language learning strategies and students' success (Oxford, 1989, 1993; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975). The major finding among them is that the most successful language learners tend to use language learning strategies that are appropriate to the material, task, goal, need, and stage of learning. In general, more successful learners appear to use a wider range of language learning strategies in different situations than do poor learners (Oxford & Crookall, 1989).

In addition, Cohen (as cited in Hurd, 2006) argues that the choice and effectiveness of language learning strategies is directly tied to the learner's underlying learning styles. Also, researches in language learning strategies identified a close link with learning style preferences that influence the process and outcomes of learning (Carson & Longhini, 2002; Ehram & Oxford; 1990; Littlemore; 2001; Oxford, 2003; Vaseghi, Ramezani, & Gholami, 2012; Wong & Nunan, 2011).

Learning style, according to Borichand Tombari (as mentioned in Vasaghi, Barjasteh, & Shakib, 2013), is generally conceived as preferred manners that people use to help their process of learning in various situations. Reid (as mentioned in Vasaghi et al., 2012) believes that learning styles are individual, natural, habitual, and preferred way(s) of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills. In other words, the way learners get, process and use information vary greatly among the learners depending on their learning styles. As Felder and Henriques (as cited in Erton, 2010) state, "students learn in many ways, by seeing and hearing, reflecting and acting, reasoning logically and intuitively, memorizing and visualizing" (p. 116). Therefore, Cornett (as cited in Bidabadi & Yamat, 2010) points out that learning styles are the overall patterns that give learning behavior a general direction.

Accordingly, knowing one's learning styles can help in various ways to enhance learning and teaching (Garf, Kinshuk & Liu, 2009). As Griggs (1991) argues the learner's style of learning can result in improved attitude toward learning and an increase in productivity, academic achievement, autonomy and creativity. This understanding, on one hand, is helpful for educators to match their teaching styles, methodologies and course organization with learners' learning styles to help learners improve their learning (Willing, 1988), and on the other hand, according to Ma (as cited in Shi, 2011), learners can choose appropriate learning strategies that may promote their autonomy and help them become successful learners.

Considering the importance of learning style preferences as an individual's preferred mode for perceiving, organizing, and retaining information; learning strategies

as techniques that make language learning more effective in the process of second language learning; and autonomy as a desirable aim that enables learners to make choices independently, each of these variables will be investigated. It seems that the correlation among them can provide more appropriate ways for language learning and teaching.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Preparing students to become autonomous and strategic learners through using effective learning strategies and adapting special ways of learning or style preferences seems as an essential issue in today's education to help them become productive lifelong learners (Beckman, 2002).

The three above-mentioned variables, autonomy as a legitimate goal of language education (Benson & Voller, 1997; Dickinson, 1987); learners' learning styles as the general approach (Anderson, 2005); and learning strategies as the specific things one takes and does to learn, are regarded important in learner centered approach (Anderson, *ibid*); however, it seems that they have not been considered sufficiently in the educational system of Iran (Bidabadi & Yamat, 2010; Khezerlou, 2013, Mohamadpour, 2013).

The common phenomenon in language learning is the learner who is still observed to be passive in the process of learning (Bidabadi & Yamat, 2010), to rely on teachers too much and to be reluctant to develop a "sense of responsibility" for the outcome of their learning. According to Littwood (as cited in Minishi, 2010), they still perceive the teachers as "an authority whose knowledge and control over classroom learning



shouldn't be questioned" (p.2), so that learning at all levels of education has mainly been directed and evaluated by the teachers (Sert, 2006).

In addition, in the educational system of Iran, according to Khezerlou (2013), most teachers do not regulate the content of the programs in accordance with the student needs. This may be due to the lack of knowledge of how to "help more learners to succeed" (Little, 1995, p.175) and how to help them succeed by themselves; or it may refer to the "centralized educational system" which prescribes curricula and authorizes textbooks. In this system, students are used to taking the teacher as the authority and expert in handling the textbooks and making decisions about what they should learn (Ma & Ma, 2012). But it seems whenever learners are involved in the process of decision-making choices and when they have their say through negotiation and when they become aware of the learning process, they will learn best, as Curran (as cited in Linder, 2000) expressed, people learn best from utterances in which they have a strong personal stake or investment.

Consequently, as Mohamadpour, (2013); Sert, (2007); Yazdi, (2013) point out, there is a need for having a systematic approach to initiate a significant change in the current education. This approach requires identifying and being aware of learners' unique characteristics. It seems that finding the connection between learners' autonomy and their individual abilities such as learning style preferences and learning strategies might lead to effective learning.

Today each learner has his/her especial way of learning that has a fundamental role in his/her success or failure (Fewell, 2010; Zare & Noordin, 2011) and the learning

outcome is higher for learners who are able to use multiple learning styles (Mulalic, Mohdshad & Ahmad, 2009; Reid, 1987). As Reid, (1987) and Too, (2007), argue each preferred learning style has a matching preferred method of instruction; however, this doesn't mean a single approach fits all learners (Riazi, 2007). In this respect, Tabanlıgil, (2003) claims that most teachers tend to teach in the way they were taught or prefer to learn; perhaps it is related to teachers being unaware of the students learning style preferences; consequently, it makes classroom boring and education becomes ineffective (Chang, 2005).

Therefore, identifying learners' learning styles might be a key element to raise instructors' and learners' awareness of their potentials, weaknesses, and strengths for effective teaching and learning in this fast growing world.

In addition to, considering autonomy and the perceptual learning styles in the learning process, we shouldn't neglect the crucial importance of learning strategies, which according to Wenden (as cited in Naizhao & Yaling, 2008) facilitate fostering of autonomy in learning, and correlate with learners' learning styles positively (Eliss, 2008). Also, the results of some second language researches on language learning strategies, as Ehram & Oxford (1990); and Oxford & Nyikos (1989) show that the context of learning English as a second language and the level of autonomy and various styles employed by language learners seem to affect second language learners' choice of learning strategies.

Accordingly, if EFL learners are given an awareness of the effective strategies and various styles, employed by autonomous learners, they may handle the learning process

much more efficiently and their language learning might be enhanced. In sum, the above-mentioned problems provide the motivation for more investigation on finding significant relationship among EFL learners' learning style preferences, use of language learning strategies and autonomy.

### **1.3 Statement of the Research Questions**

To fulfill the objective of the present study, the following research questions were proposed:

Q1: Is there any significant relationship among EFL learners' learning style preferences, use of language learning strategies, and autonomy?

Q2: Is there any significant relationship between using different types of language learning strategies and learning style preferences by EFL learners?

Q3: Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' learning style preferences and autonomy?

Q4: Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' use of language learning strategies and autonomy?

Provided that a significant correlation is obtained for the variables, the following questions were also raised:

Q5: Is there any significant difference between EFL learners' learning style preferences and use of language learning strategies in predicting autonomy?

Q6: Do EFL learners' learning style preferences predict their use of language learning strategies?

Q7: Do EFL learners' learning style preferences predict their autonomy?

Q8: Does EFL learners' use of language learning strategies predict their autonomy?

## **1.4 Statement of the Research Hypotheses**

In order to investigate the four initial research questions, the following research hypotheses are formulated:

H01: There is no significant relationship among EFL learners' learning style preferences, use of language learning strategies, and autonomy.

H02: There is no significant relationship between using different types of language learning strategies and learning style preferences by EFL learners.

H03: There is no significant relationship between EFL learners' learning style preferences and autonomy.

H04: There is no significant relationship between EFL learners' use of language learning strategies and autonomy.

Provided that a significant correlation is obtained for the variables, the following hypotheses were also raised:

H05: There is no significant difference among EFL learners' learning style preferences and use of language learning strategies in predicting autonomy.

H06: EFL learners' learning style preferences do not predict their use of language learning strategies.

H07: EFL learners' learning style preferences do not predict their autonomy.

H08: EFL learners' use of language learning strategies does not predict their autonomy.