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The Relationship Between Learning Styles and
Language Learning Strategies of
Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to identify the learning styles and strategies of Iranian language learners, the relationship between their style and strategy preferences and their level of achievement, and also to investigate whether there is a relationship between the students' learning styles and the strategies that they prefer to use. A total of 66 English language students of Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman were asked to complete two questionnaires. The Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ) was used to identify the students' perceptual learning style preferences and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was used to identify students' language learning strategies. A Michigan Test was also given to the students to evaluate their level of English language achievement. The results of the first questionnaire revealed that students' major learning style preference was visual learning. Furthermore, there was no relationship between the students learning styles and their level of achievement. The analysis of the second questionnaire revealed that cognitive strategies were favored the most. Additionally, students' cognitive, compensation, and social strategies had significant relationships with their level of achievement. The analysis with respect to the relationship between learning styles and language learning strategies revealed that auditory learning styles had a significant relationship with cognitive strategies and the tactile learning styles had significant relationships with cognitive, compensation, and metacognitive strategies.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Overview

The amount of changes taken place in the world during the last two decades has been incredible. All these scientific, cultural, social, political, and technological changes, taken place in a high speed, have created many different needs for people to meet. Communication and the exchange of information with the people around the world are the most important needs. Meeting these needs has changed language learning into a necessity and even an essential component in people's lives.

The early language teaching methods and techniques were introduced to the field of language teaching and learning in the early 1970s. After that, many different researchers tried to find out the best teaching methods and instructional materials necessary for an efficient language instruction. However, in spite of all these efforts, they did not get the results that they wished because the learners did not progress as much as it was anticipated.

The main reason is that there are some other factors rather than teaching methods, which influence language learning. These are individual-difference variables such as motivation, attitude, aptitude, learning styles, language learning strategies, sex, age, culture, etc. which cause every learner to be a unique one. In this way, none of the teaching methods and techniques can be applicable for all learners.

These results changed the focus from the language teaching methodology to the language learner and the variables that affect language learning. Since then, many different studies have been done on the learner characteristics and foreign or second language learning. Language learning strategies have been among the most popular aspects researchers have focused on. However, they have not been investigated on their own. Some other variables that affect them such as gender, achievement, motivation, culture, aptitude, learning styles, etc. have also been taken into consideration while doing research in order to reveal whether there is any relationship between the language learning strategy choice and these variables.

Oxford (1989b) offers a synthesis of the studies carried out regarding the language learning strategies and the variables that affect strategy choice. She presents the results of studies carried out with respect to language learning strategy choice and the language being learned, duration, degree of awareness, age, sex, and affective variables such as attitudes, motivational level, and personality characteristics. Learning style is another variable but Oxford (1989b) states that "little research has been dedicated to the relationship between learning strategy use and learning style" (p. 241).

Therefore, this study aims at investigating the individual learning style preferences of learners, the language learning strategies they prefer to use, the probable influence of these preferences on their achievement, and to investigate whether a relationship exists between the language learning strategy and learning style preferences of language learners in an Iranian context.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

English is the international language of science and technology. In Iran, the teaching and learning of English is important for academic, scientific, diplomatic, trading, technological, and traveling purposes. All these have changed learning of English into a necessity and even a competition among Iranians. Most of the Iranian English language learners try to find ways to learn English easier, faster, and more efficiently. Some of them try different strategies and replace one by another when they find it useless. Some others refer to those whom they believe successful in learning English and take their advice. It seems that most of these strategies, chosen by the learner or advised by others, are based on personal experiences and do not have any scientific basis.

A considerable number of studies have shown that students' individual differences play an important role in foreign or second language learning (Ehrman, 1990; Oxford, 1992; Oxford and Ehrman, 1993; Scarcella and Oxford, 1992; Skehan, 1989). Learners' individual differences include learning styles, learning strategies, learning aptitude, age, gender, culture, and the affective domain (i.e., motivation, anxiety, self-efficacy, tolerance of ambiguity, etc.).

Among these individual difference variables, "language learning styles and strategies appear to be among the most important variables influencing performance in a second language" (Oxford, 1989a, p. 21). In addition, learning style was found to be related to the choice of learning strategies (Oxford, 1990b). As a result, "language teachers should provide a wealth of information to students in order to raise their

awareness about learning styles and strategies and finally, to work with students' learning strengths" (Reid, 1996, p. 3).

To the extent of the researcher's knowledge, few attempts have been made to investigate the perceptual learning style preferences and language learning strategies of Iranian language learners and nearly no attempts have been made to investigate the relationship between them. Due to these reasons, the researcher intended to investigate the relationship between perceptual learning style preferences of Iranian EFL learners and the language learning strategies used by them and also their relationship with the learners' level of achievement.

1.3. The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate both the individual learning style preferences of EFL learners and the language learning strategies they prefer to use, and to reveal whether there is a relationship between language learning strategies and learning styles of students studying English at Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman. In addition, this study aims at finding out whether there are significant differences in the perceptual learning style and language learning strategy preferences between the learners at a higher and those at a lower level of achievement at the same grade level.

1.4. Significance of the Study

The present study seeks to contribute to a comprehension of the relationship between learning styles and language learning strategies of

Iranian EFL learners. Though limited in number, the studies done on this topic in different contexts show that there is a strong relationship between an individual's learning style and language learning strategies (see chapter II).

This study might prove useful to both language teachers and learners. Existence of a relationship between learning styles and language learning strategies in an Iranian educational setting can help teachers prescribe the right strategies for their students according to their learning styles and put them in the right path to learn English easier, faster, and more efficiently. Lack of this relationship can also be useful showing that students are not aware of their learning styles and do not use suitable learning strategies related to their styles. If so, teachers should first make their students aware of their learning styles and then help them match the strategies they use to their learning styles.

Raising students' awareness regarding their learning styles and strategies might make them not only more prepared for learning but also more analytic about their learning styles and the learning strategies that they use. Reid (1995) states that developing an understanding of learning environment and styles "will enable students to take control of their learning and to maximize their potential for learning" (p. xiv).

This study might also prove useful to the curriculum developers and material producers. Since teachers need to have enough time to do both the identification of learners' learning styles and strategies and learner training activities, curriculum developers will be able to allocate enough time for each session. Knowing students general preferences might also enable material developers to produce materials that both match students'

learning styles and help them use suitable and useful strategies. In other words, as a result of what curriculum and material developers do, teachers may have enough time to identify their students' learning styles and strategies, and may also become able to use appropriate materials and activities that match the learners' learning styles and they can have better opportunities to assess and guide the learners with respect to learning strategies used in various situations.

It can be concluded from the above discussions that this study can also be useful to English Language Institutes, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology in Iran.

1.5. Research Questions

In this study the research questions are stated as follows:

1. Are the learning style preferences of the learners at a higher level of achievement the same as those of the lower achievers?
2. Are the language learning strategy preferences of the learners at a higher level of achievement the same as those of the lower achievers?
3. Is there any significant relationship between learning style and language learning strategy preferences of Iranian EFL learners?

1.6. Research Hypotheses

Regarding the above mentioned questions, this study aims at testing the following null hypotheses:

1. There is no significant relationship between the learning styles and language learning strategies of Iranian EFL learners.
2. There is no difference between the learning style preferences of students with high achievement and those with low achievement.
3. There is no difference between the strategy use of the students with high achievement and those with low achievement having the same learning style preferences.

1.7. Limitations of the study

In this study the individual-difference variables of students, except learning styles and language learning strategies were not taken into account. As it was mentioned earlier, the results of a great number of studies (e.g. Ehrman, 1990; Oxford, 1992; Oxford and Ehrman, 1993; Scarcella and Oxford, 1992; Skehan, 1989) have revealed that students' individual differences including learning styles, language learning strategies, learning aptitude, age, gender, culture, and the affective domain (i.e. motivation, anxiety, self-efficacy, tolerance of ambiguity, etc.) play an important role in foreign or second language learning. Due to time limitation, the researcher did not take all individual-difference variables into consideration.

1.8. Definitions of Terms

Language Learning Strategies

“learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more

effective, and more transferable to new situation” (Oxford, 1990a, p. 8).

Memory strategies: Are “techniques specifically tailored to help the learner store new information in memory and retrieve it later” (Oxford and Crookal, 1989, p. 404).

Cognitive Strategies: “Are skills that involve manipulation and transformation of the language in some direct way, e.g. through reasoning, analysis, note-taking, functional practices in naturalistic settings, formal practice with structures and sounds, etc.” (Oxford and Crookal, 1989, p. 404).

Compensation Strategies: “enable learners to use the new language for either comprehension or production despite limitations in knowledge” (Oxford, 1990a, p. 47).

Metacognitive Strategies: Are defined as “behaviors used for centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating one’s learning” (Oxford and Crookall, 1989, p. 404).

Affective Strategies: “Are techniques like self-reinforcement and positive self-talk, which help learners gain better control over their emotions, attitudes and motivations related to the language learning” (Oxford and Crookal, 1989, p. 404).

Social Strategies: Oxford (1990a) believes that language is a form of social behavior, and language learners should essentially communicate with others in target language to learn it effectively. She also believes that what help language learners to have a successful communication are social learning strategies which are divided into three sets including asking questions, cooperating with others, and empathizing with others.

Learning Styles

Dunn and Dunn (1979 as cited in Reid 1987) define learning styles as “a term that describes the variations among learners in using one or more senses to understand, organize, and retain experience” (p. 89).

Auditory Learners: Auditory learners are “students who enjoy the oral-aural learning channel. Thus they want to engage in discussions, conversations, and group work. These students typically require only oral directions” (Oxford, 1995, p. 36).

Visual Learners: Visual learners are learners who “prefer to learn via the visual channel. Therefore, they like to read a lot, which requires concentration and time spent alone. Visual students need the visual stimulation of bulletin boards, videos and movies. They must have written directions if they are to function well in the classroom” (Oxford, 1995, p. 35).

Tactile Learners: Tactile learning “suggests learning with one’s hands through manipulation of resources, such as writing, drawing, building a model, or conducting a lab experiment” (Kinsella, 1995, p. 172).

Kinaesthetic Learners: Kinaesthetic learning “implies total physical involvement with a learning environment such as taking a field trip, dramatizing, pantomiming, or interviewing” (Kinsella, 1995, p. 172).

Group Learners: A group learner is the one who “learns more effectively through working with others” (Reid, 1995, p. x).

Individual Learners: An individual learner is someone who “learns more effectively through working alone” (Reid, 1995, p. x).