A Study of Iranian EFL Learners' Autonomy Level and its Relationship with Learning Style

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Abstract

Foreign language learning has become an essential component in people's lives over the past decades. Knowing the importance of students learning style, autonomy level and their impact on learning helps teachers take into consideration such factors when choosing the appropriate techniques and tasks for their lessons. This study investigated learners' autonomy level and its relationship with learning style in a sample of 200 undergraduate students studying at the Department of Foreign Languages, of Azad University, in Shiraz Branch by means of two questionnaires. The data of the study were analyzed by a two-way ANOVA and Pearson Product Moment Correlation with SPSS Version 16.0. The results revealed that visual and auditory learning styles were significantly and positively related to their learner autonomy. However there were no significant differences among males and females regarding language learning style and autonomy level.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, Levels of autonomy, Language learning style, Learning style dimensions

1. Introduction

The literature linking specific learning styles to learners' level of autonomy is not easy to find. The more typical target-language studies are those that have taken a broad pass at describing styles, a similar broad pass at describing learners' autonomy level, and have arrived at broad conclusions.

1.1 Learner Autonomy

Since language learning has become an essential component in people's lives, educational research has emphasized the need for students to take responsibility for their own learning. It goes without saying that this shift of responsibility from teachers to learners is the result of changes in the curriculum towards a more learner-centered learning. Thus, in order to contribute to the development of learner-centered education in language classrooms, it is vital that students be involved in taking control of their own learning.

Most educators and thinkers agree that autonomy should be taken as a desirable educational aim in order for students to master the new language. In this respect, many conceptions have been proposed and many educators have tried to explain learner autonomy. To define autonomy, we might quote Holec (1981: 3, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 1) who considers it as ''the ability to take charge of one's learning''. Little (1991) also defines learner autonomy as "essentially the matter of the learners' psychological relation to the process and content of learning, a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action". In this respect, Candy (1991) stated autonomy "is learned at least partly through educational experiences [and interventions]" (Candy, 1991: 115). To develop this point, Littlewood (1996: 97) defined autonomy as "learners' ability and willingness to make choices independently". He also suggested that: ''ability depends on possessing both knowledge about the alternatives from which choice have to be made and necessary skills for carrying out whatever choices seem most appropriate. Willingness depends on having both the motivation and confidence to take responsibility for the choices required'' (Littlewood, 1996: 97).

1.2 Language Learning Styles

Learning style took its name in the 1970s. The origin of this concept has been attributed differently by scholars to individual differences, to the idea of "life styles" and to personality types (Zhang & Sternberg, 2005). The idea of learning style is by no means a new element in the history of education. Over the past three decades, numerous studies were done on learning styles. (Lewis, 2008; McCann, 2006; Cano, 1999; Reid, 1987; Oxford, 1995; Wang,

2007). Many educators tried their best to define language learning style. "These definitions range from concerns about preferred sensory modalities (e.g., visual, auditory, tactile, etc.) to descriptions of personality characteristics that have implications for behavior patterns in learning situations (e.g., the need for structure versus flexibility). Others have focused attention on cognitive information processing patterns" (Smith & Renzulli, 1984: 45). For example, Keefe (1979) defined the notion of learning style as characteristic, cognitive, affective, and psychological behaviors that serve as stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment. According to Dunn and Griggs (1988), ''learning style is biologically and developmentally imposed set of personal characteristics that make the same teaching method wonderful for some and terrible for others.'' (p. 3). Accordingly, many educators believe learners' learning styles have an impact on their academic performance. Perry (1970), for instance, stated that a basic progression in ways of thinking for a student during the college experience existed. Perry (1970) further stated that this basic progression influenced the instructor to seek other ways to teach based on student's learning style. Another example would be that of Rossi-Le who examined the relationship between the learning styles of 147 ESL learners and their chosen strategy use. The investigator reported that learners who preferred the visual mode chose visualization as a strategy, and those who preferred tactile and kinesthetic perceptual learning styles reported themselves as becoming directly involved with the subject matter being learned.

1.3 Language Learning Styles and Learner Autonomy

It is worth mentioning that a number of educators studied the relation between learner autonomy and language learning style. In a study conducted by Foen (2009), for instance, the analysis revealed that the number of learning styles, perceived learning environment and computer technology experience were statistically predictive of learner autonomy or distance learners' intention to participate. In anothe study conducted by Güven and Sünbül (n.d) at Selçuk University, the relation between the learners' autonomy level and their learning styles was examined. The results revealed that 1. The participants usually preferred the Active Experimentation and Reflective Observation learning styles. 2. The average autonomy level of the participants was quite high. 3. There was no significant difference between the genders in relation to their learning styles and autonomous learning preferences 4. Participants with reflective observation learning style had less autonomy in learning while the ones with active experimentation had the most. The results of a study performed by Gültekin and Karababa (2010) indicated that students' level of autonomy was not high and that there was a relationship between language learning styles and the autonomy level of the learners at Ankara University. Based on the research mentioned, it is clearly seen that there are different relationships between learners' autonomy level and their learning style in different contexts. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the styles employed by Iranian EFL university students in Iranian context. This study aims to see whether there is a relationship between styles employed by learners and their autonomy level. It is hoped that the results will contribute to our understanding of autonomy and help us select the styles that will lead to more autonomy among Iranian EFL learners.

1.4 Gender, Learning Styles

Reid (1987), in a study, concluded that there was a difference in the use of tactile learning style category between males and females with males being more tactile than females. Maubach and Morgan (2001) maintained that males and females were different regarding their learning style preferences; males were more willing to take risks and speak spontaneously. They were also self-confident about asking questions to aid their own understanding, whereas the female students were more interested in reading and presenting well-organized written work.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Language Learning Styles

For the purpose of the present study, Felder-Silverman Model (Felder & Silverman, 1988) was used. It is worth mentioning that Sharp (2001) describes an instructional module based on Felder-Silverman Model that makes students aware of differences in learning styles and how they may affect personal interactions, teamwork, interactions with professors, and learning difficulties and successes. Felder-Silverman Model was adopted for the present study because it has been found to be closely related to the Perceptual Learning Style Questionnaire conducted in the present study, including language-learning styles used in this research.

2.2 Learner Autonomy

Some researchers drew largely on Vygotskyan framework in Learning Autonomy. Ushioda (1996), for instance, contributed to the field of autonomy by placing the idea within a Vygotskyan theoretical framework. Some other researchers also drew largely on Vygotskyan framework. Oxford's (2003) revision to Benson's (1997) model of autonomy refers to approaches based on Vygotskyan learning theory, in which social environment comes to the

foreground. The items in Learner Autonomy Questionnaire utilized in this study ranged from dependant problem solving to independent problem solving, which is in line with the Vygotskian concept of learning development. Thus the theoretical framework adopted for the present study is Vygotskian in nature.

3. Research Methodology

This is a descriptive study based on a survey research conducted for the purpose of making descriptive assertations about some population. This study aims at finding out the major, minor and negligible learning style preferences, the learning autonomy level, and to investigate the relationship between the learning style and learners' autonomy level at the Department of Foreign Languages in Azad University, Shiraz Branch. In this study quantitative data was collected. The data was collected through two questionnaires, one of which aimed to identify students' learning style preferences and the other aimed to investigate learners' autonomy.

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 200 undergraduate students studying at the Department of Foreign Languages in Shiraz Azad University. They were majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and Translation at the Department of Foreign Languages. There was a total sample of 200 students in 6 classes. Since the participants' mother tongue was Persian, junior and senior students were chosen who had more exposure to the English language. Students had different educational backgrounds, but they had all passed more than 70 courses in English and were proficient enough to understand and answer the items in the original questionnaires. Their ages ranged from 19 to 25 years old. The proportion of male and female students in the classes was not equal. Not all of the undergraduate students took part in the study. A simple random sampling technique was used to choose 200 participants for this study. In order to examine the gender effect on participants' autonomy level and learning styles, both male and female learners were asked to participate in this study. Of all the 200 participants, 63 were male and 137 were female.

3.2 Instrument

In this research, two instruments were used. The Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ) developed by Reid (1987) (see Appendix A), was used to explore the learning style preferences of the students. It is a self-reporting questionnaire developed on the basis of existing learning style instruments, with modifications suggested by non-native speakers and U.S. consultants in the fields of linguistics, education, and cross-cultural studies (Reid, 1987).The questionnaire consists of randomly arranged sets of 5 statements on each of the six learning style preferences (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, group learning, and individual learning). A Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (see Appendix B) developed by Zhang and Li (2004, p. 23), was also administered to see how autonomous the participants were in learning English as a foreign language. The questionnaires had been proved to have high content validity and high reliability

3.3 Data Analysis

The statistical analyses were conducted by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Regarding the analysis of the results obtained from the PLSPQ, descriptive statistics was used to group the students according to their major, minor, and negligible learning style preference categories. However only major and minor learning styles were used in the analysis, the descriptive statistics related to them were obtained in order to identify learners' learning styles regarding both major and minor learning style preferences. In order to investigate whether there was a match or mismatch between the learners' autonomy level and their learning style preference the Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used. And the relation between learners' learning style, autonomy level and gender was calculated through two-way ANOVA.

4. Results

4.1 The Perceptual Learning Style Questionnaire Results

The researcher used the Perceptual Learning Style Questionnaire developed by Reid (1987) in order to assess the students' learning style preferences. The questionnaire covers 30 questions in order for the researcher to diagnose the major, minor and negligible learning style preferences of students.

The frequency and percentage of major learning styles are presented in Table 1. It presents the most frequently used style to the least frequent one. Kinesthetic learning style is the most frequent (26.5%) while the least frequent learning style is tactile (11%). The styles in between are visual (17.5%), individual (16%), group (15.5%) and auditory (13.5%) respectively.

Minor learning style preferences among the same learners and the related statistics are presented in Table 2. The results show that 27.5% of the participants under study can be characterized as kinesthetic minor learners, while 20.5% of individuals are shown to prefer visual learning style. 17.5% of learners are auditory learners. Group and tactile learners each make up 12.5% and 12.0% of the population respectively, which are more and less the same. And finally 10.0% of the participants are characterized as individual learners. According to the descriptive statistics in Table 2., most learners (nearly half of them) prefer kinesthetic and visual learning styles as minor learning style.

4.2 The Learner Autonomy Questionnaire

As is shown in Table 3, regarding the median score of the participants' autonomy questionnaire, the mean score of the low level learners is 64.6082 with a standard deviation of 6.22283, meanwhile their scores range from 44 to 71. The average score of the high level students is 77.9778 with the standard deviation of 4.15967, and their scores vary from 73 to 93.

4.3 Relation between Learners' Autonomy Level, their Language Learning Style Preferences and Gender.

Two-way ANOVA results reported in Table 4. show no significant gender or autonomy level effect on participants' learning style preferences. As can be seen, the significance values for all six learning style types were bigger than the level of significance (.05). Therefore, the null hypotheses were retained. Thus, according to Table 4., there were no statistically significant differences between boys and girls with regard to their learning style preferences and autonomy.

4.4 Relation between Learners' Autonomy and their Language Learning Style Preferences in high and low group.

In view of the results given in the table 5, there is a positive and significant relation between autonomy and visual learning style preference in the high group. In addition, there is a positive and significant relation between the ones who preferred auditory learning style and their learning autonomy level in the same group, that is, they prefer autonomous learning. As regards the other styles, there wasn't any significant relation between the learning style preferences and learning autonomy level of the participants.

The results of the correlational analysis between different learning styles and autonomy in the low group are displayed in Table 6. As can be seen, the significance values of visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, group and individual learning styles with respect to the low level autonomy are .011, .040, .108, .051, .526, and .944 respectively. Since the *p* values are all bigger than .05, there is no significant relation between the said variables.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study has provided a rich source of information on students' autonomy level regarding their learning styles and gender. It focuses on the notion that autonomy is a matter of degrees. It also contributes to the understanding of individuals' learning style differences and the relation between learners' autonomy level and their learning style preferences.

One major finding of this study was that Iranian learners make use of all six style preferences used in this study. According to descriptive statistics, it can be concluded that regarding both learning style groups, the most preferred learning styles among Iranian EFL learners are kinesthetic and visual learning styles. The finding of this study is partly parallel with studies performed by Ramli (2008) and Reid (1987). Ramli (2008), for instance, was found that the most preferred learning style of the students was kinesthetic style. The results of a study by Reid (1987) showed that ESL students strongly preferred kinesthetic and tactile learning styles.

Results showed that most participants believed in their abilities in learning English, they were studying English due to their own interest, they thought their success and failure were due to their attempt, and they preferred pair and group work (questions number 1, 12, 14, and 16, with mean scores of 4.29, 4.32, 4.08 and 4.02 respectively). On the other hand, they did not like to preview lessons before class, keep record of their study, prepare self exams and reward themselves due to their success (questions number 3, 5, 6, and 7, with the lowest mean scores of 2.85, 2.94, 2.52 and 2.67 respectively) which are smaller than 3.0. The other questions showed the students' moderate autonomy among 21 questions Thus, regarding the overall mean value of 3.386 it can be concluded that most of the undergraduate EFL learners are moderately autonomous.

One important conclusion that could be drawn from this study is that although the author suspected that males and females may have different educational experiences, language learning style was not correlated with gender significantly and both male and female subjects subscribed to the same learning style preferences. The point that needs to be mentioned here is that the current research results show that there is no significant relationship between learning autonomy and gender either.

In order to examine whether there is a relation between learners' autonomy level and their learning style preferences, Pearson Product Moment Correlation was conducted. The results showed that there were merely two statistically meaningful relationships between the participants' autonomy level (high and low) and their six learning style preferences of the two genders. The results revealed that the visual and auditory learning style preferences had a significant relationship with high level autonomy at $p < .05$ and the correlation coefficients were .268 and .217 respectively. The results obtained from this study seem to be partly congruent with the findings of the study conducted by Gültekin and Karababa (2010) which revealed that there was a relationship between language learning styles and the autonomy level of the learners. Gültekin and Karababa (2010) also indicated that students' level of autonomy at Ankara University was not high and that there was a relationship between their level of autonomy and learning styles.

As a conclusion, it can be said that investigating learning autonomy level and learning styles from the aspects of curriculum, teaching process and teachers will contribute significantly to the Iranian Education. In addition, the research carrried out on the relation between these variables and the students' gender might help the educational system to work more efficiently.

6. Pedagogical Implications

The varied distribution of learning styles among learners implies the following points:

1) In preparing teaching materials and programs, attention should be paid to learning styles and learning autonomy level and a broad range of teaching techniques should be employed so that the different learning preferences are catered for.

2) Students should be made aware of their learning style preferences in order to understand the materials better.

3) When planning curriculums, it is sensible to recognize the students' learning styles and their autonomy level.

4) Since the educators who are aware of the different learning style preferences are able to underestand how learners receive information and gain knowledge, it is imperative for teachers to have a sense of understanding of learning styles and autonomy levels among learners in different contexts in order to serve students' needs more efficiently.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Concerning Major Learning Style Preferences

	Frequency	Percent
Kinesthetic	53	26.5
Visual	35	17.5
Individual	32	16.0
Group	31	15.5
Auditory	27	13.5
Tactile	22	11.0
Total	200	100.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Concerning Minor Learning Style Preferences

	Frequency	Percent
Kinesthetic	55	27.5
Visual	41	20.5
Auditory	35	17.5
Group	25	12.5
Tactile	24	12.0
Individual	20	10.0
Total	200	100

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics on Autonomy Scores Based on Level

Autonomy	*N*	*Min*	*Max*	*Mean*	*S.D*
Low Level	97	44.00	71.00	64.6082	6.22283
High Level	90	73.00	93.00	77.9778	4.15967

Table 4. Two-way ANOVA Results on the Relation between Learning Styles, Gender and Autonomy Level

Language Learning Styles	Source	Type III Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	*Sig.*
Visual	Autonomy level	6.332	2	3.166	.099	.906
	Gender	.044	1	.044	.001	.970
	Autonomy level * gender	55.624	2	27.812	.870	.421
Auditory	Autonomy level	12.323	1	12.323	.482	.488
	Gender	18.571	2	9.285	.363	.696
	Autonomy level * gender	5.374	2	2.687	.105	.900
Kinesthetic	Autonomy level	15.768	1	15.768	.538	.464
	Gender	4.150	2	2.075	.071	.932
	Autonomy level * gender	40.234	2	20.117	.687	.505
Tactile	Autonomy level	39.954	1	39.954	1.229	.269
	Gender	64.242	2	32.121	.988	.374
	Autonomy level * gender	33.960	2	16.980	.522	.594
Group	Autonomy level	140.164	1	140.164	1.995	.159
	Gender	130.757	2	65.379	.931	.396
	Autonomy level * gender	177.082	2	88.541	1.260	.286
Individual	Autonomy level	33.734	2	16.867	.194	.824
	Gender	4.858	1	4.858	.056	.813
	Autonomy level * gender	179.460	2	89.730	1.031	.359

Table 5. Correlation between Participants' Autonomy and Learning Style Preferences in High Group

Learning Style Preference		Learners' Autonomy
Visual	Pearson Correlation	.268
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.011
Auditory	Pearson Correlation	.217
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.040
Kinesthetic	Pearson Correlation	.171
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.108
Tactile	Pearson Correlation	.207
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.051
Group	Pearson Correlation	-.68
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.526
Individual	Pearson Correlation	.008
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.944

Table 6. Correlation between Participants' Autonomy and Learning Style Preferences in Low Group

Learning Style Preference		Learners' Autonomy
Visual	Pearson Correlation	-.088
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.389
Auditory	Pearson Correlation	-.008
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.939
Kinesthetic	Pearson Correlation	.62
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.545
Tactile	Pearson Correlation	.077
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.453
Group	Pearson Correlation	-.040
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.700
Individual	Pearson Correlation	.080
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.439

APPENDIX A

Full Name (if possible):
Age:
Sex: Female Male
Date:
Major Field:

Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire

Directions: People learn in many different ways. For example, some people learn primarily with their eyes (visual learners) or with their ears (auditory learners); some people prefer to learn by experience and / or by "hands-on" tasks (kinaesthetic or tactile learners); some people learn better when they work alone, while others prefer to learn in groups.

This questionnaire has been designed to help you identify the way(s) you learn best – the way(s) you *prefer* to learn. Read each statement on the following pages. Please respond to the statements AS THEY APPLY TO YOUR STUDY OF ENGLISH. Decide whether you agree or disagree with each statement.

Please respond to each statement quickly, without too much thought. Try not to change your responses after you choose them.

Questionnaire Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. When the teacher tells me the instructions, I understand better.					
2. I prefer to learn by doing something in class.					
3. I get more work done when I work with others.					
4. I learn more when I study with a group.					
5. In class, I learn best when I work with others.					
6. I learn better by reading what the teacher writes on the chalkboard.					
7. When someone tells me how to do something in class, I learn it better.					
8. When I do things in class, I learn better.					
9. I remember things I have learned in class better than things I have read.					
10. When I read instructions, I remember them better.					
11. I learn more when I can make a model of something.					
12. I understand better when I read instructions.					
13. When I study alone, I remember things better.					
14. I learn more when I make something for a class project.					
15. I enjoy learning in class by doing experiments.					
16. I learn better when I make drawings as I study.					
17. I learn better in class when the teacher gives a lecture.					
18. When I work alone, I learn better.					
19. I understand things better in class when I participate in role-playing.					
20. I learn better in class when I listen to someone.					
21. I enjoy working on an assignment with two or three classmates.					
22. When I build something, I remember what I learned better.					
23. I prefer to study with others.					
24. I learn better by reading than listening to someone.					
25. I enjoy making something for a class project.					
26. I learn best in class when I participate in related activities.					
27. In class, I work better when I work alone					
28. I prefer working on projects by myself.					
29. I learn more by reading textbooks than by listening to a lecture.					
30. I prefer to work by myself.					

APPENDIX B

Questionnaires to investigate the Learner autonomy

Direction: In order to investigate the Learner autonomy, will you please circle the one closest answer to the following questions according to your true cases. Thank you very much for your help and patience!

Part I

Questionnaire Statements	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	always
1. I think I have the ability to learn English well.					
2. I make good use of my free time in English study.					
3. I preview before the class.					
4. I find I can finish my task in time					
5. I keep a record of my study, such as keeping a diary, writing review etc.					
6. I make self-exam with the exam papers chosen by myself.					
7. I reward myself such as going shopping, playing etc. when I progress.					
8. I attend out-class activities to practice and learn the language.					
9. During the class, I try to catch chances to take part in activities such as pair/group discussion, role-play, etc.					
10. I know my strengths and weaknesses in my English study.					
11. I choose books, exercises which suit me, neither too difficult nor too easy					

Part II

12. I study English here due to:
    1. my parents' demand
    2. curiosity
    3. getting a good job, help to my major
    4. interest of English culture, such as film, sports, music, etc.
    5. 3 and 4
13. I think the learner-teacher relationship is that of:
    1. receiver and giver
    2. raw material and maker
    3. customer and shopkeeper
    4. children and partners
    5. explorer and director
14. I think my success or failure in English study is mainly due to:
    1. luck or fate
    2. English studying environment
    3. studying facilities(aids)
    4. teachers
    5. myself
15. Whether students should design the teaching plan together with teachers or not, my opinion is:
    1. strongly agree
    2. agree
    3. neutral
    4. oppose
    5. strongly oppose

16. When the teacher asks questions for us to answer, I would mostly like to:
    1. wait for others' answers
    2. think and ready to answer
    3. look up books, dictionaries
    4. clarify questions with teachers
    5. join a pair/group discussion
17. When I meet a word I don't know, I mainly:
    1. let it go
    2. ask others
    3. guess the meaning
    4. 2 and 5
    5. look up the dictionary
18. When I make mistakes in study, I'd usually like the following ones to correct them:
    1. let them be
    2. teachers
    3. Classmates
    4. Others
    5. books or dictionaries
19. When I am asked to use technologies that I haven't used before(e. g. internet discussion),
    1. I usually try to learn new skills
    2. I learn them following others
    3. I feel worried, but anyway
    4. I put it off or try to avoid it
    5. I resist using them
20. 1 think the following way is most useful in my English study:
    1. taking notes
    2. mechanic memory
    3. doing exercises of grammar, translation, words etc.
    4. classifying or grouping or comparing
    5. group discussion
21. I usually use materials selected:
    1. only by teachers
    2. mostly by teachers
    3. by teachers and by myself
    4. mostly by myself
    5. only by myself