

LEARNING STYLES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN THE IRANIAN CONTEXT (A STUDY ON IELTS PARTICIPANTS)

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ABSTRACT

Research in the area of characteristics of good language learners has been the home of choice for SLA researchers since mid 1970. In this regards, both learning and learner variables have been researched (see Griffiths, 2008). Yet, one of the features almost left intact in this scope is the relationship between the characteristics of good language learners and their achieved scores and results in the standard proficiency tests such as IELTS and TOEFL. The present study was an attempt to investigate the characteristics of good language learners in the Iranian context. . 34 Iranian IELTS examinees who received 6 plus band score were selected and then they received the learning style and the style recognition questionnaires. They were also asked to take part in the interview sessions to report about the styles. They were asked to submit their own written reports about their learning styles and self-recognition. Based on the results of this study, the learners emphasize employing styles enabling them keep more vocabularies in mind and activate them. In terms of style also the findings revealed that there is a high correlation between high scores in IELTS and possessing Kinesthetic, Auditory, and Visual styles. It also presented that the learners were interested in individuality rather than group work. In terms of Tactility style, of course the participants of the study recorded a high score.

Key Words: Characteristics, good learners, IELTS, learning style, learning strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Research in the area of characteristics of good language learners has been the home of choice for SLA researchers since mid 1970. In this regard, both learning and learner variables have been researched (see Griffiths, 2008). Yet, one of the features almost left intact in this scope is the relationship between the characteristics of good language learners and their achieved scores and results in the standard proficiency tests such as IELTS and TOEFL. Most of the early studies in the field of language learning strategies focused on identifying the characteristics of good language learners. Identifying and discussing the styles used by good language learners were considered as a good way to make the learners aware of the notion of language learning strategies. The findings provided insight into how successful learners learn, and, subsequently, teachers tried to teach the strategies used by successful learners to those who were unsuccessful with the hope the strategy training could help them become successful.

Learning a second language involves variety of social, cognitive, affective and educational setting factors. A lot of individuals develop a very well-organized L2 experience and a lot more are not successful second language learners. Rubin (1975) implies that the successful second language learners enjoy specific characteristics which might be helpful, providing us with strategies and insights which probably could be helpful for the poorer learners of the second language. Iranian learners develop English as a foreign language and for many of them learning English is a burden and one of the most important and demanding tasks they will need to accomplish. That is why an awareness of how to learn a language, not just what to learn, is very important for these learners. Knowledge of the characteristics of a good language learner can help students increase their language learning efficiency. Additionally, recognizing the features of good language learners might provide the teachers and ELT educators with a vehicle to help the poor learners of the second language to improve their learning. The results of the study might be found intriguing enough to shed some lights for the researchers to investigate the application of specific strategies the good language learner makes use to pave the way for the ones who have not been successful in this respect. It is hoped that the result of this study can help the ELT educators and second language teachers to provide the poor learners with a tentative way of success.

Theoretical Background

The Good Language Learner

A number of recent studies on language learning styles and strategies have attempted, tried to define the "Good" language learner. During the 1970s, teachers and researchers reached conclusion that no single method of language teaching and research findings would end to the universal success in teaching a second language (Brown, 2007). It seems that learners would be successful in language learning regardless of methods or teaching techniques. In this regard, Brown (2007) says that, "Certain people appeared to be endowed with abilities to succeed; other slacked those abilities" (p.132). Many observations and research studies (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Rubin and Thompson, 1994) tried to describe "good" language learners in terms of personal characteristics, styles, and strategies. In this regard, are (2012) believes that good language learners:

1. Find their own way, taking responsibility for their own learning,
2. Organize information about language,
3. Are creative, and try to feel the language by experimenting its grammar and words,
4. Create opportunities for practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom,
5. Learn to live with uncertainty by not getting confused and by continuing to talk or listen without understanding every word,
6. Use memory strategies to bring back what has been learned,
7. Make errors work for them and not against them,
8. Use linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of the first language, in learning a second language
9. Use contextual cues to help them in comprehension,
10. Learn to make intelligent guesses,
11. Learn chunks of language as wholes and formalized routines to help them perform "beyond their competence",
12. Learn to use certain tricks to keep conversations going,
13. Learn certain production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence,
14. Learn different styles of speech and writing and learn to vary their language regarding the formality of the situation. (pp. 1 – 2).

The studies on defining the good language learner provide a basis for the understanding of what good language learners do in order to learn a second language. Finding and clarifying the strategies of successful language learners helps the teachers and researchers to teach these strategies to less successful learners. On the other hand, the methods and criteria of determining a good language learner is unclear and under question. It seems easy to classify a language learner as a good one: if s/he has developed the four basic skills and can use them successfully, she/he is considered as a good language learner. The problem is to decide about a learner who has only learned one or two of these skills. Speed of acquisition, learner's previous exposure to English, learner's goal, and student's level of proficiency should be taken into account in determining the good language learner (Sewell, 2003). However, understanding and knowing the strategies and techniques good language learners use, can help them enhance learning efficiency.

Learners Variables

Motivation

It is no doubt that good language learners are motivated. Experienced teachers believe that high achievers are highly motivated as well. The personal motivation has been the source of success during the life. Without motivation, success will be hard to come by, and the case of learning a second or foreign language would be different. Motivation is listed by Rubin (1975) among the three essential variables on which good language learning depends. Also, Gardner and Lambert (1972) cited in Ushioda (2008) believe that motivation has a social psychological perspective on learner attitudes and is related to the language cultures and the native speakers. Gardner and Lambert (1972) saw language learning motivation qualitatively different from other forms of learning motivation. Also, Gardner and Lambert (1972) cited in Ushioda (2008) found out that learner' attitudes to the new culture and people had a great influence on their motivation leading to their success in learning a new language.

Age

The role of age in development of second language acquisition and the relationship between age and other affecting variables in learning a new language has been hotly debated. There are different ideas about the impact of age on language development and different research studies add to this controversy. According to Brown (2007) young language learners are better language learners than adults. Some of these research studies are about the analogies between the process of first language acquisition and second language learning. In this regard, Brown (2007) believes that this is a big mistake. If we consider language learning as a cognitive process, the age of the language learner will play a great role in being successful in this process.

Learning Styles

A very important question for language researchers is the effect of individual differences on the efficacy of language learning. For example, learners differ from one another in the ways in which they process information from the environment. The way we learn things in general and the way we try to solve a problem is based on our personality and cognition; Brown (2007) calls it as "cognitive style" (p.119). When cognitive styles are related to education contexts, then they are referred to as "learning styles" (Brown 2007; p. 120). Skehan (1991) believes that learning style is "a general predisposition, voluntary or not, toward processing information in a particular way." (p. 288). Learning styles relate emotion to cognition. For instance, a reflective style is rooted in a reflective personality or a reflective mood. Or, an impulsive style usually arises out of an impulsive emotional state. The learners' styles depend on how they internalize their total environment. According to Brown (2007), since this internalization process is not a merely cognitive process, we can see that physical, affective and cognitive factors play great roles in learning styles. According to Reid (1987), and research has identified four basic perceptual styles preferences: visual (for instance reading, charts), auditory (for instance lectures, tapes), kinesthetic (involving physical activity), and tactile (for instance building models or doing laboratory experiments). To these Reid added the dimensions of group versus individual learning preferences to develop the well-known Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire. Ehrman and Leaver (2003) researched the relevance of nine styles to second language acquisition as: field independence/dependence; random (non-linear) vs. sequential (linear); global vs. particular; inductive vs. deductive; synthetic vs. analytic; analogue vs. digital; concrete vs. abstract; leveling vs. sharpening; impulsive vs. reflective. The terms field dependence and field independence are used to describe two extreme dimensions of human perception of stimuli. The more a learner is able to separate relevant material from its context (or field), the more field independent they are said to be (Witkin and Goodenough, 1981 cited in Nel 2008). Research into the impact of field dependence/independence on perception suggests that these are stable traits that affect individual responses in a variety of situations. For example, learners who are field dependent are likely to see problems as a whole and have difficulty separating component parts (Witkin and Goodenough, 1981). In contrast, field-independent learners tend to be more analytical and prefer breaking down problems into component parts.

METHOD

Participants

A group of 56 IELTS candidates (both male and female) taking part in the IELTS preparation courses in the TEFL research center, Tehran, Iran were given a version of a standardized IELTS test (documented as specimen Materials, 2003EMC/1667b/3y01UCLES 2003) which consisted of 25 listening comprehension items, 35 reading comprehension items, and 2 types of writing. The test was administered for purpose of selecting the appropriate candidates for the study. The 34 participants selected to take part in the study were the ones receiving 6+ band score. It is worth mentioning that the scientific background, major, gender, age, and other individual differences of the learners were not taken into consideration in the present study.

Instrumentation

Interviews with participants

Both controlled and open ended (free) types were employed. The interviews with the participants were recorded, listened to, and analyzed for their main points. 3.2.2. Free writing of the participants then the participants were asked to answer the questions in the essay type form. This ensured the researcher if they had missed a point in the interview session.

IELTS General Module

A Standard version of the IELTS General Module test (documented as Specimen Materials, 2003EMC/1667b/3y01UCLES, 2003), the reliability of which, based on K-R 21, was reported to be .78 and its construct validity based on the Cronbach's alpha was acceptable ($\alpha = .74$).

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), Version 7.0, developed by R. Oxford (1989), available at richarddpetty.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/sill-english.pdf

Learning Style Questionnaire developed by Barsch (2009) available at <http://www.engr.ncsu.edu/learningstyles/ilsweb.html>

Validity and Reliability of the data collection Instruments

The *interview items* for both styles and strategies were developed based on the prominent concepts reported in the literature (Barsch, 2009; Ehrman, 2008; Felder & Henriques, 1995; Griffiths, 2008; Reid, 1987; Ting-Hui, 2006)

Procedures

56 IELTS candidates taking part in the preparation courses of IELTS General Module in the TEFL research center, Tehran, Iran took part in a standard version of IELTS General Module. They were tested against the criteria set for the four skills in the IELTS General Module. The experienced IELTS examiners dealing with the job administered the test specifically in the speaking part. 34 individuals whose overall scores were 6+ were selected for the study. They were interviewed and asked to write down their own reports of the experiences they had in developing their second language. They were asked to report their preferred strategies while studying English as well. They were also requested to fill out the 55 learning strategy and learning style questionnaires. The results of interviews and open ended questions were specifically organized and classified via employing both descriptive and explanatory methods. The learners' responses to the standardized questionnaires also were analyzed by SPSS system Version 20.

Data Analysis and Discussions

Qualitative Analysis

Which learning styles are more prevalent among good language learners of English in the Iranian context?

To answer the question 34 participants of the study were interviewed and then they were asked to answer the questions in the essay type form and write their own self reports. This ensured the researcher if they had missed a point in the interview session and also allowed the participants to feel free to present whatever they thought in a less stressful situation and correct their own writings and present their ideas the best way possible. The interviews with the participants were recorded, listened to, and analyzed for their main points. The self reports of the learners also were analyzed through axial and open coding methods (Creswell, 2008). Through the interview and report results; frequency of each and every style related description was pursued. To do so participants' proposed items were transcribed, coded, and categorized. Then the Learning Style Inventory (Barsch, 2009) was taken into consideration and the participants' descriptions were categorized and matched to the scale presented. In case there was something of very low frequency it was omitted and if there was a new item referred to it was added to the table. The most eye catching learning styles reported by the participants were categorized and reported.

Table 4.2: Learning style preferences item analysis

Row	Style	Related Items
1	Visual	2 /3/7/10/14/16/20/22
2	Auditory	1/5/8/11/13/18/21/24
3	Kinesthetic	4/6/9/12/15/17/19/23
4	Tactile	37/38/39/40/41/42
5	Group	25/26/27/28/29/30
6	Individual	31/32/33/34/35/36

Based on the data gathered preference means for each and every learning style was calculated and reported (see table 4.3. below).

Table 4.3: Learning Style Preference Means

	Visual	Auditory	Kinesthetic	Tactile	Group	Individual
NNs						
Means	16.28	16.36	17.58	16.10	11.39	15.34
N=34						
Note: Preference means 13.50 and above = major learning style preference; means of 11.50–13.49 = minor learning style preference; means of 11.49 or less = negative learning style preference.						

Based on the results obtained one can come to know that IELTS candidates taking part in the study are mostly moving towards the being Kinesthetic, Auditory, and Visual in terms of the style they are more inclined to. Analysis of the results also presents that the learners are interested in individuality rather than group work. In terms of Tactility style, the participants of the study have recorded high degree, though. The highest rank belongs to kinesthetic style and the lowest rank belongs to the Group work style. Table 4.4, below represents the ranking value of the style preferences by the participants.

Row	Learning style	Means	Rank
1	Kinesthetic	17.58	1st
2	Auditory	16.36	2nd
3	Visual	16.28	3rd
4	Tactile	16.10	4th
5	Individual	15.34	5th
6	Group	11.39	6th

Quantitative study

In order to investigate the strategies used by the Iranian students taking part in IELTS preparation courses in TEFL research center 34 students with different backgrounds received the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), Version 7.0, developed by R. Oxford (1989). This version of the strategies inventory for language learning has been designed for students of English as a second/ foreign language. There are statements about learning English including Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Meta-cognitive, Affective, Social strategies. Based on their real situations of English learning, participants were required to choose the answer. Participants were also briefed that the survey was not a test so they did not need to be worried about the results affecting their academic performance. There are fifty questions being categorized into six main strategies. *Memory Strategies* contain nine questions. *Cognitive Strategies* contain fourteen questions. *Compensatory Strategies* contain six questions. *Meta-cognitive Strategies* contain nine questions. Affective Strategies include five questions. Social Strategies include seven questions. This questionnaire takes about 20-30 minutes to complete. The questionnaires were gathered and analyzed based on the scales presented in the manual and the average frequency of the language learning strategy use of the learners was reported. Accordingly the frequency of language learning strategies use was also computed.

Table 4.6 below represents the frequencies thereof.

	Memory	Cognitive	Compensation	Meta-cognitive	Affective	Social
Highest grade	4.0	4.0	5.0	4.1	4.4	4.7
Lowest grade	2.1	2.5	2.3	2.0	2.4	2.4
Average grade	2.9	3.1	3.7	3.1	3.3	3.4

Table 4.6 shows the results of the survey. In this questionnaire, the highest-grade in Memory strategies is 4.0; the lowest grade is 2.1, and the average grade is 2.9. In the chart, we can see learners get lower grade than other strategies. The highest grade in Cognitive strategies is 4.0, the lowest grade is 2.5, and the average grade is 3.1. Obviously, the participants do not get high grade in these strategies either. From this, we know people use the two strategies not often. The highest grade in Compensation strategies is 5.0, the lowest grade is 2.3, and the average grade is 3.7. Compared with other strategies, it gets the highest grade. The highest grade in Meta-cognitive strategies is 4.1, the lowest grade is 2.0 and the average grade is 3.1. The highest grade in Affective strategies is 4.4 the lowest grade is 2.4, and the average grade is 3.3. The highest grade in Social strategies is 4.7, the lowest grade is 2.4 and the average grade is 3.4. It seems that the frequency of the three strategies is in the middle part. According to the average grades, the researcher ranked the six main learning strategies and found out that Compensatory strategies were the top choice for participants. The second top

main strategy was Social strategies and was closely followed by the Affective strategies. Then, Cognitive and Meta-cognitive strategies got the same grades and are equally used by the students. Surprisingly, Memory strategies were the least one to be used by the participants.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study in the domain of style inventory revealed that IELTS candidates taking part in the study are mostly inclined towards being Kinesthetic, Auditory, and Visual. Analysis of the results also presented that the learners are interested in individuality rather than group work. Of course in terms of Tactility style, the participants of the study have recorded a high degree. The highest rank belongs to kinesthetic style and the lowest rank belongs to the Group work style.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study revealed that there is a high correlation between the good language learners' scores in the IELTS test and their obtained scores in the style inventories. In terms of style also the findings revealed that there is a high correlation between high scores in IELTS and possessing Kinesthetic, Auditory, and Visual styles. Analysis of the results also presented that the learners were interested in individuality rather than group work. In terms of Tactility style, of course the participants of the study recorded a high score.

Pedagogical Implications

The style inventory results in the present study also represented the most eye catching styles the learners (study participants) possess. Though limited the number of the participants was in the present study, these characteristics could be into some extent the representative features of advanced Iranian learners of English. Language teachers, curriculum developers, and teacher trainers might employ the findings of the present study in their work, enriching the task in hand to help the learners more proficiently. Paying attention to individual differences of the learners, learners' style of learning, and strategy enrichment processes could be of paramount importance when teaching and learning of English in the EFL context comes in. Employing the aforementioned findings of the study teacher of English could enrich classroom interactions and would help subsequent L2 development of the learners.

Suggestions for Further Research

1. Future studies might consider examining the residual effects of style preferences and strategies to explore whether and how long-term these effects actually could be. A semi-longitudinal study of the concept of noticing on a specific group of learners could reveal if this theory energizes "retention of vocabulary items, grammatical points, pronunciation features, and the like in the learners' mentality or not.
2. Further research is recommended to explore the role of cooperative learning, instructed noticing, attention, and awareness in second language development, and the characteristics of highly proficient learners, their relationship together or the likely effect they leave on learner autonomy, self regulatory factors of learning, and learner motivation.
3. Work needs to continue on the grouping of styles, on investigating the degree to which students report using one group or another and the relationship with proficiency.

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