

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEPTUAL LEARNING STYLE PREFERENCES AND LISTENING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES OF IRANIAN INTERMEDIATE EFL LEARNERS

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### ABSTRACT

*This article aims to identify the learning styles and listening comprehension strategies of students, to check whether there are significant differences in the learning style and strategy preferences between high and low proficient listeners, and investigate whether there is any relationship between students' learning style and listening strategy preferences. To achieve this purpose, a language proficiency test was administered to ninety language learners majoring in English Language Translation and ultimately sixty intermediate language learners were selected and they were assigned as high and low proficient listeners through administering a listening comprehension proficiency test. They were asked to complete two questionnaires. One was used to identify students' perceptual learning style preferences and the other was used to identify students' listening comprehension strategies. In addition, think aloud protocols were held to determine the cognitive and metacognitive strategies students used while listening. The data analysis of the first questionnaire revealed that high and low proficient listeners' major learning style preferences were visual learning and kinesthetic learning. Furthermore, significant difference was found in the preference of group learning style between high and low proficient listeners. The analysis of the second questionnaire revealed that cognitive and metacognitive strategies were favored the most, respectively. In addition, significant difference was found in the preferences of listening strategies between high and low proficient listeners. The analysis with respect to the relationship between learning styles and listening strategies revealed that*

**Keywords:** Learning styles, listening comprehension, listening strategies, think aloud

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years with the shift from an instructional paradigm to a learner-oriented approach towards language learning/teaching, understanding the way people learn is of crucial importance and is the key to educational improvement. Zhou (2004) stated that learners' individual differences, their cognitive styles, learning styles and learning strategies are believed important in language learning (p. 1). Chiya (2003) stated that teachers should consider students' learning styles and enhance students' learning strategies for their successful learning. When teachers are aware of the importance of learning styles and learning strategies, they can provide a good map to their students (p. 27).

Zou (2006) claimed that learning styles are so closely linked to learning strategies that a clear understanding of learners' styles will help teachers consciously develop learners' potential in enhancing learning strategies and raise their chances for successful learning. Tutunis (2001) stated that learners' individual characteristics and their learning styles need to be taken into consideration in the study of the use of listening strategies.

Vandergrift (1999) and Holden (2004) hold that listening comprehension is a highly integrative skill. It plays an important role in the process of language learning/ acquisition, facilitating the emergence of other language skills. As such, an awareness and deployment of effective listening comprehension strategies can help students capitalize on the language input they are receiving.

Considering the importance of perceptual learning style as an individual's preferred mode for perceiving, organizing, and retaining information and listening comprehension strategies that facilitate comprehension and make language learning more effective in the process of foreign language learning, this study aims to find out the perceptual learning style preferences and listening strategy preferences of Iranian EFL learners and the relationship between style and strategy preferences.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Tabanlıoğlu (2003, pp. 4-5) claimed that most of the teachers tend to teach in the way that they themselves were taught or in the way they preferred to learn. In addition, sometimes teachers choose materials which are in conflict with students learning style preferences; these may be due to the lack of teachers' awareness of their students learning style preferences; consequently, it makes classroom boring and the education becomes ineffective.

Guo and Wills (2005) stated that language learning depends on listening since it provides the aural input that serves as the basis for language acquisition and enables learners to interact in spoken communication. Listening is the first language mode that children acquire. It provides the foundation for all aspects of language and cognitive development, and it plays a life-long role in the processes of communication (p. 3).

Having a good listening comprehension skill has always been the main concern of EFL students, and their teachers. From the very moment that EFL students start learning English as a foreign language in school, what comes to their minds after listening to the native speaker's speech is to comprehend all the speech which s/he produces.

Accordingly, if EFL learners are given an awareness of the effective learning style and listening strategies employed by proficient listeners, they may handle the listening skill much more efficiently, and consequently their language learning will be enhanced. Listening strategies are effective techniques used by language learners in order to process and understand input materials, while learning styles are the general approaches that students use in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subject.

### **HYPOTHESES**

With regard to the nature of this study, the researcher has formulated the following null hypotheses:

H0: There is no significant perceptual learning style preference of Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level.

H0: There is no significant listening comprehension strategy preference among Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level.

H0: There is no significant relationship between perceptual learning style and listening strategy preferences among Iranian EFL learners, and Proficiency has no significant effect on the relationship between learning style and listening strategy preferences.

### **MTHODOLOGY**

For the purpose of this study and in an attempt to test the hypotheses, a sample Nelson language proficiency test was administered to 95 participants majoring in English Language Translation in Kazeroon Islamic Azad University to identify a homogeneous population. Based on participants scores, one standard deviation above and below the mean (6.6 and 25.6), 64 were selected as intermediate EFL language learners. Then, the 50 item Longman listening comprehension proficiency test was administered. Participants' scores (max 42 and min 21) then were sorted in a descending

order. Those who ranked above the mean score were assigned as high-proficient and the remaining as low-proficient listeners.

The following instruments were used in this study:

1. Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ) developed by Reid in 1987: This questionnaire was used to identify participants' major, minor, or negligible perceptual learning style preferences. The participants were required to respond to the questions in 20 minutes. The allocated time was determined according to the results obtained from the pilot study. The pilot study was conducted with some other 10 students before the questionnaire was administered to the participants of this study. To increase the credibility of the responses, the participants were reminded that they should be sincere in their answers and they were asked not to linger much on any of the items. Participants were also asked not to change their first answers. The questionnaires were collected and the responses were entered into the computer for data analysis.
2. Listening comprehension strategy questionnaire (LCSQ) adapted from language learning strategy model proposed by Oxford in 1990: The second questionnaire (LCSQ) was completed after an interval of seven days. The participants were required to fill in the questionnaire in 30 minutes. The time that was allocated for the completion of the questionnaire was also determined according to the pilot study results. The questionnaire was also piloted with 10 other students in order to find out any potential problems with the questionnaire that may arise during the data collection, and the amount of time that is needed to answer the questionnaire. Pilot study showed that students had difficulty with four items in the questionnaire; those items were rephrased and changed to more comprehensible ones. For instance, the item "*Grouping*" was changed to 'I remember the words which belong to the same class of words'. The item "*Associating/Elaborating*", to 'I think of the relationship between what I already know and new things I learn in English'. The item "*Semantic mapping*", was changed to 'I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used'. Finally the item "*Transferring*", was changed to 'I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English'.
3. Think aloud protocols: The think aloud protocols were used to gather qualitative data on the participants' actual use of listening comprehension strategies. Since the students' strategy preferences were identified through the questionnaire, for the think aloud protocols 14 volunteers (7 high-proficient and 7 low-proficient) were randomly chosen among the participants as a representative sample to find out the cognitive and metacognitive strategies students actually make use of while listening to a listening task.

In this study, there was no treatment and no control over what had already happened to the subjects. The intermediate students chosen for this study were regarded as enjoying the same knowledge of English whose listening comprehension ability was supposed to be evaluated.

### Data Analysis

The *Perceptual Learning Style Questionnaire* was used to assess the students' learning style preferences. The questionnaire consisted of 30 questions designed to diagnose the major, minor and negligible learning style preferences of students. The participants' responses to the above-mentioned questionnaire were analyzed based on the cut off points stated in the scoring sheet of the questionnaire to calculate the mean score for each type of perceptual learning style. According to figures presented in table 1, it seemed that only the mean scores of two learning style preference categories, namely visual and kinesthetic, being 39 and 38.2 respectively, fall into the major learning style preferences category by high-proficient listeners. As for the low-proficient listeners, the mean scores of group

learning, kinesthetic and visual learning style were 39.26, 38.33, and 38.33 respectively, so these styles fall into the major learning style categories. Since the mean scores of the remaining three categories were below 38, the cut off point for major learning style preferences category, they fitted the minor learning style preferences category.

Concerning the proficiency differences in the learning styles preferences of the participants, an independent samples t-test was conducted at  $p < .05$ , the significance level, as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Proficiency differences in the learning styles preferences of the participants

Style Category	High-Proficient		Low-Proficient		T-test
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Group Learning	33.33	7.07	<b>39.26</b>	8.58	.019
Kinesthetic	<b>38.2</b>	6.72	<b>38.33</b>	6.41	.94
Visual	<b>39.2</b>	5.17	<b>38.33</b>	4.69	.58
Auditory	37.53	5.42	36.86	4.91	.59
Tactile	35.46	5.82	36	6.25	.76
Individual Learning	34	7.06	33.86	8.08	.95

According to the table 1, the meaningful difference was located for the group learning styles, as the observed value for this type of style was .019. This means that there is statistically significant difference in the preference of the group learning styles between high-proficient and low-proficient listeners; low-proficient listeners prefer group learning style category more than high-proficient listeners (see table 1).

The purpose of using the *Listening Comprehension Strategy Questionnaire* was to identify the listening strategy preferences of the students who participated in this study. The questionnaire consisted of 52 items, which identified the strategy preferences of the participants. The strategies were grouped under the six main categories: cognitive, memory, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies.

The results of the descriptive statistics, conducted to identify the general tendency of strategy preferences of the high-proficient listeners in this study, indicated that the most preferred strategy category of all, with a mean score of 48.16 was the one related to cognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies ranked the second with an average of 38.63. The third place in the ranking order was taken by the memory strategies with a mean score 32.43. The mean score of the affective strategies was 30.36, so it ranked the fourth. The social strategies with the mean score of 16.8 were ranked as the fifth category. Finally, the least preferred strategies, compensation strategies, with the mean score of 5.56 were ranked as the sixth category.

The results of the descriptive statistics, conducted to identify the general tendency of strategy preferences of the low-proficient listeners in this study, indicated that the most preferred strategy category of all, with a mean score of 43.1 was the one related to cognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies ranked the second with an average of 34.7.

The third place in the ranking order was taken by the memory strategies with a mean score 30.63. The mean score of the affective strategies was 29.13, so it ranked the fourth. The social strategies with the mean score of 16.97 were ranked as the fifth category. Finally, the least preferred strategies, compensation strategies, with the mean score of 5.46 were ranked as the sixth category.

An independent samples t-test was conducted in order to find whether there was a significant difference in the listening strategy preferences of the high-proficient and low-proficient participants. The results showed that there was statistically significant difference between the strategy preferences of the two groups, as the significance value for cognitive and metacognitive strategies were located

.032 and .033 respectively at  $p < .05$ . This indicates that high-proficient listeners prefer cognitive and metacognitive strategies more than low-proficient listeners.

Table 2

Strategy Category	High-Proficient		Low-Proficient		T-test
	M	SD	M	SD	
Cognitive	<b>48.16</b>	7.2	<b>43.1</b>	5.57	0.032
Meta-cognitive	<b>38.63</b>	6.37	34.7	5.14	0.033
Memory	32.43	5.61	30.63	4.48	0.21
Affective	30.36	5.24	29.13	4.7	0.41
Social	16.8	2.36	16.97	1.86	0.65
Compensation	5.56	1.4	5.46	1.45	0.91

In order to determine whether there was a statistically meaningful relationship between the learning style preferences and the listening strategy preferences of the participants, the Pearson correlation was computed. In relation to the effect of proficiency on the relationship between learning styles and listening strategies, no relationship was found between these two variables among low-proficient listeners. In case of high-proficient listeners it was found that kinesthetic learning style category had significant relationship with memory and social strategies at  $p < .05$  significance level, their correlation coefficients being .424 and .446 respectively.

The purpose of conducting the think aloud protocols was to gather qualitative data with respect to the strategies students make use of while listening to a text. The analysis of the think aloud protocols show that students employed cognitive and metacognitive strategies in order to comprehend the listening material when listening to an oral text.

## DISCUSSION

The findings related to perceptual learning styles show that both groups, high and low proficient listeners, expressed a major learning style preference for the kinesthetic mode; according to Rossi-Le (1995) this learning style involve a practical, experiential approach to learning. So students prefer a style of learning that will involve them in the totality of the language learning experience. Kinesthetic learners prefer to learn by getting their body into action and moving around. They are “hands-on” types who prefer doing to talking. Such learners understand best if they can touch, feel, move, build, or manipulate what they are learning.

Another learning style which was expressed as the major learning style preferences for both groups was the visual learning style; like the other five perceptual learning style, visual learning relates to the fundamental ways in which people take-in information. Visual learners learn predominantly with their eyes. They prefer to see how to do things rather than just talk about them. Visual learners prefer to watch demonstrations and will often get a lot out of video taped instruction as well. These learners prefer receiving instruction through pictures and written language.

In addition, low-proficient listeners indicated a learning style preference for group learning, but they indicated only a minor learning style preference for individual learning. This suggests that low-proficient listeners prefer a style of learning that will involve them in collaborative work. Therefore, they might benefit from realistic contexts and interactive behavior as a basis for their language development (Rossi-Le, 1995). Those who prefer group learning style learn more effectively through studying with others.

Oxford (1990) suggests that cognitive strategies are essential in learning a new language because they operate directly on incoming information. Oxford (1990) stated those cognitive strategies, such as highlighting, analyzing, or summarizing messages, “enable learners to understand and produce new language by many different means” (p. 37). Besides, O’Malley and Chamot (1990) consider cognitive strategies as the most popular strategies with language learners. Metacognitive strategies, like arranging, planning, and evaluating one’s learning, allow learners to control their own cognition through planning, arranging, focusing, and evaluating their own learning (Oxford, 1990, p. 37). The reason why cognitive and metacognitive strategies were the most frequently used ones by the Iranian EFL learners might be the fact that Iran is an EFL context and language learners do not have much exposure to the target language to pick it up unconsciously. In fact, due to the lack of enough exposure to the target language, they hardly have any chance to unconsciously pick up the target language. Through conscious attention to language learning process, and direct manipulation and transformation of the target language input they receive, they can compensate for this deficiency, and that is why cognitive and metacognitive strategies were used at such a high level.

Based on the results of the present study kinesthetic learning style has a significant correlation with memory and social strategies. This relationship was only found among the high-proficient listeners; however, among the low-proficient listeners no relationship was found between learning style and listening strategy preferences.

In relation to memory strategies, the results show that kinesthetic learners know how to manipulate and transform the target language well. That is, they are aware of what practicing strategies they need, how much practice they need, and what practicing strategies they need to make use of. Furthermore, these learners know how to analyze input logically and to make meaning out of it. With regard to the social strategies, it can be stated that these students can also ask questions for verification or clarification without any hesitation. They are also good at cooperating with other students in class and other native speakers. What is more, it can be added that they can empathize with others by developing cultural understanding and awareness of other people’s thoughts and feelings.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the information obtained from the PLSPQ, it can be concluded that Iranian EFL learners prefer receiving information from the visual channel, learning by working in group, and involved in learning kinesthetically. Visual learners like to view everything as completely and clearly as possible. They like to watch demonstrations and will often get a lot out of video taped instruction as well. They learn better by reading what the teacher writes on the chalkboard and learn better by reading than listening to someone. Iranian EFL learners also prefer to learn by getting their body into action and moving around. They enjoy lots of hands-on work and tend to learn something physically, moving their arms and legs in imitation of what you’re doing as a teacher. Moving is so fundamental to kinesthetic learners. Kinesthetic learners need to get to the action as soon as possible. In addition, Iranian EFL learners like to interact and cooperate with their peers and prefer a style of learning that will involve them in collaborative work. They enjoy working on an assignment with their classmates.

Statistical analysis of the LCSQ showed that some groups of strategies were significantly influenced by this variable. Both groups, high and low proficient listeners, preferred cognitive and metacognitive strategies more frequently than the other strategy categories followed in a descending order by memory, affective, social, and compensation strategy categories. It was also found that there was a significant difference between high and low proficient listeners in the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategy categories. High-proficient listeners preferred these two strategy categories more frequently than low-proficient listeners. Although, high-proficient listeners got the higher average frequency in the other strategy categories, but the differences were not so high.

This finding implies that the difference in listening proficiency between high and low proficient listeners seem to be related to the qualities of listening strategies they employed. Each use of listening

strategy is not necessarily successful or efficient, but it represents the listeners' ability of actively solving problems.

The findings of the present study show that kinesthetic learning style has significant relationship with memory and social strategy categories. The relationship between kinesthetic learning style and memory strategies shows that kinesthetic learners utilize strategies, such as using physical response or sensation, repeating, placing new words into a context, using imagery, using keywords and they like becoming directly involved with the subject matter being learned. The relationship between kinesthetic learning style and social strategies shows that kinesthetic learners utilize strategies, such as, working with peers, requesting clarification, and asking for correction.

Implications for both teaching and further research can be drawn from this study.

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