

# The Relationship between Iranian EFL Instructors' Understanding of Learning Styles and Their Students' Success in Reading Comprehension

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## Abstract

Many variables reasonably influence teachers' education. One of these considering variables is being aware of the students' learning styles. Dörnyei (2005) maintains that individual differences correlate strongly with L2 achievements. Keefe (1979) believes that learning styles might be thought of as cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment. The present study investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL instructors' understanding of learning styles and their students' success in reading comprehension tests. To achieve this goal, the researchers randomly selected 240 Iranian EFL instructors at tertiary level with more than three years of experience in teaching reading comprehension courses. The Teacher's View over Students' Learning Preferences Inventory (TVSLPI) as well as a test of language proficiency (MELAB) was employed as the study's instruments. The findings revealed a significant relationship ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) between the Iranian EFL instructors' recognition of learning styles and their students' success in reading comprehension test. Besides, the results of interviews showed that Iranian instructors have approximately similar attitudes toward teaching reading comprehension in Iranian contexts.

**Keywords:** learning styles, individual differences, reading comprehension test, understanding learning styles

## 1. Introduction

One of the prevailing purposes in foreign language learning contexts is to raise awareness about students' different preferences and their possible effects on the learning process and accordingly, on learning outcomes (Blair, 1982). Today, learning about the students' learning styles and increasing the awareness in personal differences in language classrooms is definitely one of the prime objectives in foreign language learning and teaching. Sulaiman and Sulaiman (2010) pointed out, "all learners are individuals with unique patterns of strengths and weaknesses. They differ greatly in cognitive abilities. Some learners learn complex classroom materials quickly and easily, whereas others struggle to master basic concepts and skills" (p. 1). Learners are different and they learn in a variety of ways. Numerous variables reasonably influence teachers' education. One of these considering variables is awareness of the students' learning styles. The prerequisite of discussing about this significant issue is the definition of learning style.

Brown (2007) defined style as a permanent propensity within an individual that is directly related to the individuals' personality. It includes how they think about learning and how they experience learning process. Celce-Murcia (2001) believed that the way individuals perceive, interact with, and answer to their environment is a consistent tendency that indicates their styles. Keefe (1979) suggested that learning styles might be assumed of as cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively constant indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment (as cited in Brown, 2007).

Wong and Nunan (2011) in the definition of style considered it as an individuals' normal, habitual, and preferred way of absorbing, processing, and preserving new information and skills. They added that these styles appear to be relatively steady and will be deployed by persons regardless of the subject matter being studied or the skill being mastered. To Entwistle and Peterson (2004), learning styles are relatively constant preferences for adopting learning processes, despite the introduced task or problem. This is probably correct as an explanation of the

conventional core of the notion of learning styles, but the term has always been used in a wide variety of ways to describe differences in the way that people learn (as cited in Richardson, 2010). Correspondingly, Erton (2010) defined learning styles as individual's characteristics and preferred way of gathering, interpreting, organizing, and thinking about information.

Learning styles are the general approaches that students use in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subjects. These styles, in addition, are the overall patterns that give general direction to learning behavior (Oxford, 2003). Oxford (2003) stated, "Language learning styles and strategies are among the main factors that help determine how- and how well - our students learn a second or foreign language" (p. 1). She also argued that learning styles are not dichotomous and they overlap each other to some extent. Ehrman (1996) also had the same idea and believed that learning styles generally function on a continuum. For example, a person might be more extraverted than introverted, or more closure-oriented than open-oriented, or equally visual and acoustic but with lesser kinesthetic and obvious contribution. Few if any people could be classified as having all or nothing in any of these categories (as cited in Oxford, 2003).

### *1.1 Statment of the Problem*

According to Fahim and Samadian (2011), English instructors in Iranian EFL context have developed their own fixed and established personal method in their teaching and mostly ignore the students' preferences in language teaching. Iranian university instructors have adopted productive approaches such as grammar translation method (GTM), so students have negative attitudes towards language teaching. Richards and Schmidt (2002) suggested that differences in cognitive styles are thought to affect how learners deal with learning tasks and may affect success on those tasks. Providing different needs of learners and giving value to them as a fundamental part of the learning system is significant. Mulalic et al. (2009) expressed that by considering the process of teaching practices of the lecturers, it is easy to conclude that a great number of the lecturers are not aware of their students learning styles. When they ignore the importance of this issue and consider it as an insignificant component in the learning process, many unanticipated problems arise.

Boström (2011) proposed that for teachers, learning styles require pedagogy to be taught according to the learners' preferences. She emphasized, "knowledge of human diversity affects learning at a deeper level, ie. the meta-cognitive skills develop. Students can understand both their own and others persons' learning better" (p. 34). Boström (2011) emphasized that teaching according to the learners' preference is a foremost part of every teaching course. However, it seems that this part of language teaching circle has missed in Iranian teaching context. As it seems there are few researches considering instructors' awareness toward students' learning styles and its effect on language teaching in Iran, this study tries to discover if there is any relationship between Iranian EFL instructors' understanding of learning styles and their students' success in reading comprehension skill. Most of the researches on teaching and learning styles focus on how demographical variables such as sexual category, age, university major, and personality influence learning styles. There have also been studies, although relatively limited, on the matching and mismatching of teaching and learning styles. Naimie et al. (2010) stated that the findings of past studies (for example, Felder, 1988; Goodwin, 1995; McDonald, 1996) elucidated that a learner's achievement in any class is determined by factors such as national ability, and the level of association between learners' learning styles and teachers' teaching styles.

### *1.2 Significance of the Study*

In general, learning style is the method by which learners gather information from their environment. However, Ellis (2008) distinguished learning style and cognitive style. He suggested that cognitive styles are relatively fixed and learning styles are subject to change. Learners can change their learning styles based on their classroom and their environments' experiences. He also added that learning styles could be taught. Vawda (2005) stated that researchers have investigated learning styles from psychological, social, physiological, and educational perspectives and because of these diverse perspectives, they have produced many learning and cognitive styles inventories.

To Sadeghi et al. (2012), reading comprehension is a process of unlocking meaning from connected text. Reading comprehension as a great source of knowledge has been one of the important parts in second/foreign language tests and examinations. It also plays a fundamental role in the educational and professional life of any student. Hsieh et al. (2007) suggested that there are multifarious ways such as taking action research methodologies, one-to-one computing approaches and collaborative approaches in the system for investigating different learning styles to improve students' reading comprehension competence. Through these diverse ways, teachers can orchestrate their methods with their students' learning goals. The findings of current educational research studies such as Dunn (2009) and Williams (2010) which focused on reading comprehension

demonstrated that there is a significant relationship between kinesthetic, auditory, visual sensory learning styles and reading comprehension. Besides, they illustrated that teachers could offer different activities that fit learners' learning styles.

### *1.3 Review of Literature*

Ghada and Rima (2011) stated that in the recent decade, researches in applied linguistics field have paid more attention to learners' learning styles and learning strategies that are important factors influencing the outcomes of learning. They claimed, "A teacher could be very knowledgeable, creative, caring, and enthusiastic yet fail to facilitate learning for students whose strengths or learning styles are not acknowledged or addressed by the teaching methods in the classroom" (p. 168). Richardson (2010) investigated conceptions of learning and learning styles in higher education and believed that learning styles have been construed in different ways but traditionally have been regarded as relatively stable. In contrast, the students' attitudes to learning perspective tend to assume that approaches to studying are contextually driven. In his study, Richardson (2010) argued for a linkage between these traditions. First, the evidence that students' perceptions of their context determine their approaches to studying is open to other interpretations. Second, students' approaches to studying depend as much on their conceptions of learning as on contextual factors. Third, students' conceptions of learning seem to be relatively stable, even across an entire degree programme. The findings suggested that students' approaches to studying in higher education might be related to their perceptions of their academic environment, their conceptions of learning, and commencing of themselves as learners. Shi (2011) investigated the relationship between cognitive styles and learning strategies. This study focused on the relationship between cognitive styles and learning strategies of second-year English major learners. The results proved that cognitive styles have significant influence on learners' choices of learning strategies. Shi (2011) demonstrated that synthesizing style, sharpener style, field-independent style and impulsive style of cognitive styles correlate positively almost with every strategy presented, so they turn to be the most significant learning styles that have an impact on learners' learning strategy choices. As a result, if students can recognize their learning styles, they can reach their potential in language learning. In addition, by being aware of the style areas, learners deal with tasks that do not seem quite suited to them, therefore, style preferences will help them stretch beyond their existing level and expand their learning and working potential, which is definitely beneficial to students themselves. She found, "students' cognitive styles have positive connection with their learning outcomes through the interaction of cognitive styles and learning strategies" (p. 25).

Graf, Lin, and Kinshuk (2008) investigated the relationship between learning styles and cognitive traits that is, getting additional information for improving student modeling. The results of their study showed that a relationship exists between learning styles and cognitive traits. This relationship can be used to get additional information about the learners in systems that are able to identify either only learning styles or only cognitive traits. For systems that already consider both learning styles and cognitive traits, the relationship can be used to build a more strong student model.

McKeachine (1995) claimed that matching teaching style to learning style is not a cure-all that solves all classroom conflicts as there are other factors such as classroom climate, previous background, motivation, gender and multicultural issues that will greatly affect the amount and quality of learning that take place. However, Montgomery and Groat (1998) maintained that both learning and teaching styles are changeable. They can be adapted over time and for different purposes in different classroom contexts. Therefore, though it may be beneficial to modify one's teaching style to match a wider range of students in a particular class, it may also be valuable for those same students to introduce class activities that noticeably expand their learning style preferences.

Montgomery and Groat (1998) believed that there are many reasons to incorporate an understanding of learning styles in language teaching. They mentioned five points to consider: 1) making teaching and learning a dialogue, 2) responding to a more diverse student body, 3) communicating our message, 4) making teaching more rewarding, and 5) ensuring the future of our disciplines. Jilardi Damavandi et al. (2011) stated that having different learning styles leads to significant difference in the learners' academic achievement. To Fahim and Samadian (2011), the main purposes of teachers are to determine better the individual needs of their students. This statement shows that considering learners' learning preferences is the only way to handle the diversity of learners in the classroom, and to prepare students for their classrooms. Moreover, the teacher is the best one who can help students to become more comfortable with learning approaches they have not experienced before.

Amir and Mohd Jelas (2010) approved that the quality of teaching contributes to quality of learning. Learners learn effectively when they are active, highly motivated and have the right strategy knowledge. In order to help

this kind of learning, instructors need to know and adapt to different styles of learning. Chu and Nakamura (2010) believed that if teachers can respond appropriately to individual learning needs as well as interests, and successfully design and deliver language instruction relevant to a multiplicity of learning style, they may assume that every student can learn (as cited in Psaltou-Joycey & Kantaridou, 2011).

#### *1.4 Research Questions and Hypotheses*

To achieve the goals of the present correlational study, the following research questions were posed:

**Q1.** Is there any relationship between Iranian EFL instructors' understanding of learning styles and their students' success in reading comprehension skill?

**Q2.** Is there any relationship between Iranian EFL instructors' teaching experience and their students' success in reading comprehension skill?

**Q3.** Is there any relationship between Iranian EFL instructors' teaching experience and their understanding of students' learning styles?

**Q4.** From Iranian EFL instructors' perspective, what kinds of learning styles are more suitable for students' success in reading comprehension skill?

To come up with reasonable results on the basis of the aforementioned research questions, the following null hypotheses were proposed:

**H0<sub>1</sub>:** There is no significant relationship between Iranian EFL instructors' understanding of learning styles and the students' success in reading comprehension skill.

**H0<sub>2</sub>:** There is no significant relationship between Iranian EFL instructors' teaching experience and their students' success in reading comprehension skill.

**H0<sub>3</sub>:** There is no significant relationship between Iranian EFL instructors' teaching experience and their understanding of students' learning styles.

**H0<sub>4</sub>:** From Iranian EFL instructors' perspective, there is no specific learning style related to the students' success in reading comprehension skill.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Participant*

Both Iranian instructors and students participated in this study. The sample of this study was selected accidentally from among Iranian EFL instructors. Two hundred and forty university instructors participated in the present study (N= 240). Their teaching experiences ranged between 3 to 25 years. All instructors taught language skills courses in tertiary level in universities. Their ages were between 25 to 55 years old. 88 (36.7%) of them were under 30 years of age, 71 between 31 to 40 years old, 49 between 41 to 50, and 32 had more than 50 years of age. The instructors taught in different universities of Iran. One hundred and three (42.9 %) were in state universities, 88 in different branches of Islamic Azad University, 18 in nongovernmental and nonprofit institutes of higher education, 17 in different branches of Payam-e Noor University, and 14 in different branches of the University of Applied Sciences. These instructors studied in different fields of study: 190 in English language teaching, 34 in English literature, and 16 in English translation.

The instructors' students also participated in the present study. They were in advanced level. The sample of students was 300 and they were also selected accidentally. Their reading comprehension scores in MELAB reading test were used to determine the relationship. The researchers collected 1 to 3 students' reading score from every instructor. For those instructors that had more than one reading score, the researchers used the students' mean scores. Therefore, the number of students' reading scores that was calculated in the data analysis was 240 (N= 240).

### *2.2 Procedures*

In order to recognize the instructors' understanding of the students' learning styles, the researchers distributed the piloted online/offline inventory among 500 English university instructors who taught language skills courses in tertiary level in different universities. Out of 500 distributed inventories, only 286 (177 online and 109 offline) were returned. Since some instructors' students were not available for the researchers to check their reading comprehension performance, the researchers excluded forty-six of them from the study, so the final population was 240 (N= 240).

To make a rational verification, the researchers also conducted a semi-structured interview with nine English

instructors from different universities such as state university, different branches of Islamic Azad University (IAU), different branches of Payam-e Noor University, nongovernmental and non-profit institutes of higher education, and different branches of the University of Applied Sciences. These instructors (N= 9) participated in this interview voluntarily. In this 20 minutes face-to-face interview, the researchers tried to verify these instructors' recognition over students' learning styles. The interview questions mainly reflected the researcher-made inventory questions. Moreover, the interview phase conducted to verify the collected data from the inventory as well as to answer the fourth research question of this study that was; from Iranian EFL instructors' perspective, what kinds of learning styles are more suitable for students' success in reading comprehension skill?

### *2.3 Instrumentations*

To determine the relationship between instructors' understanding of learning styles and their students' reading comprehension ability, the following instruments were employed in the present study:

1. Teacher's View over Students' Learning Preferences Inventory (TVSLPI). This researchers-made inventory was derived from Cohen et al. (2003) Learning Style Survey to determine instructors' view over learning styles. Three experts reviewed it for its content validity and reliability. Next, the collected data of TVSLPI were subjected to Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation to ensure its construct validity. Based on the results of running PCA, seven items were omitted and the validated inventory comprised 30 Likert-scale items. Then, it was piloted through 50 ELT instructors that were different from participants but had similar characteristics. Cronbach's Alpha formula for the inventory was employed; the results showed a reliability index of .919 ( $r= 0.919$ ). In this inventory, every item was made by some statements describing a learning preference and its related activities. Participants were to decide whether they agreed or not with each of them through Likert-scale items. In addition, since this inventory was distributed through the internet as well, and in order to avoid misunderstandings, the researchers presented clear instructions in the cover page.

As this study's aim was to focus on reading comprehension, the researchers extracted those learning styles from Cohen et al. (2003) Learning Style Survey that were mostly related to reading skill. This inventory focused on learning styles such as visual, auditory, kinesthetic, extroverted, introverted, global, particular, field-independent, and field-dependent. Understanding of every learning style determined through three questions except visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles that determined through four questions.

2. Semi-Structured Interview. In addition to Teacher's View over Students' Learning Preferences Inventory, the researchers conducted a semi-structured interview with nine English instructors. In this 20 minutes face-to-face interview, the researchers tried to verify these selected instructors' recognition over students' learning styles. The interview questions mainly reflected the researcher-made inventory questions. The major categories of interview questions focused on visual, auditory, kinesthetic, extroverted, introverted, global, particular, field-independent, and field-dependent learning styles.

3. Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB). The Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB) is a standardized test created at the University of Michigan, which evaluates advanced-level English language competence of adult nonnative speakers of English. This secure test battery consists of three mandatory parts including written composition, listening comprehension, and grammar, cloze, vocabulary and reading comprehension multiple-choice questions, and one optional speaking test in the form of a one-on-one interview with an examiner.

In the current study, reading comprehension part of MELAB (1997) test was administered to the instructors' students to homogenize the students' reading comprehension scores. This test included four reading passages with total 20 multiple-choice reading comprehension questions for students to be answered in 30 minutes.

### **3. Results and Discussions**

Having collected the required data based on the mentioned data collection instruments and procedures, the researchers conducted data analysis and tested the hypotheses formulated for the present study.

To investigate the relationship between Iranian EFL instructors' understanding of learning styles and the students' success in reading comprehension skill, the researchers compared the results of TVSLPIs with students' mean scores.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation of Instructors' Understanding and Students Success

Students' mean scores		
Instructors' understanding of LS	Pearson Correlation	.237**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
N		240

Note. \*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The relationship between Iranian EFL instructors' understanding of learning styles (as measured by TVSLPI) and students' success in reading comprehension skill (as measured by MELAB reading test) was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity. There was a small, positive correlation between the two variables,  $r = .237$ ,  $n = 240$ ,  $P < .000$ , with high level of understanding of learning styles associated with higher students' success of reading comprehension skill.

The R value of .237 [ $r = .237$ ,  $P = .000 < .05$ ] indicates that there is a statistically significant relationship between the two variables. Thus, the null-hypothesis as no significant relationship between Iranian EFL instructors' understanding of learning styles and the students' success in reading comprehension skill is rejected. As the results of Table 1 reveal, there is positive relationship between instructors' understanding of learning styles and the students' success in reading comprehension ability.

To investigate the relationship between university instructors' teaching experience and their students' success in reading comprehension skill, the researchers employed Pearson-product correlation coefficient.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation of Instructors' Teaching Experience and Students' Success

Students' mean scores		
Instructors' teaching experience	Pearson Correlation	.311**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
N		240

Note. \*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The relationship between Iranian EFL instructors' teaching experience (as measured by TVSLPI) and the students' success in reading comprehension skill (as measured by MELAB reading test) was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity. There was a medium, positive correlation between the two variables,  $r = .311$ ,  $n = 240$ ,  $P < .000$ , with high level of teaching experience associated with higher students' success of reading comprehension skill.

The R value of .311 [ $r = .311$ ,  $P = .000 < .05$ ] indicates that there is a statistically significant relationship between the two variables. Thus, the null-hypothesis as no significant relationship between university instructors' teaching experience and their students' success in reading comprehension skill is rejected. As the results of Table 2 reveal, there is a positive relationship between university instructors' teaching experience and their students' success in reading comprehension skill.

To investigate the relationship between university instructors' teaching experience and their understanding of students' learning styles, Pearson-product correlation coefficient was conducted.

Table 3. Pearson Correlation of Instructors' Teaching Experience and Sum of TVSLPI

Sum of TVSLPI		
Instructors' teaching experience	Pearson Correlation	.650**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
N		240

Note. \*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The relationship between university Iranian EFL instructors' teaching experience (as measured by TVSLPI) and their understanding of students' learning styles (as measured by TVSLPI also) was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity. There was a large, positive correlation between the two variables,  $r = .65$ ,  $n = 240$ ,  $P < .000$ , with high level of teaching experience associated with higher understanding of students' learning styles.

The R value of .65 [ $r = .65$ ,  $P = .000 < .05$ ] indicates that there is a statistically significant relationship between the two variables. Thus, the null-hypothesis as no significant relationship between university instructors' teaching experience and their understanding of students' learning styles is rejected. As the results of Table 3 indicate, there is a positive relationship between university instructors' teaching experience and their understanding of students' learning styles.

To investigate the fourth research question, the researchers conducted a semi-structured interview with nine English instructors. In this 20 minutes face-to-face interview, the researchers tried to verify these instructors' recognition over students' learning styles.

In general, the results of interviews revealed that Iranian instructors have approximately similar attitudes toward teaching reading comprehension in Iranian contexts. They stated that learners have different learning styles and learning preferences. Thus, considering these styles in one classroom is a complicated task that needs very professional teachers. However, based on the nature of reading and its adequate method for teaching, they suggested that focusing on sensory preferences and providing related teaching strategies would be an applicable method for teaching reading comprehension in Iran or even in every teaching context. They asserted that sensory preferences are the ultimate solution of diversities in classrooms. They recommended that using video, charts, pictures, maps, role-plays, discussions, games, conversations, social tasks, interactive tasks, and group-work activities are the most appropriate strategies that can be employed to teach reading comprehension in Iranian language environments.

#### 4. Conclusions

The results of this study indicated that there was a significant relationship between instructors' understanding of learning styles and the students' scores of reading comprehension tests. The findings corroborated the ideas of Mahamod et al. (2010) who suggested that teachers could play the most important role in developing students who are skilled in learning efficiently. The role of teachers and students are often complementing each other and the main responsibility of a teacher is to translate the teaching syllabus into another form through a series of suitable learning activities. The results of interviews also indicated that instructors that knew learning styles very well could deal with their students efficiently and handle complexities of the teaching process. When teachers are familiar with a special learning style, they would be able to employ appropriate learning strategies particular to that learning style.

One of the most important reasons to this understanding is teachers' experience. The results of this study indicated that experience had a significant effect on both instructors' understandings of learning styles and their students' success in reading comprehension achievements. These findings are in agreement with Chu (2010) findings that suggested professional teachers that can provide adequate opportunities for their learners could control diversity of learners' learning styles and successfully design and deliver language instruction relevant to a multiplicity of learning style.

The results of interview confirmed the findings of Kirmizi (2010) that declared relating effective reading process solely to use of learning styles would be misleading. There are different variables affecting this process. In interviews, instructors stated that one of these variables is learners' motivation. Regardless of their learning styles, it is clear that motivated learners would have better achievements. However, the findings of the current study do not support Oxford and Lavine (1991) research that showed well-suited learning styles can entirely enhance academic achievement, improve students' attitude and behavior as well as mastering of a foreign language (as cited in Mahamod, 2010).

According to the results of the current study, sensory preferences are the ultimate solution of diversity in classrooms. Along with Oxford's (2003) work on learning style, the researchers recommended that using video, charts, pictures, maps, role-plays, discussions, games, conversations, social tasks, interactive tasks, and group-work activities are the most appropriate strategies that can be employed to teach reading comprehension in Iranian language teaching environments.

In addition, the research data gathered in this study provide educators information that they can employ in their

action research projects, which explore creative ways to implement sensory learning style techniques into the reading curriculum. It is important that teachers to be sensitive to different results obtained from different students and make any possible adjustment to the course design. Educators could also use this study to explore ways to help students learn to adapt their learning styles. Finally, it would have lesson plans that incorporate kinesthetic or tactile, auditory, and visual activities. While it may not be possible for every reading teacher to create a perfect multisensory classroom, this research indicates that adding multisensory activities might be one way to help struggling readers.

This study addressed the relationship between Iranian EFL instructors' understanding of learning styles and their students' success in reading comprehension skill. It is possible that conducting this study in other contexts would have different findings. Additional research could also focus on how specific reading strategies can be adapted to a multisensory approach. Furthermore, different types of participants can be studied in future researches. This study focused on Iranian instructors only. It is suggested that it can be duplicated with teachers with different levels and in different contexts. The current study focused on reading comprehension skill. It would be a great idea to consider teachers' understanding of learning styles on other language skills.

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