

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Overview

English is considered a foreign language in Iran. Learning English officially starts when the students enter a secondary school. At that level students will learn three languages as compulsory subjects (Persian, Arabic, and English). The Persian language, which is their mother tongue, is learnt since primary school and in the secondary school they will start learning English and Arabic. The pupils must attend classes for these languages for one and a half hours twice a week for each subject.

After seven years of studying English under this system both in high school and secondary school, they prepare themselves to enter the university. At this stage English is also one of the subjects, which is tested at an entrance exam every year. Students are required to get a certain grade for the entire test to be accepted into certain courses. All the individuals have their own strategies to learn more efficiently and these styles and strategies would be different from one person to another.

English can be considered under two categories in the non-native situation: EFL and ESL. English is considered in the EFL context in Iran and is the most important language after the mother tongue. As Kang (1999) states that "EFL" means English is used neither as a medium of instruction nor as an official language for school subjects and it is used more for international communication rather than intra-national, such as the case of English in Iran, Thailand and Japan.

Looking at the history of foreign language learning, we will find that one of the major questions in this area is the matter of the different levels of success. It is noticeable that some people have more potential than others in learning and using a foreign language. We cannot deny that all individuals with normal abilities and under normal situations can master their mother tongue but to learn a foreign language, however, requires a person to have a certain ability or technique that he will achieve in the learning environment.

There are a number of factors which have been identified to explain differences in success among foreign language learners, to clarify why some learn a language easily while some faced a lot of problems in learning language and only meet with limited success. The factors, which are related to differential success, can be categorized as age, language aptitude, social psychological strategies and cognitive style, among others.

Ellis R. (1990:114) asserts that: "cognitive style is a term used to describe the manner in which people perceive, conceptualize, organize, and recall information. Therefore, it can be stated that cognitive style is the preferred way in which individuals process information or approach a task, and each person is considered to have a more or less consistent mode of cognitive functioning.

Various aspects of cognitive style have been identified in psychological literature, and few of these have been investigated for the second or foreign language learning implications. These are usually presented as dichotomies. The dichotomy, which has received the greatest attention where foreign language learning concerned, is field dependence/independence (from now on FD/FI). As Ellis R. (1990:114) states:

"The terms do not really represent alternatives, but poles on a continuum, with individuals varying in the extent to which they lean toward dependence or independence."

Witkin et al. (1977:7) define FD/FI as:

"The extent to which a person perceives part of a field as discrete from the surrounding field as a whole, rather than embedded or...the extent to which a person perceives analytically."

So people are termed field independent if they are able to abstract an element from its context, or background field. In the same direction, Chappelle and Roberts (1986:28) assert that:

"A field independent person may approach problem solving situations analytically, while a field dependent person may approach them in a more global way. In the area of intellectual problem solving, a highly field independent person tends to get lost in totality of the stimuli."

Consequently, a field independent person is at an advantage in problem solving situations in which isolating and manipulating a critical element is important. A field dependent person, on the other hand, is more capable of perceiving the total picture in a situation.

Thus, the relationship between field independence /field dependence and success on a given task depends on the nature of the task. Furthermore Witkin and Goodenough (1976:11) hold that:

"Theoretically, FD fosters greater skill in interpersonal relations, while FI nurtures greater cognitive restructuring ability on various perceptual and intellectual tasks."

Concerning field independent /dependent individuals, it can be stated that a field independent person is able to perceive a particular, relevant item or factor in a "field" of distracting items. The term "field" in general may be perceptual or it may be more abstract in referring to a set of thoughts, ideas, or feeling from which the field independent individuals' task is to perceive specific relevant subsets. Field dependence, on the other hand, is the tendency to be dependent on the total field such that the parts embedded within the field are not easily perceived, though the total field is perceived more clearly as a unified whole. Brown, H.D (1987:88) states that:

"Affectively, persons who are more predominantly field independent tend to be generally more independent, competitive, and self confident, whereas field dependent persons tend to be more socialized, tend to derive their self identity from persons around them, and are usually more empathetic and perceptive of the feelings and thoughts of others."

It is assumed that whereas a field independent individual will perform some tasks more effectively than a field dependent, the opposite will be true for other tasks. Principal characteristics of a field independent and field dependent cognitive style can be summarized based on Hawkey, 1982 (mentioned in Ellis 1993) (See table 1.1 below).

Table 1.1 Characteristics of field dependent/field independent individuals

Field dependence	Field independence
1. Personal orientation i.e. reliance on external frame of reference in processing information.	1. Impersonal orientation i.e. reliance on internal frame of reference in processing information.
2. Holistic, i.e. perceive a field as a whole; parts are fused with background	2. Analytic, i.e. perceives a field in terms of its component parts: parts are distinguished from background
3. Dependent, i.e. the self view is derived from others	3. Independent, i.e. sense of separate identity
4. Socially sensitive, i.e. greater skill in interpersonal/social relationship	4. Not so socially aware, i.e. less skilled in interpersonal /social relationship

Ellis, 1993; based on Hawkey: 1982

1.2 Purpose of the study

The main objective of this study is to find out whether and to what extent, there is a relationship between field dependent/independent cognitive styles and in choosing language learning strategies. It should be mentioned that normally a field independent person is good at language activities such as finding pattern, organizing data to make generalizations, and learning rules, and on the other hand, a field dependent person may be good in learning material with social context and they can be positively influenced by their teacher, but they are good in structured tasks.

It is noticeable that for many years the main concern of educational specialists has been teaching. There have been large amounts of effort and studies, along with theories and hypothesis, which have tried to devise a way to enable the teacher to teach better. There has been, however, little attention paid to the learner and the process of learning as it is taking place in the mind of the learner.

Nowadays, fortunately, the trend has shifted towards investigating what learners do when they are involved in a learning task. There are many psychologists who try to define how learners approach a learning task, how they cope with problems which they have inherited in learning, and so on.

The interest about finding and describing what "a good language learner does" Oxford and Nyikos (1989); Ehrman and Oxford (1995) has resulted in research which has led to different classification of strategies and other related items to learning. But, as Van and Abraham (1990) state, the exclusive observation of good language learners has resulted in problems in strategy training. Van and Abraham believe that many studies on strategies of good language learners are based on an assumption that poor language learners lack these strategies. In other words, regarding the fact that most, if not all, Persian students experience language learning strategies while studying or in the class room setting, this study seeks to find out whether being field dependent or independent facilitates or hinders choosing the learning strategy for acquiring English language proficiency.

1.3 Research Questions

Consequently, the current study seeks to address the following questions:

1. Does students' cognitive style (FD/FI) affect their choice of learning strategies?
2. What types of strategies do field dependent /independent learners use?
3. Is there an intermediate group in the cognitive style category? If so what are the learning strategies preferred by them?

1.4 Statement of problem

Successful language learners tend to select strategies that work well together in the language learning task. (Chamot and Kupper, 1989). It is supposed that the choice of a particular learning strategy by the student is in close relationship with being field dependent /independent. Rubin and Thompson (1994) found that the use of appropriate language learning strategies often results in improved proficiency or overall achievement or in specific skill areas. Referring to what we know about the problem of using the appropriate learning strategies a question arises, is there any relationship between field dependant/independent cognitive styles with selecting learning strategies among Persian students majoring in English?

English is considered as a foreign language in Iran like other languages such as German, Italian and French, among others. English is the language, which gains the most attention, because people use English in their commercial trade and international business, in cultural exchanges such as international sports, tourism and different festivals. Since English is an international language and it is the only language that

people all over the world can use to communicate with each other, most people in Iran prefer to learn it as a second language.

Every individual has his own style for learning foreign language and differences between styles will make an interesting point. For this research the researcher will try to find the styles and strategies which Persian students use for learning English and the effect of being field dependent or independent on this choice. The subjects of this study are students from the department of English, in the Faculty of foreign languages at the Azad University Center Branch in Tehran and Garmsar. They are a group of second year students who are taking contrastive analysis as one of their subjects. They have different levels of English proficiency and English backgrounds. As the researcher observed, each one of the students has her own strategy in successful learning of English.

1.5 Limitations of the study

There are several limitations in this study:

1. The number of students, who involved in this study, is 140. More subjects would have provided more reliable results. Out of the mentioned number, 117 students answered the entire questionnaire completely while the rest who did not were excluded from the study.
2. The findings are also limited because the study is based on Persian students who are majoring in the English language. The study may show different results if Persian students of other major participate.

3. There is no true test assessing field dependence /independence. GEFT assesses the degree of field independence, whereby a high score on GEFT indicates field independence. Although field independence or dependence has been conceived by psychological researchers as a stable construct logically and observationally, field independence /dependence is changeable within one person, depending on context. Individuals can vary their utilization of field independence or field dependence but generally, one style is preferred by each learner.

4. The number of the chosen subject was limited to 117 female individuals who were all Iranian.

5. The language learning strategies investigated in this study were limited to those contained in the strategy inventory for language learning (SILL). There may be other strategies that Iranian students use that were not investigated.

1.6 Significance of the study

This seems to be the first study of its kind concerning the area of language strategy selection of Persian students learning English. Understanding whether FI/FD cognitive style enhances or hinders language learning strategies of Persian students would be beneficial in an educational setting. It would lead the curriculum designers and material producers (text writers) to provide students with more appropriate methods of teaching, or interactive methods, as well as the appropriate type of materials and texts matched which correspond with the cognitive style they enjoy.

At the same time it will prove beneficial to test developers. The educational implication of the finding of this study will be enormous for teachers and teacher trainers. Since this study will determine the role of FI/FD cognitive style in the area of

English language proficiency, therefore the role and effect of these dichotomies in this selection and presentation of materials as well as methods of teaching will be influential.

1.7 The relevance of the issue to teaching

The concepts and methods derived from work on cognitive styles in general, and FD/FI in particular over the past four decades are being applied at an increasing rate to research on problems related to education. The FI/FD dimension as the most commonly studied cognitive style has had the widest application to educational problems, while research on educational application is still in the early stages. The evidence that research has already produced suggests that a cognitive style approach containing the educational implications of FD/FI cognitive style maybe useful with profit to a variety of educational issues in general and second or foreign language learning in particular.

In language learning it is often necessary to understand language items in their context and at the same time to clarify the item out of that context and to understand it paradigmatically. For example, the learner should understand an embedded phrase, a clause, meaning of words, or sound sequence in the context or “field” in which it occurs; yet it is equally necessary to be able to isolate the linguistic item from its field and to use it in other contexts. Looking at this aspect, concerning the ability of field dependent people to abstract an element from its context or background field and to use it in new situation, it is assumed that FI plays a helpful role in the development of foreign language proficiency in a formal environment. This study aims to conduct

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research in the same line and believes that FI/FD as a factor may affect both the foreign language learning process and the achievement outcome.

1.8 Definition of terms

Due to the complexity of some technical terms used in this study, it was felt necessary to define them in order to avoid the possible problems of ambiguity and inconsistency.

1.8.1 Style and Strategy

Style is a term that refers to consistent and rather enduring tendencies or preferences within an individual. Styles are those general characteristics that differentiate one individual from another (Brown 1987:104). "Strategy is the way we approach a problem or task or in other words those specific "attacks" that we make on a given problem." (Brown 1987:104).

1.8.2 Learning Style

Learning style is the way the learner chooses for better, meaningful and useful learning. 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", (Keefe 1979:4) or, more simply, perhaps, as "a general predisposition, voluntary or not, toward processing information in a particular way" (Skehan 1981:288).

1.8.3 Learning strategy

Brown (1987) describes learning strategies "as those specific "attacks" that we make on a given "problem" posed by second language input and output". Anna Uhl Chamot (1989) explained it as: "Learning strategies are techniques which students use

to comprehend, store, and remember new information and skills. What a student thinks and how a student acts in order to learn comprise the non observable and observable aspects of learning strategies.”

1.8.4 Cognitive style

Cognitive style refers to general disposition toward processing information. According to Brown (1987:84) “ the way we learn things in general and the particular attack we make on a problem seem to hinge on a rather amorphous link between personality and cognition; this link is referred to as cognitive style ” .

1.8.5 Field dependence cognitive style

A field dependent person is one who is unable to abstract an element from its context or background field. According to Brown (1987:85) “field dependence is the tendency to be dependent on the total field such that the parts embedded within a field are not easily perceived, though that total field is perceived more clearly as a unified whole”, or on the other hand the tendency to be dependent on the total field such that the part embedded within a field is not easily perceived.

1.8.6 Field independence cognitive style

A field independent person is one who tends to be more analytic and object-oriented. Hence, she or he is able to exclude an element from its context, or background field. Brown (1987:85) defines field independent cognitive style as “your ability to perceive a particular, relevant item or factor in a field of distracting items.”

1.8.7 Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)

The SILL questionnaire version 7.0 self report questionnaire developed by Oxford (1990) for the Army Research Institute (DLB) is designed for the ESL /EFL learners. This questionnaire is composed of 50 items consisting of six strategies: memory strategy, cognitive strategy, compensation strategy, meta cognitive strategy, affective strategy and social strategy. Park (1997:213). Students are required to answer these items on a five -point Likert scale ranging from “**Never**” or “**Almost never true**” to “**Always**” or “**Almost always true**” or “**True**” . (See Appendix B).

1.8.8 Group Embedded Figure Test (GEFT)

As Stanfield and Hansen (1981) point out GEFT is a group administered test that gets the subject to outline a simple geometric shape within a complex design. The subject must locate or separate the relevant information from the contextual field and restructure it to design the correct shape. In theory, this task discriminates the extent to which the person perceives analytically and is able to identify the relevant information within the organized field. Through this test we will find out that whether the individual is field dependent or independent. (See appendix A).

1.9 Conclusion

This chapter, first of all, clarified briefly the crucial importance of some prospective studies on FD/FI dichotomy, and its relationship with English language proficiency and choosing learning strategies of Persian students. Secondly, it elaborated on the purpose of the study, the research questions, the significance of the study, and the relevance of the issues to teaching. Finally, an overview of the method and the ideal aims of the study, as well as definition of important terms and the limitations of the study were pinpointed.

The next chapter includes a review of literature tracing back a historical background of the dichotomy, as well as psychological differentiation and detailed discussion of the concepts of FD/FI in literature.