# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

There have been numerous studies, theories and hypotheses, trying to guide teachers to teach better. Amongst these are studies on learners and the process of learning as it is taking place in their minds.

Today, one of the focuses of research in teaching and learning is exploration of the learners' strategies when they are involved in the learning task. There is now more emphasis on how students handle learning problems, how they explore the strategies which help them to become successful learners and the effects of the teaching styles on student performance (Dansereau, 1985; Weinstein & Underwood, 1985).

In the area of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) the understanding of the ESL and EFL learning process is also being emphasized. It has become a major concern of some ESL and EFL researchers (Oxford, 1990). The premise behind this drive is the belief that, to be effective, ESL and EFL teachers need to have knowledge about the learners' learning needs, individual differences in learning, the required teaching methods, learners' preferences as well as the necessary teaching materials required to meet the learners' needs in the educational setting. More specifically, recently, emphasis has also been paid to teaching and learning style.

**Learning Styles and Teaching Styles Match and Mismatch**

Educators have noticed that some students prefer certain ways of learning more than others; this preference is referred to as the learning style that can aid teachers in the successful teaching plan (Baumgartner, 2001). In other words, learning styles can be defined as the way the individual prefers to go about learning. The notion of learning style needs to be clarified, because in most situations learning styles, learning strategies and learning preferences are used interchangeably. Smith and Dalton (2005) defined learning style as "a distinctive and habitual manner of acquiring knowledge, skills or attitudes through study or experience" (p. 7).

The information on students' learning styles can be useful when the learning style implementation in adult education is related with teachers considering learner style versatility at different levels and in different subjects (Nielsen, 2005). This aspect of the adult learners normally is argued under the matching and mismatching of the teacher styles and their learners' learning styles (Beck, 2001; Hyman & Rosoff, 1984; Zhang, 2006), and it is advised to connect and link the learners' learning styles and teachers' teaching styles (Zhang, 2006). Learning style has often been substituted with learning strategy and learning preference. Learning style preferences are defined as, "favoring of one particular mode of learning over another" and these preferences can differ within the same individual depending on the task mode (Diaz & Cartnal, 1999, p. 130). In this study, the definition of learning styles by Felder and Soloman (2006) is adapted whereby learning style classified students under four categories based on their preferences. The categories are namely: Active / Reflective, Sensing /Intuition, Visual / Verbal, and Sequential / Global.

Teaching style has been explained by active and passive concepts. Active teaching style refers to the situation when the students in a class are actively involved in an exchange of information, while passive teaching style refers to a situation where a teacher prefers not to engage the class members (Desai, 1996; McDonald, 1996). According to Reid (1995) teachers with awareness about their students' learning styles are better able to adapt their teaching methods appropriately.

The findings of past studies (Felder, 1988; Goodwin, 1995; McDonald, 1996) explained that a learner's achievement in any class depends on a few factors, such as native ability, and congruence level of the learner's learning styles and the teacher's teaching styles. Some studies have also found that congruence (matching) between the learning styles and teaching styles have a positive impact on achievement and satisfaction (Ester, 1994; Felder, 1988; Goodwin, 1995; McDonald, 1996). Matching and mismatching between learning styles and teaching styles exist in any academic setting. The mismatch happens when the students' preferred methods of processing information are not aligned with the teachers' preferred styles of teaching. According to Felder (1988) a possible reason for poor performance is that students become bored and demotivated.

The consensus is that when student and teacher styles are better matched, students are likely to work harder both in and outside the classroom and also benefit much more from their EFL classes. However, Felder (1995) warns that "the teaching style which learners prefer may not be the best option for their learning" (p. 27).

Of the many issues central to the effectiveness of students and teachers in the classroom, variations in learning styles, teaching styles and the impact of the match and mismatch between them on learners' achievement appear to be the critical factors in the success of both.

The findings of many studies propose that mismatches often occur and have bad effects on students' learning and attitudes (Cortazzi, 1990; Ehrman, 1996; Felder, 1995; Jones, 1997; Littlewood, Liu, & Yu, 1996; Oxford, Hollaway, & Horton-Murillo, 1992; Reid, 1987; Stebbins, 1995). Research on the matching or otherwise of learning styles and teaching styles has been carried out before; many of the research studies believe that matching teaching and learning style improves learning, attitudes, behaviors and motivation (Felder, 1995; Hyland, 1993; Jones, 1997; Kinsella, 1995; Nelson, 1995; Oxford, Hollaway, & Horton-Murillo, 1992; Reid, 1987, 1995; Spolsky, 1989; Tudor, 1996; Willing, 1988).

**Learning Styles in L2 Learning**

Research on learning styles in particular on L2 learning is still very much limited (Peacook, 2001). The relationship between learning and teaching styles and specifically the match or otherwise between them is still very much under-researched in ESL and EFL.

Many studies (Eslami-Rasekh & Valizadeh, 2004; Maleki & Zangani, 2007; Riazi & Riasati, 2007; Salehi & Shahnooshi, 2007; Zarei, 2002) have identified environmental and personal factors as having contributed to the problem. In Iran, students who are trained to be foreign language teachers have been found to be lacking in communication skills (Farhady, Jafarpur, & Birjandi, 1994).

This raises the question as to the effectiveness of the EFL classes in Iran. The achievement of the EFL and ESL students is dependent on many factors, among which could be learning styles. This is plausible because studies have shown that students who have knowledge about their own learning style are more likely to be successful learners, achieve higher grades and have more positive attitudes about their studies (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995). However, research on learning styles in ESL and EFL is still very limited specifically in the Asian context. In Iran, only a few studies on ESL and EFL classes are related to learning styles and teaching styles.

Therefore, there is a need to look at learning styles in the EFL classroom in Iran. Studies showed that EFL learners in Iran do not achieve well in their studies, for example communication is the problem for EFL learners even after they have graduated from the university or from the classes; learning English as a foreign language is a challenging task for these students. Furthermore, the literature is relatively silent with regard to learning and teaching style match and mismatch among EFL learners and their impact on achievement in the Asian context. Learning style, cognitive styles and development are considered to have great impact on student achievement, and also on how teachers make their instructional choices.

Torres and Cano (1994) explained that, "Because learning style affects the learning successes of students in specific kinds of situations, instructors need to be sensitive to learning style differences. Instructors should have an insight of students' preferred learning style" (p. 64).

However, research on the match and mismatch of learning and teaching styles with respect to achievement is still rather limited and therefore there is a need to provide further empirical evidence as to whether the match and mismatch of learning and teaching styles could affect EFL learners' achievement in Iran.

For the purpose of fulfilling the EFL and ESL learners' needs in language learning, teaching methods, curricula and teaching material have been developed. In countries such as China, the possibility of curricula change is limited; there is no chance for individualized instruction (Kang, 2005). Teachers realize the value of being able to assist the students during the language learning task to make learning more enjoyable and fruitful for them. This study is based on Iranian students who are learning English as their major and to investigate the learning styles and teaching styles match and mismatch and its impact on student achievement.

## Statement of the Problem

Research on the benefits of matching teachers' teaching styles with students' learning styles began in the 1980s (Bonham, 1989). Studies in this direction in both academic and industry environments have been done from different angles (Dunn & Dunn, 1993; DeGregoris, 1986; Della Valle, 1984; Hodges, 1985; Krimsky, 1982; Lemmon, 1985; Peacock, 2001). Some studies have indicated that mismatches do happen and that there are adverse consequences on students' learning and attitudes to the class and to English language learning (Cortazzi, 1990; Ehrman, 1996; Felder, 1995; Jones, 1997; Littlewood, et al., 1996; Oxford et al., 1992; Reid, 1987; Stebbins, 1995).

However, research on the match and mismatch of learning and teaching styles with respect to achievement is still rather limited especially in the Asian context and therefore there is a need to provide further empirical evidence as to whether the match and mismatch of learning and teaching styles could affect achievement. This is especially in light of studies that have shown mismatch to be a significant factor in student achievement in some areas (Glass, 1967; Kolb, 1985; Montgomery, 1972; Nelson, 1972). There is a need to understand why and under what circumstances the matching or mismatching can impact on achievement.

Research in EFL has seen exceptional growth in Iran during the last few years and this growth can be described as being due to the upsurge of interest among Iranians to pursue learning English as an effective means of communication.

However, research on EFL classes in Iran is still rather limited. Nevertheless, studies done by Farhady et al. (1994) have reported that the achievement of EFL students in Iran is somewhat lacking. What are the possible causes? Some studies have identified environmental and personal factors such as age, gender and motivation as influencing achievement of the EFL students.

Most of the studies in Iran have focused on personal factors such as, age, gender, family background, proficiency level, motivation and learning style preferences in general; others have focused on environmental factors, such as parental intervention, physical conditions of the learning setting and teaching style. But none of them look at the learning styles from the aspect of congruence and incongruence with teaching styles. In studies done by Eslami-Rasekh and Valizadeh (2004), Maleki and Zangani (2007), Riazi and Riasati (2007) as well as Salehi and Shahnooshi (2007), the personal factors have been discussed while in studies done by Farhady et al. (1994), Koosha and Jafarpour (2006) and Zarei (2002), the

environmental factors have been highlighted but none of the studies discussed the impact of learning styles and teaching styles match and mismatch on learner achievement. Therefore, there is a need to look at the learning styles from different angles such as the impact of the match or otherwise of the teaching styles and learning styles in the EFL classroom in Iran.

Elsewhere, it has been established that matching the learning styles and teaching styles will help the learners become successful and better learners (Buell & Buell, 1987; DeGregoris, 1986; Della Valle, 1984; Hodges, 1985; Krimsky, 1982; Lemmon, 1985). Many researches have found that matching teaching styles and learning styles will improve learning, attitudes, motivation, and behavior (Ehrman, 1996; Felder, 1995; Jones, 1997; Littlewood et al., 1996; Spolsky, 1989; Stebbins, 1995; Willing, 1988).

Cornett (1983) and Marshall (1991) indicated that the teacher's styles have a great impact on the students' learning styles preferences. Furthermore, Kinsella (1996) and Gagne (1993) suggested that exploring the learning styles and providing appropriate instruction can enhance learning. As Oxford and Anderson (1995) posited, for "optimal language process, language instructors need to understand their students' learning styles and the cultural and cross cultural influences that shape those styles" (p. 201).

Brown (2000) stated that when a proper match between learning style and teaching style occurs, the learner's motivation, performance and achievement will increase. The findings of a study by Smith and Renzulli (1984) indicated that matching learning styles to teaching styles has a positive impact on student achievement, interest and motivation. The results of several studies which investigated the potential relationship between learning styles and learning

approaches showed that student performance can be improved when instructional methods are compatible with learners' learning styles (Dunn, Dunn, & Price, 1979; Sein & Robey, 1991; Wesche, 1981). As a result, it is suggested that identifying students' learning styles in order to provide appropriate instruction promotes more effective learning (Sims & Sims, 1995).

Dunn and Dunn (1993) and Keefe (1989) have suggested that learning styles are only good or bad to the degree that they match or fail to match the instructional environment of the learners. They declared that if the learner's style is compatible with the teacher's teaching style, then the learner will probably learn more than if the two styles are incompatible. On the contrary, if the information is presented in several ways so that all learning styles are accommodated, nobody will have the advantage.

Reviews of the history of foreign language learning have indicated that one of the major questions in this area is the different levels of success in language learning. Linguists have noted that some people have more potential than others in learning and using a foreign language. People learn their first language with a fair degree of fullness, and this happens because all are born with the ability to learn a language and then grow up in a community in which they need to function to some degree through language, the rules of which are imparted to them in the normal life in their society. However, some people are more successful than others when learning a second or foreign language.

Rifkin (2000) believed that learner belief (or, in other words, their preferences) about the learning process is a key factor for success or failure in mastering a foreign language. According to Bada and Okan (2000), the majority of teachers believed that there is a need to comprehend learners' preferences, but they do not consult learners when conducting language activities. Bada and Okan note that, according to the teachers, learners sometimes were unable to express what they need to learn, how they need to learn and what they want.

There is no known research on matching learners' learning styles and teachers' teaching style preferences and the relation between these two variables and Iranian EMSs (English Major Students) achievement at university level. The context of English language teaching in Iran, with its anti-Western outlook after the 1979 revolution and limited exposure to English language, makes it different from the EFL teaching context reported in other studies (Bada & Okan, 2000). Learning styles and teaching styles, especially the match and mismatch between them, are the key and "under- researched" aspects of L2 studies (Peacock, 2001).

On the other hand, researchers such as Block (1994, 1996) believed that learners are aware of what is happening in the class, and thus the teachers should align their task orientation to that of learners. A finding of the study conducted by Breen (cited in Block, 1996) showed that students were able to identify their favorite techniques used by the teacher to facilitate their language learning. Moreover, Nunan (1989) explained the findings of two Australian studies that showed how learners favor traditional learning activities compared to communicative activity types. He observed that some students seek opportunities to participate in conversation and be involved in communicative activity.

On the other hand, Bada and Okan (2000) explained that some learners prefer the grammar teaching method; furthermore, Barkhuizen (1998) stated that when the teachers noticed the learners' diversity, they would take those preferences into consideration and design and conduct their teaching based on them.

The findings of this study will benefit the teachers of EMSs by providing them with the knowledge to better understand how learners learn English and what kind of teaching styles they should use in order to make the learning and teaching more meaningful. This study will also benefit curriculum developers for the purpose of designing the curriculum which is based on the students' language learning style preferences. Furthermore, test designers will gain the essential information for designing tests based on the students' needs. All these will assist the students to become more successful learners.

**English Language Situation in Iran**

English language teaching (ELT) has gained exceptional status in the past 27 years in Iran. According to Aliakbari (2002) past revolutionary reactions to ELT in some ways moved to the extreme end. English language education in general and English language teaching specifically became the current trend in Iran. As a required course in junior high school, English is taught three to four hours in a week. Learners are not satisfied because they lack of sufficient training in high school and university; thus, they will try to find a better way to fulfil their ever-increasing need. This is evidenced by the growing number of private language institutes for teaching English in Iran. The program quality for teaching English and qualification of the school teachers are crucial factors which determine the parents' choice of a high-quality school for their children.

Because of certain limitations in state schools, private language centers and language schools are mushrooming, and they have attracted an increasing number of learners including young children and adults.

Universities in Iran are also places where English is taught. These universities also teach English in a range of independent fields of study, such as English language and literature, teaching English as a second or foreign language and English translation. The students in these fields are referred to as English major students (EMSs). A majority of EMSs in Iran have chosen their major with a certain degree of capability in language use, but some students do have low proficiency in English. Every EMS goes through two years of training that covers general English, which is about the four main skills: reading, listening, writing, and speaking. In the next two years, the students focus on their specialized course of study.

Some of the learners have problem in grasping the contents and concepts of the course given in the English language, and this seems to be one of the problems that EFL students face in the target language. This can be explained by their inability or weaknesses in general English, which may have a significant impact on their academic success. Passing some courses successfully is not the determining factor in assessing the students' overall performance in the language. After passing their core courses and graduating, Iranian EFL graduates still are not proficient and qualified in language use and its components as expected (Farhady et al., 1994).

The teaching of English concepts is growing so fast in Iran that there is a need to understand that learners' and teachers' preferences have become central in English education in general and English teacher training in particular.

Along the same line, Nunan (1988) stated that “no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learner’s subjective needs and perceptions relating to the processes of learning are taken into account” (p. 177).

This study investigates the profile of learning styles among EMSs and teaching styles of their teachers, as well as looking at the existing match and mismatch level between the teachers’ teaching styles and learners’ learning styles for those who major in English as a foreign language. The focus of this study is on the Iranian ESL students who are studying English as their major in Iranian universities. This study is needed because of the absence of a proper teaching style which is based on the learners’ learning style preferences as an important factor.

## Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this research was to determine the connection between the learning styles of adult students enrolled in an EFL program in a university in Iran and the teaching styles of their lecturers, and the impact of this connection on learners’ achievements. The second objective is to determine and describe the key styles of EFL learners and the teaching styles of their teachers in one of the universities in Iran. The third objective is to highlight the impact of the demographical factors on students’ learning styles preferences. Finally, this research tried to determine the extent to which lecturers in EFL classes accommodate the learning style preferences of their students. It also attempts to explore the congruence and incongruence level between students’ learning styles and teachers’ teaching styles in the EMSs classroom setting; it also intends to determine the influence of selected demographic variables, including age, gender and family background on learning style preferences.

However, the key point of this study is to compare levels of achievement among the participants who were given instruction that was congruent or incongruent with their perceived learning styles.

## Research Questions

Specifically this study hopes to answer the following questions:

1. What are the learning style and teaching style preferences among the EMSs learners and lecturers in Iran?
2. How do personal factors, namely age, gender, number of years studying English and parents' educational background relate to learning style preferences for EMSs learners in a university classroom setting in Iran?
3. Does the match or mismatch of teaching and learning styles impact on the achievement of EMSs learners in a university classroom setting in Iran?
4. What is the impact of the independent variables on dependent variable on learner's achievements?
5. What are the accommodations of EMSs lecturers toward students' learning styles in a university classroom setting in Iran? (4 case studies)

## Rationale of the Study

The researcher has already spent many years teaching and/or studying in that environment and has noticed this gap in the literature when she was involved. There is a lack of research or, in other words, little research has been done in Asian countries on learning styles in the EFL context, so this researcher decided to make an attempt at filling in this gap.

As a result of the English major program, English is considered as a medium of instruction, so the demand on teachers to have proficiency in English is indeed great. One of the tactics to improve the quality of education is to raise awareness and call teachers' attention to the learning styles of the students. Upon reviewing the related literature the researcher found that it is not uncommon to discover that university lecturers who have been teaching in the EFL and ESL setting for many years have only recently discovered the importance of learning styles preferences.

This statement does not indicate that all lecturers are unaware of the role of the style preferences in their classrooms, but recently learning styles awareness has been emphasized in most of the teacher training programs as well as English major programs in order to improve the quality of education. However, this study tries to connect the literature on learning styles with the correct EFL setting in Iran, specifically among the EMS learners. Thus, this study aims to widen our understanding of how lecturers experience the effort to accommodate various learning style preferences in university classrooms in Iran and how instructors negotiate the demands and challenges while trying to increase the quality of instruction provided.

## Significance of the Study

The study of teaching style starts with each educator's beliefs and values. The purpose of studying styles is to give a clear picture to educators to understand their beliefs about teaching and to explore how useful those beliefs are in their own practices and philosophy in teaching (Ross-Gordon, 2001). Nowadays in the higher education system, adult learners are the majority of participants. Every learner has a dominant learning style; being familiar with these learning style characteristics will

result in a better roadmap for the learners to look deeply into their own learning styles (Gregorc, 1982b). Learners learn based on their learning styles, while teachers are teaching based on their teaching styles and their teaching experience.

The idea of matching the learner's learning style and teacher's teaching style is not always comprehensible; therefore, students should be made aware of their own learning styles accompanied with the structured outline for learning based on their individual characteristics. Teachers must be sensitive to the learners' learning styles and be able to identify the learning styles that are used most often by each student.

In addition, they should also indicate whether there is a relationship between the students' scores and the match and mismatch between learners' learning styles and teachers' teaching styles (Stevenson & Dunn, 2001). Another point which makes this study significant is that it will contribute to the knowledge of learning and teaching of English in major training programs in Iran. Having knowledge about the learners' preferred learning styles and teachers' teaching styles will contribute to English major training programs, and therefore provide better understanding for lecturers involved in these programs. This is the first time that this aspect of language learning is being investigated for Iranian EMSs students. It is considerably difficult to study learning styles in different cultural backgrounds and to avoid the ethnocentric bias and address the definition of good language learning strategies (Wharton, 2000).

Because of the lack of research in this discipline within the Asian context, this specific research can be considered as an exploratory study in the Iranian context. A review of the history of language learning clearly shows that this concept has been discussed and researched mainly in Europe. The study's intention was to use both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the core research

questions itemized above by focusing on the connection level and impact between learning styles and teaching styles, combining learning styles and teaching styles together to improve academic achievement and performance and addressing any factors that have an impact on learning style and teaching style match and mismatch. Finally, this study will provide a more understandable portrait of language learning style preferences and factors, such as family background, culture, and so forth, which are affecting the choice of learning style preferences among Iranian students.

## Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations in this study:

1. Since the participants in this study are all Iranian university students, the generalization of the results should therefore be limited to populations similar to the one described in this study.
2. Accuracy of style preferences is dependant upon the willingness of subjects to respond accurately.
3. The number of the chosen subjects was limited to 300. A research study with more subjects will probably yield different results.
4. The duration for data collection in this study was limited to one semester; perhaps a longitudinal study will yield different results.

## Delimitations of the Study

The delimitations of this study are as follows:

1. The learning styles that are discussed in this study were those that were classified in Felder and Silverman (1988) and there is a possibility that students used other styles which have not been mentioned in the Felder inventory.
2. Students' achievement was measured only by their final marks in the course, which observed and tested for their learning styles preferences.
3. The subject group is undergraduate Iranian students currently enrolled in a translation training program located in one university in Iran.

## Definition of Terms

Here are the definitions of the words which have been used in this study.

**Learning Styles**

For the purpose of this study the learning styles definition based on Felder and Silverman (1988) is used: Felder and Silverman (1988) indicated that "A student's learning style may be defined in large part by the answers to five questions:

1) What type of information does the student preferentially perceive: *sensory* (external)-sights, sounds, physical sensations, or *intuitive* (internal) - possibilities, insights, hunches?

2) Through which sensory channel is external information most effectively perceived: visual-pictures, diagrams, graphs, demonstrations, or *auditory- words*, sounds? (Other sensory channels-touch, taste, and smell-are relatively unimportant in most educational environments and will not be considered here.)

3) With which organization of information is the student most comfortable: *inductive*-facts and observations are given, underlying principles are inferred, or *deductive*-principles are given, consequences and applications are deduced?

4) How does the student prefer to process information: *actively*- through engagement in physical activity or discussion, or *reflectively*- through introspection?

5) How does the student progress toward understanding: *sequentially*-in continual steps, or *globally*-in large jumps, holistically?" (Felder & Silverman, 1988)

**Teaching Styles**

For the purpose of this study the teaching style definition based on Felder and Silverman (1988) is used:

"Teaching style may also be defined in terms of the answers to five questions:

1) What type of information is emphasized by the instructor: concrete- factual, or *abstract-conceptual*, theoretical?

2) What mode of presentation is stressed: visual-pictures, diagrams, films, demonstrations, or *verbal*- lectures, readings, discussions?

3) How is the presentation organized: inductively-phenomena leading to principles, or *deductively*- principles leading to phenomena?

4) What mode of student participation is facilitated by the presentation: active-students talk, move, reflect, or passive-students watch and listen?

5) What type of perspective is provided on the information presented: sequential-step-by-step progression (the trees), or global-context and relevance (the forest)?"

**Matched and Mismatched Style Preferences**

A level of matching or mismatching based on preferred style can be determined from the different scales on learning styles and teaching styles. The most dominant learning styles were compared with the position of the same style on the teaching profile based on the positions of the styles on the inventory scales.