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Investigating the Effect of Motivation and Attitude towards Learning English, Learning Style Preferences and Gender on Iranian EFL Learners' Proficiency

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The present study was carried out to investigate the effect of motivation and attitude towards learning English, learning style preferences, and gender on Iranian EFL learners' proficiency. To this end, 154 Iranian EFL learners (male and female) participated in the study. Three instruments, namely, Oxford Quick Placement Test (OPT), Brasch Learning Style Inventory (BLSI) Questionnaire, and Motivation and Attitude Questionnaire were used to collect the data necessary for the study. Crosstab procedure, correlation, one way ANOVA and multiple regression analysis were utilized to analyze the data. The results indicated that visual and auditory learning styles are the most frequently preferred learning styles among the Iranian EFL learners. These learning styles were also the mostly preferred learning styles by both male and female EFL learners. According to the findings, there was no significant difference between gender and learning style preferences, and motivation and attitude towards learning English. Moreover, learning style preferences did not correlate with learners' language proficiency. Finally, it was revealed that gender was the best predictor of language proficiency for Iranian EFL learners.

Key words: motivation, attitude, learning style, learning preferences, gender, proficiency.

1. Introduction

Human beings are unique creatures and each person is a unique combination of feelings, mentalities, concepts, aims and reactions. This can be regarded as one of the most significant characteristics of human beings. Teachers should be well aware of the fact that each individual has his/her own innate traits and strengths. Learners perform well in some specific fields and teachers should pay equal and enough attention to every learner so that they become well educated (Chung, 2009). Dunn (1990) is of the opinion that “[s]tudents can learn almost any subject matter when they are taught with methods and approaches responsive to their learning style strengths” (p.15). Being aware of their peculiar learning

styles, they can vary their study habits suitable to their personal learning styles and it will contribute to their better performances on tests and improving their grades as well.

Learning style is a broad concept that includes cognitive, affective and physiological styles. It is defined as cognitive, affective and physiological traits which are stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with or respond to learning environment (Keefe, 1979, as cited in Shen, 2010). Learning styles do not distinguish talented students; but they make us capable to perceive such students more accurately and know their gifts, and teach them more effectively as well (Kreitner, 1981).

Motivation plays a vital role in the realm of language learning and it seems that it positively affects language learning process. A group of individuals are intrinsically motivated and enjoy learning language itself; however, a group of them are extrinsically motivated, driven by external factors such as sources of rewards and punishments as well (Brown, 2000; Richards & Schmidt, 2002). However, according to Oroujlou and Vahedi (2011), successful individuals are well aware of their preferences, strengths and weaknesses. They know how to use their strengths to compensate their weak points. Language learning is also linked to individuals' passion which is related to an individual's intrinsic desires and goals. Such being the case teachers should scrutinize ways to connect to this passion or motivation. According to the aforementioned points, the existence of a positive relationship between variables such as learning style preferences and motivation and attitude towards learning English seems to be logical.

2. Theoretical framework—categorizations of learning styles

According to Reid (1995), learning styles appear to take place in three major areas: “cognitive learning”, “sensory learning” and “personality learning”.

Cognitive learning styles are identified as the way a person perceives, thinks and solves problems. For instance, a Field-Dependent Learner “tends to look at the whole of a learning task which contains many items”. This is while a Field-Independent Learner “is able to identify or focus on particular items and is not distracted by other items in the background or context” (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 200). An Analytic Learner “remembers something by separating it into parts”. On the contrary, a Global Learner “tries to remember something as a whole” (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p.226 & 227). A Reflective Learner learns better when he/she has enough time to regard options before responding. On the other hand, an Impulsive Learner is able to respond immediately and take risks (Reid, 1995).

Psychological or Sensory learning styles are biological; moreover, they contain reactions to the physical environment that may influence learning. Sensory learning styles are divided into two groups. The first one is Perceptual Learning Style which includes Auditory Learners, who learn by hearing; Visual Learners who learn by observing options; Kinaesthetic Learners, who learn more effectively through movements of body; Tactile Learners, who learn by touching; and Haptic Learners, who prefer combining touch and body movement. The second group is Environmental Learning Style which includes Physical Learners, who learn in a situation in which different variables embracing temperature, sound, light, time, food, mobility, and classroom or study arrangement are regarded, and Sociological Learners who learn when variables such as group, pair, individual and team work are considered (Reid, 1995; Riasti, 2005).

Affecting or Personality learning styles embrace emotional characteristics (Reid, 1995; Hohn,

1995; Borich & Tombari, 1997; Slavin, 2000). For instance, an Extrovert Learner is a person whose interests and energies are consciously directed outwards towards other individuals and happenings than towards the persons themselves and their inner experience. However, an Introvert Learner is an individual who tends to avoid social contacts with others (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). A Sensing Learner learns by reporting observable facts and is dependent on the five senses. In contrast, a Perception Learner learns more efficiently from meaningful experiences and association with others. A Thinking Learner learns from logical consequences. A Feeling Learner gains insight from social values and personalized circumstances. A Judging Learner learns through processes, reflection and analysis that involve closure. On the other hand, a Perceiving Learner not only learns by negotiation and feeling, but also by inductive processes that delay closure. When opportunities for taking risks are presented, an Ambiguity Tolerant Learner learns best. On the contrary, an Ambiguity Intolerant Learner learns most effectively in a less risky situation. A Left Brained Learner is eager to visual, reflective and self-reliant learning; however, a Right Brained Learner is interested in auditory, impulsive and interactive learning (Reid, 1995; Riasati, 2005).

These three major learning styles and their subcategories are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

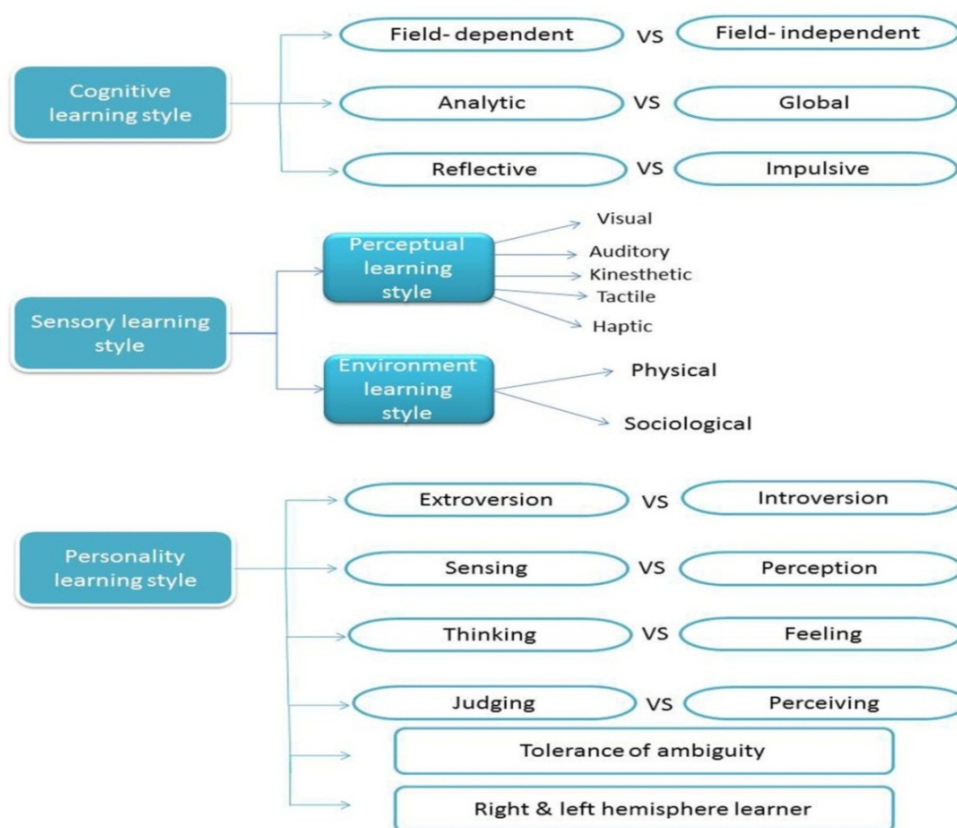


Figure 1. Three Major Categories of Learning Styles

2.1. Motivation and attitude towards learning English

A good instructor should find ways to associate sources of intrinsic motivation with external motivational factors in a classroom. Individuals have various goals to study a language, so

teachers should recognize their purposes and evolve a suitable motivational strategy. Every individual has his/her peculiar expectations and instructors should consider these facts for designing language courses (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011).

In the field of language learning, motivation is defined as combination of the individuals' attitudes, willingness and desires to expand efforts to learn the second language as well (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). As Oroujlou & Vahedi (2011) argue, attitude is different from motivation. In general, "attitude is a set of beliefs and motivation is a reason for doing something" (p. 997). It is confusing due to the fact that set of beliefs could be reasons of doing something. Such being the case, individuals might be motivated to learn the language because of their attitude towards the culture of that language or their teachers.

It is worth to say that in this study motivation and attitude towards learning English is taken into account as one variable, that is, they are not two separate items.

2.2. Statement of the problem

With regard to the crucial importance of learning styles, some researchers have devoted themselves to investigating the issue, yet it seems more research is needed on the relationship between variables such as learners' English proficiency, motivation and attitude towards learning English, gender and learning style preferences. Therefore, more efforts can be put into the investigation of learning styles and these three variables, especially in Iran. These matters seem to be of high necessity to be taken into account by teachers, learners, test developers and material and curriculum designers.

3. Literature review

3.1. Previous investigations outside Iran

Gunes (2004) aimed to determine the learning style of preparatory school learners from Gazi University to observe the relationship between individuals' learning style preferences and faculty, gender, proficiency level, and achievement score on listening, reading, writing and grammar in English courses. Three hundred and sixty seven randomly elected individuals took part in this study. The Index of Learning Style (ILS) was administered to them. Finally, the results revealed the existence of no significant difference between individuals' learning style preferences and faculty, gender, level and achievement scores as well.

Salem (2006) tried to investigate the role of motivation, gender and language learning strategies in EFL proficiency. To achieve this goal, 147 male and female participants were asked to complete two questionnaires; Motivation Scale (MS) to estimate their motivation and Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) to evaluate their language learning strategies. Furthermore, verbal SAT scores were used to determine language proficiency as well. Findings of the study indicated that although motivation does not correlate with EFL proficiency generally, effort does, in favor of the high proficient. Moreover, no significant gender differences in overall motivation were demonstrated. This is while in comparison with males, females had more efforts and had higher perception of the valence of learning EFL. The results did not illustrate a significant role for gender in EFL achievement. The overall strategy use did not play a significant role in EFL achievement, although the results showed a low and negative correlation between using metacognitive strategies and proficiency. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies were considered as the most frequently used strategies and the least frequently used were the affective strategies. To summarize, the

findings did not show any significant differences between males and females in their memory use, compensation strategies and cognitive strategies in favor of females.

Gomleksiz (2010) believed not only age, socio-economic status and methods and techniques, but also teaching-learning environment and cultural dimensions are some of the factors which influence English language learning. Another important factor that should be considered is motivation. Gomleksiz aimed to explore learners' attitudes towards learning English in different terms including grade level, gender and department variables. One thousand and two hundred and seventy five learners took part in this study. Collecting data through a Likert scale questionnaire and analyzing data through ANOVA and t-test, statistically significant differences were found in terms of grade level, gender and department variables. According to statistics, individuals had significant differences in terms of attitude and there were significant differences between their attitudes in terms of gender as well as grade level and department variables. Their attitudes towards learning English varied significantly in terms of gender.

Tao (2011) aimed to predict English achievement of Chinese learners by using a Productivity Environmental Preference Survey (PEPS). Participants of the study were 300 university students who were non-English majors and their foreign language achievement was estimated by using the learners' final marks in their English course. Nineteen modalities of noise, light, temperature, design, motivation, persistence, responsibility, structure, peer orientation, authority orientation, auditory, visual, tactile, kinaesthetic, intake, evening/morning, late morning, afternoon, and mobility were measured. She aimed at investigating the modalities that predict English proficiency. Results revealed the fact that just seating design, responsibility, authority orientation, kinaesthetic and mobility could significantly predict English achievement. Moreover, learning styles were not strong predictors of English achievement of Chinese learners. The results of the study also demonstrated that Chinese learners would rather visual and auditory approaches to learn.

3.2. Previous Investigations in Iran

Riazi and Mansoorian (2008) did a study on the preferred learning style(s) of male and female EFL Iranian students. Their findings revealed the fact that the major styles preferred by the students were the auditory, the visual, the tactile, and the kinaesthetic learning styles. Individual learning styles and group learning styles were considered as the minor learning styles among male and female students. Regarding gender as a distinguishing factor, they found male students more interested in tactile, group and kinaesthetic learning styles, while female students were less willing to use these styles, particularly group learning style. They came to the point that introducing different learning styles to the students will cause them to ease their way of learning a new foreign language.

Ghazvini and Khajehpour (2011) tried to examine Iranian learners' attitudes and motivations toward learning English. One hundred and twenty three male and female learners participated in their study. Interestingly, they concluded that female learners were more interactively motivated and male learners were more instrumentally motivated to learn English. Furthermore, female learners had more positive attitudes to learn English than males and were more inclined to bilingualism as well. On the other hand, they found no significant difference between participants in motivational orientations, while they have positive attitudes to learn English as a second language.

Oroujlou and Vahedi (2011) did a study to observe if there is any efficient association

between language learning and motivation and attitude to provide an overview of recent advances in research on motivation and attitude to second language. Analytic and descriptive approaches were utilized to clarify motivations and attitudes' role. They concluded that creation and implementation of different techniques can positively vary individuals' attitudes toward learning English. Based on the results of the study, there exists a direct relationship between the individuals' efficiency in classrooms and motivation and attitude. To summarize, motivation and attitude have great roles in increasing proficiency of the learners and beside other factors including talents of the individuals they can affect the efficiency of the individuals.

As the literature review presents, what is prevalent in Iran's context is a lack of investigation to identify the relationship between variables such as learners' English proficiency, their motivation and attitude towards learning English, gender and learning style preferences. Such being the case, more studies are needed in order to investigate the relationship(s) between or among these variables.

4. Objectives and research questions of this study

First, the study investigated if variables such as learning style preferences, motivation and attitude toward learning English and gender are related to one another in the EFL learners. The second purpose of the study is to see if these variables have any relationship with the learners' English proficiency and can be a good predictor of this variable.

Considering the above objectives of this study, the following research questions are formulated:

1. What are the most frequently preferred learning styles among the Iranian EFL learners?
2. Which type(s) of learning style(s) is/are mostly preferred by male and female EFL learners?
3. How are learning styles, motivation and attitude toward learning English and gender related to one another?
4. Which type of learning style has more influence on learners' language proficiency?
5. Which of the variables, learning style preferences, motivation and attitude toward learning English and gender is the best predictor of language proficiency?

5. Method

5.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 154 Iranian EFL learners (46 males and 108 females). All the participants were Persian native speakers, learning English as a foreign language at the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics of Shiraz University, Iran. They mostly ranged in their twenties and were chosen based on convenience sampling.

5.2. Instruments

In general, three different instruments were used in this study which are described in details in the following.

Oxford Quick Placement Test (OPT). The OPT is a test of English language proficiency which is developed by Oxford University Press and Cambridge ESOL. It is flexible and reliable as well

as time saving. The OPT consists of 2 sets of graded items; each of which evaluating learners' abilities in vocabulary, grammar and reading (Geranpayeh, 2003). It took the participants about 30 minutes to answer 60 items of the test. The first 40 items are nearly suitable for all the learners and the second part consisting of 20 items are appropriate for more proficient learners. Using Alpha Cronbach, the reliability of the test was measured as 0.75.

Brasch Learning Style Inventory (BLSI). BLSI was developed by Brasch in 1996 was used in the current study because not only is it composed of a simple and convenient set of questions, but also it is time saving and takes 10-15 minutes to complete. Moreover, it is easy to understand and as Gunes (2004) states it is peculiarly designed for English language learners. The main focus of the instrument is on the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning style preferences to be tested. There are 24 statements, each of which has been assigned scores: 5 points, 3 points and 1 point in order for often true, sometimes true and seldom true. Items are divided into three separate sections. The first 8 items address the visual learning style, items 9-16 are allocated to the auditory learning style and the last section, items 17-24, are devoted to the kinaesthetic learning style. Learners selected the choices that corresponded with their styles better and then totaled up their scores for each of these options to know their individual learning styles. The highest score showed their preferred learning style, which could be visual and related to seeing, auditory and related to hearing or kinaesthetic and related to actual performing in a task (Amran, Bahry, Yusop, & Abdullah, 2011). Some of the participants preferred a mixture of these three main learning style preferences. Although students had totaled up their scores, the latter were computed again by the researchers to prevent any source of miscomputation. The reliability of the questionnaire obtained through Alpha Cronbach was 0.73, which indicated that the questionnaire was reliable enough.

Motivation and Attitude Questionnaire. The Motivation and Attitude Questionnaire was used in this study in order to evaluate the Iranian EFL learners' motivation and attitude towards learning English as a foreign language. It was developed and validated by Laine (1987) and has been validated by Salimi (2000) in an Iranian context. The questionnaire has five choices for each item. The choices have numerical values from 1-5, which show the participants' degree of preference for or tendency towards the items of the questionnaire. The numerical value 5 was assigned to strongly agree, 4 to agree, 3 to no idea, 2 to disagree, and 1 to strongly disagree. It took the participants 10-15 minutes to complete the questionnaire, and then their averages were calculated to reach an estimation regarding their motivation and attitudes towards learning English. Using Alpha Cronbach, the reliability of the questionnaire was estimated as 0.88.

5.3. Data collection and analysis procedures

Data needed for this study were mostly collected in one session by administering the questionnaires and the proficiency test to the participants during their class time. In the first stage, OPT was administered to determine their level of proficiency. Having explained the purpose of the test and introducing it to the participants, they were given about 30 minutes to complete the test. In the second stage, the researcher administered the two questionnaires directly to the participants. The first one was BLSI to determine individuals' learning style preferences, and the second one was Motivation and Attitude Questionnaire to determine their motivation and attitude toward learning English as a foreign language.

SPSS (version 19) was employed to analyze the data. In general, the descriptive statistics were used to demonstrate frequencies, percentages, means and the range of scores. As for

the data analysis related to the first research question, frequencies and percentages were computed. For the second research question, the crosstab procedure was conducted. For the third research question, correlational analysis was used. For the fourth research question, one-way ANOVA was computed to find the best learning style which can influence participants' language proficiency. Finally, for the fifth research question, multiple regression was used to determine whether the participants' gender, learning style preferences, and their motivation and attitude towards learning English could predict their proficiency in English.

6. Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics of the data are provided to portray the frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations of the participants' learning style, motivation and attitude towards learning English, gender and foreign language proficiency.

	<i>Visual</i>	<i>Auditory</i>	<i>Kinaesthetic</i>	<i>Visual Auditory</i>	<i>Visual Kinaesthetic</i>	<i>Auditory Kinaesthetic</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Freq.</i>	88	34	11	8	8	5	154
<i>%</i>	57.1	22.1	7.1	5.2	5.2	3.2	100.0

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of learning style preferences

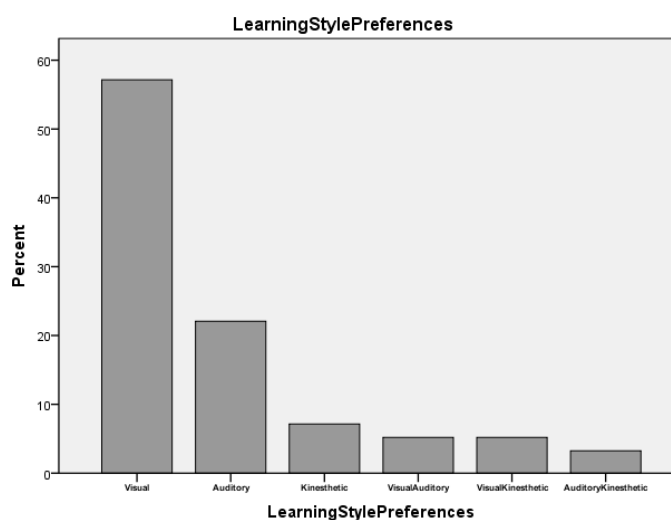


Figure 2. The percentage of different learning styles preferred by the participants of the study

With regard to Table 1 and Figure 2, in terms of learning style preferences, 51.1% (n=88) of the participants were visual, i.e., they had high visual scores. Such learners need to see all the study materials. 22.1% (n=34) of them were auditory, that is they had high auditory scores. They listen to tapes and prefer to sit in front of classrooms or lecture halls to hear well. 7.1% (n=11) were kinaesthetic, that is they had high kinaesthetic scores. Such learners involve their body in the process of learning. Hence, they trace words as they say them. However, a small number of the participants had a mixture of two learning style preferences, for instance, 5.2% (n=8) took advantage of both visual and auditory learning

style preferences, 5.2% (n=8) benefited from both visual and kinaesthetic learning style preferences, and 3.2% (n=2) took advantage of both auditory and kinaesthetic learning style preferences. So, visual and auditory learning styles were found to be the most frequently preferred learning styles among the participants, respectively.

In terms of motivation and attitude towards learning English, as seen in table 2 below, Iranian EFL learners had the mean of 3.8 and SD of .039, the maximum score was 4.89 and the minimum score was 2.28 out of 5.

<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Error of Mean</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>
3.7772	.03916	2.28	4.89

Table 2. Descriptive statistics on motivation and attitude.

Table 3 shows that, in terms of foreign language proficiency, Iranian EFL learners had the mean of 43.5 and SD of .530, the maximum score was 55 and the minimum one was 26 out of 60.

<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Error of Mean</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>
43.4675	.53015	26.00	55.00

Table 3. Descriptive statistics on proficiency scores.

6.1. Results related to crosstab procedure, correlational analysis, one way ANOVA and multiple regression

Crosstab procedure was utilized to find the learning style(s) which is/are mostly preferred by males and females according to the findings obtained from the learning style questionnaire developed by Barsch.

As Table 4 illustrates, 56.5% (n=26) of males were visual learners and 32% (n=15) of them were auditory learners. Just 2.2% (n=1) preferred kinaesthetic learning style. A small percentage of them had mixed learning style preferences. Respectively, 57.4% (n=62) of females were visual learners, 17.6% (n=19) were auditory learners and 9.3% (n=10) were kinaesthetic learners. Moreover, a small percentage of them had mixed learning style preferences, too. Hence, visual learning style was the mostly preferred learning style by both genders and auditory learning style was the second preferred learning style.

Correlational analysis was performed to see if learning styles, motivation and attitude toward learning English and gender are related to one another.

According to the results illustrated in Table 5, there was not any statistically significant relationship between gender and learning style preferences, gender and motivation and attitude, and learning style preferences and motivation and attitude ($p > 0.05$). In other words, these three variables were not related to one another.

		Gender		Total	
		Male	Female		
Learning Style Preferences	Visual	Count	26	62	88
		% within Gender	56.5%	57.4%	57.1%
	Auditory	Count	15	19	34
		% within Gender	32.6%	17.6%	22.1%
	Kinaesthetic	Count	1	10	11
		% within Gender	2.2%	9.3%	7.1%
	Visual	Count	1	7	8
		% within Gender	2.2%	6.5%	5.2%
	Auditory	Count	2	6	8
		% within Gender	4.3%	5.6%	5.2%
Kinaesthetic	Count	1	4	5	
	% within Gender	2.2%	3.7%	3.2%	
Total	Count	46	108	154	
	% within Gender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Table 4. Crosstabs procedures for learning style preferences and gender.

		Gender	Learning Style Preferences	Average for Motivation
Gender	Pearson Correlation	1	.083	.085
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.305	.296
	N	154	154	154
Learning Style Preferences	Pearson Correlation	.083	1	-.036
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.305		.653
	N	154	154	154
Average for Motivation	Pearson Correlation	.085	-.036	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.296	.653	
	N	154	154	154

Table 5. Correlations among gender, learning style preferences and motivation and attitude.

Learners were also administered Oxford Quick Placement Test to determine their current level of foreign language proficiency. One way ANOVA was mainly used to see which type of learning styles has a better influence on language proficiency.

Proficiency	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	184.917	5	36.983	.850	.516
Within Groups	6437.420	148	43.496		
Total	6622.338	153			

Table 6. One way ANOVA for the effect of learning styles on language proficiency.

With regard to Table 6, the values (F=0.85 and p=0.516) indicated the existence of no significant relationship between various learning styles with regard to the proficiency scores

($p > 0.05$). In other words, the mean of proficiency for learners with different learning styles was the same. Such being the case, in this study learning styles do not show any significant relationship with foreign language proficiency.

Finally, multiple regression analysis was conducted to see which of the independent variables of learning style preferences, motivation and attitude towards learning English and gender is the best predictor of language proficiency.

ANOVA^b

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	R ²
1 Regression	192.147	3	64.049	1.494	.219 ^a	0.029
Residual	6430.190	150	42.868			
Total	6622.338	153				

- a. Predictors: (Constant), Average of Motivation, Learning Style Preferences, Gender
- b. Dependent Variable: Proficiency

Table 7. Multiple regression analysis for the relationship between independent variables and language proficiency.

According to the results shown in Table 7, the three variables of learning style preferences, motivation and attitude towards learning English and gender have no significant relationship with foreign language proficiency in the full regression model ($p = 0.219 > 0.05$). The results show that the R² index is 0.029 which shows that 2% of the variation in the language proficiency scores was accounted for by the independent variables.

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	47.876	4.516		10.602	.000
Gender	-2.438	1.161	-.170	-2.099	.037
1 Learning Style Preferences	.053	.392	.011	.135	.893
Average for Motivation	-.096	1.094	-.007	-.088	.930

- a. Dependent Variable: Proficiency

Table 8. Partial regression coefficients for the degree of prediction of independent variables.

However, with regard to the partial regression coefficients, as seen in Table 8, the independent variable of gender has a significant relationship with foreign language proficiency ($p = 0.037 < 0.05$). Moreover, the purpose is finding the independent variable(s) which is/are the best predictor(s) of foreign language proficiency. Such being the case, Backward Method was utilized in order to find a suitable model.

Backward Method estimates the parameters for the full model that includes all eligible

variables. That is, finding the best possible regression model is the main purpose of Backward Method. According to Rawlings, Pantula, & Dickey (1998), “[b]ackward elimination of variables chooses the subset models by starting with the full model and then eliminating at each step the one variable whose deletion will cause the residual sum of squares to increase the least.” (p. 213). So, this method chooses the variables with the largest significance and removes them ($p > 0.05$). The Backward Method procedure continues until the analysis reveals the variable with the least amount of significance ($p < 0.05$).

ANOVA^d

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	192.147	3	64.049	1.494	.219 ^a
Residual	6430.190	150	42.868		
Total	6622.338	153			
2 Regression	191.818	2	95.909	2.252	.109 ^b
Residual	6430.519	151	42.586		
Total	6622.338	153			
3 Regression	190.988	1	190.988	4.514	.035 ^c
Residual	6431.349	152	42.312		
Total	6622.338	153			

- a. Predictors: (Constant), Average for Motivation, Learning Style Preferences, Gender
- b. Predictors: (Constant), Learning Style Preferences, Gender
- c. Predictors: (Constant), Gender
- d. Dependent Variable: Proficiency

Table 9. Regression of Backward Method for the relationship between independent variables and language proficiency.

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	43.001	4.313	9.971	.000	
	Gender	2.438	1.161	.170	2.099	.037
	Learning Style Preferences	.053	.392	.011	.135	.893
	Average for Motivation	-.096	1.094	-.007	-.088	.930
2	(Constant)	42.634	.991	43.021	.000	
	Gender	2.447	1.153	.171	2.122	.035
	Learning Style Preferences	.055	.391	.011	.140	.889
3	(Constant)	42.741	.626	68.285	.000	
	Gender	2.433	1.145	.170	2.125	.035

- a. Dependent Variable: Proficiency

Table 10. Partial regression coefficients of Backward Method for the degree of prediction of independent variables.

With regard to the results of Tables 9 and 10, firstly the model is considered with all the independent variables (learning style preferences, motivation and attitude towards learning

English and gender), and then these independent variables are removed based on their highest amount of significance.

Excluded Variables^c

Model	Beta In	T	Sig.	Partial Correlation	Colinearity Statistics	
					Tolerance	
2	Average for Motivation	-.007 ^a	-.088	.930	-.007	.991
3	Average for Motivation	-.008 ^b	-.094	.925	-.008	.993
	Learning Style Preferences	.011 ^b	.140	.889	.011	.993

a. Predictors in the Model: (Constant), Learning Style Preferences, Gender

b. Predictors in the Model: (Constant), Gender

c. Dependent Variable: Proficiency

Table 11. Excluded variables in Backward Method.

Excluded independent variables are presented in Table 11, respectively. In this table there are non-significant coefficients, indicating that these variables do not contribute much to the model. Taking the process of Backward Method into account, in the first step motivation had the highest significant value, so it was removed ($p=0.93$). Then the backward procedure was continued regarding the two variables of learning style preference and gender. In this section, learning style preference had a higher significant value ($p=0.889$). Hence, learning style preference was the second removed variable from the model. Such being the case, there exists a regression model just in accordance with gender variable ($p=0.035 < 0.05$). So, the most important significant predictor is gender variable. To sum it up, among these three independent variables, gender was the best predictor of foreign language proficiency.

7. Discussion

In accordance with the frequencies and percentages presented in Table 1, visual and auditory learning styles are the most frequently preferred styles among the learners, respectively. So, individuals do not learn in the same way(s). This aspect of the results of the study is congruent with findings of Tao (2011) who showed visual and auditory learning style preferences as preferred approaches to learning by Chinese learners. Not completely, but to some extent, this aspect of the results of the study supports those of Riazi and Mansoorian (2008). They found that auditory, visual, tactile and kinaesthetic learning style preferences were the major styles preferred by the participants of their study.

The results of crosstab procedure revealed that both genders have tendency towards visual and auditory learning styles, respectively (Table 4). Hence, most visual male and female learners prefer pictorial materials such as graphs, diagrams, taking notes, using highlighters, and copying written materials from the board, while auditory learners utilize audiotapes, take part in group discussions, read more slowly, explain well and are not afraid of speaking in classrooms. Riazi and Mansoorian (2008) found male learners to be more interested in tactile, kinaesthetic, and group learning styles, while female learners were less willing to use these styles.

According to Table 5, independent variables of learning style preferences, motivation and attitude towards learning English and gender were not related to one another. This is due to the fact that learning style preferences of the learners are not taken into account either by learners or instructors. Learners are not well aware of their peculiar way(s) of learning, so they get bored in the process of learning and lose their motivation towards the subjects and materials. In addition, instructors' teaching methods and techniques are more or less the same in different classrooms, which, in turn, causes learners to lose interest and motivation. In fact, as stated by Harrelson, Dunn, and Wright (1998), learning style can be expressed very closely in the form of teaching style when an educator teaches. Salem (2006) found no significant gender differences in the overall motivation. Gunes (2004) also came to the point that there is not a significant relationship between learners' learning styles and their gender. Gomleksiz (2010) found significant differences between individuals' attitudes and their gender.

As Table 6 indicated, in general, learning styles did not influence language achievement since learning styles and language proficiency had no significant relationship with each other. One possible explanation for this aspect of the study is ignoring styles in classrooms by teachers. For example, teachers want learners to listen and respond to tests that are the worst test types for visual learners who prefer reading essays to learn through seeing. They expect learners to read passages and write the related answers to them in a timed test, which is the worst test type for auditory learners who prefer to write responses to lectures they have listened to. Teachers would rather give long tests and essays that are the worst test type for kinaesthetic learners who prefer multiple choice items, fill-in-the blanks and short definitions. In reality, as maintained by Tao (2011), a common phenomenon which can be observed in most learning/teaching environments is that certain dominant teaching styles might not conform to students' preferred learning style and consequently their learning becomes worse. Gunes (2004) hold the view that individuals' learning style preferences and their achievement scores do not have any significant relationship with each other. Tao (2011) came to the conclusion that learning style preferences are not strong predictors of foreign language achievement. In other words, they are indirectly and weakly connected to foreign language proficiency.

The results of multiple regression and Backward Method (Tables 7 & 9) revealed that among all the independent variables (learning style preferences, motivation and attitude towards learning English, and gender) gender was the best predictor of language proficiency. As mentioned earlier, ignoring learning style preferences in classrooms, particularly by teachers might be a reason for lack of significant relationships between learning styles and language proficiency. Moreover, based on the related literature, motivation is of great importance in the realm of language proficiency and acts as a fundamental predictor of language achievement. With regard to learning style preferences, results of the current study are congruent with those of Gunes (2004) who discovered no significant relationships between individuals' learning style preferences and their achievement. Regarding motivation, Salem (2006) found that motivation does not correlate with EFL proficiency generally. Among nineteen modalities used in her study, Tao (2011) also did not find motivation as a modality that could predict foreign language proficiency. The reason why motivation did not correlate with language proficiency can be attributed to the fact that some participants did not actually take the study seriously enough and did not respond to the motivation and attitude questionnaire accurately enough. Of course, the participants of the study should not be blamed so much either since they had already taken part in some other studies throughout the same semester when the data were collected for the present study and they had, in fact, lost their motivation to take the job seriously enough. However, the results of the present

study are in sharp contrast with those of Ghazvini and Khajehpoor (2011). Regarding motivation, they found female learners integratively motivated and male learners instrumentally motivated to learn English. Based on analytic and descriptive approaches, Oroujlou and Vahedi (2011) also pinpointed motivation and attitudes have great roles to increase individuals' foreign language proficiency. In order to explain the difference between the findings of the present study and that of Oroujlou and Vahedi, one can refer to Yeung, Lau, and Nie (2011) who believed that although motivation has an important impact on essential academic outcomes, learners' motivation may diminish as they grow up.

8. Conclusion and pedagogical implications of the study

Referring back to the findings of the present study, the results indicated that visual and auditory learning styles were the most popular and frequently used styles among the Iranian EFL learners. Visual learning style was the first and most frequently preferred learning style by both male and female learners; in addition, auditory learning style was the second preferred learning style for both genders. The results also indicated no association between gender and learning style preferences, gender and motivation and attitude towards learning English, and learning style preferences and motivation and attitude towards learning English. In other words, the relationship between the aforementioned variables was not statistically significant. In light of the results of the study, learning style preferences did not have any significant influence on foreign language proficiency. That is, visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning styles had no relationship with learners' language proficiency. Finally, among the independent variables learning style preferences, motivation and attitude towards learning English and gender, gender was the best predictor of language proficiency.

Based on the finding of the study, the following pedagogical implications can be proposed. First of all, findings of this study are of great importance to learners in order to show the importance of learning style preferences. That is, distinguishing the way(s) through which individuals can acquire the language is what the learners should identify. This way, individuals will be acquainted with their strong and weak points during the learning processes and they will share more responsibilities for their personal learning. Second, findings of the study seem to be crucially important to instructors in order to select suitable teaching methods and materials to enhance their learners' achievements. In other words, individuals learn in various ways and instructors should teach through miscellaneous methods.

Last but not least, findings of the present study can provide valuable information to design appropriate materials for successful teaching. Hence, suitable materials can be developed for various groups of individuals at various levels based on their preferred learning styles.

8.1. Limitations of the study

Although insights of the present study seem to be beneficial in the field of language learning/teaching, it suffers from one major limitation that is related to sampling and participants. The 154 participants of the study were chosen based on convenience sampling; furthermore, they were mostly females and studied in Shiraz University. It was, in fact, almost impossible to enquire more subjects to take part in the study due to lack of interest on the students' part to participate in the study and also owing to the limited number of EFL learners in the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics of Shiraz University. In fact, as mentioned earlier, some of the participants did not take the study seriously enough and, as a result, did not respond to the motivation and attitudes questionnaire accurately

enough. The imbalance between the number of participants in terms of gender may have had an effect on the findings of the study; however, it was not actually possible to reach such a balance in this study due to the existing difference in the number of males and females studying English at the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics of Shiraz University. Moreover, the researcher had to limit the participants of the study to Shiraz University. This, in turn, limits the generalizability of research findings.

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