

# Learning preferences of students attending and not attending language institutes

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## Abstract

In the context of language classroom, learners are by and large the consumers whose beliefs, attitudes, motivation, and preferences play the most important role in the learning path. Therefore, with respect to learners' differences and the unique situations each learning context requires, this study attempted to investigate the differences, if any, between English language learning preferences of students studying in language institutes in addition to their language programs that schools have set up with those who mainly study English via school curriculum. To this end, 180 high school students within the age range of 15-17 took part in this study; 90 students studying in language institutes in addition to attending language programs and 90 who attended only the mainstream school program. The researchers employed a 53-item Likert scale questionnaire to survey learning preferences of the participants. The results of the *t*-test analyses indicated that there was not any significant difference between the learning preferences of the two groups in general; however, there were differences regarding different classifications of items namely, grouping, vocabulary learning, learning grammar, error correction, media, and learning activities. The findings are hoped to pave the way for learners and teachers to ameliorate language programs.

**Keywords:** language learning styles; learning preferences; high school students; language institutes; high schools

## Introduction

"Consumer is always right". In the context of language classroom, learners are by and large the consumers whose beliefs, attitudes, motivation, and preferences gained considerable support since the late 60s and early 70s when a significant shift within the field of language learning and teaching brought about a greater emphasis on learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching (O'Malley & Chamot, 1995). Accordingly, teachers, practitioners, materials developers, and curriculum designers started to see learners as the most important feature of language learning process whose roles would overwhelm the importance of other features. Since, even with the best method one can find, it is the learner anyway who goes through the process of language learning; thus, the power of learning should firstly and for the most be controlled by learners. Thereby, learners' preferences and styles became the focus of attention. Investigating learner preferences, as Spratt (2001) puts it, can provide valuable and interesting information for teachers as well as curriculum and syllabus designers to make language learning a process more in line with 'good language learning'. With this in mind, the question motivated the present researchers to investigate whether

teaching in Iran is at all in accord with the needs and preferences of the learners. Teaching experience and confronting students with different background knowledge, motivation and different learning context reminded the researchers of unique characteristics of individual learners studying in different contexts with different attitudes to language learning. Though studies report a general positive attitude to language learning among Iranian language learners (Moiinvaziri, 2008; Vaezi, 2008; Chalak & Kassaian, 2010), the researchers have witnessed that high school students studying in outskirts with no facilities but a textbook and a blackboard have different views to language learning process than that of students studying in private language institutes. These students often have no other exposure to language but the one and a half hour English class per week. Having witnessed these situations, the researchers became curious to investigate if these students' preferences have any difference with that of their counterparts with an intensive exposure to language, say, 6 hours studying English in language institutes in addition to their studies in high school. The researchers were wondering if this was the case with the students, then "one size does not fit all"; therefore, teaching preferences and styles should be questioned and made more in accord with those of students. Likewise, Hall (2011) encouraging teachers to take their students' special needs into account, warns that "the right choice at the right time will vary from context to context, and classroom to classroom" (p. 30). Having set the ground, here it seems necessary to have a closer look at the state of ELT (English Language Teaching) in Iran in general and the learners' position in particular.

## **Literature review**

### **An overview of language teaching methodologies in Iran**

The history of formal teaching of English in Iran dates back to 1939 (Foroozandeh, 2011). Since then, English has been included in the educational curriculum of Iran and special attention has been given to it in the society. According to Razmjoo and Riazi (2006b), the paramount importance of English in Iran's educational system is mainly related to the use of the latest technological and scientific resources mainly written in English, the efficient use of the Internet in the era of information explosion, and the need for materializing the dialog among civilizations. To achieve these objectives, English teachers in Iran have used a variety of approaches, methods and techniques at different times. For instance, as Rahimi (as cited in Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006b) demonstrated, grammar-translation method (GTM) was used in 1950's all over the country. Later, the Audio-lingual method was introduced to the language teaching environment of Iran which as Rahimi states was not successful in Iranian English classes because of the shortage of qualified teachers, teaching aids, time, and so forth. In addition to teaching English in public schools, a large number of institutes take the responsibility of TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) in the country. What follows is a review of the general trends in these two domains.

### **Teaching English in public schools**

Since the establishment of 'Dar Ul-Fonun' (The House of Techniques), in which the foreign language instruction was started, the Iranian educational system has been changed based on the trends of the time (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006a). The present educational system of Iran includes the following levels: Primary School, Junior High School, High School, and Pre-university. From the age of 7, pupils attend primary schools. In this stage, English is not practiced. After six years (recently, the primary school is extended from five years to six years), students proceed to junior high school for two years (in line with the changes in primary school, the junior high school years of study is reduced to two years). Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, English education in Iran was formally introduced from the 2nd grade of junior high schools (Ghorbani, 2009). Since then, English teaching started from the 1st grade of junior high schools. However, currently, as a result of changes in primary school years, it starts from 2nd grade and is taught as an obligatory subject. It is one of the key subjects taught about three hours a week at this level. Dialogs, pattern practice, and new words are the major components of the textbooks designed for this level to be taught based on the Audio-Lingual Method (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006b). After junior high school, students proceed to high school for three years. The textbooks, taught about two hours a week at this level, have attempted to adopt a combination of the situational language teaching (SLT) approach in contextualizing the language in relevant situations and the Reading Method in introducing the word lists and structural patterns in reading passages (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006b). After high school, students start the pre-university level for one year based on a credit-semester system in which English is taught four hours a week (Yarmohammadi, 2000). The Pre-university English textbook has been developed on the basis of the Reading Method (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006b). Table 1 (adapted from Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006b) presents the related information on the English teaching in Iranian public schools.

Table 1. An outline of EFL instruction in Iranian public schools

Levels	Age	Amount of instruction	Basic focus
Primary School	7-12	-	-
Junior High School	13-14	3 hours a week	Basic training in reading and writing
High School	15-17	2 hours a week	Reading
Pre-university	18	4 hours a week	Reading

### Teaching English in private institutes

The first formal English language institute established in Iran in 1925 was Iran-America society (Farzin-nia, as cited in Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006 a). After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, this institute underwent some modifications. For instance, the name of the institute was changed to Iran Language Institute (ILI). In addition, it underwent radical changes in terms of management, objectives, and curriculum (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006a). Little by little, due to the shortcomings of EFL instruction in Iranian public schools on the one hand and the importance of foreign language instruction on the other, different institutes under different

titles were established all over the country. Language learners attend the institutes to improve their command of English proficiency. First, they sit for a placement test. Based on the results of the placement test, they are put into appropriate levels (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006a).

With the rise of new methods in the language teaching field, especially the advent of communicative language teaching (CLT), Iranian institutes rethinking their pedagogy, take up a communicative approach with the main focus on meaning-focused instruction. However, the high schools were slow in this regard and kept their traditional views confined in the fences of forced Curricula.

In fact, insufficiency of high school textbooks and their limited scope to the process of language learning along with the boring and compulsory situation of high school classrooms, result in the growing number of parents who enroll their children in private language schools (Bagherian Azhiri, 2012). This makes, as the authors witnessed, high school classrooms packed with heterogeneous students who can be laid along a continuum with two extremes of students who have different background knowledge. On one hand, students who are brought up with the streamline of schools and are dependent on the textbook and the teacher as the only source of input and, on the other hand, a group of students studying in language institutes as well as having their studies in high schools. This very last group of students has different and often negative attitudes to the textbook and high school language classrooms.

Studies comparing learners' preferences with those of their teachers' reveal that teachers do not always teach what the learners want (Spratt, 1999). The mismatch between teaching style and students' learning style would lead to inferior performances impeding learning processes. However, by matching teaching and learning styles, chances would improve for successful language learning (Jones, 1998). Sedaghatgoftar (2010) studying learner preferences of Iranian students, has found that though there is no significant difference between learners' and teachers' preferred styles, there are some in terms of vocabulary and grammar learning in particular.

Having said this, the teacher is left with a big dilemma: how to adjust his or her methodology to address the diverse needs of the aforementioned two groups of students. By and large, this is the dilemma that obscures every responsible teacher's mind teaching in Iranian high schools. This dilemma is the key factor encouraging the researchers to set out this study. Consequently, finding out students' learning preferences seems to clear the road. The present study, thus, was an attempt to empirically test the aforementioned hypothesis, thereby paving the way for our flexibility of decision making in confronting with different students having different language knowledge and attitudes gathered together in a high school classroom. More precisely, we wanted to come up with a framework of our students' learning preferences helping us in confronting with mixed classes having both types of aforementioned students (which is the case in most of Iranian high school classes).

## **Background to the study**

Learners who take part in English as a foreign language (EFL) program are individuals with different characteristics. These individuals bring their specific characteristics to the foreign

language learning context, thus, learning process is nevertheless affected by those unique characteristics (Hall, 2011; Brown, 2007). Fortunately, today's second and foreign language learning programs are after addressing these individual differences together with differences in learning styles and preferences (Brown, 2007; Chastain, 1988). In fact, language learning will be more successful when it is matched to individuals' preferred styles of learning.

Having observed the diversity of characteristics, catering for the diversity in the types of teaching styles seems inevitable. Indeed, as Chastain (1988) stated, the question is not whether students have individual learning styles, but how to deal with them. Likewise, Ellis (2008) suggests that learning will be more successful when it is matched to students' particular aptitudes and styles of learning.

Studies in second language area reveal that mismatches between teaching styles of the teachers and learning styles of the learners though common, negatively affect learning and learner motivation and attitudes (Reid, 1987; Felder, 1995). The key to overcome this discrepancy lies in understanding learning style preferences of the learners.

### **What are learning styles or preferences?**

It is widely believed that different ways of how a learner acquires, retains, and retrieves information are collectively referred to as learning styles or preferences (Reid, 1987). "When cognitive styles are specifically related to an educational context, where affective and psychological factors are intermingled, they are usually more generally referred to as learning styles" (Brown, 2007, p. 120).

Brown (2001) defines learning styles as the manner in which individuals perceive and process information in learning situations. In his definition, styles whether related to personality (such as extroversion, self-esteem, anxiety) or to cognition (such as left/right-brain orientation, ambiguity tolerance, field sensitivity) characterize the tendencies or preferences that may differentiate one person from another. He contends that learning preferences refer to the choice of one learning situation over another.

As already mentioned, different authors have presented different definitions and categorization for learning styles. However, mostly they overlap in the fact that learning preferences are the individual ways of processing information, feelings, and behaviors in learning situations, and that they differ from one language learner to another. Along with different but overlapping definitions, there are also different frameworks of learning styles which are the extended, sometimes revised forms of five broad classifications, namely: field independence-dependence; left and right-brain dominance; ambiguity tolerance; reflective and impulsive; visual, auditory, and kinesthetic styles. In addition to these factors which may mirror unique characteristics of individuals, there are also other contextual factors such as intensive exposure or different learning situations which may affect the process of second language learning considerably. That is to say, the differences are not always something inborn but are affected by environment, training, etc. In fact, learners' choices of learning preferences are greatly influenced by teaching and academic environment (Attar, 2010). Thus, we need to consider environmental effects and context of education as well as academic exposure to language in differentiating learners' preferences.

In the context of Iranian high school classrooms, students are gathered together from different language backgrounds. Some, studying English in private schools, consider high

school language classrooms as compulsory and less useful. While for some others, high school classes and teachers are the only source of exposure to the target language. In such a context, investigating learners' preferences seems necessary for a teacher to be able to decide on appropriate teaching styles to address the diversity of needs in his or her classroom.

Since there is little if any evidence from the previous studies accomplished in Iran addressing this issue (Negahdar, 2011), the findings of this study would help teachers in dealing with mixed classes having both types of students (i.e. with and without the experience of studying in language institutes). To address this concern, this study was conducted to identify the learning preferences of Iranian high school students who had an experience of studying in language institutes which provide more academic and more exposure to foreign language with those who had not such an experience. Thus, the study was set out to investigate if there was any significant difference between those two groups of students making up Iranian high school language classrooms. Accordingly, the study was intended to answer the following research question:

Is there any significant difference between the learning preferences of high school students who are studying English in EFL institutes in addition to their studies in high school and those who only attend the mainstream program of the high school?

The following null hypothesis was set to be tested in the present study:

- There is no significant difference between the learning preferences of high school students who are studying English in EFL institutes in addition to their studies in high school and those who only attend the mainstream program of the high school.

## **Method**

The present study investigated the different preferences of high school students. More precisely, the study addressed the learning preferences of two groups of students; those who have had exposure to language only through their studies in high school and those who have been studying English in private language schools as well as having their language classes in high school. To this end, a descriptive design was carried out to analyze the data elicited from participants.

## **Participants**

To accomplish the objectives of the study, data was elicited from 180 participants within the age range of 15-17, of which, the first group consisting of 90 students were exposed to English only through their classes in school. The remaining 90 students, comprising the second group of the study, were studying English in Shokuh language institute in addition to their studying of English in their schools.

## **Instrument**

In order to be able to access the opinions of large and potentially diverse population, a questionnaire was administered. The Persian translation of the questionnaire was used to facilitate the task of the subjects and avoid any misunderstanding of the items. It was adapted from an M.A. thesis (Sedaghatgoftar, 2010) which had utilized it for a similar purpose, thus, its validity and reliability were already established. However, the questionnaire was piloted on a similar sample in order to estimate the reliability and validity. The sample consisted of 80 participants similar to the real participants of the study. The questionnaire enjoyed a good degree of reliability ( $\text{Alpha} = 0.85$ ). Its content validity was established by 3 experts. It contained 53 items using a five-point Likert scale, as follows:

**strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree      no experience**

The values varied from 5 for “strongly agree” to 1 for “no experience”. The items ranged across the idea of reading, writing, speaking, listening, participation mode, and learning activities. The related items were grouped together into 10 categories, namely grouping (items 1-4), in or out of class learning (items 5-6), ways of learning (items 7-13), vocabulary learning (items 14-18), learning grammar (items 19-23), error correction (items 24-28), media (items 29-34), learning activities (items 35-46), learning pronunciation (items 47-48), and homework preferences (items 49-53).

## Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to the 180 participants of the study. It took them 30 minutes to answer the 53 items of the questionnaire.

## Data analysis

Data was analyzed using SPSS 16 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). *T*-tests were employed to compare the two groups of the participants. Each item was separately checked for the two groups and an independent samples *t*-test was used for each item of the questionnaire in order to compare the responses of the two groups.

## Results and discussion

The present study made use of a five-point Likert scale questionnaire containing 53 items. Regarding the research hypothesis and the design of the study an independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of the two groups. In this sense, group 1 contained the students who had no other language studies but high school language classroom. Group 2 presented the students who have been studying English in Shokuh language institute in addition to their language studies in high school.

The results of the *t*-test analysis indicated that there was no significant difference in the mean score of the first group ( $M=108.53$ ,  $SD=17.37$ ) and the second group ( $M=106.93$ ,  $SD=15.95$ ) in general ( $t(178) = .64$ ,  $p = .52$ ). In fact, the magnitude of the difference in the means (mean difference = 1.60) was very small. The mean was estimated by adding up the values for each item of the questionnaire and then finding the average for all of the participants in each group. Table 2 summarizes the related information.

Table 2. Total difference between two groups

Category	groups	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t.obs.</i>	<i>P</i>
Total	Only school	108.53	17.37	178	.64	.52
	School and institute	106.93	15.95			

However, significant differences were detected in 5 categories of the questionnaire, namely grouping, vocabulary learning, learning grammar, media, and learning activities. Table 3 illustrates the results of independent samples *t*-tests on these categories. It should be mentioned that only those items in which there were significant differences between the two groups were included in the table. With regard to the rest of items, there were no significant differences between the two groups.

Table 3. Difference between two groups in 5 categories

Category	Item NO.	groups	<i>M</i>	<i>P</i>
Grouping	Q1	Only school	2.12	.00
		School and institute	2.74	
Vocabulary learning	Q16	Only school	2.39	.01
		School and institute	1.99	
	Q18	Only school	2.13	
		School and institute	1.52	
Grammar learning	Q20	Only school	1.52	.01
		School and institute	1.82	
	Q21	Only school	2.49	
		School and institute	2.92	
Media	Q29	Only school	2.55	.05
		School and institute	2.19	



		Only school	2.12	
	Q30	School and institute	1.57	.00
		Only school	1.83	
Learning activities	Q38	School and institute	1.52	.02
		Only school	2.51	
	Q42	School and institute	1.87	.00

As Table 3 indicates, students in group 1 prefer to study alone more than group 2. The possible reason, in this regard, would be the approach taken up by high schools where there is no room and attention to group work, thus dictating the students to be independent in this sense. While institutes with their communicative approach highly respect group work and encourage learners to view language learning a goal better achieved in group.

As regards vocabulary learning, students in group 2 prefer more than the first group to learn vocabularies by hearing them. They also consider vocabulary to be the most important part of language.

In terms of learning grammar, group 1 regards the grammar part to be the most important part of language more than the students in the second group. This can be the effect of high school textbooks whose emphasis is mostly on grammar while institutes pay peripheral attention to grammar. More interestingly, group 2 ( $M = 2.92$ ) wants the teacher to explain grammar part explicitly which is in contrary to the implicit method of teaching grammar employed by institutes. This can also be the result of different methods used in schools and institutes; while, the former emphasizes the explicit teaching of grammar as the most important component of language, the latter deemphasizing grammar ignores its importance, thus, ignores students' needs in this regard. In line with the current finding, Baleghizadeh (2010) reporting on the effects and advantages of formal instruction, points out that among the major problems with language teaching approaches which emphasize meaningful communication, the first one is overlooking language forms. His findings lend support to the researchers' investigation of institute learners' preference to receive explicit teaching of grammar. While institutes ignore this need, high school English courses offer language teaching as mostly emphasized on grammar. These two extremes leading to dissatisfactory results in one way or another, highlight the need for an eclectic method of teaching integrating the positive points of both communicative and traditional approaches to possibly overcome the shortcomings of each.

Moreover, group 1 students preferred to use cassettes, videos, and movies in learning English more than the second group. Last but not least, group 1 expressed their interest in practicing conversation in class and using language lab more than the second group. In fact, since the second group has access to these facilities in institutes, they do not feel the need to have them in school classes.

- The results clearly mirror the different conditions experienced by the aforementioned two groups of students and sheds light on the possible pros and cons of each situation. Apart from the differences aroused as the result of facilities, there are other reasons for the witnessed diversity of preferences. For instance, grammar-translation method proceeded in high school classes satisfies the need for explicit

focus on form highlighting the language institutes' ignorance of this important factor under the principles of communicative language learning. This may, in turn, be the result of the "influences of corporate factors" (Richards, 2002) which offer two extreme approaches to language teaching and learning in these two contexts; high schools follow the traditional methods which put the emphasis on the forms of the language while institutes are after new trends focusing on the meaning behind those forms with the misconception leading them to define this meaning focused method as "a method including conversations without grammar teaching" (Dordi Nejad, Ashouri, Hakimi, Mosavi Atri, 2011, p.1761). Another significant reason discussed by Dordi Nejad et al. is the learners' cultural background; Iranians generally are dependent learners who seek teachers' accuracy in correcting them and prefer explicit teaching of grammar.

With all these in mind it can be inferred that ELT has taken an extreme movement in Iran in private and public language schools which brings problems for language teachers having both groups of students in their classes. Here, it seems a good solution to offer eclecticism which gathering together the well found ideas and techniques from both of the contexts would hopefully reap the benefits of both. Therefore, not only language learners gathered together in high school context would benefit but also learners in each of these distinctive contexts may release from the extreme movements forced to public and private language schools.

The interpretations can go on and cover every aspect of classroom methodology comparing language institutes and high school classrooms, thereby providing rich source of guidance for teachers. To sum up the discussion, the findings of the study revealed that students studying in language institutes had different learning preferences regarding 5 abovementioned categories of items in comparison with those who had not such an experience. Furthermore, it was found that high school students with no experience of studying in language institutes had more interest in using pedagogical tools such as language lab, cassettes, movies, etc. which are rarely found in high school context. One possible explanation would be the different context of language institutes which provide more suitable environment for language learning. This confirms the views on effects of educational environments on language learning, attitudes, and motivation of students (Attar, 2010) which was discussed in the literature.

## **Conclusion**

As Reid (1987) suggests, "identifying the learning styles preferences of non-native speakers may have wide-ranging implications in the areas of curriculum design, materials development, student orientation, and teacher training" (p. 88). Therefore, addressing the objectives of the present study, its findings would be helpful for teachers dealing with mixed classes having both types of students who had a greater exposure to language and those who were exposed to language only through mainstream high school language program. It is clear that schools do not provide proper situation for learning a foreign language as do language institutes. Thus, it puts a burden on teachers' shoulders to provide their students with useful tips and familiarize them with different ways of learning using different

facilities. A teacher with a toolbox of activities would try to employ different teaching procedures to address the diverse needs and interests of his or her students. The findings of the study would inform teachers of these needs on the part of the students from both groups and advocate a learner-centered approach catering for individual differences.

As any human product this study also contained some pitfalls among which the limited number of participants from 2 schools can be mentioned. Having mentioned this major limitation, the authors suggest further studies with a sufficient sample size to obtain more reliable results.

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