

**The Relationship between Learning Style and Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners'  
Speaking Performance**

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**Abstract**

There are a number of factors which influence the success of learning foreign language including students' learning styles. This study investigated language learning styles of Iranian EFL learners and their class achievement. To this end, sixty female intermediate learners of instruction and different ages (15-25), studying at a language institute in Rasht city were asked to take part in the study. A 30- item language learning styles questionnaire developed by Reid (1987) was employed to elicit information for the study. The data obtained through the questionnaire were subjected to Pearson correlation in order to check the relationship between the learning style and students' speaking achievement. Results showed that students use different learning styles in class and indicated that kinesthetic and group learning styles were the most favorable ones among Iranian EFL learners. The aforementioned styles positively correlated with the learners' speaking achievement.

**Keywords:** Learning style, speaking performance, relationship, EFL learners

## **Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

According to Bailey and Savege (as cited in Fauziati, 2010, p. 15), “speaking in a second or foreign language has often been viewed as the most demanding of the four skills”. The purpose of speaking is for communication. Communication can function not only as tool of interaction with other people but also media to solve all problems faced by them. Speaking naturally is designed to do just that: teach students how to perform certain language functions in English by presenting the social rules for language use.

Speaking is one of the four language skills through which learners can communicate with others to achieve certain goals or to express their opinions, intentions, hopes and viewpoints. In addition, in almost any setting, speaking is the most frequently used language skill. Rivers (1981) argues that speaking is used twice as much as reading and writing in our communication.

Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) has changed tremendously over the past two decades. Curricula, teaching methods, and teaching materials have been developed to meet the changing needs of the ESL/EFL population. Research on learning styles, has provided teachers with a different view of learning and demonstrated how to apply it to classroom teaching. An awareness of individual differences in learning has made ESL/EFL educators and program designers more sensitive to their roles in teaching, learning and learners' success and course achievement.

Teaching speaking skill is one of the major purposes of teaching English at intermediate level in Iran. In view of Mackey (2007) and Ellis (2003), interaction is beneficial to language development overall, but whether it is beneficial to develop all the

skills of second language learning is not known because a certain skill may be developed in different manners.

Currently, numerous studies have been conducted in national context centering on the relationship between learning style and the EFL learners' performance in different skills (Faris Fahrudin & Adi Nugroho, 2012; Moenikia & Zahed-Babelan, 2010; Barzegar & Tajalli, 2013). The majority of the experimental studies in the field of second language acquisition have been carried out on different aspects of learning styles but a few of them has specifically focused on the relationship between learning style and the speaking skills' performance. Minimal research attention has been directed toward learning speaking skill considered in this study.

In addition, the present study results may contribute in Iranian TEFL domain through providing English language teachers and curricula designers with a list of learning styles for speaking skill essential for EFL students to be taken into consideration in designing speaking activities appropriate for those students and contributing to modification of the teaching methods, so far, employed to develop speaking skill in Iranian English language institutes.

## **2. Literature review**

In case of acquiring foreign language, Ahmed (2012) stated that there are a number of factors which influence the success of learning foreign language, including learning styles. Regarding these, studies have been undertaken to investigate the correlation between students' learning styles and students' outcomes. Alkubaidi (2014, as cited in Faris Fahrudin & Adi Nugroho, 2012) found that there is no relationship between learning style and writing score in Saudi English Major University Students. Also, Pratiwi, Arifin, and Novita (2011, as cited in Faris Fahrudin & Adi Nugroho, 2012) found that there is no significant correlation

between students' learning styles and students' reading comprehension of the fourth semester students of English education program of FKIP UNTAN Pontianak.

In addition, Naning and Hayati (2011) found that there is no correlation between the learning styles of the English Education Study Program Students of Sriwijaya University and their listening achievement.

Moenikia and Zahed-Babelan (2010) conducted a study which studied learning styles and their roles on the second language learning of the students of Payame Noor University (PNU), Ardabli center, Iran. The statistical population involved all of the Ardabil Payame Noor University English language students (N = 457). From these, 112 students are selected as sample via random sampling. The questionnaire memletics is used to collect data about learning styles with using Cronbach's alpha ( $=0.81$ ). Students' scores in TOEFL exam including 4 sections (listening, writing, structure, reading) are taken as a criterion for second language learning. Data analyzed by using ANOVA test. Findings showed that: Listening, writing, structure and reading mean scores of students with different learning styles was different significantly.

Barzegar and Tajalli (2013) investigated language learning styles of Iranian EFL learners and their class achievement. To this end, sixty female advanced learners of instruction and different ages (15-30), studying at a language institute in Shiraz were asked to take part in the study. A 30- item language learning styles questionnaire developed by Reid (1987) was employed to elicit information for the study. The data obtained through the questionnaire were subjected to Pearson correlation in order to check the relationship between the learning style and class achievement. Results showed that students use different learning styles in class and indicated that kinesthetic and group learning styles were the most favorable ones among Iranian EFL learners. The aforementioned styles positively correlated with the learners' achievement.

Faris Fahrudin and Adi Nugroho (2012) aimed at finding out whether there is a significant correlation between students' learning styles and students' speaking achievement of the twelfth graders of SMA Negeri 1 Tumpang in the academic year of 2014/2015. 34 students of XII IA 3 class were involved as the participants of this correlational research. In addition, quantitative method was employed by using field notes, questionnaire and students' speaking scores as the instruments. It was found that auditory learning style was the most preferred learning style, followed by kinesthetic learning style and visual learning style. However, the ANOVA analysis showed that there is no significant correlation between learning styles and speaking achievement of XII IA 3 students of SMA Negeri 1.

On the basis of what was said above, the present study aims at determining the learning styles of a group of EFL learners and investigating the relationship between their learning styles and their speaking performance. That is, some learning styles may relate to learner's speaking achievement in English language classes. This study aims to find if individual learning style preferences have any influence on students' speaking performance. To this end, the present study aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the language learning styles of Iranian EFL learners?

RQ2: Is there any relationship between individual learning style preferences and Iranian intermediate EFL learners' speaking performance?

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Participants**

The participants of this study are 60 female EFL students at intermediate level of proficiency. All of the participants are native speakers of Persian studying English in an English language

Institute situated in Rasht city. Their age are ranged from 15 to 25. The students were recruited (based on the convenient sampling) from four classes the researcher had access to.

### **3.2. Instruments and materials**

We utilized the following instruments to collect the data for the present study:

3.2.1. 30-item questionnaire developed by Reid (1987)

3.2.2. An *IELTS* speaking test

### **3.3. Procedures and data analysis**

In order to achieve the aim of the study, the following procedures were followed. After obtaining the teachers' permission for conducting the research, the Reid's questionnaire was administered some weeks before the students' final speaking exam. The questionnaires were administered after the students' regular class time. The required data were collected in one session. The time for administration was about 20 minutes. Prior to distributing the questionnaire, the researcher explained briefly to each class the purpose of the study and the survey procedures, and then obtained each individual's consent by mentioning that the survey would be anonymous, that their answer will not affect their grades, and the data would be kept confidential. Instruction as how to complete the questionnaire was given in Persian. Students could ask any questions about the content of the questionnaire if they came to any vague point. Most of the data collection was carried out by the researcher herself, and some with cooperation of the colleagues. Finally, after their final speaking test, their scores were gathered by the researcher to determine the students' performance based on their learning styles.

After all the tests were administered and the data were collected, to test the research hypothesis and to answer the research question, the researcher used SPSS 19. To analyze the

information of learning styles questionnaire, descriptive statistics were then used and for finding the relationship between the variables, Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used.

#### 4. Results

The first research question attempted to see what the language learning styles of Iranian EFL learners are. Descriptive statistics of EFL learners' responses including the mean, standard deviation are summarized in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1.

*The mean score and standard deviation of EFL learners' learning style descriptive statistics*

	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Visual</b>	60	36.2333	5.53683
<b>tactile</b>	60	32.0000	8.28313
<b>auditory</b>	60	39.5667	5.40046
<b>group</b>	60	38.3667	8.10517
<b>kinesthetic</b>	60	40.5333	7.20515
<b>individual</b>	60	28.3000	9.06343
<b>Valid N (listwise)</b>	60		

As this study has followed Reid's measuring questionnaire (1987), the results were compared to Reid's assigned mean score classification of major, minor, and negligible learning categories. The mean score for each set of variables was divided into three categories, namely, major, minor, and negligible learning styles. The mean score of 38 and above represented the major learning style while the mean range between 25 and 37 stood for the minor learning style, and finally a mean score of 24 or less showed a negligible learning

style. Table 4.1 displays the mean scores and standard deviation of EFL learners' learning style dimensions. The highest mean score of 40.54 belonged to kinesthetic learning style while the lowest mean score of 28.30 was obtained for auditory, kinesthetic, and group type in descending order of preferences. The result indicated that most students possessed multiple learning styles.

Table 4.2.

*The percentage of learning style usage*

<b>learning style</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>visual</b>	5	8.33
<b>tactile</b>	2	3.33
<b>auditory</b>	14	23.33
<b>group</b>	15	25
<b>kinesthetic</b>	20	33.33
<b>individual</b>	4	6.67

As shown in the table 4.2, it can be concluded that EFL learners seem to favor a communicative approach to language learning by showing reluctance to working on their own. As displayed, only %6.67 of students expressed their preference for working individually, although it is less stressful than talking in pairs or groups. On the other hand, %25 of the students preferred other ways of learning speaking, such as learning in pairs or groups. Regarding kinesthetic learning style, by %33.33 expressed their interest toward learning by doing something in class or participating in role-playing. Group learning style also received relatively high percentage from students (%25). It seems they feel more productive by working in their ways. As can be seen auditory learning style also received a high percentage (%23.33) after kinesthetic and group learning style. On the other hand, visual



and tactile learning styles received a low percentage as %8.33 and %3.33 that may be due to facility in this condition.

The second research question asked if there is relationship between learning style and speaking performance of EFL learners. To this end, the Pearson correlation procedure was run. The results of the correlation procedure are given in the following table.

Table 4.3.

*Correlation between speaking performance and EFL learners' learning style*

		visual	tactile	auditory	group	kinesthetic	individual
<b>Speaking performance</b>	Pearson correlation	-.096	.085	-.032	.426**	.290*	-.493**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.467	.519	.808	.001	.024	.000
	N	60	60	60	60	60	60

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

As stated earlier, the main aim of the present study was to find out the relationship between different learning styles and students' speaking achievement. To this end, student's final speaking scores were compared with their learning styles to discover which students are more successful in English speaking test. That is, whether students who use the group learning styles are more successful or students who use the individual learning style.

In the Reids' questionnaire, items 6, 10, 12, 24 and 29 asked about visual learning style. Based on table 4.2, only %8.33 of the learners expressed their willingness towards learning visually. As it is clear from the table above, in the correlations table there is no significant correlation between the visual learning style and learners' speaking performance.

And items 11, 14, 16, 22, and 25 asked about tactile learning style, these items asked if they prefer to learn things by doing something or making drawings as they study. It is obvious that it is the least favorable learning style among this group as only %3.33 of them used it. And there is no significant relationship between tactile learning style and EFL learners' speaking achievement.

Then, the next 5 items ask about auditory learning style (1, 7, 9, 17, and 20) that is more popular among this Iranian EFL group but there is no relationship between this style and EFL learners' speaking achievement.

In items 3, 4, 5, 21, and 23, EFL learners were asked about if they prefer to learn language in groups or working on an assignment with some classmates. Correlational analysis suggests a significant positive correlation between the EFL learners' speaking achievement and group learning style. Students by %23.3 were of the opinion that they enjoy working on a speaking assignment with two or three classmates and they prefer to study with others. In other words as the EFL learners, use of group learning style increases their speaking performance increases too.

Items 2, 8, 15, 19, and 26 were about kinesthetic learning style which received the highest percentage among the other learning styles and showed a positive correlation.

Items 13, 18, 27, 28, and 30 asked about individual learning style. As is apparent from Table 4.3 there is a significant negative correlation between the individual learning style and the speaking performance.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

The results provide fairly strong support for the effect of learning style on speaking performance. Many studies have been conducted on learning styles, but there are a few studies on learning styles and enhancing speaking achievement.

Group learning received relatively high percentage from EFL learners (%25). This finding is in line with Wiergest, DeCapua, and Marlyn (2003) whose findings revealed that EFL learners clearly prefer group activity over individual work, with the Russian EFL and Asian ESL learners favoring group work.

However Reid's (1987) study contradicts the findings of this study. The findings of her study revealed that EFL learners gave group work a minor or negative preference mean. And her findings are the opposite of what proved to be true in the present study.

The result of the present study is not consistent with previous studies (Alkubaidi, 2014; Pratiwi, Arifin, & Novita, 2011; Naning & Hayati, 2011; Faris Fahrudin & Adi Nugroho, 2012) which have shown that there is no significant correlation between learning styles and foreign language achievement.

In addition, the findings of the present study corroborate those of Barzegar and Tajalli (2013) and Nabih Ahmed (2012) who reported EFL learners use different learning styles in class and indicated that kinesthetic and group learning styles were the most favorable ones among Iranian EFL learners. The aforementioned styles positively correlated with the learners' speaking achievement.

The study of Alkubaidi (2014) on learning styles and their roles relationship between learning style and writing score is in partial contrast with the present study, as they considered writing achievement, in their study, while in the present study only speaking performance were taken into account.

Furthermore, the result of this study does not support the findings from Neuhauser (2002) who figured out that there were no significant differences between students' learning styles and grades in an online and face-to-face section. He concluded that there was no relation between the preferred styles of learning and final grades in either group. Besides, this adds to the discussion of the similar studies undertaken to measure the correlation between

students' learning styles and the other three skills such as reading (Pratiwi et al., 2011) writing (Alkubaidi, 2014) and listening (Naning & Hayati, 2011).

Some major points are concluded from the study as follows that regarding working styles, students do not like working individually. Types of learning styles that emphasize productive skills appeal to students more than receptive skills. They do not like to be sitting passively in classroom, but to be engaged in classroom practices. Students' most favored learning styles are kinesthetic and group learning styles. And their least favored one is individual learning style. There is a positive correlation between kinesthetic and group learning styles and the student's speaking performance. The more they used these styles the better scores they received. There is a negative correlation between individual learning style and achievement. The more they used this style the lower scores they received. There is a strong correlation between kinesthetic, group, tactile and auditory learning styles, that is, as the learners, use of kinesthetic style increase the use of group, tactile and auditory increases. There is a negative relationship between kinesthetic, group, auditory and individual learning styles. In other words, as the learners' use of kinesthetic, group, and auditory increase the use of individual learning style decreases. Moreover, the findings of this study are helpful to students in demonstrating the importance of learning style identification. Students are recommended to identify the best way(s) through which they can learn language more fruitfully. Knowledge of one's learning style may be beneficial in that the learner will now be aware of his/her strength and weaknesses in terms of learning experiences. Therefore, future learning may be enriched if the learners maintain their strength and improve on their weaknesses. Aside from that, this process will improve one's self-esteem because now the students will feel more comfortable and prepared to take on the learning challenge, also give students the confidence needed to achieve their goals. This study focused on the relationship between learning style and speaking performance of EFL intermediate EFL learners. For those who are interested in

conducting research in the area of speaking skills and identifying their learning styles, the following questions are suggested for further research. As the focus of this study was on speaking performance, other studies can be investigated on the other skills. And as the number of participants was limited into 60 EFL learners, other studies can be done with more participants. At last, as all participants of this study were intermediate EFL learners, future studies can be done with advanced level participants to see whether the results are different or not.

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