Gender and Learning Style Preferences of EFL Learner

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Abstract
This study presents the results of an investigation of the relationship between gender and learning style preferences, and language perception and use of EFL learners. Participants in this study were 212 undergraduate students majoring in English at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Oman. The students were 58 males and 158 females from different years of study. The students' learning styles and patterns of language perception and use were measured using a questionnaire consisting of thirty items. The results yielded in this study showed that although all styles were represented in both groups of learners to varying degrees, the female group was significantly more communication oriented than the male group. The results did not reveal any significant differences between the two groups with regard to their perception of the importance of English. They did reveal, however, significant differences between them in the amount of time they spent practicing English outside the classroom, as well as in their enjoyment of learning English. The study suggests that success in learning a foreign language depends on adopting effective learning strategies, as well as on the learners developing awareness about their own learning. The study also maintains that language teachers need to help learners expand their learning styles by encouraging them to use more effective learning techniques.
Keywords: learning styles, learning strategies, language perception, strategy training, gender

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, second language research has focused on the differences among students in how they approach learning tasks. While, for instance, some learners might prefer reading a textbook, others like listening to verbal explanations. One factor contributing to such differences is preferred learning. Oxford (2003) believes, along with many other researchers (see., e.g., Benson, 2003; Chamot, 2004; Nunan, 1999; Reid, 1987; Willing, 1988), that learning styles and strategies are among the most important factors that determine the extent of success in learning a foreign/second language. Reid (1987, p. 88) argues that "identifying the learning style preferences of nonnative speakers (NNSs) may have wide-ranging implications in the areas of curriculum design, materials development, student orientation, and teacher training." Willing (1988, p.1) also suggests that the "efforts to accommodate learning styles by choosing suitable teaching styles, methodologies and course organization can result in improved learner satisfaction and attainment." Similarly, Claxon and Murrell (1987) found that developing instructional methodologies and techniques that match students' learning styles had positive impact on their reading scores and their perception of the learning experience.

Recent cognitive models view language learners as active, self-determining individuals who process information in complex ways (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). It is believed that language learners who develop the ability to learn-how-to-learn are more able to assess their weaknesses and strengths and employ strategies that meet the task demands and match their own strengths. Chamot (2004, p. 14) noted that effective and strategic language learners possess "metacognitive knowledge about their own thinking and learning approaches, a good understanding of what a task entails, and the ability to orchestrate the strategies that best meet both the task demands and their own strengths." Similar findings were reported by Nunan (1991), Benson (2001) and others. Nunan (1991) found that effective language learners developed a high degree of autonomy and self-direction in the learning process, and possessed conscious awareness of the processes underlying their own learning. Likewise, Weinstein, Zimmerman and Palmer (1988) believe that learners can be trained to process new information and acquire new skills by exploiting more effective learning strategies.

Considerable research has been done on learning styles and strategies and the relationship between them in the western context (see, e.g., Oxford, 2003; Reid, 1987; Schmeck, 1988; Willing, 1998). Few studies, however, have addressed this issue in the Arab world (see, e.g., Al-Otaibi, 2004; El-Dib, 2003; Khalil, 2005; Radwan, 2011; Shamis, 2003). The findings in the western context, though informative, cannot be extrapolated automatically to the Arab world context, especially in light of research findings showing that different cultures manifest different modes of thinking (Anderson & Oxford, 1991; Witkins, 1976) and different learning styles (Reid, 1987). This study, therefore, explores the relationship between gender and learning styles and patterns of language perception and practice among SQU students.

2. Background

Since the mid 1970s, research in second/foreign language has focused primarily on the language learner, exploring the roles that different psychological, cognitive, cultural and affective factors play in learning a second language (Brown, 2000). This interest in the language learner has led to substantial research on the qualities that distinguish the successful learner from the less successful one, focusing in particular on learning styles and strategies (see, e.g., Anderson, 2005; Cohen, 1998; Green & Oxford, 1995; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2007; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1993; Oxford & Anderson, 1995; Reid, 1995, to name just a few). Rubin (1975) and

Stern (1975) attempted to characterize the 'good language learner' by identifying their personal characteristics, learning styles, and preferred learning strategies.

Learning styles are broadly defined as "cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment" (Keefe, 1997, p. 4). A similar definition states that styles are "an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred way of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills" (Kinsella, 1995, p. 171). Learning styles are "relatively stable and will be deployed by individual regardless of the subject being studied or the skill being mastered" (Wong & Nunan, 2011, p. 145). These various definitions emphasize the stable nature of learning styles.

Research has offered numerous taxonomies and classifications of learning styles using mostly self-reporting questionnaires. Dunn (1984) believes that learners possess four perceptual learning modalities: visual leaning (reading and studying of charts), auditory leaning (listening to lectures), kinesthetic learning (experiential learning), and tactile learning (hands-on learning). Christison (2003) goes beyond the perceptual modalities identified by Dunn and distinguishes between three major learning styles: cognitive style (field-dependent vs. field-independent, analytic vs. global, reflective vs. impulsive), sensory style (visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic) and personality style (right brain vs. left brain dominance, tolerance of ambiguity). On the basis of learners' preferred learning strategies, Willing (1994) identified four learning styles based on Kolb's (1976) distinction between cognitive styles (field-dependent vs. field-independent) and personality traits (active vs. passive). These styles are the communicative style (field independent and active), the analytical style (field independent and passive), the authority-oriented style (field dependent and passive), and the concrete style (field dependent and active). It should be noted, however, as Oxford (2003, p. 3) pointed out, that learning styles are not dichotomous and "generally operate on a continuum or on multiple, intersecting continua." This basically shows that, although each learners has a preferred learning style, the other styles might be represented in him/her to varying degrees.

Early research in learning styles has focused on English native speakers, especially those learning a second language (see, e.g., Hansen & Stansfield, 1982; Hodges, 1982; Ramirez, 1986; Witkins, 1976). In general, research findings emphasized the existence of differences in learning styles to due to social, ethnic and cultural factors. Witkins (1976), for example, demonstrated that different cultures adopt different modes of thinking (global and abstract functioning). Building on this research, Reid (1987) investigated the learning styles of 1234 ESL students and 159 native speakers of English using clusters of variables including language background, gender, duration of stay in the United States, etc. She found that the learning style preferences of the native speakers differed significantly from those of non-native speakers. She also found that the other variables related to significant differences in learning styles. Oxford and Anderson (1991) also found that ESL learners from a variety of cultures demonstrated differences in their sensory preferences. In addition, Ehrman (1996) established a positive significant relationship between personality traits and proficiency in English. Likewise, Wong and Nunan (2011) showed that more 'effective learners' tend to be more communication oriented in their learning styles than 'less effective learners'.

As for learning strategies, they are defined as specific behaviors, communicative procedures or thought processes that learners employ to enhance their own L2 learning and language use (Chamot, 2004; Oxford, 2003; Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992). Likewise, Cohen (1990, p. 4) defines them as "processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in actions taken to enhance the learning or use of a second or foreign language through the storage,

retention, recall, and application of information about that language." Weinstein and Mayer (1986, p. 315) add that leaning strategies aim to "affect he learner's motivational or affective state, or the way in which the learner selects, acquires, or integrates new knowledge." If used properly, learning strategies can make learning more enjoyable and more effective, and at the same time make the learner more independent, self-directed and autonomous (Oxford, 2003). When learners are consciously aware of the strategies they are employing, learning can become quicker and more effective (Nyikos & Oxford, 1993). However, since students are generally inclined to use strategies that suit their own learning styles, teachers need to encourage their students, especially the less successful ones, to use strategies that may fall outside their style preferences (Oxford, 1996).

Research has offered different taxonomies of learning strategies (see, e.g., O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Schmidt & Watanabe, 2001; Willing, 1988), but Oxford's (1990) classification was the most comprehensible. Oxford has classified strategies into six categories: metacognitive strategies (help learners control their own cognition and enable them to maximize learning through monitoring their language use, planning, coordinating the learning process, and looking for opportunities to use the language.), cognitive strategies (helping learners understand and produce new language through practicing, summarizing, reasoning deductively, and analyzing), memory-related strategies (helping learners remember, store and retrieve new information when there is a need for communication), compensatory strategies (enabling learners to use the language to overcome any limitations and gaps in their linguistic knowledge through guessing, making up new words, and using circumlocution and synonyms), affective strategies (helping learners through lowering their anxiety levels, increasing their motivation, and controlling their emotions), and social strategies (helping learners to interact, communicate, cooperate, and empathize with others to maximize learning).

Research into learning strategies has explored the relationship between strategies and a number of variables including gender, age, proficiency, motivation, cultural background, and beliefs (see e.g., Dornyei, 2005; Chamot, 2005; Green & Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2003; Kato, 1996; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2007; Radwan, 2011). Kato (1996) and Oxford and Ehrman (1995) demonstrated that cognitive strategies are significantly related to L2 proficiency. Purpura (1999), however, showed that metacognitive strategies have an "executive function" over cognitive strategies and are relatively strong predictors of L2 proficiency. In the initial stages of language learning, when learners need to build their repertoire of new lexicon, memory-based strategies were shown to relate positively to L2 proficiency (Kato, 1996). However, these strategies were shown by Pupura (1997) to negatively impact learners' test performances in grammar and vocabulary. This could be because memory strategies are less critical to success in language learning in the later stages, since the learner by then is probably well equipped with vocabulary and structures of that language (Oxford, 2003).

As for the link between learning styles and strategies, Marina (1996) states that the learners' style preferences are likely to influence their choice of learning strategies. Oxford (1993) argues that for learners to succeed in learning a second language they need to be consciously aware of their own learning styles, attempt to maximize their potentials and adapt their learning strategies to suit the learning requirements in different contexts. While language learners cannot change their learning styles, they can adjust their learning strategies to make up for any disadvantaged caused by their learning styles (Wong & Nunan, 2011). This, according to Reid (1995), can be done when students "stretch their learning styles so that they will be more empowered in a variety of learning situations." Language teachers, for their part, have to encourage their students

to stretch their learning styles. They also need to help the less proficient ones to adopt more effective strategies. At the same time, they should modify their own teaching style to accommodate the various style preferences of their students (Christison, 2003).

3. The Study

This study investigated whether there were any differences between male and female and students in their learning styles, strategy preferences, and patterns of language practice and use. In particular, the study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. Are there any differences between male and female students in their overall learning styles?
2. Are there any differences in the individual learning strategy preferences of the two groups?
3. Are there any differences in the amount of time the two groups spent on practicing English outside the classroom?
4. Do students in the two groups differ in their perception of the importance of English?
5. Do students in both groups differ in their enjoyment of learning English?

3.1 Participants

The questionnaire used in this study was distributed to 234 undergraduate students majoring in English at Sultan Qaboos University during their regular classes. Of these, only 212 returned the surveys completely answered. The sample was not balanced, with only 58 males and 154 females. In fact, this reflects the demography of the English department, where the female-male ratio is 2 to 1. The students come from different years of study: 5 freshmen, 73 sophomores, 56 juniors, and 78 seniors.

3.2 Instrument

The study used a slightly modified version of Wong and Nunan's (2011) survey, which was based on Willing's (1994) learning strategy questionnaire. The survey consisted of two parts. The first part collected biographical information, including gender, students' GAP in English courses, rating of importance of English, year of study, extent of enjoyment of English, and number of hours of English practice off campus per week. The second part consisted of thirty statements, asking students to rate themselves on a four-point scale with regard to their use of in-class and out-of-class strategies. Many of the statements used in this survey resemble strategies used in Oxford's (1990) well-established SILL, designed for ESL/EFL learners.

Following Willing (1994), learners were classified into four categories based on their strategy preferences: (1) concrete learners: these learners tend to like games, pictures, films, video, using cassettes, talking in pairs and practicing English outside class, (2) analytical learners: these learners like studying grammar, studying English books and reading newspapers, studying alone, finding their own mistakes and working on problems set by the teacher, (3) communicative learners: these students like to learn by watching, listening to native speakers, talking to friends in English and watching television in English, using English out of class in shops, trains, etc., learning new words by hearing them, and learning by conversations, and (4) authority-oriented learners: these learners prefer the teacher to explain everything, like to have their own textbook, to write everything in a notebook, to study grammar, learn by reading, and learn new words by seeing them.

4. Results

4.1. Learning style and gender

The first research question examined the relationship between gender and the overall learning styles of the students. Data analysis revealed that the dominant learning style for female students was the communicative style (57.9%), followed by the authority-oriented style (18.4%), the concrete style (13.8%), and finally the analytical style (9.9%). For male students, the dominant style was also the communicative style (38.9%), followed by the authority-oriented style (35.2%), the analytical style (18.5%) and the concrete style (7.4%). A chi-square analysis showed that the two groups differed significantly in their overall learning styles (chi-square = 17.522, p = .001).

A chi-square analysis of the different styles revealed significant differences favoring the female group in the use of the communicative style (chi-square = 26.778, p = .013). Results for the other styles did not show any differences between the two groups: the concrete style (chi-square = 20.405, p = .202), the analytical style (chi-square = 21.379, p = .125) and the authority-oriented style (chi-square = 14.343, p = .500). Table (1) shows the descriptive statistics for both groups.

Table 1. *Learning style and gender*

	Female	Male		Significance
	M	*M*	*Chi-square*	
Communicative	3.217	3.321	17.522	.001
Authority	3.078	3.114		
Analytical	3.000	3.010		
Concrete	2.879	3.007		

4.2. Gender and individual learning strategy preferences

The second research question explored the differences between the two groups in the use of individual learning strategies. Analysis of students' individual preferred strategies showed that the five most popular strategies of the female group were:

1. "I like to learn by watching/listening to native speakers." (M = 3.65)
2. "I like to learn many new words." (M = 3.47)
3. "I like to practice sounds and pronunciation." (M = 3.43)
4. "In class, I like to learn by conversation." (M = 3.41)
5. "I like to go out with the class and practice English." (M = (3.33)

As for the male group, the five most preferred strategies were:

1. "I like to learn by watching/listening to native speakers." (M = 3.53)
2. "I like to learn many new words." (M = 3.47)
3. "In class, I like to learn by conversation." (M = 3.38)
4. "In class, I like to learn by pictures, films, videos." (M = 3.28)
5. "I like to learn by suing English outside class in stores, etc." (M = 3.28)

These findings show that the two groups shared three of their top five most popular strategies. Not surprisingly, these strategies were communicative in nature, which is consistent with our finding that students in both groups are predominantly communication oriented. A chi-square analysis of all individual strategies showed significant differences between the two groups only in the use of two strategies: "*In class, I like to learn by games.*" and "*I like to go out with the*

class and practice English." In these two strategies, the mean scores were significantly higher for the female students than their male counterparts (chi-square = 16.395 , *p* = .001, for first strategy; chi-square = 9.387 , *p* = .025, for the second strategy).

4.3. Gender and patterns of language use

The third research question investigated the differences between the two groups in the amount of time each group spent on practicing English outside the classroom per week. The results reported in Table 2 show that while only 29.22% of female students spent less than 1 hour using English outside the classroom, 46.55% of the male student did so. Another noticeable difference between the two groups occurred in the 4-5 hours range. While about 12% of the male group spent between 4-5 hours a week using English, almost 37% of the female group did so. A chi-square analysis of these results revealed significant difference between the two groups (chi-square = 12.844, *p* = .005).

Table 2. *Gender and amount of time spent using English outside the classroom*

	Female		Male		*chi-square*	Significance
Less than 1 hour	45	29.22%	27	46.55%	12.844	.005
1-3 hours	35	22.73%	17	29.31%		
4-5 hours	56	36.36%	7	12.06%		
More than 5 hours	18	11.69%	7	12.06%		

4.4. Gender and language perception

The fourth research question examined student's perception of the importance of English. Results showed that almost 90% of the male respondents agreed that English was either 'very' or 'extremely' important for them. Similarly about 94% of the female participants rated English in the same way, see Table 3. A chi-square analysis did not reveal any differences between the two groups (chi square = 1.634, *p* = .442)

Table 3. *Gender and importance of English*

	Female		Male		*chi-square*	Significance
Extremely important	71	46.10%	23	39.66%	1.634	.442
Very important	74	48.05%	29	50%		
Somewhat important	9	5.84%	6	10.34%		

The last research question explored the relation between gender and students' enjoyment of learning English. Data analysis showed that the almost 78% of the female group enjoyed English either 'a lot' or 'a great deal'. In contrast, about 62% of the male group reported enjoying English in a similar way (see Table 4). A chi-square test revealed significant differences between the two groups (chi-square = 7.604 , *p* = .05).

Table 4. *Gender and enjoyment of learning English*

	Female	Male	*chi-square*	Significance

A great deal	45	29.22%	18	31.03%	7.604	.05
A lot	73	48.67%	18	31.03%		
Somewhat	32	20.78%	17	29.31%		
Not very important	4	2.59%	5	8.62%		

5. Discussion

In this study, female learners were significantly more communication oriented in their learning styles than their male counterparts. According to Willing (1994), communicative leaners are likely to possess active personality and be field-independent cognitively. These learners tend to actively seek opportunities to maximize their own learning. Female students in the English Department seem to exhibit these two qualities, as they are generally autonomous, self-directed and active in the learning process. They seek opportunities to maximize their learning inside and outside the classroom, which makes them more effective language learners than male students. This is corroborated by students' reported measure of their proficiency (GPA in English courses). While 61.7% of the female students reported a B-and-Above GPA, only 32.8% of the male group reported this level of proficiency. This finding concurs with results obtained by Wong and Nunan (2011), Gan (2004) and Willing (1994), showing that effective language learners are more involved in interactions for learning purposes that other learners. The result can also be explained in light of learning strategy research that shows that overall female students use more social strategies than male students, and they excel at building vast social networks (Khalil, 2005). Social strategies help learners to interact, communicate, cooperate, and empathize with others to maximize learning (Oxford, 1990).

The study showed that female students spent significantly more time practicing English outside the classroom than the male students. This result is consistent with their dominant communicative learning styles. Learners with this style are known to assume more control of the learning process and they are generally more active in seeking opportunities inside and outside the classroom to maximize their learning. Similarly, proficient learners, as pointed out by Wong and Nunan (2011), spend more time practicing English outside the classroom than the less proficient ones, and they are generally more autonomous than the other group. Given that the majority of students in the female group belong to the proficient group, it is expected for them to be self-driven and independent learners who spend a great deal of time practicing the language inside and outside the classroom.

Both groups give approximately equal importance to English. This can be understood in light of the fact that most of the students in both groups have joined the English Department at SQU to become English teachers. It is basically an easy pass to a reasonably good career after graduation, and as such they "place a high premium on facility in English" (Wong & Nunan, 2011, p. 153). Despite this finding, the female learners seemed to be enjoying learning the language more than the male group. This, as pointed out by Wong and Nunan (2011), could be an attitudinal issue. The male group did not seem to be as much involved and in the learning process as the other group. This might affect the level of enjoyment they experience in the learning process, which in turn can affect their overall progress in the language. This is well manifested in their GPAs in English courses, which were lower than those obtained by the female group.

Despite the noticeable differences between the two groups, it is worth noting, as the results show, the different styles are present in both groups to varying degrees. In fact, Reids (1995) argues that all styles, which exist on "wide continuums", could be present in every individual;

however, certain styles are more dominant than others. Thus, while it is not possible to change someone's style, pedagogical interventions need to be style-neutral, and the language learner with the help of their teachers need to 'stretch their styles' (Christison, 2003). This means they are required to become more independent learners, take more responsibility of their learning, be more willing to adopt more effective learning strategies, and seize every opportunity to maximize learning inside and outside the classroom.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between gender, on one hand, and learning styles, language perception and patterns of language use on the other. The data yielded by this study revealed significant differences between the male and female groups in their style orientations and patterns of language use. Overall, the results showed that the two groups differed in their orientations. Analysis of individual styles revealed that this difference is a result of the female group being more communication oriented than the other group. In general, communicative learners tend to be independent and active learners that makes them more effective learners, and thus are likely to excel in developing their proficiency in the target language (Oxford, 2001).

The two groups seemed to give the same degree of importance to learning English. This, however, was translated in the female group into extra effort at learning the language than the male group. They spent significantly more time practicing the language outside the classroom than the other group. This could have been the result of the higher levels of enjoyment of learning the language they exhibited. Enjoyment of language has probably driven them not to be content with what was offered in the classroom, so they sought learning opportunities outside the classroom.

From a pedagogical point of view, both teachers and learners have to change their perspectives about the learning/teaching process. The language teacher should be cognizant of his students preferred ways of learning and need to change his ways and approaches to suit their style preferences (Hong- Nam & Leavell, 2006). A one-suits-all strategy will not be very effective and is deemed to fail. While teachers cannot change students' orientations, they can help students, especially the less proficient ones to develop varied strategies to enhance their own learning, and they can also add "a learning-how-to-learn dimension to the curriculum" (Wong & Nunan, 2011, p. 155).

Students, on the other hand, need to take more control of their own learning, not limiting themselves to what is offered by the teacher in the classroom. To excel in learning a new language, they need to be more active and self-driven learners who seek opportunities to maximize their own learning. In addition, they need to be more conscious of their own learning and try to adopt more effective learning strategies.

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