



Learning Style Preferences of first-year JFL students in Iran

Zeinab Shekarabi

University of Tehran

Abstract

Research indicates that among the many factors involved in language learning, the learning style of language learners is one of the key factors in learning a language. This study examined the language learning preferences of Iranian first-year students studying Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) in Iran. To investigate the effect of the learners' gender on the learning style preferences of these students, 24 JFL learners out of a cohort of 28 at a university in Iran volunteered to participate in the study. A perceptual learning style preferences questionnaire was used to collect the data. Using the information from the questionnaire, the descriptive statistics and results of a t-test were analyzed. Results showed that Iranian first-year JFL learners tend to prefer kinesthetic and individual learning styles. Although no significant difference was observed between female and male students overall, females tended to prefer auditory and males to prefer visual and kinesthetic learning styles. The findings of this study have significant implications for educators and language textbooks developers.

Keywords: Learning preferences, JFL learners, Visual, Auditory, Tactile, Kinesthetic, Individual, Group



Introduction

One of the most important reasons for students experiencing fatigue, boredom, and failure is the mismatch between the teacher's teaching style and the students' learning style. Research shows that to reach the optimal level of learning, the teaching method should be coordinated with the dominant learning style of the students. Thus discovering the dominant learning style of language learners in each field will help teachers deliver more successful teaching and thus accelerate both the learning and the motivation of language learners.

Researchers have investigated a number of different learning styles and detailed how these can be used in language teaching (Brown, 2000; Chapel & Green, 1992; Reid, 1995). These have included field-dependent and field-independent styles, left- and right-brained styles, extroversion and introversion, thinking and feeling, and perceptual learning styles. For example, research shows that learners with a field-independent analytical style carefully analyze different parts of the language to be learned. In contrast, learners with a general, field-dependent style see the language to be learned as a whole and as a result, they are more successful in language communication skills. Another example of learning styles used in multicultural environments where English is learned as a second or foreign language is perceptual style, with visual language learners learning by seeing the material, In contrast, auditory learners prefer new language to be presented orally, and tactile language learners usually learn content better by touching and feeling.

Reid (1987) conducted a study of EFL learners' learning preferences. In a survey of 1,388 EFL learners in the US, she found that Chinese, Arab, and Korean learners preferred a visual style and usually used visual tools in learning language. For example, Japanese students learn a language less by listening, while Thais, Malians, and Spaniards use listening styles to learn a second language. According to Reid's findings, four learning styles were discernible: visual learning (i.e., reading and studying charts, graphs, etc.), auditory learning (i.e., listening to speeches, audiotapes), kinesthetic learning (involving physical responses), and tactile learning (using hands-on learning or building models, etc.).

Some studies have been conducted on the learning styles of Iranian students (Barzegar & Tajalli, 2013; Fatemi & Pishghadam, 2008; Taheri, Sadighi, Bagheri, & Bavali, 2019). Taheri et al. (2019) showed that EFL learners' achievement correlated with particular learning styles. Barzegar and Tajalli (2013) found that while advanced EFL students used different learning styles, kinesthetic and group learning styles were more popular for them. Fatemi and Pishghadam (2008) investigated the learning style of university-level Iranian students with four different majors: science, English literature, medicine, and engineering. The result showed that most Iranian students tend to use tactile learning styles, while females prefer auditory and males prefer tactile and kinesthetic learning styles.

As explained above, students' learning styles are an important factor in language learning achievement. However, there has been no investigation into Iranian JFL learners' learning styles. Accordingly, this pilot study aims to investigate the learning style preferences of first-year learners of Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) in Iran. Since some learning styles may be related to the gender of the learners and the experience of learning Japanese as a less commonly used language in Iran, the study also investigated the learning style preferences of these students and whether female and male students have different learning style preferences as regards Japanese.

Research Questions

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the learning styles preferences of Iranian first-year JFL learners?
- 2) Is there a pattern in the learning style preferences of male and female Iranian first-year JFL learners?



Methodology

Participants

Twenty-four first-year students studying Japanese as a foreign language in their first year at a university in Iran participated in this study. They included 18 females and 6 males, and the range of their ages was 19 to 21. They were all native speakers of the Persian language and had almost no experience of studying Japanese before entering the university.

Instrument

Reid's (1987) questionnaire, which includes 30 items regarding learning styles, was administered to participants. The questionnaire categorizes the perceptions of students learning a second language into six categories: visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, group, and individual learning styles. Each category is assigned five questions. Students answer the questions by choosing one of the following five options: "strongly agree;" "agree;" "undecided;" "disagree;" or "strongly disagree". The reliability of the questionnaire is strong ($\alpha = .93$) and thus acceptable.

Procedure

The Japanese Institute at this university was selected for data gathering as only one university teaches Japanese academically in Iran. The number of first-year students studying Japanese as a foreign language in this university was 28 at the time of data collecting, of whom 24 volunteered to complete the questionnaire. Before participants answered the questionnaire, the researcher explained the content of the questionnaire and the aim of the study. The researcher also stressed that the answers would be kept anonymous and would not affect the participants' grades and that they were free to ask any question in this regard.

Data Analysis

We used data from the questionnaire, including language learning styles, the descriptive statistics, and the results of a t-test to investigate the relationship between the variables (in total and in each category).

Results and Discussion

Turning to the first research question, which addressed the language learning preferences of Iranian first-year JFL learners, a t-test was conducted. Based on Reid's (1987) classification, we divided the mean score of each learning style as a variable into three groups: major (above scores of 38), minor (between 24 and 37), and negative (below 24). The descriptive statistics of students' learning style preferences are shown in Table 1. The highest mean score was Kinesthetic (21.17) followed by Individual (20.53). In contrast, the lowest mean score was Tactile (16.65). This shows that Iranian first-year JFL learners mostly prefer kinesthetic learning styles and that they prefer to learn Japanese individually. In most cases, they do not favor using a tactile learning style.

The finding of a preference for the kinesthetic learning style among first-year JFL learners is in line with Barzegar & Tajalli's (2013) findings, which showed that Iranian advanced learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) prefer to use a kinesthetic learning style. It can therefore be concluded that Iranian language learners tend to involve physical responses while learning a language regardless of level or status. This preference for a kinesthetic learning style may have its source in Iranian culture since Fatemi and Pishghadam (2008) also found that Iranian university-level students in a range of different majors have a high tendency to prefer kinesthetic learning.

Regarding the preference for the individual learning style among JFL learners, a possible explanation may be this is the approach to teaching usually followed by teachers in their classes in Iranian schools. This teaching style mostly includes individual activities, which forces students to work individually (Mirzaii & Roshani, 2012).



The findings of the present study regarding the avoidance of tactile learning among Iranian JFL learners runs contrary to Fatemi and Pishghadam (2008), whose findings revealed that Iranian students preferred the tactile learning style. The reason for this opposition may be the target students these researchers used in their study. Their sample included students of medicine and engineering. Compared with language learning, the nature of these students' majors may have affected their preference for learning style.

Table 1 – Descriptive statistics for students' learning styles (Mean and SD)

| Preferences learning styles | N | Mean Scores | Std. Deviation (SD) |
|-----------------------------|----|-------------|---------------------|
| Visual | 24 | 18.65 | 3.70 |
| Auditory | 24 | 20.03 | 3.75 |
| Tactile | 24 | 16.65 | 4.96 |
| Kinesthetic | 24 | 21.17 | 4.65 |
| Group | 24 | 18.62 | 4.97 |
| Individual | 24 | 20.53 | 3.81 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 24 | | |

With regard to the second research question, which aimed to investigate the learning style preferences of male and female Iranian first-year JFL learners, a t-test was conducted. Table 2 shows mean scores and standard deviations for the total as well as for each category of learning style by gender. As Table 3 shows, there was no significant difference between female and male JFL learners in terms of learning differences ($t(23) = .17, p > .05$). However, results by learning style category showed that female students use the auditory learning style more than male students ($t(23) = 3.84, p < .001$). Moreover, male students use kinesthetic and visual learning styles ($t(23) = 3.26, p < .001$), ($t(23) = 2.61, p < .001$), respectively.

These findings are partially in line with Fatemi and Pishghadam's (2008) study, which showed that female students tend to use an auditory learning style but that male students have a high tendency to use a tactile learning style. This contrasts with the findings of the present study, which revealed that male Iranian first-year JFL learners prefer a visual learning style.

Table 2 – Descriptive statistics for students' preferences of learning styles based on gender

| Preferences learning styles | Gender | N | Mean Scores | Std. Deviation (SD) |
|-----------------------------|--------|----|-------------|---------------------|
| Visual | Female | 18 | 19.11 | 3.67 |
| | Male | 6 | 18.19 | 3.70 |
| Auditory | Female | 18 | 20.64 | 3.51 |
| | Male | 6 | 19.42 | 3.91 |
| Tactile | Female | 18 | 16.69 | 4.90 |
| | Male | 6 | 16.60 | 4.92 |
| Kinesthetic | Female | 18 | 20.63 | 4.50 |
| | Male | 6 | 21.73 | 4.67 |



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|------------|--------|----|-------|------|
| Group | Female | 18 | 18.83 | 4.90 |
| | Male | 6 | 18.45 | 4.91 |
| Individual | Female | 18 | 20.28 | 3.80 |
| | Male | 6 | 20.77 | 3.78 |
| Total | Female | 18 | 19.38 | 4.69 |
| | Male | 6 | 19.31 | 4.93 |

Table 3 – Results of t-tests for each learning style category between male and female JFL students

| Preferences learning styles | t | df | p value |
|-----------------------------|-------|----|---------|
| Visual | 2.61 | 23 | .00 |
| Auditory | 3.84 | 23 | .00 |
| Tactile | .41 | 23 | 8.03 |
| Kinesthetic | 3.26 | 23 | .00 |
| Group | .86 | 23 | .62 |
| Individual | -1.01 | 23 | .32 |
| Total | .17 | 23 | 8.82 |

Conclusion

The findings of the present study showed that the dominant learning style among Iranian first-year JFL learners is the kinesthetic learning style. This shows that Iranian language learners do not like to sit at a desk for hours without being active and prefer to use activities such as games. Thus teaching methods involving movement and dynamics such as total-physical response (TPR) should be used when teaching Japanese, especially to first-year students, and to use activities such as role-play or any other activities involving movement with more advanced students. However, methods related to physical movement are not enough. According to the findings of the present study, since female JFL learners are more auditory, and male JFL learners are more visual, the use of both visual and auditory activities should not be neglected. The findings of this study will be useful in informing language teaching, especially Japanese language teaching, as well as in developing language teaching and learning textbooks.



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