

Correlations Between Learning Style Preferences and Arab-Speaking Gulf Region First-Year College Students' EFL Performance: A Literature Review

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Abstract—This review aims at examining recent and relevant literature that investigates the correlations among learning style preferences, awareness of learning style preferences, motivation, intelligence types, gender, and Arab Gulf region first-year college students' EFL performance. A lot of studies about the influence of learners' awareness of their learning style and motivation types on their ESL (English as a second language) learning performance have been conducted in English speaking Western countries, but fewer similar research studies have been conducted in EFL (English as a foreign language) contexts, particularly in the Arabian Gulf region Arabic-speaking countries and more particularly with first-year college-students as research participants. This review attempts to explore the dominant learning style preferences, main or obvious intelligence types according to the multiple intelligence theory, main motivation type and how the awareness of these could impact the learners' progress or otherwise in EFL. Due to the relative scarcity of relevant research in the Arab Gulf region, other studies conducted in neighboring and culturally similar countries were reviewed as well. As a result of examining the literature in this respect, more studies and research are recommended to help learners, instructors, professionals, researchers, and practitioners concerned and involved in EFL in this context.

Index Terms—EFL, learning style, learning approach, cognitive style, extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation

I. INTRODUCTION

The topic of learning styles and how they influence learning has been appealing to various researchers in different disciplines such as psychology, psycholinguistics, pedagogy, and language acquisition (Cassidy, 2004). Investigating learning styles is useful for both learners and teachers; it helps both to learn and teach effectively. It particularly helps EFL teachers to personalize and individualize their teaching methodology and instructional practices, which leads to boosting their learners' EFL performance (Irvine & York, 1995). Learning styles and how they influence EFL have been intensively studied particularly in USA and Europe, but similar studies about Arabic speaking college students in the Arab Gulf region are quite few.

The concept of learning styles has been approached from different perspectives by various researchers. For example, Keefe (1988) focused on perception while investigating learning styles and categorized the learning styles as visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile. The same classification of these four modalities was given by Dunn (1983), but Dunn pointed out that age plays a significant role in learning style dominance and preference. For Keefe (1988), perception is the process via which the human brain collects, stores and processes information. Kinsella (1995) stated that each individual has a preference toward one or more learning styles, and this is determined by both biological and environmental factors. An individual's genes as well as the experiences he or she encounters during the early stages of one's life shape his or her learning style dominance and preference.

The construct of learning styles has been handled in the literature using different terms such as learning approach, learning orientation and cognitive style; there's sometimes even some confusion and overlapping between learning styles, cognitive styles, and personality types (Ehrman et al., 2003). There is a strong tendency among researchers toward accepting Keefe's (1979) definition of learning styles as "*distinctive psychological, affective and cognitive behaviors that indicate how learners perceive, respond to and interact with the learning environment*" (p. 4). There are several other definitions of learning styles, and they simply differ because researchers investigate the different dimensions of learning styles, such as the perceptual, social, and psychological dimensions. Keefe's (1979) definition takes all these into consideration. In the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL), learning styles refer to individual and unique preferences exhibited by learners when they respond to and interact with EFL information and skills until they integrate and internalize such information or skills. The learning environment plays a significant role here; therefore, teachers who are aware of their students' learning styles and learning style preferences can create a healthy and effective learning environment.

Learning styles are related to both learning strategies and intelligence types or multiple intelligences; however, each one of them is a different concept and they should not be confused. Learning strategies refer to specific actions and conscious behaviors chosen and exhibited by the learner to learn the foreign language whereas learning styles are spontaneous approaches or characteristics of individual learners (Nunan, 2010). An individual's specific learning styles determine the learning strategies he or she decides on to process learning a certain EFL linguistic feature. Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligence and the construct of learning styles are closely related because both encourage adopting a personalized, individualized learner-centered approach in teaching to create a healthy learning environment. Prior to Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences, the traditional view of intelligence comprised only linguistic and mathematical competences, but Gardner challenged this view and identified at least eight kinds of intelligence: linguistic, mathematical, musical, spatial, kinesthetic, naturalist, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Gardner (1983) confirmed that all individuals possess all types of intelligence, but with varying amounts.

Another similarity here between multiple intelligences and learning styles is they are not dichotomous; preferring one learning style or possessing one intelligence type does not mean the other learning styles and intelligence types do not exist. Kolb (1981) clearly said that learning styles do not function in an exclusion mode: when one learning style is dominant or preferred, the others are not dormant or non-existing. Learning style dominance can change over time and according to the learning situation, learning task and learning context (Brown, 2007).

Several researchers explored the benefits of matching students' learning styles and teachers' teaching techniques and the disadvantages of mismatching them; Reid (1995) disapproved of high school teachers' dependence on lecturing and catering only for the auditory learning style even though it is the least common learning style among this group of learners. Language learning is basically a type of skill acquisition, and it requires adopting a variety of teaching styles, techniques, and strategies to accommodate all different types of learners. When teachers create a learning environment that facilitates learning in various ways (Gilbert & Swanier, 2008), students' EFL performance is improved as the teacher's instructional practices prove that they are sensitive to the diversity and differences their students bring to the EFL classroom. There are several classifications of learning styles such as Reid's (1987) perceptual learning styles and the VARK model (Fleming & Mills, 1992). In the next section of this article, some recent studies about the correlation between learning styles and EFL learning will be discussed; some of these studies investigate motivation and EFL.

II. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON LEARNING STYLES, MOTIVATION AND EFL

EFL / ESL pedagogy, psychology, psycholinguistics and second language acquisition researchers have extensively and intensively investigated learning styles and how they are related to EFL or ESL performance, but most of the relevant studies took place in ESL settings such as in Australia, Canada, GB, or USA. There are relevant studies that took place in EFL settings in various parts of Europe and Asia; however, a careful examination of the literature yielded no results regarding similar studies that took place in the Arabic Gulf region or in countries such as UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, or Kuwait in an EFL college setting. As Gulf countries such as UAE, Qatar, Bahrain or Kuwait are relatively small Asian countries in the Middle East; therefore, studies that were conducted in neighboring areas are pertinent and useful. Focusing on studies that geographically took place near the Arabic Gulf region is vital due to the role played by culture. Culture comprises beliefs, norms and value systems and plays a significant role in learning and learning modalities; it is of particular importance to EFL because the relation between language and culture is inextricable (Hinkel, 2014). Culture influences learning styles as well because it has been noticed that different cultures seem to be disposed to certain learning modalities and preferred styles (Tileston, 2004).

EFL teachers are noted for their mobility and traveling to work in different corners in the world and they are given culture induction and orientation when they move to a work environment that is different from their own. This shows how crucial culture is for teachers who are willing to excel in their jobs; understanding the learners' culture can help EFL teachers in the effective selection of materials and activities to enhance their EFL retention, success, and achievement. The selected studies mentioned in this review, therefore, took place in culturally similar educational settings because of the limitedness and scarcity of relevant research about learning styles that took place in the Arab world.

A relatively recent study by Wu and Al-Rabah (2009) investigated the effect of cross-cultural context on the learning styles and multiple intelligences of two groups of EFL first-year college students; one group included 112 Kuwaitis and the other 138 Taiwanese students. Wu and Al-Rabah (2009) confirmed that understanding learners' multiple intelligences and learning styles is crucial to effective EFL practices and for an optimal learning environment. This shows that understanding the students' preferred channels and strategies of learning in the form of knowing their learning style preferences is important for both effective instruction on the teachers' side and for the good quality of language acquisition, learning and retention on the students' part. The two groups of the study participants in Wu and Al-Rabah's (2009) study were different in their first language, culture, and faiths; however, they both share their interest in learning EFL and communicating in English as a lingua franca. The researchers used two different instruments to measure the Kuwaiti and Taiwanese college students' learning styles and multiple intelligences; they used Oxford's (1998) SAS or Style Analysis Survey to measure learning styles and Christison's (1998) Multiple Intelligence Inventory for Teachers to measure multiple intelligences. The researchers simplified the content of these two instruments to ensure the participants' comprehension and easily compare the results of the two groups.

Very few of the participants did not respond to the two surveys used by the researchers: 3% of the Taiwanese students and 5% of the Kuwaiti students. The results showed that the most dominant learning style of both Kuwaiti and Taiwanese students was the visual one, followed by the auditory for Taiwanese and tactile or hands-on for the Kuwaiti students. The instruments also measured extroversion and introversion and both Kuwaiti and Taiwanese students displayed preference to extroversion. As for the multiple intelligences survey, Kuwaiti students scored high in interpersonal, visual, kinesthetic, logical, and linguistic intelligences consecutively and low in naturalist, intrapersonal and musical whereas the Taiwanese students scored high on visual and interpersonal and average on the other types of intelligence. The researchers recommended that the results of their research can be used to raise awareness regarding different groups of learners' strengths, but there was no clear indication regarding how these differences affect EFL performance, which means more studies need to be conducted to measure the efficacy of language learners' awareness of their learning styles, innate learning preferences and strategies and how this could impact their EFL learning performance.

Learning styles are basically related to how instead of what: how individual learners collect, interpret, analyze, organize, and process information rather than what they acquire or learn (Al-Seghayer, 2021). Learning styles are innate and learners use them intuitively or unconsciously as they gradually acquire EFL or ESL skills and subskills. According to Al-Seghayer (2021), Saudi EFL learners are multimodal when it comes to which learning style they prefer, but they mostly favor visual and tactile learning styles and like to learn via concrete learning aids. Saudi EFL learners do not like to learn individually, and group work is highly favored in their EFL learning.

Alkhatnai (2011) explored the correlation between EFL college students' perceptual learning styles and whether this could predict their success or effective learning of EFL, something which the previous study done by Wu and Al-Rabah (2009) did not do. Alkhatnai (2011) also sought to investigate the relationship between EFL college students' learning styles and academic satisfaction in two different learning environments: the physical and traditional classroom and the virtual online learning environment. Alkhatnai (2011) used the Perceptual Learning Styles Preference Questionnaire (Reid, 1984) with one hundred Saudi college students and conducted interviews with six students for more in-depth information. The researcher, therefore, adopted the mixed-methods research approach to elicit more information about the study participants' learning perceptual learning styles and how they could be related to their EFL success, performance, persistence, and satisfaction.

Unlike Wu and Al-Rabah (2009) who found that the most dominant learning style among Kuwaitis to be visual, followed by tactile and auditory, Alkhatnai (2011) found that tactile comes first for Saudi college students and it is followed by auditory, visual, collaborative, kinesthetic and finally individual. The two studies used different data collection methods and instruments, but it should be noted here that Saudis and Kuwaitis share a lot in terms of culture, faith, first language, customs, and traditions. Alkhatnai (2011) explored the social dimension of learning styles, which Wu and Al-Rabah (2009) did not and found that Saudi college learners are more collaborative than individual in both traditional and online EFL learning. More studies are needed to confirm Alkhatnai's (2011) study results because collaboration and learning in pairs and groups is very important in learning language skills effectively since communication particularly in its spoken format is at the core of ESL / EFL learning and acquisition.

Alkhatnai (2011) found no correlation between the students' choice or preference of the way of learning whether face-to-face or online and their preferred learning styles, but there was a correlation between the learners' satisfaction, positive learning experiences and success in EFL with their learning styles. Alkhatnai (2011) found that teachers' teaching styles, cultures and personality types affect the learners' way of perceiving learning styles. This study concluded that Saudi college learners prefer online classes to face-to-face instruction and the way they perceive their learning styles influences their motivation and selection of effective learning strategies. It is important to note here that was long before the Covid-19 pandemic which forced almost all classes to be done online, and it is interesting that Saudi language learners had already liked doing language classes online.

When EFL teachers know whether their students are collaborative or individual in their learning ways, this helps them teach effectively because much of the language content is based on interaction and communication, both of which cannot be done individually. A relatively recent study, which was conducted in Saudi Arabia, confirmed the importance of collaborative work in EFL teaching and learning and it was done by Almutairi (2008). The researcher explored the learning strategies and learning styles of 209 Saudi female EFL college students, and how the culture, sociocultural and educational backgrounds of these women could influence their learning ways and strategies. Like Wu and Al-Rabah (2009), Almutairi (2008) used SAS or Oxford's (1998) Style Analysis Survey and interviewed a focus group of 10 students.

Quite similar to the findings of Wu and Al-Rabah (2009), Almutairi (2008) found that the majority of the Saudi female students preferred the visual modality; however, this study is different because the teachers played a significant role in orienting or influencing their learners' choice of their perceptual learning styles. This study confirmed that female Saudi students' learning styles are influenced by the sociocultural background and the students' previous academic profiles. The study aimed at enhancing the roles played by Saudi women in their community through finding out how culture and previous education influence learning style preferences to get value data that can be used in teachers' professional development and training to boost the students' cognitive competencies and learning skills.

Almutairi (2008) stressed that collaborative and group work learning styles and classroom activities are essential for effective EFL learning.

The importance of cooperative and collaborative learning as a learning style that should be encouraged among non-native learners of English in the Arab region was also confirmed in another study by Al-Tamimi and Attamimi (2014) who sampled Yemeni EFL college students for their study. Al-Tamimi and Attamimi (2014) sampled 60 students and collected data at several points of time before, during and after their experimental treatment to have valid and reliable data regarding the effect of cooperative learning styles on improving EFL communication, speaking skills and attitudes. The researchers used diagnostic pre-tests, a Likert scale questionnaire to get data about the students' attitudes, and posttests to track any changes or progress. Al-Tamimi and Attamimi (2014) analyzed the data they collected and concluded that cooperative learning and collaborative learning styles significantly improve the Yemeni EFL speaking skills, oral production, communication skills and the positivity of their attitude toward learning EFL. As a result, Al-Tamimi and Attamimi (2014) highly recommend that EFL teachers encourage the cooperative and collaborative learning styles and do their best to integrate cooperative learning EFL tasks and activities into their classroom practices.

The literature includes fewer studies about learning styles and EFL in Asian Arabic countries in the Arabian Gulf region; therefore, exploring similar studies in other Asian countries such as Palestine or Iran, which is very close to the Gulf region, is relevant and important as well. For example, Aqel and Mahmoud (2006) studied the preferred learning styles of 120 EFL Palestinian college students using the online Penn State Learning Style Inventory and found out that Arab learners at their research site prefer the visual and written learning styles, which is in agreement with most of the previously reviewed studies conducted with students in the Gulf region. The researchers in this study recommended incorporating a basic computer or IT course in the EFL courses because they noticed its great impact on the students' EFL performance and in making them autonomous and independent learners. Aqel and Mahmoud (2006) confirmed that there are no differences concerning the learning styles of both genders in the sample of their study. Aqel and Mahmoud (2006) recommended conducting further research in the area of learning styles and EFL to find out more about how students' learning styles are related to their personality types.

Another study was conducted in Palestine by Naqeeb and Awad (2011) who mentioned in the literature review section of their study that they decided to conduct their own study in response to Aqel and Mahmoud (2006) who recommended in their study that more relevant studies should be conducted in Palestinian universities. Naqeeb and Awad (2011) confirmed that EFL students' learning styles play a significant role in shaping the teaching methods and decisions regarding the teaching practices they decide on in order to cater for their learners' needs. Consequently, Naqeeb and Awad (2011) investigated 396 male and female college students' learning styles in order to familiarize the instructors at the research place with their students' learning preferences and to help them by suggesting additional teaching methods that they can incorporate into their instructional practices to improve their learning environment and help their learners to improve their EFL performance. Naqeeb and Awad (2011) examined whether male and female students differ in their learning styles and whether the academic and EFL proficiency level affect the preference of a certain learning style.

Naqeeb and Awad (2011) investigated only four perceptual learning styles: auditory, visual, tactile and kinesthetic, and they created their own data collection method: a questionnaire consisting of 20 items with 5 items addressing each learning style. Unlike Aqel and Mahmoud (2006), Naqeeb and Awad (2011) found out that the auditory learning style is the most dominant learning style among the Palestinian college students in their sample. As a result of this, Naqeeb and Awad (2011) recommended that EFL instructors in Palestine give more priority to materials and activities that cater for learners with auditory learning ways and preferences; they even recommended that teachers should get some training on doing this effectively. However, Naqeeb and Awad (2011) admitted that the results of their study cannot be generalized at a wide scope because the study was conducted in one single Palestinian university at a particular time. They recommended further research in this area using various data collection methods and investigating other variables such as the effect of the geographical location of the students and their socioeconomic status or standard of living.

As for how both learning styles and motivation are related to Arab learners' EFL performance, there are very few studies in the literature and one of them was conducted by Al-Qahtani (2013) who investigated several factors that affect EFL learning of Saudi medical students; these factors included motivation, learning strategies, attitude, and academic achievement. Qahtani (2013) wanted to investigate what learning strategies medical students adopted in their EFL learning and what types of motivation drove them to study English. Qahtani (2013) also wanted to explore the medical students' attitudes toward speakers of English, and she sought to investigate any relationships between EFL proficiency and variables like motivation, attitude, academic achievement, learning strategies and demographic backgrounds. The participants in that study were 120 female students and they were asked to complete self-administered anonymous questionnaires. The results showed that the students displayed both integrative and instrumental motivation with a slight increase in integrative motivation; they were also positive toward their learning environment. One very important result that there was a positive correlation between the students' EFL proficiency and their social or collaborative learning style: interaction and group work strategies helped the students improve their EFL proficiency.

Motivation is crucial for success at EFL learning, and teachers should develop their strategies to increase motivation and preclude demotivation (Elsheikh et al., 2014). Elsheikh et al. (2014) conducted a study sampling 100 Saudi female

university students to explore the types of motivation and demotivation and what causes them. The researchers assumed demotivation could be caused by economic, social, cultural, or pedagogical factors. The researchers used a 15-item questionnaire that was translated into Arabic to make sure the students would provide valid answers regarding their types of motivation. More than half of the participants stated they did not enjoy learning EFL or using EFL outside the classroom. More than half of the participants said they did not feel competent during EFL classes, and almost 80% of them said they preferred to only sit and listen rather than participate during EFL classes. The overall results showed that the rate of integrative and intrinsic motivation is low while only instrumental motivation is relatively and comparatively high. The researchers recommended adopting a creative motivation strategy to face this challenge.

Finding more studies about learning styles, motivation, and their impact on EFL in Arabic countries and educational contexts was really hard; therefore, reviewing studies conducted in Iran was the alternative here. Iran, a neighboring country to Arabic-speaking countries in the Gulf region, has a lot in common with the Arab world particularly in terms of faith and culture. A relatively recent study conducted by Seifoori and Zarei (2011) explored the correlations between Iranian EFL college students' different learning styles and their types of multiple intelligences. There is a positive correlation between certain learning styles and certain multiple intelligences (Seifoori & Zarei, 2011), and this can be very useful for teachers to do necessary adaptations in their teaching styles, methods, materials, activities and EFL classroom practices in general. This study is different because the participants were not freshmen or first-year college students; they were sophomores and the researchers wanted to find out their dominant multiple intelligences, their preferred learning styles and how they both correlate.

Seifoori and Zarei (2011) sampled 96 male and female sophomores to participate in the study; they were chosen out of 110 candidates based on their score on a modified Cambridge PET exam that measured their English proficiency. They filled out the Perceptual Learning Styles Preference Questionnaire (Reid, 1984) and Christison's (1998) multiple intelligence inventory in addition to interviewing some of the learners to get more in-depth information. The results showed that the tactile and group learning styles were the most dominant ones, which is consistent with the results of Wu and Al-Rabah's (2009) study about the Kuwaiti EFL college students.

As for the Iranian sophomores' dominant type of multiple intelligence, Seifoori and Zarei (2011) found that spatial intelligence is dominant, and it is followed by interpersonal intelligence. There is consistency in the results here because both the dominant group learning style is expected to correlate with the interpersonal intelligence type. As for the correlations between all learning styles and all multiple intelligences, Seifoori and Zarei (2011) found that the tactile learning style correlates with mathematical intelligence, the kinesthetic learning styles with the bodily intelligence and the tactile learning style with the spatial intelligence. The researchers concluded that learners use multiple modalities in the way they learn, and teachers need to be aware of this through doing relevant training programs.

Unlike the study which Seifoori and Zarei (2011) carried out, Gilakjani (2012) conducted a study about Iranian EFL university students' learning styles and found out that the dominant learning style in the 100 students of the study sample is the visual one. Gilakjani's (2012) purpose was to increase faculty awareness of the impact of their students' learning styles on EFL performance. Contrast and conflict among the results of different studies could be attributed to other extraneous variables.

III. CONCLUSION

The reviewed studies here are relevant and important to ELT professionals and practitioners especially those dealing with Arabic-speaking learners in the Arabic Gulf region and nearby countries that share the same culture. EFL teachers and researchers need to conduct more action research driven and affected by the ideas expressed in the reviewed studies regarding the importance of understanding different learning styles, the students' preferred modalities, their intelligence types, the importance of being aware of these preferences, catering for diversity in the classroom, the importance of motivation, the impact of cultural and demographic factors, and how all these could contribute to improving EFL teaching methods, teaching practices and material development.

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