

Field Dependent vs. Field Independent EFL Learners' Perceptions of Their Instructors' Teaching Methods in English Language Classes

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ABSTRACT

Teachers are the core component of teaching and learning a second or foreign language; therefore, they should know what the learners consider as the most effective teachers' characteristics which may enhance their learning. Accordingly, the main aim of the present study was to compare field dependent and field independent Iranian learners in terms of their perceptions about effective language teaching. Fifty intermediate Iranian learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) participated in this study and three instruments were utilized to collect the data. The first instrument was Oxford Placement Test (OPT, 2001) to test the homogeneity of the EFL learners. The second instrument was Group Embedded Figures Test (GEFT) to classify field dependent learners from field independent ones and the third instrument was an effective EFL teaching questionnaire to record the participants' perceptions of effective EFL teaching. The obtained results revealed that field dependent and field independent learners had different expectations in class. That is, for field dependent learners, confidence and open-mindedness in class were important characteristics of an effective teacher while for field independent learners, teachers' knowledge and proficiency were important. Indeed, there was no significant difference between the perceptions of field dependent participants and the field independent EFL learners about the overall characteristics of an effective teacher. Knowing EFL learners' cognitive styles can open new insights in the second language (L2) domain and lead to more influential teaching.

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INTRODUCTION

It is clear that the teaching and learning process in English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) is a complicated process and teachers always aim at using various activities to meet this pedagogical target (Gerami & Noordin, 2013; Hassanzadeh, 2012; Ismail et al., 2012; Zare & Nordin, 2011). In times of the current pandemic, online teaching has become a new reality and with emphasis given on connectivity and interactivity, Kourieos and Evripidou (2013) indicated that “it is widely acknowledged that the most effective pathway to improve student learning outcomes is the quality of teaching, especially teachers’ ability to motivate and facilitate such learning” (p.1). This shows that a successful learning and teaching process is an interactive process between teachers and learners and being aware of inner power of both poles (in this case EFL learners and EFL instructors) and their feeling or interest can have influential effects especially on analyzing, motivating, and assisting students in language learning environments. This interactive process between educators and learners is very important in various educational environments (Gerami & Noordin, 2013). Moreover, the relations between different parties may play pivotal roles (Bastani et al., 2018). Accordingly, Williams and Burden (1997) claimed that “learner motivation is seen as one of the most powerful influences on learning and in the case of a foreign language, a fundamental factor in FL (foreign language) achievement”(p.1). Weak

foundation can be attributed to students’ motivation to learn, and the teachers’ lack of interest (Noordin et al., 2019). Indeed, EFL teachers need to be aware of the way they implement the teaching process and enhance motivation as an effective factor throughout the academic year to increase learners’ achievement. In order to do that, they really need to know what their pupils think about their teaching styles and/or strategies that are employed to bring about promotion among learners because learners who can use language learning strategies more frequently in the process of their language learning might be more successful and to achieve their educational goals (Lim et al., 2018); moreover, it is required for EFL teachers to understand how their students think about an effective language teaching in an educational process. These perceptions from EFL learners can influence teachers’ working styles and output and how their instruction can be delivered through classroom activities (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Field dependent and field independent are both learning styles involving mental processes introduced by Witkin et al. (1971) to resemble “the degree to which one perceives analytically or globally” (Hadley, 2003, p. 215). This is a mental ability of a person in analyzing or decoding the message and the way of analyzing, understanding or solving a puzzle which varies from person to person.

Brown (2014) indicated that field dependent and field independent styles of learning were psychological terms

that referred to individual differences. This cognitive concept deals with EFL learners' perceiving, organizing, analyzing, and experiencing through learning. Field dependent and field independent learners are under the effect of an inner tendency and because of this they behave or think differently. Brown (2014) added that Field independent involved the "ability to perceive a particular, relevant item or factor in a 'field' of distracting items" (p.114).

Chappelle and Green (1992) looked at field dependent and field independent learners comparatively in the learning domain and highlighted the major learning, thinking, perceiving or concluding aspects in a cognitive style. Chappelle and Green (1992) placed field independent person in the analytical category while according to this classification, the field dependent learner had been listed in the holistic group. Accordingly, Ahmadi and Yamini (2003) investigated Field dependent and field independent personalities based on Chappelle and Green's (1992) view and concluded that "Field independence is reported to be associated with the use of analytic strategies, while field dependence is mostly correlated with the use of global strategies (holistic strategies)" (p.62).

Objectives of the Study

This study has twofold objectives. Firstly, it is going to investigate what characteristics Field dependent and field independent EFL learners attribute to effective language teachers. Secondly, it aims at investigating if there is any significant relationship

between EFL learners' field dependent and field independent and their perceptions of effective language teaching. On the basis of the objectives of the present study, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. What are field dependent L2 learners' perceptions of effective language teaching?
2. What are field independent L2 learners' perceptions of effective language teaching?
3. Is there any significant relationship between L2 learners' field dependence and field independence and their perceptions of effective language teaching?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design of the Study

This study has a quantitative-survey design. The study was considered to be a survey study because the researchers utilized two main reliable questionnaires to elicit EFL learners' cognitive learning styles (field independent/dependent) and to attain EFL learners' perception about effective language teaching. Therefore, the present research included the following variables: field dependent and field independent as independent variables and perception of effective language teaching as dependent variable of the study.

Participants

As the researchers had access to the female branch of Navid language institute in Shiraz, Iran, the participants of the current

study were 50 female EFL learners. These participants were selected through purposive sampling, meaning that among the EFL learners of the above-mentioned private language institute, based on a placement test (second version of Oxford Placement Test, just 50 EFL learners, out of 80 EFL learners who were more homogeneous based on their language proficiency were selected as the final target. It is worth mentioning that the defined cut-off score in selecting the final subjects was 30-39 (lower-intermediate).

Instruments of the Study

The researchers applied a quick placement test of OPT (2001, version 2) taken from Kazemi et al. (2014) to identify homogeneous participants. This placement test included 60 questions and was divided into five sections while all the questions were designed in multiple-choices form. Test-retest type of reliability is commonly used when raters decide about the language produced by learners (Brown, 2014). The obtained correlation coefficient was .80 that is within the accepted range. According to Riazi (1990), measurement validity is the degree of fit between a construct and its indicators. With this regard, two experts in TEFL in English department in Shiraz Islamic Azad University (IAU) measure the validity of the tests. Finally, the validity, particularly the face and content validity of OPT were confirmed by these two experts.

The second instrument was metacognitive strategies questionnaire Group Embedded Figures Test (GEFT), which is a test to clarify and classify field

dependent learners from field independent ones, developed by Witkin et al. (1971). This test has been used frequently by other researchers and can be considered as the most frequently used test (e.g., Alavi & Kavayanpanah, 2009; Shahsavari & Tan, 2011). To measure the reliability of GEFT, Pearson correlation coefficient (test-retest method) was employed. The reported result was .82 which is within an acceptable reliability.

The third instrument of this research was an effective EFL teaching questionnaire to record the participants' perceptions of effective EFL teaching developed by Kourieos and Evripidou (2013). Its validity and reliability were checked too.

Procedures of the Study

First, the researchers administered Oxford Placement Test and 50 homogenous learners out of 80 available ones were selected based on their proficiency level. Then, field dependent and field independent questionnaires were administered among 50 students which lasted for 60 minutes. After that, to classify the participants as field dependent or field independent, the papers were controlled and scored based on the Group Embedded Figures Test (GEFT) developed by Witkin et al. (1971).

After determining the participants' cognitive styles (FD/FI), the researchers asked the participants to answer the effective EFL teaching questionnaire developed by Kourieos and Evripidou (2013). To measure the frequency of effective language teaching among the students, the questionnaire raised

the following question: to what extent do you believe that the following aspects are useful/effective for language teaching?

Data Analysis

To analyze the collected data and answer the research questions, the SPSS software version 21 was utilized. To address the research questions, descriptive and inferential statistics were used. Mann-Whitney U test was used to see if there was any significant relationship between students' field dependence/independence and their perceptions of effective language teaching.

RESULTS

This study sought to investigate what characteristics field dependent and independent EFL learners attribute to effective language teachers. Furthermore, this research tried to explore if there was any significant relationship between EFL learners' field dependence/independence and their perceptions of effective language teaching. First, the researchers selected 50 homogeneous participants out of 80 students using Oxford Placement Test. Then, the authors administered GEFT questionnaire to identify field dependent and field independent learners using a defined cut-off score based on Case's criteria (Cited in Mahvelati & Mukundan, 2012). Accordingly, the participants with 1.4 SD below the mean were considered as field dependent and those with 1.4 SD above the mean were considered as field independent.

The maximum possible score was 25. The higher students score the more field independent he/she would be. It is worth mentioning that those learners whose mean score was between 1.4 SD below and 1.4 above the mean were considered as field-mixed and excluded from the list. Finally, the researchers administered the effective EFL teaching questionnaire to both groups i.e. field dependent and field independent learners as presented below.

Field dependent L2 Learners' Perceptions of Effective Language Teaching

This part summarizes and explains the findings related to field-dependent L2 learners' perceptions about effective language teacher's personal and interpersonal features

Table 1 depicts information related to the total mean score of field-dependent students' idea and belief about different features of effective language teachers including personal and interpersonal ones. Items 1-8 were rated higher than the midpoint, 3. They were all related to the teachers who were considered encouraging and supportive by the learners, while item 9 achieved a lower score, showing that field-dependent EFL students did not welcome the instructor's authoritarian role. All 8 items were ranked in the above-mentioned table based on their importance. The following table summarizes the findings, which focus on the field-dependent EFL students' perceptions about English proficiency of the instructors (see Table 2).

Table 1
Personal and interpersonal features of instructors as perceived by FD learners

An effective language teacher should	N	Mean	S.D	Rank
1. Be eager to help students in and outside the classroom	29	3.5	.97	4
2. Encourages students to express and discuss their ideas for the content of the lesson.	29	3.2	1.03	6
3. Praise effort	29	3.0	.94	7
4. Be friendly to students	29	3.9	.99	3
5. Treat students fairly regardless of achievement.	29	3.4	1.26	5
6. Take into consideration students' difficulties with the F L	29	3.4	1.26	5
7. Express confidence in students' language abilities.	29	4.0	.94	2
8. Be open-minded	29	4.1	.56	1
9. Use authority to maintain discipline	29	2.6	.69	8

Table 2
English proficiency of the instructors as perceived by FD learners

An effective language teacher should	N	Mean	S.D	Rank
1. Use the FL competently	29	4.2	.99	3
2. Have a broad vocabulary in the FL	29	4.3	.82	1
3. Have a native-like accent	29	3.1	.73	5
4. Have a sound knowledge of the grammar	29	4.2	.78	2
5. Be familiar with language learning theories	29	3.9	.56	4
6. Be acquainted with the target culture	29	3.1	.99	5

Regarding the English proficiency of the instructors as perceived by FD learners, Table 2 shows that items 2, 4, 1 were reported showing higher means compared to other items in Table 1. It shows that some items in the second thematic area received higher attention, whereas items 5, 3, and 6 were reported to show lower means in the items tested. Table 3 focuses on the method used by the instructors to present, assess, and explain the new materials and content. The findings indicate that instructors who emphasised more on the use of educational materials, content, and tasks to enhance and facilitate learning demonstrated higher competence in their delivery. The following table summarizes the related data.

Table 3 depicts that between all 20 items in this table just 5 items obtained a mean score higher than 4. Items 1, 16, 2, 12, and 7 are ranked respectively based on the order of importance. On the contrary, items 17, 6, 8, 10, 19, and 11 were considered as less important or not as effective as other teaching methods.

Field Independent L2 Learners' Perceptions of Effective Language Teaching

This section tries to present and discuss the findings associated with field-independent L2 learners' perceptions with different aspects of effective language teachers.

Table 3
Teaching methods as perceived by FD learners

	An effective language teacher should	N	Mean	SD	Rank
1.	Follow the textbook rigidly	29	4.5	.65	1
2.	Make frequent use of other materials	29	4.1	.73	3
3.	Integrate computer-aided instruction into the FL classroom	29	3.4	.51	7
4.	Set activities which expose students to the target culture	29	3.4	.51	7
5.	Design or select materials according to students' major	29	3.4	.69	7
6.	Simplify his/her language to facilitate comprehension	29	3.0	.66	18
7.	Expose students to real life topics	29	3.6	.84	6
8.	Use recasts to correct students' mistakes	29	3.2	.42	14
9.	Use the FL as the predominant means of classroom communication.	29	3.3	.48	10
10.	Provide opportunities for students to use the FL beyond the classroom setting	29	3.2	.42	14
11.	Not grade language production (speaking/writing) primarily for grammatical accuracy	29	3.2	.42	14
12.	Set activities which require students to interact with each other in the FL	29	4.1	.31	3
13.	Grade written assignments predominantly for effort and content	29	3.2	.42	14
14.	Set activities which require students to work in pairs or small groups	29	4.1	.31	3
15.	Use activities which draw learners' attention to specific grammatical features.	29	3.3	.48	10
16.	Thoroughly explain new grammar rules before asking students to practice the relevant structure	29	4.2	.42	2
17.	Grade written assignments predominantly for grammatical accuracy	29	3.0	.47	18
18.	Correct students immediately after making a grammar mistake during communicative activities	29	3.3	1.05	10
19.	Address errors by immediately providing explanation as to why students' responses are incorrect	29	3.2	.42	14
20.	Set activities which require students to work individually	29	3.3	.48	10

Table 4 depicts data related to the overall mean score of field-dependent students' idea and belief about different features of effective language teachers including personal and interpersonal ones. Items 1-8 were rated higher than the midpoint, 3. They were all related to the teachers who were considered encouraging and supportive by the learners, while item 9 achieved a lower score, showing that field-

dependent EFL students did not welcome the instructor's authoritarian role. All 8 items were ranked in the above-mentioned table based on their importance. Table 5 summarizes the findings, which focus on the field-independent EFL students' perceptions about English proficiency of the instructors.

Based on this table, the highest score is 4.1 for items number 2 and 5, while the lowest number is for number 6 (mean= 2.8).

Table 4
Personal and interpersonal features of instructors as perceived by FI learners

An effective language teacher should	N	Mean	S.D	Rank
1. Be eager to help students in and outside the classroom	21	3.3	1.05	6
2. Encourages students to express and discuss their ideas for the content of the lesson.	21	3.4	.84	5
3. Praise effort	21	3	1.28	7
4. Be friendly to students	21	3	1.59	7
5. Treat students fairly regardless of achievement.	21	3.6	1.07	3
6. Take into consideration students' difficulties with the FL	21	3.6	1.07	3
7. Express confidence in students' language abilities.	21	4.2	1.03	1
8. Be open-minded	21	3.7	.48	2
9. Use authority to maintain discipline	21	2.3	.48	9

Table 5
English proficiency of the instructors as perceived by FI learners

An effective language teacher should	N	Mean	S.D	Rank
1. Use the FL competently	21	3.7	.94	4
2. Have a broad vocabulary in the FL	21	4.1	.87	1
3. Have a native-like accent	21	3.0	.66	5
4. Have a sound knowledge of the grammar	21	3.9	.87	3
5. Be familiar with language learning theories	21	4.1	.56	1
6. Be acquainted with the target culture	21	2.8	1.22	6

This shows that field-independent learners value instructors who are proficient in the English language as effective teachers. Table 6 focuses on the methods used by the instructors to present, assess, and explain the new materials and content. It concentrates on how instructors use educational materials, content, and tasks to enhance and facilitate learning. The following table summarises the related data.

Table 6 shows that only 5 items obtained a mean score higher than 4. Items 1, 16, 12, 2, and 14 were ordered respectively according to their importance level. On the contrary, items 5, 6, 13, 18, 19, and 20 were ordered respectively as the less important ones.

It can be established that EFL learners commonly desire to follow activities or procedures, which are based on communication or peer work. Moreover, students emphasize on explicit methods of teaching as a major factor of an effective teacher. On the other hand, EFL learners have less preference for individual work, having teachers explain about grammatical points in L2 classes or be corrected by them. In sum, by comparing the most and the least effective language teachers' characteristics it can be noted that students' perceptions about effective language teachers are under the effect of cognitive process. Hence, it is important to consider psychological aspects when conducting lessons with students.

Table 6
Teaching methods as perceived by FI learners

An effective language teacher should	N	Mean	SD	Rank
1. Follow the textbook rigidly	21	4.7	6.44	1
2. Make frequent use of other materials	21	4.1	.73	4
3. Integrate computer-aided instruction into the FL classroom	21	3.3	.67	12
4. Set activities which expose students to the target culture	21	3.3	.67	12
5. Design or select materials according to students' major	21	3.2	.78	15
6. Simplify his/her language to facilitate comprehension	21	3.2	.91	15
7. Expose students to real life topics	21	3.9	.87	6
8. Use recasts to correct students' mistakes	21	3.5	.84	8
9. Use the FL as the predominant means of classroom communication.	21	3.7	.82	7
10. Provide opportunities for students to use the FL beyond the classroom setting	21	3.3	.48	12
11. Not grade language production (speaking/writing) primarily for grammatical accuracy	21	3.4	.69	10
12. Set activities which require students to interact with each other in the FL	21	4.2	.42	3
13. Grade written assignments predominantly for effort and content	21	2.8	1.0	20
14. Set activities which require students to work in pairs or small groups	21	4.0	.47	5
15. Use activities which draw learners' attention to specific grammatical features.	21	3.5	.52	8
16. Thoroughly explain new grammar rules before asking students to practice the relevant structure	21	4.5	.52	2
17. Grade written assignments predominantly for grammatical accuracy	21	3.4	.96	10
18. Correct students immediately after making a grammar mistake during communicative activities	21	2.9	1.44	19
19. Address errors by immediately providing explanation as to why students' responses are incorrect	21	3.0	.66	18
20. Set activities which require students to work individually	21	3.1	.73	17

Relationship between L2 Learners' FD/I and their Perceptions of Effective Language Teaching

In order to compare EFL learners' perception about different aspects of effective teachers, Mann-Whitney U test was run on the scores obtained from sections of the Effective EFL teaching questionnaire and its total scores. Mann-Whitney U test, a non-parametric test,

is used to compare two means which belong to a single population; moreover, it is also used to examine if these two means are equal or not. The following table summarizes the results.

As depicted in Table 7, the participants did not have different perception toward personal and interpersonal features of instructors (Sig=.223), and teaching methods

(Sig=.179). However, they had different perceptions about English proficiency of the instructors, the field-independent learners consider English proficiency of the instructors more important than other variables; moreover, the effect size was

0.38 which was higher than the effect size of other variables. It should be added that the field dependent and field independent groups were not different in the total score of the questionnaire (Sig=.232).

Table 7
Mann-whitney U test on EFL learners' perception

	Group	N	Mean rank	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	Effect size
Personal and interpersonal features of instructors	FD	29	23.38	243.0	678.0	-1.22	.223	0.192
	FI	21	28.43					
English proficiency of the instructors	FD	29	21.10	177.0	612.0	-2.54	.011	0.381
	FI	21	31.57					
Teaching methods	FD	29	27.83	237.0	468.0	-1.34	.179	-0.104
	FI	21	22.29					
Total	FD	29	23.41	244.0	679.0	-1.19	.232	-0.126
	FI	21	28.38					

DISCUSSION

The findings indicated that field-dependent L2 learners valued certain aspects in teaching demonstrated by the teachers highly compared to others. Some of these aspects include expressing confidence in students' language abilities, being open-minded, making frequent use of other materials, setting activities which require students to interact with each other in the foreign language setting, activities which require learners to work in pairs or small groups, and thoroughly explaining new grammar rules before asking the students to practice the relevant structures. This result may be due to FD learners' characteristics, since they are prone to interact with their

surroundings and have great interest in communicating with others. In addition, FD learners were also keener on using social media. These findings are supported by Witkin and Goodenough (1981), who stated that in the process of a mental activity through a pedagogical task, learners' tendencies and inner ability could play an effective role and led a person to utilize different styles depending on personal differences. In addition, this finding is also supported by Farsi et al. (2014) study who stated that the relationship between teaching styles and learners' preferences was heavily influenced by both learners and teachers' personality.

According to the findings of current study, field independent L2 learners believed that effective teachers have characteristics, including following the textbook rigidly, thoroughly explaining new grammar rules before asking students to practice the relevant structure, setting activities which require students to interact with each other in the FL, expressing confidence in students' language abilities, making frequent use of other materials, being familiar with language learning theories, having a broad vocabulary in the foreign language and setting activities which require students to work in pairs or small groups. The findings may be attributed to the learner's learning preference to drill activities as well as tasks that require their critical thinking skills are in line with studies of Hassanzadeh et al. (2012), Ismail et al., (2012) and Zare and Noordin(2011).

According to Ahmadi (2002) and Tehrani and Razali (2018), FD/FI EFL learners apply different techniques and strategies through language skills learning and the learners also employ various and most of the time different learning strategies. Furthermore, the results of this study are in line with Mancy and Reid (2004) who found that field independent learners preferred to separate a structure into its different parts and made a different and new structures according to what they were exposed to before.

Furthermore, the findings of the current study revealed that field dependent and field independent learners do not have different perceptions about their instructors' personal

and interpersonal features particularly on teaching methods. However, it is interesting to note that they had different perceptions about their instructors' English language proficiency where field-independent learners valued it more than field independent learners. It is worth mentioning too that learners do not have different perceptions about the overall characteristics of effective teachers. This result may be due to the fact that field dependent learners are concrete thinkers and prefer group interactions while field independent learners prefer to be involved in fixed activities. This result is in line with studies by Brown (2014) and Salmani-Nodoushan (2007) who claimed that there was a positive relationship between field-independent cognitive styles and success in learning new languages. Besides, this result concurs with Jamieson's (1992) research, where cognitive style of learning and personal difference could affect any part of language learning and development of language skills. Furthermore, this finding is also consistent with Shishavan and Sadeghi's (2009) research where they reported personality as an important factor in developing effective teachers.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, the participants did not have different perceptions about the overall characteristics of an effective teacher. According to the obtained statistical findings, there were 9 considerable items in an effective teaching process. In EFL learners' perception, some referred to

personal aspects of EFL teachers while some others dealt with interpersonal aspects of EFL teachers. When field-dependent students were asked to rate personal and interpersonal features of effective language teachers. Items 1-8 were rated higher than the midpoint, 3. They were all related to the teachers who were considered encouraging and supportive by the learners, while item 9 achieved a lower score, showing that field-dependent EFL students did not welcome the instructor's authoritarian role. It reveals that field-dependent EFL students did not desire such characteristics.

On the other hand, based on the results of the present study, field independent learners believed that an effective EFL teacher should focus on textbooks and explain the grammatical points explicitly and there must be a high level of interactive activities to promote EFL learners' confidence in the learning process. These interactive processes can be completed through group work and employing frequent use of pedagogical materials. The points which have been considered by field independent learners in general are the same as the field independent EFL learners' perceptions but the factors like being open-minded and preferring the pair work in the class over other classroom activities were also considered by field dependent learners.

Teachers and learners should consider the different factors in the process of teaching or learning the English language. These factors can either be personal or interpersonal. In this respect, the findings of the current study revealed that in teaching

English, taking into consideration EFL learners' personal traits (in this case field dependent and field independent) and their perceived output prove to be effective and can produce better results. Therefore, being aware of specific methodological activities to use and providing pedagogical attention is required. Moreover, language learning involves an integrated process and with the new changes in higher education, it is vital to be familiar not only with EFL learners' inner ability or differentiation but also with their perception about the teaching competence of the instructors. It cannot be denied that teaching during the pandemic is a new challenge for most educators and many teachers are still figuring out a style that works best for both them and students. With many students experiencing stress and anxiety over their future, teaching using ineffective methods during COVID-19 will create an overwhelming learning environment that causes frustration and disengagement.

Therefore, being familiar with the EFL learners' personal traits and their perception about what makes an effective language teacher is considered important in keeping the teaching delivery coherent and consistent with the strategies used. The COVID-19 pandemic situation has undeniably posed unprecedented challenges which requires teachers to adapt to a different teaching situation. It is crucial that policy makers realise that field dependent and field independent learners have different outlooks towards language learning. This calls for urgent initiatives to normalise

new learning environments by focusing on personal traits when planning and designing the foreign language national curriculum.

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