



The Impact of Cognitive Style as a Source of Variation in ESL Students' Attitudes about Ownership in Writing

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to find out the relationship between cognitive style and ownership in ESL Students' writing. 80 International ESL Iranian students studying in different colleges in Mysore City, India participated in this investigation. After conducting Nelson Proficiency test, two groups of 40 based on GEFT have been organized. A questionnaire of 10 multiple choice questions has been given to all participants in both groups to identify their attitudes regarding ownership in writing. Data analysis revealed that there is a significant relationship between cognitive style and ownership in writing and cognitive style can affect students' attitude towards ownership. Field-dependent students indicated more tendencies towards ownership in writing.

Keywords: Cognitive Style; Field-Dependent; Field-Independent; Ownership; Writing

1. Introduction

Ellis states that "Cognitive Style is a term used to the manner in which people perceive, conceptualize. Organize and recall information (Ellis R, 1990, p.114)". Therefore, it is to mention that cognitive style is the preferred mode in that learner analyzes data and performs a task, and every learner is supposed to have less or more constant modes of cognitive performance. Different aspects of cognitive styles have been recognized in the psychological background of learning that a small number of them were being studied for the ideology of foreign or second language learning. These are commonly described as dichotomies. The dichotomy that has attracted the highest interests in the area of Language Learning is named as Field Dependence/Field Independence (FD/FI). As Ellis R. (1990, P.114) states: "The terms do not really represent alternatives, but poles on a continuum, with individuals varying in the extent to which they lean toward dependence or independence." Regarding Field-Dependent/Field-Independent individuals, it is to mention that a Field-Independent person can

perceive a particular, relevant item of factor in a "Field" of distracting items. The term "Field" generally may be perceptual or it may be more subjective in mentioning to a set of thoughts, opinions, or feelings from which the Field-Independent individuals' task is to comprehend particular relevant subsets. Field-Dependence, in other words, is the tendency to be dependent on the total field such that the parts added within the field are not easily perceived, though the total field is perceived more clearly as a unified whole. Brown H.D in the same line states that: "Affectively, persons who are more predominantly Field-Independent tend to be generally more independent, competitive and self-confident, whereas Field-Dependent persons tend to be more socialized, tend to derive their self-identity from persons around them and usually are more empathic and perceptive of the feelings and thoughts of others (Brown H.D, 1987, P. 88)". It declared that whereas Field-Independents will perform some tasks more effectively than Field-Dependents, the opposite will be true for other tasks. The effect of cognitive styles in learning a foreign language has received much attention in recent years. Field



independence is one kind of cognitive styles which was introduced by Witkin, et al. (1971) to resemble “the degree to which one perceives analytically or globally” (Hadley, 2003). The ability of a person to extract the ‘message’ or ‘signal’ from the ‘noise’ or irrelevant information or the cognitive restructuring ability is associated with field independent characteristics. Field independents have the ability to break a complex stimulus into separate elements and to give it a different structure or organization based on previous experiences or restructure it in their own way. If it is difficult to do such a thing, the person will be field dependent (Mancy & Reid, 2004).

2. Review of Literature

A chronic variance in literature on cognitive styles is the one between style and ability. As both style and ability may influence performance on a specific task, this difference is significant and essential. Riding (2000) states that style and ability are the two main factors that are investigated with respect to individual differences in cognitive processing. Several distinct characteristics can be discovered in the literature. Guilford (1980) declares that ability concentrates on the level of performance, while style is more related to the mode of performance. Witkin et al. (1977) also suggest that cognitive style is related to the form rather than the content of performance. Messick (1984) defines abilities as being unique constructs (i.e., more of it is ‘better’), while styles are usually supposed to be bipolar (i.e., both poles may be equally benefited, but in different conditions). This means that having more or less of ability can be related to possible levels of realization in a certain area. Cognitive styles on the contrary range from utmost to a contrasting extreme and each pole of the aspect has different intimation for cognitive functioning. Research supports the idea that cognitive style may be thought of as describing different, rather than better, ways of thinking (e.g., Kirton, 1989; Riding & Pearson, 1994; Sadler-Smith, 1997; Tinajero & Paramo, 1997).

Hayes and Allinson (1994) propose that cognitive styles may not be easily changed through teaching or experience, while strategies have a rather potential flexibility. Witkin (1976) also state that many of the behaviors originating from cognitive styles might be more pliable, whereas cognitive style may be consistent over time. According to Sadler-Smith and Badger (1998) a style can be known as mainly a performance of the individual (and more particularly the personality), while a strategy rather is a performance of the interplay of the individual and the circumstance. Kogan (1980) and Robertson (1985) also propose that cognitive styles produce stable behaviors across different situations, whereas strategies are more particular and demonstrate the conscious decisions individual make in dealing with cognitive tasks. Both notions might be confused in study which causes apparently contrasting results relating to the flexibility versus consistency of cognitive style. Cognitive style has a tendency according to us towards consistency across time and condition and therefore remains mainly inattentive to particular training (Kagan & Kogan, 1970).

Some scholars differentiated field independent individual from field dependent individual by if they “reflect preferred modes of relating to, classifying, assimilating and organizing the environment” (Witkin et al., 1962, p.71). Witkin et al.’s (1971) bipolar development of field independence and field dependence assessed the degree to which learners depended upon interior or exterior referents as they process data and interplay with the surrounding field. Generally, field independent people observed objects away from the background, but field dependent people were confused by the surrounding field. On the other hand, field independent people could easily disregard unrelated parts, whereas field dependent people were easily influenced by irrelevant elements. Many researches have proposed that FI is a powerful predictor of successful second or foreign language learning. Naiman et al. (1975), studying English-speaking



Canadian students of secondary school studying French, discovered that FI was a considerable predictor of L2 performance. They found that FI/FD learners thought to process and create linguistic structures in different ways. FI was obviously connected with higher success on emulation and listening comprehension tasks. In the same situation as that in the investigation of Naiman et al. (1975, 1978), Bialystok and Frohlich (1978) also recognized that FI represent a significant relationship with success in French reading, listening, writing and grammar tests. Chen (1991), who has done an investigation on the relationship of FI and English proficiency of Taiwanese college students, also verified the significant relationship between FI and listening comprehension skill relevant to both phonological and conversational aspects. In a research of adult ESL learners by Seliger (1977), a relationship was also observed between FI and a sentence disambiguation test, therefore supporting the hypothesis that FI was linked to successful L2 proficiency learning. Another survey by Lieu (2000) investigated the relationship between students' cognitive styles and tasks of English sentences among junior high school students in Taiwan; Lieu found that a significant correlation between FI and performance in recognizing English clauses tasks.

3. Research Question: Does Cognitive Style significantly affect ESL Students' Attitudes about Ownership in Writing?

4. Null Hypothesis of the Study: Cognitive Style does not significantly affect ESL Students' Attitudes about Ownership in Writing.

5. Method and Procedure: Totally, 100 Iranian students in an age range of 25-33 from different

colleges and departments have been collected as participants but the data of 80 students were analyzed, because some of the students were excluded from the study based on their extreme scores on the proficiency test and neutral scores on GEFT. One week prior to the main survey, to guarantee the homogeneity of the participants, Nelson English Proficiency Test was administered among 100 students and the students whose scores did not fall within the range of standard deviation were eliminated. After executing the GEFT (Group Embedded Figures Test by Witkin et al., 1971), the students divided into two groups of 40 based on field dependent and field independent cognitive style. The ownership questionnaire including 10 multiple-choice questions has been given to all students in both groups to realize their attitudes towards ownership in writing.

6. Data Analysis

6.1. Group Embedded Figures Test: The GEFT was administered among the 90 participants to find out their cognitive style preferences. The investigator neglected the mediocre of the test distribution that is the students gained scores within 1/2 stand deviation below or above the mean, have not been included in the study. The participants were divided into two groups of field-dependent and field-independent. Those who obtained scores of 17-18 were included in FI (Field-Independent) group and students who obtained scores within 0-11, considered as FD (Field-Dependent).

6.2. Final Participants: Totally 20 participants were eliminated from the main study based on their scores above or below standard deviation and two group of 40 Field-Dependent and Field-Independent ESL students have been organized.

Table 6.1. Final Selected Participants in Each Group

Group	Total Number of Participants in each group	Age range	Gender
A (Field-Dependent)	40	25-33	22 males 18 females
B (Field-Independent)	40	25-33	17 males 23 females

6.3. Questionnaire Outcomes: Here some important questions which directly aimed at ownership will be interpreted. Totally 84% of students in FD group and 12.5% of students in FI group showed positive ideas regarding the topic selection by their owns. Generally 5% of FD students and 32.5% of FI students disagreed with the 3rd status in questionnaire and rest of them (10% of FDs, 55% of FIs) were neutral. 85% of FD students and 10% of FI students are totally interested in reading their writing works aloud when teachers ask them, but generally 2.5% of students in FD group and 65% of students in FI group disagreed with this status. Moreover 12.5% of FD and 25% of FI students had neutral responses. As for status 5 in questionnaire, a total number of 34 FD students (85%) and 2 of FI students (5%) indicated that they feel anxious when facing with unfamiliar topics for writing tasks. On the other hand, 2 FD students and 29 FI students showed that they will not be anxious if they are exposed to unfamiliar topics for writing assignments. Among them, 10% of FD students (n=4) and 20% of FI students (n=8) were impartial. A total of 30% of ESL students in FD group and 62.5% of ESL students in FI group were interested to write in their pleasure times. Conversely, in general 25% of FD students and 12.5% of FI students showed no tendency towards writing in pleasure times. Based on the data analysis, 45% of students in FD group and 25% of students in FI group has neutral responses. About question 7, 87.5% of field-dependent students and 12.5% of field-independent students totally indicated that they can write easily when they choose the topic

themselves. But, 2.5% of FD students and 27.5% of FI students totally disagreed with this case. Also, 10% of students in FD group and 60% of students in FI group were neutral. For status 8 in the questionnaire, a total number of 36 field dependent ESL students (90%) and 13 FI students (32.5%) has positive answers, means generally agreed (They will read the teacher comments about their writings to become a better writer) . On the other hand, only one student in FD group (2.5%) and 10 numbers of FI students (25%) totally disagreed with the status. 7.5% of FD students (n=3) and 42.5% of FI students (n=17) has neutral responses. Data analysis demonstrated that, totally 90% of FD students and 17.5% of FI students feel writing is an opportunity to express themselves and has positive ideas, on the contrary, 2.5% of students in FD group and 25% of students in FI group showed opposite responses generally. The neutral answer included 7.5% of FD students and 57.5% of FI students. Regarding the 10th and last status of the questionnaire, 82.5% of students in FD group and 5% of students in FI group totally showed that writing for school assignments is not desirable for them and they dislike it. But, totally 10% of FD students and 75% of FI students disagreed with this status. Among them, 7.5% of field-dependent and 20% of field-independent students demonstrated neutral ideas. Thus, based on the data analyses of 10 status of the questionnaire, it can be concluded that Field-Dependent ESL students has more tendency towards ownership in writing compare to Field-Independent ESL students. FD students showed more positive answers about the questions.

According to data interpreted and shown in figures, it is revealed that there is a relationship between Field-dependent/Independent Cognitive

Style and Ownership in Writing. So, the answer to the research question is positive and null hypothesis is disapproved.

Figure 6.1. Numbers of FD Students' Responses for each Question of Ownership

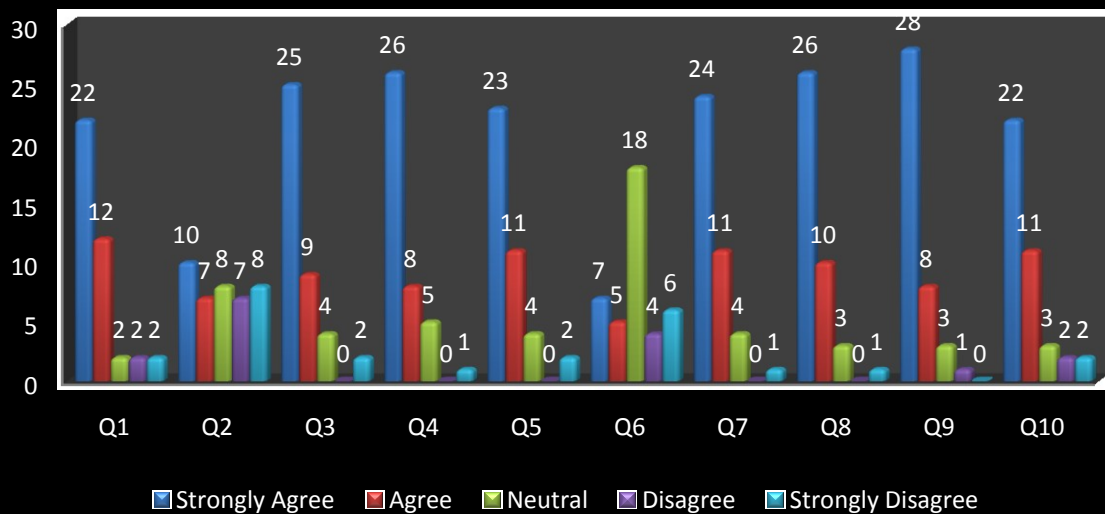
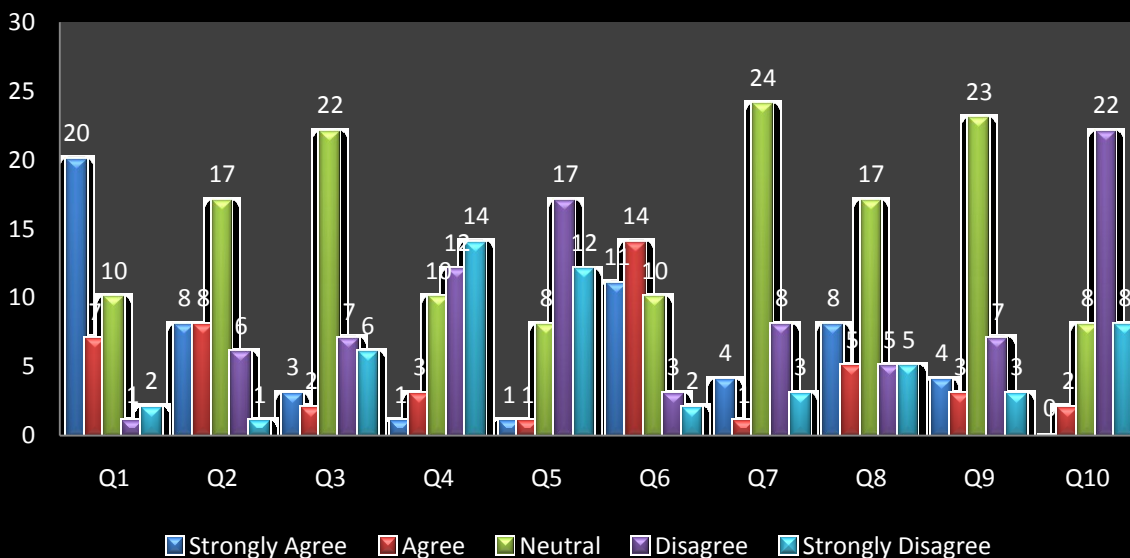


Figure 6.2. Numbers of FI Students' Responses for each Question of Ownership



7. Discussion and Conclusion: Data collected regarding this hypothesis in present study demonstrated a correlation between field-dependent/independent cognitive styles and ownership in writing. According to the data

analysis, the field-dependent students had more positive views to ownership in writing rather than field-independent students. It means that the field-dependent students' ownership tendency in writing is more than field-independent students.



Ownership in writing is not a newfound notion but relatively a notion which is attracting a lot of attention (Ede & Lunsford, 1985). Both the instructional experts and the educational researchers related to writing realize that writing nurtures individual, interpersonal and mental concept. Therefore in writing, chances for fostering senses of ownership appear when topics permit learners to discover their experiences, opinions, interests, ideas, difficulties and also write about whatever crucial for them (Applebee, 1991). Moreover, Calkins (1986) advocates such opinions by claiming that writing should permit the learner to write with her or his own ideas therewith demonstrating that she/he is not said what to write.

The notion of ownership in writing is indicated by a person when her/his writing ideas reveal meaning concerns, worth and his/her viewers. But, this matter has to be stated in writing as the person's thoughts, modes of observing and interacting, so that they can be authenticated (Buddemeier, 1982). This is the situation when a student writes as he/she feels a profound and individual affiliation to the procedure. Based on Bright (1995), permitting learners to have ownership in writing appeared to motivate learners to write with "less difficulty and more Confidence" (p. 3). Shanklin (1991) agrees that learners try to write best if they are permitted to regularly self-chosen subjects, are fascinated in a subject or are acquainted with that subject (p. 50). Thus, this claim may open a new point of view and a technique to improve the field-dependent students writing performance.

8. Implications: The results of this survey have created a new aspect. Learners can improve their writing performance by being conscious of style zones in which they feel less convenience, creating ways to enhance their mental development (Yarahmadi, 2011). Likewise, instructors can recognize strong style types in their writing classrooms and benefit efficiently from these findings to contrive instructional

strategy that match students' cognitive style precedencies.

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