

## **The Relationship between English Listening Proficiency Levels and Learning Styles**

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### **Abstract**

Several factors have been investigated in order to understand how learners attempt to learn a second language, one of which is learning style. Learners particularly EFL learners from different English language backgrounds and listening proficiency may vary from one another in their learning style preferences. With such a view, it is essential to consider the differences in learning styles and listening proficiency levels in teaching because this would have an impact on the learning process. The aim of the study was to identify Iranian freshmen's levels of English listening proficiency and their learning style preferences as well as the relationship between them. A group of 92 freshmen from a population of 120 freshmen were randomly selected from a university in Esfahan, Iran. The Oxford Placement Test was first administered to identify the freshmen's listening proficiency levels and the learning style preferences. Questionnaire was employed to identify their preferred learning styles. Based on the results obtained from the Oxford Placement Test, 19 freshmen were identified as advanced learners, 39 intermediate learners, and 34 low proficiency learners. The descriptive analysis of the learning style preferences indicated that all the learners preferred high level learning styles and considered themselves as communicative learners. The Pearson Correlation analysis also indicated that there was a significant positive correlation between the learners' English listening proficiency levels and their learning style preferences. The implication of the study is that all lecturers should be aware of their learners' learning style preferences and their English listening proficiency levels in order to match their teaching styles with their learners' learning style preferences.

**Keywords:** learning styles; learning process; English listening proficiency; EFL learners; communicative learners

### **Introduction**

Various research studies on education have identified several factors which should be taken into account in understanding how learners attempt to learn a second language. One of these factors is learning style, which is widely described as 'cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment' (Keefe, 1979: p. 4). Learning styles are

sometimes predicted by factors such as culture, age, type of tasks, grade, nationality, race, religion, and previous learning (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Dunn, 1996). Learning styles and listening proficiency are important factors in learning English in general and listening in particular because listening is central to all learning and precedes the development of the other language skills (Byrnes 1984; Dunkel 1986; and Feyten 1991). Learners particularly EFL learners from different English language backgrounds and listening proficiency may vary from one another in their learning style preferences. Thus, the differences in learning styles and listening proficiency levels need to be taken into account for planning classes and the activities to be carried out because these would have an impact on the learning process (Abella & Salinas, 2006). Each learner has his or her own learning style(s) that is (are) employed when doing a specific task. They learn in different ways; some tend to learn by seeing, others by hearing and some desire to learn on their own, while others prefer to learn by interacting with their peers (Riazi & Riasati, 2007).

Several learners prefer learning by utilizing tape recorders or videotapes, while others prefer learning visually, that is, learning through reading books or graphics (Felder & Henriques, 1995; Liu, 2008; Riazi & Riasati, 2007). Oxford (1990) asserted that learners' characteristics such as 'learning styles and personality traits are difficult to change' (p. 12). Therefore, it is believed that successful learning is attributable to a learner's inherent characteristics. Another important factor is the learning strategy (ies) that learners employ in the learning and listening process, which is affected by their learning styles (Chang, 2005). When learners recognize their types of learning style preferences, they try to learn in general and listen in particular in a way which is effective to their learning and listening in terms of using top-down, bottom-up and interactive strategies. Therefore, identifying and understanding the types of learning styles and their potential in enhancing English language listening proficiency is crucial for these EFL learners. Thus, this study aimed to identify Iranian EFL freshman university learners' English listening proficiency levels, the types and levels of preferred learning styles, and the relationship between these two variables.

### **Learning Style Preferences**

Most learning style taxonomies are based on the distinction between the left brain (analytical) and the right brain (concrete) (Anderson, 1988; Dodigovic, 2005; Willing, 1988, 1989). Analytical learners process information in linear, sequential, rational, objective, abstract, verbal, and mathematical ways, with concentration on detail, engaging in reflective and cautious thinking, replying to selective and low-intensity stimuli. These learners have control over sequential and structured thinking, analytical problem solving, predictable routines, and familiar activities; and struggle with learning material that is abstract, factual, and practical. They also use some systematic instructional strategies; work either independently or with a compatible partner, and set their goals and direct their own learning, follow examples, trial and error, rules, and definitions (Dodigovic, 2005; Willing, 1989). They tend to employ bottom-up approaches in their learning in general and listening in particular to identify the words and details of the text (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

In contrast, concrete learners process information in a holistic, pattern-seeking, intuitive, subjective, concrete, emotional, and visual way, concentrating on overall impression while being impulsive (hasty) and trusting hunches, requiring rich and different input. They like to cooperate with one another to solve problems, and do different and creative activities. They also tend to pull back from non-stimulating tasks and cultural relevance. These learners also use different realistic and simultaneously managed instructional strategies, work with others to gain common goals, and prefer explicit structure, modelling, guidance, and feedback for not only task completion but also repeated exposure to association patterns (Dodigovic, 2005; Willing, 1989). They probably use more top-down approaches to learning in general and listening in particular (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). Learning style has been extensively researched (Ehrman, Leaver & Oxford, 2003; Ho, 1999; Liu, 2008; Oxford & Nam, 1998; Reid, 1998; Wintergerst, DeCapua & Verna, 2003; Willing, 1988). For example, Reid (1998) investigated 1300 ESL students with different cultural backgrounds. A large number of students mostly preferred to take part in activities and role-play (kinaesthetic) and write notes (tactile learning), and the least preferred learning style among students was group learning. Reid concluded that the inherent differences in cultural or language backgrounds and disciplines often play an important role in determining types of learning style.

Ho (1999) conducted a study on a group of 237 computer studies students, two groups of year 1 and four groups of year 2 to find out their preferred learning styles. Ho used the Learning Style Questionnaire developed by Willing (1988). Findings of Ho's study revealed that most students in each of the six groups were communicative learners. Ho also asserted that the result of her study is a safe indicator for the general direction to take in designing tasks for computer studies students. Ho suggested that identifying the students' learning style preferences at the beginning of each course can assist their teachers in making adjustments in the proportion of task types to facilitate the learning of the students. Ho also concluded that if the students' learning style preferences are identified across years of study, a clear direction and fairly reliable basis for the task design can be determined and teachers can make their course materials on this basis.

Willing (1988) investigated a group of 517 learners from different ethnic groups (Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabic, South Americans, and Polish/Czech students) to find the correlation between learning style preferences and biographical variables. The results indicated that there were cultural differences with regard to the learners' learning style preferences; for example, all learners from the different cultures reflected that they liked studying grammar. The Arabic learners were the ones who preferred grammar the most because 65% of them ranked this item as the "best". In other words, the findings indicated that authority-oriented and analytical learning styles were highly valued by Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabic, South American, and Polish students (Willing 1988, p. 130). As a result, Willing (1988) identified four distinct types of learning styles including: Communicative learners who have a desire for a communicative learning approach; Concrete learners employ very direct means of taking in and processing information – they like games, pictures, video, talking in pairs, and practicing outside classrooms. According to Willing (1988), the common characteristic of concrete learners is the development of inadequacy or an inferiority complex. They disfavoured learning

monotonously and written work. They like variety. They prefer verbal and visual experiences. They have strong desire to be entertained by using games, and tend to be involved in learning physically. Similarly, Felder and Henriques (1995) stated that concrete learners or more specifically kinaesthetically oriented learners prefer to receive information by means of physical sensations and desire to be concrete. Authority-oriented learners who are probably not predisposed to actively organize information would like their teachers to explain everything to them, tend to have their own textbooks, to write everything in a notebook, like to study grammatical rules, learn by reading, and learn new words by looking at them. They depend on their teachers in learning, textbooks, and their notebooks. Finally, there are analytical learners whose cognitive strengths lead them not only to analyse carefully and demonstrate great interest in structures but also to put a great deal of value on showing their independence by performing these things themselves, autonomously (Willing, 1988). They employ cognitive strategies to get the overall meaning by focusing on general features.

Furthermore, Ong Wei Ann, Rajendram, Yusof (2006) conducted a study on a total of 75 students to investigate the relationship between the learning style preferences and written English proficiency of Cohort 3 students of the B. Ed. (TESL) Foundation course in IPBA. The findings of their study on the investigation of the effect of learning style preferences on the students' written English proficiency levels indicated that the students' major learning style preferences was kinaesthetic through which many students learned best through involvement in classroom experiences. They liked to learn by carrying out physical activities. Their written English proficiency levels had been affected by their learning style preferences. In another study, Liu (2008) asserted that learners from different listening proficiency levels have various characteristics while learning a second language. Therefore, it is concluded that the learners' learning style preferences affect their English proficiency levels in general and English listening proficiency levels in particular. To this end, Willing's (1988) theoretical model underpinning the investigation which is based on the ways learners process information and their interaction with the management of learning process and human relations is used in this study. Fleming (2001) further differentiated between four information processing modalities: Visual (V), Aural (A), Read/Write (R), and Kinaesthetic (K) to interpret Willing's (1988) learning style category. Fleming (2001) asserted that concrete learners are clearly right-brained with a tendency toward kinaesthetic information processing modality; analytical learners are completely left-brained with a strong "read or write" information processing orientation; communicative learners seem to be aural in information processing modality; and the authority oriented learners appear to rely on their visual modality. Therefore, the theory developed by Willing (1988) was employed in this study to find out the learners' learning styles.

## **The Study**

### **Participants**

A total of 92 freshmen out of 120 female freshman learners majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) course at a university in Esfahan were randomly selected

based on the sample size table developed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). They were all 18 years old and native speakers of Farsi (Persian). They are all learning English for academic purposes. These freshmen were chosen as they were beginning undergraduates who need to know their learning style preferences as it would help them learn English language in general and listening in particular more effectively. For enrolment in universities, all Iranian learners are required to sit for a university Entrance Examination, namely, Concour Examination. The Concour Examination is a pre-requisite to assess the students' academic competency and ability on different subjects including English. All the tests are written tests in Persian/Farsi except for tests on foreign languages, namely French, German, and English. The written tests for these three languages are focused only on grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. In other words, the Concour Examination focuses on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. This exam does not include listening skills. Thus, a majority of the undergraduates face difficulties in understanding lectures as they fail to listen well in English. Hence, the Oxford Placement Test was administered as it has been tested as a highly effective instrument and a reliable means of grading students at all levels from lower-intermediate upwards, with a consistent record of predictive validity in the light of examination entry (Allan, 1992). The participants were then grouped into three groups. A group of 19 freshmen (21%) who scored between 67 and 96 marks with a mean score of 79.21 and a standard deviation of 7.09 were identified as advanced, 39 (42%) who scored between 35 and 66 marks with a mean score of 50.95 and a standard deviation of 9.46 as intermediate, and 34 (37%) who scored between 8 and 33 marks with a mean score of 23.47 and a standard deviation of 7.00 as low listening proficiency learners.

### **Instrument**

The first instrument utilized in this study was the Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 1992) to identify the students' English language listening proficiency levels. The second was the adapted and modified version of Learning Style Questionnaire developed by Willing (1988) because according to Ho (1999), it is a rather updated one and the learner's types identified by Willing (1988) and the learning methods mentioned in the questionnaire are more comprehensive, understandable, applicable and relevant to second/foreign language (L2/FL) learning contexts. It involves four categories: Communicative, Concrete, Authority-oriented, and Analytical. Items one to six represented learners who liked to learn through watching, listening to native speakers, talking to friends in English (Communicative Learners); items seven to twelve represented learners who liked to learn through games, films, cassettes, talking in pairs, utilizing English outside of the classroom (Concrete Learners); items thirteen to eighteen described learners who preferred their teachers to explain everything to them, have their own textbooks, study grammar, learn by reading, and learn new words by seeing them (Authority-Oriented Learners); and items nineteen to twenty four represented learners who liked studying the rules of grammar, studying English books, reading newspapers, studying by themselves, finding their own mistakes, and working on problems set by the teacher (Analytical Learners).

This questionnaire was distributed to the students to identify their learning style preferences. It indicated the students' choices on a four-point scale, Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree. Prior to the actual data collection, the Learning Style Questionnaire was piloted and the reliability Cronbach's Alpha was 0.814.

### **Data Collection Procedure and Analysis**

The students first took the listening proficiency test (OPT). Then, they were informed (in Farsi) the purpose of the study and how to complete the questionnaire. The students were asked to fill in the questionnaire in 20 minutes. The statistical analyses were conducted utilizing the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 16.0 for Windows. With respect to the analysis of the results achieved from the Learning Style Questionnaire, descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) were utilized to group the students into Communicative, Concrete, Authority-Oriented, and Analytical learning style preferences. The descriptive statistics were also utilized to rank order the learning style preferences from the most preferred to the least preferred.

Then, analysis was done to see the relationship between learners' English listening proficiency levels and their learning style preferences. Prior to measuring the relationship between these variables, it was essential to test the normality of the data (Abd Rahim Md Nor, 2009). One-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was computed to test whether the sample means followed a normal distribution. The results showed that the p-values of the variables were not significant at 0.05. The data followed a normal distribution. Thus, the Pearson Correlation analysis was used to indicate whether there was a significant relationship between the two variables. Guilford and Fruchter's (1973) statistics were used to interpret the level of correlation as follows: < 0.20: slight relationship; 0.20–0.40: low correlation; 0.40–0.70: moderate correlation; 0.70–0.90: high correlation; > 0.90: very high correlation.

### **Findings and Discussions**

#### **Descriptive Analysis of the Level of Total Learning Style Preferences**

Table 1 reveals that the students' responses in each group (advanced, intermediate, and low) were categorized into three ranges (low, moderate, and high) based on their overall mean scores and frequency of their total learning style preferences. From the total of 19 advanced freshman learners, 84% of the learners experienced high level, whereas 16% of them experienced moderate use of total learning styles. Meanwhile, among the intermediate freshmen, 66% of a total of 39 participants felt that they experienced high level of total learning styles, while 34% of them experienced moderate level of total learning styles. Finally, among the low freshmen learners, (34) 79% of learners felt that they experienced high level of total learning style preferences while 21% felt moderate level of total use of learning style preferences.

Table 1: Level of Learning Style Preferences among Advanced, Intermediate, Low Groups

Groups	Level of Learning Styles	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Advanced</b>	Low (24–47)	0	0
	Moderate (48–71)	3	16
	High (72–96)	16	84
	<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Intermediate</b>	Low (24–47)	0	0
	Moderate (48–71)	13	34
	High (72–96)	26	66
	<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Low</b>	Low (24–47)	0	0
	Moderate (48–71)	7	21
	High (72–96)	27	79
	<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>100</b>

As Table 1 shows, none of the advanced, intermediate, and low freshman learners experienced low level of total use of learning styles. This indicates that these learners all attempt to be aware of their types of learning styles while they are learning a foreign language in general and listening in particular. Learning style preferences theory contends that learners perceive, interact with, and reply to the learning environment by utilizing their cognitive, affective, and psychological traits that are rather fixed indicators of learners (Keefe, 1979). Also, this theory argues that learners of different types of learning styles process information differently and have different individual learning style preferences, which can influence their learning in general and their listening in particular. Hence, learners learn and process their learning input based on their characteristics and traits.

### Descriptive Analysis of the Learning Style Preferences among Advanced, Intermediate, and Low Groups

In order to achieve a conclusive finding, Table 2 presents a descriptive analysis (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) of the advanced (n = 19; F = 21%), intermediate (n = 39; F = 42%), and low (n = 34; F = 37%) level of English listening proficiency freshman learners' learning style preferences by categories.

Table 2: English Listening Proficiency Freshman Learners' Learning Style Preferences by Categories

Proficiency Levels		Advanced		Intermediate			Low		
Learning Styles	F (%)	M	SD	F (%)	M	SD	F (%)	M	SD
Communicative	78.9	3.38	0.38	74.4	3.29	0.34	73.5	3.35	0.37

Concrete	73.7	3.31	0.33	71.8	3.24	0.34	58.8	3.21	0.40
Authority-Oriented	78.9	3.25	0.44	59.0	3.12	0.44	73.5	3.24	0.40
Analytical	63.2	3.19	0.37	53.8	3.01	0.39	50.0	3.10	0.41

Note: Advanced (n = 19; Mean: 79.21, SD: 7.09); Intermediate (n = 39; Mean: 50.90, SD: 9.46); Low (n = 34; Mean: 23.47, SD: 7.00)

It is notable to mention that among these four types of learning style preferences, the one which indicated the highest mean value was considered to be the advanced, intermediate and low level of English listening proficiency learners' preferred learning style. As Table 2 indicates, among the 19 advanced freshmen, 15 of them (78.9%) favoured communicative learning styles with the average mean value of 3.38 and a standard deviation of 0.38; 14 of them (73.7%) favoured concrete types of learning style with the average mean value of 3.31 and a standard deviation of 0.33; 15 of them (78.9%) liked authority-oriented (M = 3.25; SD = 0.44); and 12 of them (63.2%) preferred analytical types of learning style with the average mean value of 3.19 and a standard deviation of 0.37. Among the 39 intermediate freshmen, 29 of them (74.4%) favoured communicative types of learning style with the average mean of 3.29 and a standard deviation of 0.34. Twenty-eight of them (71.8%) favoured concrete types of learning style with the mean value of 3.24 and a standard deviation of 0.44. Twenty-three of them (59.0%) liked authority-oriented types of learning style with the average mean value of 3.12 and a standard deviation of 0.44; and 21 of them (53.8%) favoured analytical types of learning style with the mean value of 3.01 and a standard deviation of 0.39. Finally, among the 34 freshmen with the low level of English listening proficiency, 25 (73.5%) favoured communicative types of learning style with the average mean values of 3.35 and a standard deviation of 0.37; 20 (58.8%) preferred to use concrete types of learning style with the mean values of 3.21 and a standard deviation of 0.40; 25 (73.5%) had desire to use authority-oriented with the average mean values of 3.24 and a standard deviation of 0.40; and 17 (50.0%) favoured analytical types of learning style (Mean = 3.10; SD = 0.41).

According to Willing (1988), learners would probably favour a mixture of learning styles with one predominating. As the findings of this study showed, these three levels of English listening proficiency freshman learners favoured and applied all types of learning style preferences flexibly while listening to the spoken texts. However, a majority of the advanced, intermediate, and low level of English listening proficiency learners favoured communicative types of learning styles in which they had strong desire to learn by watching, listening to native speakers of their target language (English) in and outside the classrooms, talking to friends in English, hearing English words and learning through the use of conversations because they are not exposed to English outside. This may be the only opportunity for Iranian EFL learners to practice their English listening and speaking skills. This implies that tape recorders and CD players are the main sources (other than the teacher) of spoken language texts in most classrooms. Similarly, Ho (1999), Riazi & Mansoorian (2008), Riazi & Riasati (2007) asserted that a number of students desire to learn by interacting with their classmates and peers. Riazi & Riasati (2007), in their study, found that the learners of three different levels of instruction (elementary,



intermediate, and advanced) preferred to be communicative, that is, they desire to work in pairs and in groups. They reported that they tend to listen to tapes either in the classroom environment or outside the classroom. The rationale might be that tapes are rather cheap and easy to use. Moreover, they are the main sources (other than the teacher) of spoken language texts in most classrooms (Riazi & Riasati, 2007). They also believe that the students like to communicate with each other in English. Moreover, Ho's (1999) study also showed that the students favoured communicative types of learning styles, which concurs with the findings of this study.

Surprisingly, the low English listening proficiency learners of this study also preferred communicative types of learning styles. This may be due to their interest in learning a second or foreign language. It is assumed that sometimes low proficient learners would like to perform well in school; however, their inability to recall facts through lecture, discussion, or reading contribute to their low performance in traditional schools where it is teacher-centred, and students just listen and read (Dunn, 1988; Dunn, 1996; Dunn & Griggs, 2000). Nevertheless, the findings of this section showed that the low English listening proficiency learners similar to the advanced and intermediate freshman learners, preferred communicative learning styles. They tend to converse with one another maybe by using those words and sentences they have already learned to practice their English.

These types of learners desire to learn in groups. They prefer a communicative approach to learning because in this case, they can enhance their listening input. This implies that teachers should provide an English speaking environment in the classrooms to allow these learners to use and communicate with one another in English. This may be provided through videos and tapes of language input by native speakers. Also, as these learners like to converse with one another maybe using their existing knowledge of English; they should be given the opportunities to do so. The use of mass media such as televisions, videos and tape recorders provides visuals and audios that will enhance these learners language learning process and in this case English language listening proficiency.

As Celce-Marcia (2001) and Riazi & Riasati (2007) asserted videos and televisions are kind of mass media that motivate students by bringing the real life situation into the classroom and by presenting language in its more complete communicative context. In other words, they should be exposed to learning English through listening and speaking and also be provided with the opportunities to use and communicate with one another. Contrastingly, Liu's (2008) study on Taiwanese university students showed that the majority of the Taiwanese students considered themselves as authority-oriented learners rather than communicative learners. This indicates that learners favour various types of learning style preferences while learning a second or foreign language in general and listening in particular.

### **Analysis of the Relationship between Learning Style Preferences and Listening Proficiency Levels**

In the preliminary analysis, the aforementioned results indicated that a majority of the Iranian EFL freshmen of three different English listening proficiency levels in this study

considered themselves as communicative learners. Therefore, with regard to the relationships between the two variables, Pearson Correlation was run with regard to the normal distribution.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix

<b>Listening Proficiency Levels &amp; Scores</b>	<b>Learning Style Preferences</b>	<b>Pearson Correlation (r)</b>	<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>N</b>
Advanced Mean = 79.21 SD = 7.09	Communicative	0.742**	54.76%	0.000	19
	Concrete	0.660**	43.56%	0.002	
	Authority-Oriented	0.668**	43.56%	0.002	
	Analytical	0.562*	31.36%	0.012	
	Total Learning Style Preferences	0.707**	49%	0.001	
Intermediate Mean = 50.95 SD = 9.46	Communicative	0.536**	28.09%	0.000	39
	Concrete	0.524*	27.04%	0.001	
	Authority-Oriented	0.401*	16%	0.011	
	Analytical	0.359*	12.25%	0.025	
	Total Learning Style Preferences	0.498**	24%	0.001	
Low Mean = 23.47 SD = 7.00	Communicative	0.381*	14.44%	0.026	34
	Concrete	0.409*	16%	0.016	
	Authority-Oriented	0.252	06.25%	0.150	
	Analytical	0.402*	0.16%	0.018	
	Total Learning Style Preferences	0.398*	15.21%	0.020	

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); N = Number of Respondents

Table 3 indicated that among the advanced freshmen (n = 19), listening proficiency levels were positively associated with communicative (r = 0.742, p < 0.01), concrete (r = 0.660, p < 0.01), authority-oriented (r = 0.668, p < 0.01), and analytical (r = 0.562, p < 0.05) types of learning styles. Their percentages of variances being r<sup>2</sup> = 0.54, r<sup>2</sup> = 0.43, r<sup>2</sup> = 0.43, and r<sup>2</sup> = 0.31 respectively. The correlation coefficients of the listening proficiency and communicative, concrete, authority-oriented and analytical learning styles accounts for 54%, 43%, 43%, and 31% of the variations respectively. This means that the amount of variance in English listening proficiency can be explained by the learning style preferences. This shows that the learners' listening proficiency levels associate with their learning style preferences and vice versa. This means that these learners are flexible in applying their learning style preferences to understand the spoken texts. That is, they are

able to change their ways of learning in different situations without difficulty based on their level of listening proficiency. In other words, there is some overlap between English listening proficiency and these types of learning styles. The finding also showed that the advanced freshmen preferred communicative types of learning styles to authority-oriented followed by concrete and analytical types of learning styles. This indicates that the advanced listeners are likely to use more top-down, bottom-up and interactive processing while engaged in listening. They try to understand the overall meaning of the listening by applying various types of learning style preferences. In some situations they like to talk to their friends in English, in other situations they would like their teachers to explain everything to them and work on exercises set by their teachers.

Among the intermediate freshmen ( $n = 39$ ), their listening proficiency levels were also significantly and positively associated with communicative ( $r = 0.536$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), concrete ( $r = 0.524$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), authority-oriented ( $r = 0.401$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and analytical ( $r = 0.359$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) types of learning styles, their percentages of variances being  $r^2 = 0.28$ ,  $r^2 = 0.27$ ,  $r^2 = 0.16$ , and  $r^2 = 0.12$  respectively. The correlation coefficients of the listening proficiency and communicative, concrete, authority-oriented, and analytical learning styles account for 28%, 27%, 16%, and 12% of the variations respectively. This indicates that the intermediate freshmen are also capable of applying these types of learning styles. That is, they are flexible in different situations. They prefer communicative types of learning styles to concrete, authority-oriented, and analytical types of learning styles respectively. This indicates that the intermediate learners are similar to the advanced learners are also flexible in applying their learning style preferences however they apply fewer learning style preferences.

Meanwhile, among the low freshmen learners ( $n = 34$ ), the listening proficiency levels were also positively associated with communicative, concrete, and analytical types of learning styles with correlation coefficients ( $r$ ) of 0.381, 0.409, and 0.402 respectively, which were significant at the 0.05 levels, their percentages of variances being  $r^2 = 0.14$ ,  $r^2 = 0.16$  and  $r^2 = 0.16$  respectively. The correlation coefficients of the listening proficiency levels and learning style preferences account for 14%, 16%, and 16% of the variations respectively. This indicates that the low freshman learners are less flexible than the advanced and intermediate in applying their learning style preferences. They are less aware of their learning style preferences than the advanced and intermediate learners. This implies that they may have problems in using top-down and bottom-up approaches while engaged in listening due to low level of English listening proficiency.

Generally, Table 3 demonstrates that there was a statistically moderate positive relationship between the overall learning style preferences and listening proficiency levels among the advanced freshmen ( $r = 0.707$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $r^2 = 0.49$ ), the intermediate freshmen ( $r = 0.498$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $r^2 = 0.24$ ), and the low level of English listening proficiency learners ( $r = 0.398$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $r^2 = 0.15$ ). The correlation coefficients of the overall learning style preferences and listening proficiency levels among the advanced, intermediate, and low freshmen account for 49%, 24%, and 15% of variations respectively. Therefore, the current research statistically indicated that the higher the learner's EFL listening proficiency levels, the more frequent preferred learning styles.

This concurs with the findings of Liu's (2008) study conducted on the relationship between learners' English listening proficiency levels and their learning style preferences. Liu (2008) asserted that the learners from different English listening proficiency levels have various characteristics while learning a second language. He believes that the more proficient listeners are likely to be more flexible than the less proficient listeners in their learning styles. In some situations, the more proficient listeners are communicators, looking for opportunities to interact with native speakers of the language; in other situations, they desire to be analytic, paying attention to formal aspects of the language. Thus, it implies that the learners' learning style preferences affect their English proficiency levels in general and English listening proficiency levels in particular.

### **Implications**

One of the reasons for conducting this research study was to acquire the results that could be beneficial to the classroom practice, and guide learners and instructors as well as syllabus planners and material designers for Iranian EFL freshman university learners of various English listening proficiency levels. All classroom instructors should be aware of their learners' learning style preferences and their English listening proficiency levels. They should match their teaching styles to their learners' learning styles. They should also provide an English speaking environment in the classrooms to allow the learners to use their English and communicate with one another in English. Iranian English language textbooks should be written to involve a variety of listening materials (simple, moderate and difficult) to help different learners in relation to their types of learning styles and English listening proficiency levels. According to Ming (2003), in order to contribute learners, particularly lower proficiency learners it is essential to provide learning materials that can involve various learning styles. The results can also be useful to learners by making them aware of their learning styles to identify the best way through which they learn in general and listen in particular. According to Riazi & Riasati (2007), this process may improve learners' self-esteem because the learners may feel more comfortable and prepared to take on the learning challenge; it also gives learners the confidence needed to accomplish their goals. Furthermore, researchers may make use of the findings of the current study to conduct some research studies to employ qualitative methods to investigate deeply how listeners with different proficiency levels and learning styles learn a second language.

### **Conclusion**

This study has attempted to identify Iranian EFL freshman university learners' levels of English listening proficiency and their learning style preferences. This study also attempted to find out whether there was a significant relationship between these learners' English listening proficiency levels and their learning styles. By conducting the Oxford Placement Test, the findings showed that majority of the learners (n=39; 42%) were intermediate. The findings also revealed that among the advanced, intermediate and low level of English listening proficiency learners, 84%, 66% and 79% of advanced, intermediate and low learners respectively felt that they experienced high level of the

total use of learning style preferences. The dominant learning style preferences of these learners revealed that the majority of them considered themselves as communicative learners. They tended to learn English as a foreign language by listening to English speakers, particularly native speakers of English, probably because they feel that this would be most useful for their needs in relation to English language learning. This can help them in improving their pronunciation and accent. Receptive skills such as speaking and listening are appealing to the learners of this sample. They desire to use conversations in the classrooms and communicate in English. It can also be concluded that learning style preferences can be indicators for English listening proficiency levels since there was a statistically significant relationship between the two variables. Although this study may be limited by the participants who were all freshmen university learners aged 18, similar studies may be carried out with different age groups or in a different context to explore whether similar or different findings are gathered.

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