

# Study of the Effective Factors on the University Students' Underachievement in English Language Learning

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## Abstract

The present study investigated the effect of university students' demotivational status, language learning strategies and learning style preferences on their underachievement in English language learning. To begin, 260 Iranian undergraduate students were selected through the multi-stage cluster sampling method. They were put into two successful and unsuccessful groups using the median of their General English scores. Then, they answered the questionnaires of language learning strategies, styles and demotivation. On the next stage, the data gathered was analyzed via several statistical analyses. The results revealed that the reliability and validity of all three questionnaires calculated using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses and Cronbach alpha coefficients were satisfactory. Moreover, the results of the logistic regression analysis confirmed that there is a difference between the successful and unsuccessful groups in English language learning regarding their motivational status and learning strategies. However, their learning style preferences were not significant predictors of their achievement in EFL classroom. It was also found that from among all subscales of demotivation and learning styles and strategies, only the Lack of Perceived Individual Competence, the Lack of Intrinsic Motivation, the Inappropriate Characteristics of Teachers' Teaching Methods and Course Contents and the Metacognitive strategies predicted university students' group membership significantly.

**Keywords:** demotivating factors, language learning strategies, learning style preferences, logistic regression analysis

## 1. Introduction

This study was initiated in response to concerns about the underachievement of Iranian university students in English language learning. During several consecutive semesters in Islamic Azad University, Saveh Branch, it was noticed that many students did not have as much achievement in English language learning as some others. Therefore, the question "What are the effective factors on the students' underachievement in English language learning?" became the focus of attention of the researchers of the present study.

In order to find the answer to this question, from among all the effective factors, students' language learning styles, strategies and demotivational status were chosen since in the ESL/EFL context, these three factors are considered closely related to academic achievement (Green & Oxford, 1995; Ellis, 1994; Khaldieh, 2000; Li & Pan, 2009; McDonough, 1983; Wharton, 2000; Yu-mei, 2009). It is thus hoped that the findings of the current study will assist to improve the university students' English language learning outcomes.

## 2. Literature Review

Underachievement in English language learning is widely observed among nonnative university students around the world and has turned into an important issue for both students and teachers. Low achievement is not always due to low cognitive abilities. It may be the result of the mismatch between the teaching approach and the learning styles, or the lack of awareness about learning strategies. In addition, all teachers agree that positively motivated students achieve more than the demotivated ones.

In the recent years, many studies have been conducted worldwide on the language learning styles, strategies and motivation and their probable relation with the language learning achievement. (Abbasian, Khajavi & Mardani, 2012; Al-Hebaishi, 2012; Artelt, 2005; Aliakbari & Hayatzadeh, 2008; Baker, 1992; Cohen, 2003; Cohen &

Dörnyei, 2002; Ehrman, 1990, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2001; Ehrman & Leaver, 2003; Ehrman & Oxford, 1990, 1995; Ehrman, Leaver & Oxford, 2003; Ellis, 1994; Gardner, 1985, 2001; Irie, 2003; Jie & Xiaoping, 2006; Kinsella, 1995; Morton-Rias, Dunn, Terregrossa, Geisert, Mangione, Ortiz, & Honigsfeld, 2008; Nikoopour, Amini & Kashefi, 2011; Oxford, Ehrman & Lavine, 1991; Ur-Rahman, Jumani & Basit, 2010).

Many of these studies showed a positive relationship between the learners' use of learning strategies and their academic performance (Al-Hebaishi, 2012; Bremner, 1999; Oxford, 1989). In contrast, some other findings demonstrated no significant relationship between the students' learning styles and their academic performance (Al-Hebaishi, 2012, Shaw-Warn, 2009).

Researches on the motivating and de-motivating factors in learning and their impact on the learners' achievement have also showed a significant correlation between the motivation and academic achievement of the students (Ur-Rahman et al., 2010, Li & Pan, 2009).

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1 Participants*

Participants of the present study were 260 (150 male and 110 female) Bachelor degree students of Engineering and Humanities in Islamic Azad University, Saveh Branch, Saveh, Iran. They were selected at three levels: 1) faculty, 2) educational group, and 3) class, using the multi-stage cluster sampling method.

#### *3.2 Instrumentation*

##### *3.2.1 Demotivation Questionnaire of English Language Learning (DQELL)*

Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) devised the Demotivation Questionnaire of English Language Learning (DQELL) consisting 35 5-point Likert-type items. It contained five factors: Learning Contents and Materials, Teachers' Competence and Teaching Styles, Inadequate School Facilities, Lack of Intrinsic Motivation, and Test Scores. The questionnaire also included one question about motivation to learn English: "How motivated are you to learn English?" The participants were required to choose one of the alternatives: 1. I have almost no motivation; 2. I have a little motivation; 3. I have moderate motivation; and 4. I have high motivation. Based on the responses to this question, the participants could be divided into less motivated learners and more motivated learners. Those who answered they had "no or little motivation" were considered as less motivated and those who answered they had "moderate" or "high motivation" were considered as more motivated students.

In the present study, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were done on the Persian version of DQELL and the five factors of Lack of Perceived Individual Competence, Lack of Intrinsic Motivation, Inappropriate Characteristics of Teachers' Teaching Methods and Course Contents, Inadequate University Facilities and Focus on Difficult Grammar were extracted and confirmed. Their Cronbach alpha coefficients were 0.84, 0.82, 0.76, 0.74, and 0.60 respectively.

##### *3.2.2 Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)*

The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL version 7.0 for ESL/EFL learners, 50 items, designed by Oxford, 1990) investigates EFL learners' use of language learning strategies. The SILL instrument contains 50 short statements, each describing the use of one strategy. These statements are further grouped into six categories: Memory strategies for storing and retrieving information, Cognitive strategies for understanding and producing the language, Compensation strategies for overcoming limitations in language learning, Metacognitive strategies for planning and monitoring learning, Affective strategies for controlling emotions, motivation, and Social strategies for cooperating with others in language learning. The SILL uses five Likert-type responses for each strategy item ranging from 1 to 5 (i.e., from "never or almost never true of me" to "always true of me").

In this study, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses of the Persian version of the SILL showed that in this sample, the six-factor model of the SILL had a good fit with the data. Cronbach alpha coefficients for the Memory strategies, Cognitive strategies, Compensation strategies, Metacognitive strategies, Affective strategies and Social strategies were 0.72, 0.81, 0.70, 0.87, 0.60, and 0.80.

##### *3.2.3 Perceptual Learning-Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ)*

Among various learning styles instruments, the earliest and most widely used is Reid's PLSPQ (1987) that is based on the concept of six learning style preferences: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, group learning and individual learning. It contains 30 statements, which participants rate on a five-point Likert scale.

In the present study, five of the six learning style preferences were extracted and confirmed in the Persian version of PLSPQ using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. The visual style was deleted from the

factor structure of PLSPO in Iranian sample due to its low reliability ( $\alpha=0.38$ ). The Cronbach alpha coefficients for the five styles of group, individual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic were 0.77, 0.79, 0.50, 0.73, and 0.61.

### 3.2.4 Translation of the Questionnaires

In this study, in order to use the Persian version of the questionnaires, the back translation method was used. First, the English versions of the questionnaires were translated into Persian by a bilingual person to be used among Iranian students. Then, to preserve the linguistic and conceptual equivalence, another bilingual person translated the Persian versions into English again (Marsella and Leong, 1995). Finally, through “iterative review process”, the difference between the two versions was reduced. Accordingly, the equivalence of the translated versions with the original versions was carefully studied. Then, some faculty members of universities studied these questionnaires and confirmed their content validity and cultural consistency.

### 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

In order to have a relative understanding of the different factors affecting the students’ General English score including English language learning strategies, styles and demotivation, the following steps were taken. First, random lists of General English scores of a group of Engineering and Humanities students were taken from the Education Department of the university. Then, in order to homogenize them, only the Bachelor degree students from 18 to 22 were selected which were 260. After that, for dividing these students to two successful and unsuccessful groups, the median of the scores were calculated. The ones above the median were considered successful and the ones below median were called unsuccessful. For this purpose, Mean and Standard Deviation were not used since it could result in losing many participants. Later on, the questionnaires of language learning strategies, styles and demotivation questions were given to the participants to answer. After gathering the data, considering the General English scores of the participants, the main data analysis was performed using a logistic regression analysis.

## 4. Results

Logistic regression is a kind of multiple regressions and refers to a statistical method which describes the relationship between a criterion variable and some predictor variables. The criterion variable is usually dichotomous; typically the two outcomes are either “yes” or “no”. The predictor variables can be categorical or continuous. Logistic regression analysis helps the researchers investigate the odds of an event (one of the levels of dependent variable) on the basis of the amounts of predictor variables.

In this study, in order to determine whether demotivation, language learning styles, and language learning strategies could be used to predict students’ success or failure in General English lesson, the researchers carried out a logistic regression analysis. The analysis was performed among 260 students. The group factor (successful/unsuccessful students) was the dependent or criterion variable while the independent or predictor variables were multiple subscales of demotivation for English language learning (Lack of Perceived Individual Competence, Lack of Intrinsic Motivation, Inappropriate Characteristics of Teachers’ Teaching Methods and Course Contents, Inadequate University Facilities and Focus on Difficult Grammar), the multiple subscales of language learning strategies (Memory strategies, Cognitive strategies, Compensation strategies, Metacognitive strategies, Affective strategies and Social strategies), and the multiple subscales of learning style preferences (group, individual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic styles).

Table 1 shows the mean and frequency of the predictor variables for the two successful and unsuccessful groups. It also presents the results of an independent t-test for the comparison of the means of the multiple concepts of the study in the two successful and unsuccessful groups in General English lesson.

Table 1. Group statistics and independent samples t-test results

Outcome	Group						95% CI for Mean Difference	t	df
	Successful			Unsuccessful					
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n			
F1MOTI	20.02	7.36	139	25.12	6.79	121	-6.83, -3.35	-5.77	258
F2MOTI	17.97	6.90	139	19.85	6.95	121	-3.57, -.18	-2.18	258
F3MOTI	20.43	6.35	139	23.68	6.08	121	-4.77, -1.72	-4.19	258
F4MOTI	22.95	3.64	139	22.88	3.75	121	-.83, .97	.15	258
F5MOTI	9.93	2.39	139	9.78	2.70	121	-.48, .76	.45	258
F1PLSQ	17.24	4.05	139	17.80	3.63	121	-1.51, .38	-1.17	258

F2PLSQ	15.80	4.06	139	15.03	3.72577	121	-19, 1.72	1.57	258
F3PLSQ	18.74	2.89	139	18.43	2.47	121	-.34, .97	.93	258
F4PLSQ	17.55	3.83	139	17.65	3.53480	121	-1, .80	-.22	258
F5PLSQ	16.32	3.06	139	19.04	2.93	121	-.87, .59	-.36	258
F1SILL	25.539	5.70	139	25.21	6.96	121	-1.22, 1.87	.41	258
F2SILL	40.54	8.51	139	36.75	8.88	121	1.65, 5.91	3.50	258
F3SILL	16.54	4.13	139	15.58	4.26	121	-.06, 1.98	1.84	258
F4SILL	31.29	7.49	139	27.05	6.72	121	2.48, 5.98	4.77	258
F5SILL	16.32	4.28	139	15.09	3.92	121	.21, 2.23	2.38	258
F6SILL	18.83	5.25	139	16.53	4.93	121	1.05, 3.55	3.62	258

In DQELL: F1MOTI=Lack of Perceived Individual Competence, F2MOTI=Lack of Intrinsic Motivation, F3MOTI=Inappropriate Characteristics of Teachers' Teaching Methods and Course Contents, F4MOTI=Inadequate University Facilities and F5MOTI=Focus on Difficult Grammar.

In PLSQ: F1PLSQ= group subscale, F2PLSQ=individual subscale, 3PLSQ=auditory subscale, F4PLSQ=tactile subscale and F5PLSQ=kinesthetic subscale.

In SILL: F1SILL= Memory strategies, F2SILL=Cognitive strategies, F3SILL=Compensation strategies, F4SILL=Metacognitive strategies, F5SILL=Affective strategies and F6SILL=Social strategies

The results reveal that in Demotivation Questionnaire for English Language Learning, there was a significant difference between the means of F1MOTI, F2MOTI, and F3MOTI subscales in the two successful and unsuccessful groups. Moreover, it indicates that in the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning, the difference between the mean scores of F2SILL, F4SILL, F5SILL, and F6SILL subscales in the two successful and unsuccessful groups was statistically significant.

In order to test if the general model predicted students' membership in one of the two groups significantly, an **omnibus chi-square** test was computed (omnibus-chi-square=60.80, df=16, p<000.0). The model explained group membership of the participants between 0.21 % and 0.28 %. In other words, the model successfully predicted the membership of 75.5 % of the students in the successful group and 67.8 % of them in the unsuccessful group. In general, 71.9 % of the prediction was correct.

Table 2 shows the regression coefficients, Wald statistic, and degrees of freedom for each of the predictor variables.

Table 2. Logistic regression analysis results

Predictor	$\beta$	SE $\beta$	Wald	df	P	Exp( $\beta$ )
F1MOTI	-.099	.027	14.051	1	.000	1.105
F2MOTI	-.067	.028	5.704	1	.017	.935
F3MOTI	-.069	.027	6.423	1	.011	1.071
F4MOTI	-.030	.040	.571	1	.450	.970
F5MOTI	-.004	.058	.006	1	.939	.996
F1PLSQ	.024	.048	.253	1	.615	1.024
F2PLSQ	-.023	.046	.243	1	.622	.978
F3PLSQ	-.026	.065	.157	1	.692	.975
F4PLSQ	.038	.048	.617	1	.432	1.039
F5PLSQ	.020	.068	.085	1	.771	1.020
F1SILL	.048	.031	2.418	1	.120	1.049
F2SILL	-.024	.026	.894	1	.344	.976
F3SILL	.056	.044	1.645	1	.200	1.057
F4SILL	-.063	.030	4.600	1	.032	.939
F5SILL	-.062	.042	2.212	1	.137	.940
F6SILL	-.017	.040	.193	1	.661	.983
Constant	-.590	1.872	.099	1	.753	.555

The results indicate that from among the multiple subscales of demotivation variable, only the subscales of Lack of Perceived Individual Competence, Lack of Intrinsic Motivation, Inappropriate Characteristics of Teachers' Teaching Methods and Course Contents and among language learning strategies, Metacognitive strategies predicted the group membership significantly. Increasing values of the regression coefficients of the multiple subscales of demotivation including Lack of Perceived Individual Competence, Lack of Intrinsic Motivation, Inappropriate Characteristics of Teachers' Teaching Methods and Course Contents corresponds to decreasing odds of the event's occurrence (membership in the successful students group). Moreover, decreasing the use of Metacognitive strategies corresponds to increasing odds of the event's occurrence (membership in the unsuccessful students group). The other subscales of demotivation, language learning strategies and learning preferences did not predict the group membership significantly.

## 5. Discussion

The present research was conducted to investigate the effect of three factors of demotivation, language learning strategies, and learning style preferences on the university students' underachievement in English language learning.

First of all, the results of exploratory and confirmatory analyses showed that the reliability and validity of all three questionnaires were satisfactory. This can be beneficial for the researchers who intend to use the Persian version of the same questionnaires in their studies.

Consequently, the results of logistic regression analysis revealed that there is a difference between the successful and unsuccessful groups in English language learning regarding their motivational status and learning strategies. The findings were in agreement with Ur-Rahman et al. (2010) study which confirmed the correlation between the motivation and academic achievement of the students.

It was also found that from among all subscales of the demotivation, only the Lack of Perceived Individual Competence, the Lack of Intrinsic Motivation, and the Inappropriate Characteristics of Teachers' Teaching Methods and Course Contents predicted university students' group membership significantly. This shows that Iranian students are more affected by intrinsic demotivational factors including the Lack of Perceived Individual Competence and the Lack of Intrinsic Motivation than the extrinsic ones. A possible explanation is that the feedback and judgment of others like parents, teachers and friends about learners' operation mostly focuses on the intrinsic characteristics of individuals in Iran.

In addition, the results revealed that only Metacognitive strategies as the most frequently used language learning strategies by Iranian students (Abbasian et al., 2012; Aliakbari & Hayatzadeh, 2008; Nikoopour et al., 2011) had a significant role in predicting their language learning achievement. According to Abbasian et al. (2012), this can be attributed to Iranian educational system and the kind of skills which are necessary for a student to have in this system. The type of instruction offered at schools and universities may have reinforced this strategy more than the others.

However, students' learning style preferences were not significant predictors of their achievement in the EFL classroom. The study rejected the relationship between learning styles and achievement. The results showed that learning styles are not meaningful predictors of language learning achievement in line with some previous studies (Al-Hebaishi, 2012; Arslan, 2003; Dornyei, 2005; Kilic, 2002; Sparks, 2006).

The findings of the present study may be of benefit to Iranian EFL teachers as well as material developers. By removing demotivational factors from the learning environment especially the intrinsic ones in addition to those related to teachers' teaching methods and course contents, teachers can improve their unsuccessful students' English language. They can also focus on meta-cognitive language learning strategies in their classes so that their students can achieve more in English learning.

Material developers who develop English textbooks for General English course at the university may also benefit from the results of this study. They can put more motivating texts and tasks in the books they develop. Moreover, they can include more meta-cognitive strategies in their books. In this way, less achieving students may learn those strategies and use them to improve their English language.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that the present study suffered from some limitations. First, in order to collect the data, self-report instruments were used instead of studying the students' real behavior. This might have encouraged the participants to try to gain social confirmation by giving unreal responses. Second, although the participants of this research included male and female students, the researchers did not study the effective factors on the students' English learning achievement in the two sexes. Therefore, it is suggested that the role of sex be also considered in explaining the students' underachievement in language learning.

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