The case study of a field-independent English language learner

Mehrdad Rezaeea*, Majid Farahianb

aDepartment of Foreign Languages, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, 1467686831, Tehran, Iran
bDepartment of English Language Teaching, Kermanshah Branch, Islamic Azad University, 6718997551, Kermanshah, Iran

Abstract

The pictures about field dependent (FD) and field independent (FI) learners are confusing and there are mixed findings regarding the ability of the second language learners with these two different cognitive styles. To shed more light on the issue, this case study reports on a university freshman who was observed for three months in a grammar class at a university. Based on the pieces of evidence obtained through the observations, the private classes, and the interview with the subject, as well as the “Embedded Figures Test”, it was revealed that the student is a field-independent learner. During the interview with the learner it was also revealed that years of learning grammar in academic contexts did not result in the subject’s skill in composing sentences. This article, therefore, suggests that despite the view that FI learners profit more from de-contextualized analytic approaches and formal context (see Saville-Troike, 2006), such an approach may not help the learners and they might have problem applying grammatical rules of the second language in order to make sentences which are semantically and syntactically well-formed. This is in line with Hansen and Stanfield’s (1981) finding which found that there is a strong relationship between field independence and grammatical competence but not with communicative competence.

Keywords: Case study; Cognitive style; Field-dependent/Field-independent; Language learner

1. Introduction

One of the great wonders of the world is the way children acquire their L1 without any seemingly possible problem. Many theories have been proposed by different scholars regarding the way children acquire their L1 (Brown, 2007). Though each of these theories could shed some light on one or more aspects of the process of first language acquisition by children, none could be completely correct in illuminating the fact. In fact, all languages share the same principles but are different in parameters (Cook, 2001). What a child does is merely going through the parameters which are different from one language to another. However, the point is that a child acquires his L1 in such a high speed and quality that has amazed human beings. It has always been one of the desires of human being to reveal this riddle and use the findings in learning other (second/foreign) languages with the same speed and quality. Nevertheless, when we come to the issue of adult second/foreign language acquisition/learning, we get to the crux of the problem of how to learn or acquire a new language, be it second or foreign. In fact, there might be few if any second/foreign language learner who does not face problems in trying to get the new language, and sometimes, the causes of difficulties are multiple, ranging from cognition to personalities, affective, and feelings.

*Mehrdad Rezaee. Tel.: +98-0912-196-3802
E-mail address: mehr351@yahoo.com
Besides, people have different language learning strategies and learning styles which as such might create learning conditions for them in a way that can be different from person to person. In other words, a person’s learning style might make the issue of language learning in a way that might be either positive or act as a hindrance and negative issue. Two of the subcategories of learning style are filed-dependence and field-independence. By Field-independence we mean being “adept at dealing with language that may be out of context, but is less comfortable with the kind of global processing that can cope with a lot of things going on at once” (Ehrman, 1996, p. 78). However, such is not the case with field-dependence. (Bowker, 2001; Ellis, 2008).

2. Methodology

Having the above-mentioned findings in mind, it is good to see if the same results will be gained with subjects of different nationalities and different first language backgrounds because sometimes a new research shows findings which might be partially or totally different from what previous researchers have found. For example, in their research, Jamali (2001) and Ghasemi (2003) came to the conclusion that Iranian male learners can be field-independent while those of other nationalities and first language backgrounds can be field-dependent. This can also be true about female learners, children, etc. (See figure 1).

![Figure 1. Variables Associated with Field-Dependence/Independence (Taken from Ellis, 2008)](figure1.jpg)

Besides, the authors of this paper believe that case study can be different from the types of research done by either the previous researchers or the more recent ones as the research carried out by the aforesaid researchers were done on a group of subjects. Meanwhile, when focusing on one individual as the subject of the case study (like the one in the present paper), it might yield different results. Anyway, the authors of this research paper believe that more research needs to be done (either in the form of a case study or otherwise) to gain a higher certainty in determining the effect of field-dependence/independence learning style on the amount of learning. For this purpose, the present authors have chosen their subject from among language learners in an Iranian university context and have narrowed it down to one level of subjects (i.e., an Iranian female freshmen university student learning English as a foreign language in Tehran). Sahar (the first author’s student) is a girl of almost 20 years old. She is a freshman, and attends the author’s Grammar 1 class for four hours, one day a week. As to the characteristics of the class, it must be mentioned that the book used for teaching grammar by the first author in this class is the third edition of “Understanding and using English grammar” by Azar (2002). Usually, the first author starts his grammar class through inductive method by presenting students with example sentences, the number of which can sometimes be up to 25. Then, he starts by pointing at the generalities among those examples. Little by little, the author explains the main grammatical issue(s) first, and then gives more examples to provide the learners with a better clarification of what the concept(s) is (are) all about. Later, the students are asked to write examples and show them to the teacher which are corrected if they are erroneous. The author then wants them to write the corrected sentences again, paying
attention to the corrections made. This process goes on until all the students have grasped the grammatical point(s). When the first author feels that the students have somehow got the point, he gives the exceptions to the grammatical rule(s). Sometimes the author asks students to write sentences without referring to the book or without looking at the sample sentences written on the board. As to Sahar (the subject of this study), it must be mentioned that the first author has had an eye on her for more than half of the semester and realized that although she had no absences and attended the classes regularly, she suffered from lack of ability to see the relationship between grammatical items and thus, she can’t put them together in making sentences. Meanwhile, to make more certain about his decision, the first author talked to one of his colleagues (with whom Sahar has conversation classes in the same semester), and the colleague mentioned that Sahar can’t use correct grammar in her conversation, as well. However, he stated that Sahar has little problem in understanding what is said to her in English. This means that her problem in making sentences can’t be related to her problem in understanding the sentences said to her. In the meantime, the first author’s colleague mentioned that according to what he perceived, Sahar had a good command of abstract grammar as he had asked her some questions in this regard; however, he believed that she had a lot of trouble putting words properly next to one another to make correct sentences syntactically and semantically. For example, she has problem with present tense third person singular (e-es), subject-verb agreement, modals, prepositions, regular/irregular forms of nouns. This led the authors to conclude that there might be some problem with the learner in making sentences while she is very well aware of L2 grammar. So, they decided to do a research in this regard.

2.1. Data collection

The authors have used five instruments (Observation, Grammar test, Interview, Private classroom interactions, and Embedded figures test) to gather the data required for his study. Each will be explained in detail.

2.1.1. Observation

The subject of this study (Sahar) was observed for more than three months to see how she behaves in the class throughout the study. Except the three beginning sessions of the semester, in which the first author didn’t observe the subject attentively (since he had no information about the background of the subject), the rest of the semester, when he noticed the possible problem, he observed the subject attentively for more than three months, paying specific attention to the issues under question. The first author was considering and paying attention to the ability of the subject to make syntactically and semantically correct sentences by using the grammatical items taught in the class.

2.1.2. Grammar test

A set of 50-item MC grammar test was taken from a standardized test in a book called ‘Objective Tests in English as a Foreign Language’ by Bloor, et al., (1970) with exactly the same content which was presented in her grammar book.

2.1.3. Interview

Besides the observation and the set of 50-item MC grammar test, the first author had a formal interview with Sahar, (the subject of this study). The questions asked by the teacher were very normal based on the grammatical issues covered throughout the semester to see if the subject got panicked in the class and before others.

2.1.4. Private class interactions

The author held five 25-30 minute sessions in one of the classes as specific classroom interactions in a private manner to make sure that her problem is not due to her panic before her classmates.
2.1.5. Embedded figures test

To define operationally whether the subject of the present study is field dependent or field independent, and to gain more confidence about her status regarding field dependency/independency, the author adopted and used this test. In the test, the subject of the study was required to identify and trace simple figures embedded in complicated figures within two five-minute periods. The administration procedure was strictly consistent with the manual (See Witkin, Oltman, Raskin, and Karp, 1971). Assigning one point for each correct item, the possible scores can range from 0 to 18, and higher scores are relatively classified as field independent while lower scores are classified as field dependent. The score gained by the subject of the present study was 16 out of 18 which is a relatively high score and can most probably be an evidence that she is a field independent person.

3. Results and discussion

Based on what was mentioned in “The study” and “Methodology” sections (specifically the ‘Embedded Figures Test’), the authors figure out that Sahar (the subject of the present study) is a field-independent language learner who perceives materials analytically, but she can’t get a full picture of them and so, she can’t perceive issues globally (See figure 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIELD-DEPENDENT</th>
<th>FIELD-INDEPENDENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceives globally</td>
<td>Perceives analytically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences in a global fashion</td>
<td>Experiences in an articulate fashion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes general distinctions among concepts, sees relations</td>
<td>Makes specific concept distinctions, little overlap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learns material with social content best</td>
<td>Learns social material only as an intentional task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires externally defined goals and reinforcements</td>
<td>Has self-defined goals and reinforcements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Field Independence/Dependence Descriptions (Taken from Bowker, 2001)

As it was already mentioned through grammar test, the interview and also the private classroom interactions (as tape-recorded), she knows the grammatical issues well out of context (she managed to answer them with just 3 wrong answers; that is, 94 percent correct) but can’t put them together to make correct sentences. In fact, when she wants to use the grammatical items together to make a whole idea, she feels handicapped as she can’t conceive of a whole picture of those single elements. So, contrary to the prevalent view (see Saville-Troike, 2006) which is based on the assumption that FI learners may benefit “more from de-contextualized analytic approaches and formal instruction” (p. 88) the findings of this case study may indicate that what FI learners may gain from their cognitive disposition is linguistic knowledge with no application to be used as language use. This is in line with Hansen and Stansfield (1981) who state that "Field-independence plays a major role in the acquisition of linguistic competence but not communicative competence" (p. 353). This means that they can learn the language parts well, but they might have problem using it in the context and globally.

This could have two practical implications for FL teaching. First, it is part of a good school teacher’s job to teach students how to learn what they are going to learn. Meanwhile, schools have the task of providing learners with content materials as well as the way they can be best learnt (Gagne and Dick, 1983, cited in Mirhassani, 2003). However, unfortunately, in the context of Iranian high school, instruction is only limited to materials and for the mere purpose of passing the exam and no specific cognitive style or learning style is taught to students to help them
learn their course materials better. (Allami, Jalilifar, Hashemian, and Shooshtari, 2009). This is while educators should implement ways of drawing on cognitive style as a factor in formal language education (Salmani-Nodoushan, n.d.). In fact, as Jahangard (2007) puts it, “Learner training is helpful and valuable in pushing our learners toward the intended goals” (p. 4). Second, teachers must help learners to have a helicopter view about issues. In this way, they will be able to think globally, as well. This means that students will learn how to use language contextually not out of context. For example, focusing on Iranian students, we can say that, since they are mostly field-independent (Ghasemi, 2003; Jamali, 2001), teachers should help them by emphasizing the production skills (such as writing and speaking) so that they get to know the way language is used globally and in the context (know the use of language), not merely use language parts separately and out of the context (just know about the language). This is because field-dependence/independence learning style of learners is not something stable and unchangeable and it can change with instruction and by the help of teachers. (Naimie, Abuzaid, Siraj, Shagholi, and Hejaili, 2010).

To put the issue in question, it is seen that so much time is allocated to the teaching of grammar and practicing its exercises, no matter how well, but nothing is done to improve writing as a productive skill, and even if there is writing, it is not real writing. It is something to be named writing.

Of course, the purpose of what has been said about the conditions of language teaching and learning in the students have had the same condition when they were in guidance and high school. However, this can be part of the reason for her problem.

4. Conclusion

On the basis of the pieces of evidence provided about the subject of this case study (the types of sentences she makes and her language level together with her weaknesses in making syntactically and semantically correct sentences), one can conclude that she can be a field-independent learner who could just focus on the language items individually and couldn’t integrate them together to make a whole picture. This could be more confidently proven on the basis of the score gained by the subject in the “Embedded Figures Test”. What she gained was 16 out of 18 which is a relatively high score and according to the manual itself, the closer the score to 18, the more probability of a subject’s field independence status. So, based on her score, it can be concluded that she is field-independent. Besides these, some other issues in the research findings by other researchers were revealed and also clarified, the first of which is that the type of characteristics delineated by different researchers (Bowker, 2001) is not so clear-cut as mentioned by them. They can change with the learner’s nationality and L1 background. Too, schools can be influential in the way students learn their subject matters as it was mentioned that learners’ learning style can be changed through the instruction provided by teachers, though this is not usually provided in Iranian schools. The next issue clarified here was that though English grammar is emphasized in the curriculum of Iranian schools, this emphasis is only for the purpose of helping learners pass their English language exams not helping them gain the ability to use their language knowledge for a more global purpose like writing or speaking. Of course, this does not mean that the problem of Sahar (the subject of this case study) and her lack of ability to make sentences are completely due to the above-mentioned problems, though such issues can escalate the problem.

References


