Interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences: Do they really work in foreign-language learning?

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Abstract

Gardner’s multiple intelligences has influenced education. Considering interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences, this study aims at determining if they are significant in language learning. A number of EFL university students were selected. Through an interview, the participants were divided into groups regarding interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. They took reading and grammar sections of TOEFL test for their language knowledge. Mean score comparison revealed there was a relationship between these intelligences and language learning. It was also indicated males’ intrapersonal and females’ interpersonal intelligences helped them outperform their peers in a language test that supported Gardner’s treating of personal intelligences as independent.

Keywords: Multiple intelligences; interpersonal intelligence; intrapersonal intelligence; foreign language learning

1. Introduction

For long in the history of research on human brain and language learning, there have been a number of questions, some of which are still unanswered. The most common of these questions concern what makes some people more intelligent than others and thus help them be more successful in language learning; what kind of abilities smart people have to help them store and retrieve linguistic information better; is there any way to change the capacity of language learners’ minds and make them smarter than they used to be; and, if there is any fixed place within one’s brain in which memory is located. Though many of questions like these are subject to disagreement among neurologists, cognitive psychologists, and biologists, there exists an agreement on the definition of intelligence as a major common concept through all these questions.

Dictionary definition of intelligence can be as "an underlying ability that causes a person to function effectively in a certain situation." It is also the ability to comprehend, understand, and benefit from experience. There are different kinds of interrelated intelligence. That is, if one has a capacity in doing a task which requires a special kind of intelligence well, she/he tends to do well on all other tasks requiring other forms of intelligence. According to

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Gardner’s theory, eight types of intelligence can develop and be developed over time. Though an individual might enjoy a certain type of intelligence or talent in an activity like language learning, all healthy human beings are able to train their intelligences and develop them in their lifetime. So, learners need to identify what kind of intelligence gives them more opportunity to learn better and, then, strengthen it in order to achieve the desirable results. If a language learner enjoys a certain type of intelligence, say mathematical intelligence, then, he would most likely enjoy creating and recreating patterns in his learning. Or, a learner with linguistic intelligence is more successful in learning through reading and writing.

Intelligence has been taken into account differently in the literature. Once considered as a unidirectional concept (Binet, 1907), it is now known as a multiple concept (Gardner, 1983). Gardner (2003) believes that as a species, individuals possess not single “g” intelligence but a set of autonomous intelligences. Whether unitary or multiple, it refers to the ability or talent to comprehend, understand and use experience to function effectively in different situations. Considering it as a multiple concept, Gardner states that there are eight types of intelligence: interpersonal, intrapersonal, bodily-kinesthetic, logical-mathematical, musical, linguistic, spatial, and naturalistic. Gardner’s (1999) theory of multiple intelligences considers intelligence as having special abilities or talents in any of these aspects. According to him, all individuals possess these abilities to different extents, and they can develop them over time. He claims that applying any of these intelligences depends on personal preferences and also on the situation (Mantzaris, 1999).

Veenema, Hetland, and Chalfen (1997) define these intelligences in very simple terms: linguistic intelligence helps a person to make sense of the world through language, logical-mathematical intelligence enables one to use abstract relations, musical intelligence causes an individual to create meaning out of sounds, spatial intelligence makes it possible to perceive visual information and recreate images from memory, kinesthetic intelligence helps a person to use body to solve problems and make themselves understood, intrapersonal intelligence causes one to distinguish their different feelings and have a better understanding of their self, and interpersonal intelligence enables a person to understand others’ feelings and intentions and can make successful relationship with others.

Goleman (1995) classifies personal intelligences into five groups: knowing one’s emotions, managing emotions, motivating oneself, recognizing emotions in others, and handling relationships. From these groups, the first three ones correspond to Gardner’s intrapersonal and the last two ones to his interpersonal intelligence.

According to Wheeler (2009), learners who have intrapersonal intelligence or are ‘self smarts’ are interested in doing a set of activities in language classrooms which are totally different from those enjoyable to learners with interpersonal intelligence. He claims that a learner in the first group sets a goal in the language classroom for himself and follows it; he studies independently; he can talk about his values for language learning; he assesses his knowledge off and on; he has private spaces for studying; he enjoys having individualized language projects; and he has self-teaching instruction. On the other hand, a learner from the second group enjoys having cooperative activities; he has interpersonal interaction; he likes peer teaching; he attends language classes as extracurricular activity; he attends group brainstorming sessions, and considers social gatherings as a context for language learning.

As for the relationship between interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence, Mayer (2008) divides all types of intelligence into two groups: cool and hot. While impersonal ones like verbal meanings or visual information are considered as relevant to cool intelligences, hot group includes social, emotional and practical intelligences. Therefore, according to his classification, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences are put in the same category. He refers to these two types of intelligence as ‘personal intelligence’ which he believes is worth studying in context of language learning. According to him, the major domain of personal intelligence is “systematizing one’s goals, plans, and life stories to manage both one’s growth and others’ wellbeing”. He contends that today’s view of personality is a system with a slow and steady impact on individuals’ development in different aspects of learning (Funder, 2001; Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007). Though interpersonal intelligence addresses social relations and intrapersonal intelligence adheres to emotions, the two intelligences are likely to be integrated and the ultimate relationship between the two is an empirical issue (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008).

Pishghadam (2009a) discusses interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences and maintains that the major difference between the two is that while intrapersonal intelligence regards one’s own feelings and emotions, the other one enables one to know others’ desires, feelings, and intentions. He studies emotional intelligence as the integration of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences and foreign language learning and concluded that those having higher intrapersonal intelligence can benefit more from language classes. In another study, Pishghadam (2009b) investigates the influence of intrapersonal and verbal intelligences in foreign language learning and
concludes that intrapersonal intelligence helps the development of productive skills and verbal intelligence strengthens communicative skills of language learners.

Considering interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences as two types of intelligence and following Gardner who claimed that different kinds of intelligence can function independently, the present study aims at finding out which of these two types of intelligence can help the Iranian EFL students gain better mastery over English reading comprehension and grammar, and if there is any difference in the language performance of male and female students who enjoy either interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. For this purpose, this research is an attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Do Iranian EFL learners who enjoy interpersonal intelligence improve in their language proficiency more than those having intrapersonal intelligence?
2. Do male and female Iranian EFL learners having interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences improve equally in their language proficiency?
3. Is there any difference in language performance of those Iranian EFL students who enjoy both interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences and those who have either interpersonal or intrapersonal intelligence?

On the basis of the above-mentioned research questions, three null hypotheses were formed:

H0 1- Interpersonal intelligence does not help Iranian EFL learners improve in their language proficiency more than intrapersonal intelligence.
H0 2- Iranian male and female EFL learners who have interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences improve equally in their language proficiency.
H0 3- There is not any difference in language performance of those Iranian EFL students who enjoy both interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences and those who have either interpersonal or intrapersonal intelligence.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants of the present study were 150 male and female sophomore students majoring in English at Islamic Azad University, Shiraz and Abadeh Branches. From among these participants, 110 students were females and 40 students were male. They were all studying English Translation and thus had passed the same language courses at the university. The age range of the participants was from 21 to 28 years old.

2.2. Instrumentation

The instruments used in the present study were a language proficiency test and a personality test. The language proficiency test was a test of TOEFL (version 2005) including 40 vocabulary and reading comprehension items and 30 grammar and structure ones. Armstrong’ (1994) Multiple Intelligences (MI) checklist and Gay’s (1998) MI inventory were used in a structured interview to categorize the participants based on their dominant interpersonal or intrapersonal intelligence.

2.3. Procedure

In order to answer research questions, all the participants who were 150 male and female sophomore students majoring in English at Islamic Azad University, Abadeh and Shiraz branches took part in a structured interview, the content of which was selected from Armstrong’s (1994) MI checklist and Gay’s (1998) MI inventory. The purpose of conducting this interview was to see if a particular individual enjoys interpersonal or intrapersonal intelligence or both. Then, the participants were categorized into four groups: the first one enjoying interpersonal intelligence; the second, intrapersonal intelligence; the third group, both interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence. The last group included participants with either low or no level of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence.

A TOEFL Test consisting of 70 English vocabulary, reading comprehension, grammar, and structure items was administered to the participants in four groups to see if they were homogeneous. The results showed that the participants were homogeneous as far as their English proficiency was concerned. Thus, the test was considered as the pre-test.

Then the treatment started. For a period of three months, the participants in all groups were taught grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. The instruction took place once a week for one and a half hours. After the treatment, the participants took part in the same TOEFL test administered at the beginning of instruction. This time,
it was considered as the post-test. The next phase of the study was to compare the participants’ pre- and post-test scores.

3. Results and Discussion

In order to see if the participants were homogeneous with regard to their knowledge of English grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, a TOEFL test was administered. A one-way ANOVA was then applied to compare the performance of the participants in four groups. The results are as the following:

Table 1. One-Way ANOVA to compare the participants’ scores in the pre-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between groups</td>
<td>61.222</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8.746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within groups</td>
<td>1863</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>13.124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>1924.833</td>
<td>149</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the table, since the value of $F$ observed ($F = 0.666$) is not greater than the significance level, it can be concluded that there is not significant difference in the performance of all groups in English proficiency level. In other words, all the participants were at the same level of knowledge of English grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension.

Table 2. Scheffe test to show which of the four groups outperformed in the post-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male no inter- and intrapersonal</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female no inter- and intrapersonal</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female both inter- and intrapersonal</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>20.48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male interpersonal</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female intrapersonal</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>21.38</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male both inter- and intrapersonal</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22.45</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female interpersonal</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td>30.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male intrapersonal</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>.921</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In table 2, the two groups which outperformed the others were female students who enjoyed interpersonal intelligence (mean = 30.04) and male students who had intrapersonal intelligence (mean = 38.7). Among the other groups, female students who had both inter and intrapersonal intelligence (mean = 20.48) and those who did not show any kind of inter and intrapersonal intelligence (mean = 20.19) almost performed the same. Male students who had interpersonal intelligence (mean = 21) also performed as well as female students who had intrapersonal intelligence (mean = 21.38). Male students who showed both inter and intrapersonal intelligence showed a better performance after the first two top groups (mean = 22.45). The group which performed the worst included male students who enjoyed neither inter nor intra personal intelligence.
Based on the results of the Scheffe test, it can be concluded that while there is no interaction between interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence in language learning for a better performance, i.e., the participants who were considered as having both interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence did not outperform in their language proficiency test, male students who had intrapersonal intelligence obtained a higher mean compared to their female counterpart. On the other hand, female students with high interpersonal intelligence can perform much better in a language proficiency test compared to male students with interpersonal intelligence.

4. Conclusion

Language learners are more successful if they can recognize the type of intelligence that is dominant in them. Though one type of intelligence can be dominant in an individual, it does not mean that other types do not exist in him. According to Gardner, any types of intelligences can be developed. On the basis of the results of the present study, it can be concluded that male and female students perform differently in a language-learning class based on the type of dominant intelligence they have. This study revealed that male students can benefit from a language-learning class much better than females if they have a high level of intrapersonal intelligence. On the other hand, female students with a good level of interpersonal intelligence are able to improve their reading, comprehension, and grammar much better than their male counterparts, who enjoy the same type of intelligence. It can be concluded from the present study that female language-learners are better to improve their interpersonal intelligence to be more successful in their language-learning journey. On the other hand, male learners are advised to work on their intrapersonal intelligence in order to outperform their peers enjoying interpersonal intelligence.

References