

Teaching Speaking to Field-dependent and Field-independent Learners

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Abstract

To meet the needs of varied learners having distinct cognitive style, teachers should select appropriate teaching style. Investigating learner's learning style before choosing teaching method is receiving immense importance recently to ensure learning perfection. This study deals with teaching speaking to learners having field dependent (FD) and field independent (FI) learning style, popular to researchers for their effects on learning. This paper clarifies the concepts, mentioned by analyzing previous researches and suggests for a Learning Style Friendly (LSF) Teaching Style having appropriate strategies, effective for both field-dependent and field-independent learners on the basis of my classroom observation, requirements of speaking class and the analysis of the previous researches. This paper also explains the testing format for identifying field dependence and shows the effectiveness of the suggested teaching style by presenting a survey result on 60 learners.

1. Introduction

While teaching speaking, teachers in EFL classroom have to encounter notable differences in individual performance resulting from distinct cognitive style adopted by the learners. As a result, teachers have to develop appropriate teaching or instructional style with effective strategies and materials to ensure maximum benefit for all learners having distinct cognitive /learning style.

Studies have shown that identifying a student's learning style and then providing appropriate instructions in response to that style can contribute to more effective learning (Claxton and Murrell, 1987). Knowles (1973) also points out that understanding how a person learns is a major pre-requisite for a successful educational program. Teachers, in order to ensure speaking perfection of all learners, should pay special attention to cognitive style of every learner. Cognitive style, according to Ellis (1993), refers to "the manner in which people perceive, conceptualize, organize and recall information (p.114)." Cognitive styles, referred to as learning styles in educational context, have different dimensions, presented as dichotomies. The dichotomy of field dependence and field independence has received the greatest attention of L2 researchers in recent years due to their immense effect on learning. Here field means context or surroundings. Field dependent (FD) learners tend to depend on context whereas field independent (FI) learners depend less on context for processing information while learning. This paper deals with teaching speaking to both group of learners having field dependent and field independent learning style.

With an aim to deal with teaching speaking to FD and FI learners, this paper, firstly provides clear concepts about field dependence and field independence and analyzes the results of previous researches. Then it suggests a Learning Style Friendly (LSF) teaching style for speaking

having appropriate strategies and materials, effective for both FD and FI learners on the basis of my classroom observation, knowledge of the requirements of speaking class and the analysis of the previous researches. And finally my paper shows the effectiveness of the suggested teaching style by presenting a survey results carried on 60 learners of speaking class.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Field dependent and field independent learning style

American psychologist Herman A. Witkin (1916-1979), a pioneer of the theory of cognitive styles and learning styles, introduced the concepts of field dependency vs. field independency in 1962. Keefe, in 1979, recognized the bipolar learning style of field dependence/field independence as one of the learning style theories which were specially appropriate to the improvement of learning outcomes. Of all the many learning styles and models that have evolved over the last thirty years including, Dunn and Dunn's Learning Styles (1984), Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory (1983), Kolb's Learning Styles (1984) and Grasha's Learning Style Scales (1996), to name just a few, field dependence/ independence still remains the most researched of all the learning styles concepts (Pithers, 2002; Wooldridge, 1995).

In easy explanation, field dependency/ field independency refers to how learners perceive and memorize information. Field dependent learners depend more on context or surroundings while performing a skill or learning than field independent learners. Field independent learners depend more on their own internal frame of reference while learning. They are able to distinguish details from surrounding context. For example, they can easily recognize the hidden picture of an animal fused within the trees and leaves of an exotic forest. They are analytical in nature and rely less on teacher or other learners in classroom. But they are less skilled in social interaction. FD learners, on the other hand, tend to be less able to separate details from the

surrounding context. For example, they find difficulty to recognize the hidden picture of anything fused in a background or to find out a simple figure hidden inside a complex geometrical figure. FD learners tend to rely more on teachers or other learners in the classroom. They are good at teamwork due to their better interpersonal relationship.

According to Keefe (1979), field dependence/independence measures the degree to which an individual uses “an analytical as opposed to a global way of experiencing the environment” (Keefe, 1979:9). FD learners engage a global organization of the surrounding field instead of discerning discrete parts of the field. They tend to have short attention spans, are easily distracted and prefer casual learning environments. In addition, they like instructional situations that elicit their feelings and experiences. Field dependent persons are also more socially oriented, less achievement-oriented and less competitive, than field independent individuals (Wooldridge, 1995). They rely heavily on external stimuli and reinforcement for motivation.

On the other hand, FI learners are characterized by their analytical approach and problem solving abilities. They are more independent, more intrinsically motivated and task oriented in their learning process. They are disciplined learners having a longer attention span. Thus, field independent individuals depend more on internal than external cues and prefer formal learning environment conducive to their competitive and achievement-oriented learning style (Witkin et al., 1971; Witkin et al., 1977; Witkin and Goodenough, 1981; Wooldridge, 1995). They can impose their own structure in unstructured format. According to some other characteristics we can say FI people are secure, controlled, demanding, inconsiderate, cold and distant in relation with others whereas FD people are tense, insecure, passive, warm, affectionate, tactful, accommodating, non-evaluative and accepting of others. FD people have a high degree of social skills in contrast with FI people.

The extensive researches on the characteristics of FD and FI learners show that both learners have their advantages and disadvantages. Though characteristics of FI learners are more suitable for maximum academic situations, FD learners excel in some other circumstances. So, we should look at the difference between FD and FI modes of learning style in type intelligence rather than a degree of intelligence. Witkin (cited in Musser, 1998) also spoke about the possibility of producing change, flexibility, and mobility in cognitive style by means of appropriate training procedures.

2.2. Measuring field dependence

To measure field dependence Witkin proposed Rod and Frame Test (RFT) (Witkin & Goodenough, 1981) and Body Adjustment Test (BAT). Later more convenient methods like Embedded Figure Test (EFT) and Group Embedded Figure Test (GFT) arrived where subject finds out a simple figure, effectively hidden in a complex design. GFT, developed by Oltman, Raskin and Witkin (1971) facilitate group testing for cognitive style. "The test is scored on the basis of the total number of simple forms correctly traced. Scores may range from zero to eighteen" (MacNeil, 1980:355). Persons with lower scores are field dependent. The cutoff point between FI and FD is somewhere between twelve and thirteen. To measure field dependence, I used GFT and FI/FD checklist (Annexed) in my study.

2. 3. Investigation on the effects of field dependence and field independence on learning

Following Witkin's framework of FD and FI style, many researchers investigated the effects of field dependence/independence on learners in different academic areas and studied the ways to improve their learning.

The depiction of the studies below captures the most important research results having educational implications:

- Goodenough (1976) concluded that FD learners are dominated by salient cues in concept-learning tasks, use a “spectator” approach to learning, are more affected by negative reinforcement and are better at incidental learning of social information.
- Field dependents had more difficulty in abstracting relevant information from information supporting more difficult learning tasks. (Canelos, Taylor & Gates, 1980)
- Field independents recalled more structural and functional information (equipment parts) than field dependents. (Skaggs, Rocklin Dansereau & Hall, 1990)
- FI learners recalled significantly more from mathematical/scientific passages whereas FD learners recalled more from socially oriented passages. (Phifer, 1983)
- FI learners score better on music reading tasks than FD learners. (King, 1983)
- FI learners learned the most in Math lessons when given minimum guidance and maximum opportunity for discovery, whereas FD learners profited most from maximum guidance. (Adams & McLeod, 1979; McLeod, 1978)
- FD learners achieved higher scores on a nutrition test after using high structured materials (presented in logical order using a deductive sequence requiring written answers to convergent questions), whereas FI learners achieved more from the low structured treatment materials. (Tannenbaum, 1982)

We can identify the learning tasks where FD/FI learners can excel and the educational conditions maximizing their learning based on the extensive researches.

The learning tasks where FD learners excel:

Group oriented situations with social cues from others.

- Situations with a standardized pattern of performance.
- Knowledge domains that focus on social issues.
- Tasks requiring repetition of information to be recalled. (Musser, 1998)

The learning tasks where FI learners excel:

- Problem solving
- Concept-mapping or outlining
- Language learning
- Identifying aspects of disorganized information
- Transferring tasks to novel situation
- Performance based assessment
- Analyzing information structurally
- Evaluating knowledge
- Generating metaphors and analogies (Musser,1998)

The educational conditions for maximizing learning of FD learners:

- Pairing the field dependent student with field independent student
- Providing a social learning environment
- Offering deliberate structural support by using well organized materials
- Providing clear directions and maximum amount of guidance
- Including orienting strategies before instruction
- Providing positive and negative feedback
- Providing examples
- Embedding questions throughout learning
- Limiting stress. (Musser,1998)

The educational conditions for maximizing learning of FI learners:

- Pairing the field independent with a field dependent student
- Providing an independent learning environment
- Providing guidance but not imposing structure
- Allowing student directed learning
- Providing accessibility of supporting resources
- Providing team building exercises
- Utilizing discovery methods (student centered presentations methods like discussion, role playing, group problem solving)
- Creating outlines, concept maps etc (Musser,1998)

The summary of extensive previous researches on the effects of field dependent and field independent learning style conducted in various academic sectors can provide teachers proper knowledge to analyze the needs of FD and FI learners and design appropriate instructional style. Though no one of these researches was solely based on teaching speaking, the results helped me to identify FI and FD learners and design an appropriate teaching style.

3.1. Learning Style Friendly (LSF) Teaching Style for FD and FI learners

Optimal learning occurs when the instructional style of the teacher is matched to the particular strengths of the learner's cognitive style (Witkin et al., 1977). So a teacher should adopt a teaching style with proper instructional materials and strategies accommodating different learning styles. To teach speaking to FD and FI learners, I tried to develop Learning Style Friendly teaching style for speaking class suitable for both FD and FI learners. The factors which helped me to develop this teaching style are as follows:

3.1.1. Knowledge of speaking class environment

Maximum learners in a speaking class are nervous, less interactive and habituated with teacher centered teaching method. In case of shy, less interactive students, nervousness and stage fright may turn to be fatal (Chowdhury, N & Shaila, S.M, 2011). They lack speaking confidence, vocabulary and flow of speech. A suitable environment with student centered presentation methods such as group discussion, role playing, pair work, group problem solving etc encourages interaction. Teacher ensures equal participation and regular practice by working just as a facilitator. Social people perform better in speaking class. This concept about speaking class environment influenced me while designing my instructional style for FD and FI learners.

As a teacher of both Linguistics and Language courses, I got the opportunity to be exposed to ELT theories and apply those theories in language teaching. I have been teaching 'Public Speaking', a spoken form based course for a number of years. Though teaching presentation skills is the main target of this course, I always have to pay attention to develop speaking confidence of learners since they are unable to speak English due to lack of confidence, practice and vocabulary.

To overcome this adverse situation I divide each class into two parts – 'lecture session' and 'practice session'. In 'lecture session', I discuss the presentation skills and in the 'practice session', I try to create a little bit casual environment by making the students sit in some circles getting divided into small groups consisting of 5 or 6 people. This environment really helps them to overcome their nervousness and develop their confidence to speak gradually. While dealing with the practice session once I found the clear differences between FD and FI learners and I felt the necessity to meet the requirements of

these two groups of learners having distinct learning styles. My experience in the speaking class encouraged me a lot to apply innovative ideas and develop LSF teaching style.

3.1.2. Analysis of previous researches

Analyzing previous researches provided me with valuable insights to the characteristics (positive/negative) of FD and FI learners, areas of their possible success and instructional strategies maximizing their learning perfection. This knowledge helped me to identify and solve the problems of FD and FI learners with appropriate attempts.

3.2. The nature of LSF teaching style

According to LSF teaching style teacher has to think about the demands of each learner's learning style and design teaching materials accordingly. At first, the teacher has to identify the learning style of the learners. Since my main focus is on FD and FI learners in this paper, I suggest for using a test for measuring field dependence like GFT/EFT to identify FD and FI learners. After identifying FD and FI learners, we can divide the learners into several groups consisting of 5 or 6 people or sometimes into pairs. While making groups or pairs we should mix up FD and FI learners so that FD learner can learn the way of structuring materials, problem solving, and analytic approach from FI learners and conversely, FI learner can learn interaction, social skills, team work, dealing with social issues from FD learners. Though FI learners are more successful in maximum academic sectors, they are not socially skilled. And this feature can harm their speaking ability as perfection in oral skills largely depends on natural setting of acquisition than on classroom learning situation. Though in Bangladesh, we cannot provide natural setting for acquiring speaking skills, we can, at least, try to make a sort of casual environment in the class for practising speaking and suggest to them to continue that practice outside the class by forming

an 'English Speaking Club'. After forming group or pairs, made up of FD and FI learners, we should choose appropriate methods, techniques and materials for the benefit of both groups. The following techniques enlightened with new insights and reshaped in the context of meeting the demands of FD and FI learners can help us:

i. Social context based picture description (Group Activity)

This is a group activity where learners describe the three linked pictures, based on social context, and guess what happened next in the blank picture. FD students enthusiastically engage themselves in natural conversations about social issues. FI learners learn dealing with social issues and interaction from FD learners. FD learners learn from FI learners analyzing and structuring contents and using analogy while attending group presentation on related issues. Some context based words are provided to help the learners to continue flow of speech.

ii. Describing an object and sharing connotative feelings (Group/ pair/ individual activity)

In this exciting activity the teacher brings a bag full of objects (glass, doll etc) and each learner, with closed eyes, takes an object from the bag. After 5 minutes preparation, learners describe the object, its use etc. After that, they share the feelings or memories triggered by the object. FD learners learn describing things accurately from FI learner and FI learners learn the ways of sharing emotional feelings.

iii. Solving a problem/ riddle (Group activity/ Pair activity)

This activity requires the learners to solve a riddle or to give solution to any social problems by discussing among themselves. Here FD learners help FI by providing insights to social problems and they together work for a solution. FI learners can help others to apply analytic approach to solve riddles and to organize their thoughts while

solving problems. Teacher checks their direction and use of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. This group conversation may be followed by group presentation.

iv. Current issues based talk show (Debate based group activity)

This is an interesting activity where learners make a mock talk-show (as watched in TV) by taking the role of ministers, political leaders, journalists, economists etc. They spontaneously involve in funny debates on different current issues. Seats are just arranged like those of TV talk-shows. Audience makes funny questions and speakers receive mock telephone from class corners. Both FD and FI learners help each other by sharing their qualities through conversation. Teacher provides the positive and negative feedback regarding different linguistic aspects.

v. Mystery character (pair /group activity)

In this activity one partner represents a hidden character and the other partner(s) in pair or group tries/ try to identify the character by asking questions to the mystery partner who provides clues. The character may be from popular movie, novel etc or real professions (doctor, teacher). In this thrilling activity, social knowledge of FD learners and discovering strategies of FI learners help both learners. Teacher notices their direction with providing feedback regarding their mistakes.

vi. Acting and learning (Pair or Group activity)

This is an enjoyable session where learners play the role of different characters in particular situations (dealing a patient by a doctor, taking interview of a minister by a journalist, making a TV report on a sudden disaster, matchmaker & bride's mother etc). In this dramatic activity students learn to use appropriate expression and vocabulary

in appropriate situation under teacher's guidance and students' direction. Students incorporate here funny elements and sometimes convey social message. FD and FI learners exchange learning of social skill and organizing capacity.

vii. Context based story competition (Mixture of group activity and individual presentation)

In this activity, members of each group develop a story from an incomplete story (part of a written text/video clip) provided by the teacher. They discuss to give a complete shape to the story and divide the story for individual presentation. The social knowledge of FD learners help others to incorporate social elements in the story and structural autonomy of FI learners help to organize materials with perfect chronological order. Teacher helps by providing appropriate vocabulary clues for right context by monitoring their conversation while developing the stories.

viii. Flash card based impromptu speech (Individual presentation)

Here, each learner takes a card containing topic from lottery and presents individual presentation after 5 minute's preparation. The cards provide questions to help learners to organize their thoughts. FD learners like to work with a given structure which FI learners don't like, so FI learners are not forced to follow the given structure, but requested to consider these as helping clues to get materials. This activity helps to activate learner's capacity for taking immediate preparation and applying presentation skill in their speech. Teacher gives positive and negative feedback to help learners to overcome their drawbacks.

ix. Dictionary practice (pronunciation based group activities)

In this activity learners hear the exact pronunciation of any word from audio CD of dictionary (with pronunciation) and utter that. Whole

class can do it together or it may be a group activity where members of each group will practise pronunciation by using one laptop computer (for each group). One student per group brings a laptop for all members. Learners practise and share their feedback. In this group situation FD learners feel more comfortable. FI learners, though habituated to self- study, are benefitted by getting feedback about their pronunciation from others. Teacher selects useful vocabulary based on different situations for pronunciation practice.

x. Tongue twister (pronunciation based activity)

Whole class can do this activity where learners receive audio record of some tongue twister and their printed version. Looking at their printed version, learners utter those. This activity helps learners to overcome the barriers of articulation and achieve fluency. Both groups of learners help each other by providing feedback. Teacher monitors each learner's performance by feedback.

xi. Things in common and picture difference (pair activity)

In these pair activities, learners find out similarities and differences between pictures. Since the pairs consist of FD and FI learners, FD learners work with FI learners and learn how to observe the similarities and differences of two pictures which can develop their field independence. Their conversation can help both learners to improve speaking skill. Teacher allows the FI learners to adopt analytical approach and share with FD learner but monitors the direction followed.

Learners use only English throughout each of these activities. All these activities, with other common techniques can help both FD and FI learners to achieve speaking skill. I found notable improvement in learner's achievement by utilizing these activities.

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

The participants, selected for the survey, are 60 undergraduate students undergoing the course 'Public Speaking' in the department of Business Administration of Stamford University, Bangladesh.

4.2. Data Collection Procedure

The survey is based on the results of two presentations evaluating different aspects of speaking skill on the basis of average percentage of marks and high, medium and low grade of performance level. The 1st presentation is taken before applying my LSF teaching style. After taking 1st presentation, I have identified the FD and FI students by using GFT and a FI/FD checklist (Annexed). Then special groups are formed by mixing up FD and FI learners. After the application of my LSF teaching style on the students of these mixed groups, the 2nd presentation is taken and evaluated.

4.3. Data analysis

The results of two presentations evaluating different aspects of speaking skill on the basis of average percentage of marks and high, medium and low grade of performance level are analyzed, compared and expressed by frequency and percentage in a chart.

5. Finding and discussion

A comparative analysis of the results of two presentations marks the improvement of students in different aspects of speaking after applying LSF style. Among 7 columns in the following chart, first column shows the variables of evaluating different aspects of speaking skill, 2nd column shows the grades of performance such as high, mid and low grade, 3rd and 4th column show the number of people getting different grades in different aspects of 1st and 2nd presentation. 5th and 6th column show the average percentage of

marks got by learners in 1st and 2nd presentation. Finally, the 7th column shows the improvement made by learners in the 2nd presentation in comparison with 1st presentation which is taken before adopting LSF teaching style.

Comparative analysis of two presentations results						
Variables of evaluation	Grade of performance	No. of students out of 60		Average percentage of Marks		Improvement
		1st presentation	2nd presentation	1st presentation	2nd presentation	
Confidence Level	High	2	21			38.45%
	Mid	15	35	46.17%	63.92%	
	Low	43	4			
Performance in Pronunciation	High	2	14			24.22%
	Mid	21	35	48.17%	59.83%	
	Low	37	11			
Vocabulary and Grammar	High	7	26			29.37%
	Mid	15	25	49.08%	63.50%	
	Low	38	9			
Speaking Fluency	High	2	12			22.34%
	Mid	22	37	48.50%	59.33%	
	Low	36	11			

If we notice the seven columns of the chart, we can easily observe the improvement made by the students in 2nd presentation, taken after adopting LSF teaching style, specifically designed to help FD and FI learners. The frequency (the number of people) and average percentage of marks in 2nd presentation (shown in 4th and 6th column) are higher than those in first presentation (shown in 3rd and 5th column). The 7th column clearly reflects the improvement made by students in 2nd presentation in different aspects of speaking skill.

After LSF teaching style was applied, students' average percentage of mark improved by 22.34% in fluency, 24.22% in pronunciation, 29.37% in vocabulary and grammar and 38.45% in confidence level (shown in 7th column). So, this style can make significant improvement in confidence level along with other aspects of speaking skill and enable FD & FI students to achieve speaking perfection and gain more abilities to meet the requirements of competitive job sector.

6. Conclusion

Instructional effectiveness can be enhanced by responding to the field dependence/field independence of an individual student. Teacher should be very careful about identifying FD and FI learners and design teaching style to meet their requirement. Teaching speaking demands more careful effort from the teacher since speaking is one of the most difficult skills to teach requiring positive environment for meaningful interaction. Teacher should create socially-oriented learning environment to assist FD and FI learners. Having all these ideas in mind, I suggested LSF teaching style for teaching speaking to FD and FI learners in this paper. This teaching style can help a teacher of speaking class not only to enable learners to achieve speaking perfection but also to make them gain social skill and analytic ability to meet the challenges of professional sectors in days to come.

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Appendix

FIELD INDEPENDENT/DEPENDENT CHECKLIST

Instructions to learners: Check one box in each item that best describes you. Boxes A and E indicate that the sentence is very much like you. Boxes B and D indicate that the sentence is more or less like you. Box C would indicate that you have no particular inclination any one or the other.

	A	B	C	D	E
1 I have no problem concentrating amid noise and confusion.					I need a quiet environment in order to concentrate well.
2 I enjoy analyzing grammar structures					I find grammar analysis tedious and boring.

3 I feel I must understand every word of what I read or hear.		I don't mind reading or listening in the L2 without understanding every single word as long as I 'catch' the main idea.
4 I think classroom study is the key to effective language learning.		I think communication is the key to effective language learning.
5 I prefer working alone to working with other people.		I really enjoy working with other people in pairs or groups.
6 Receiving feedback from other people really doesn't affect my learning at all.		I find feedback useful as a means of understanding my problem areas.

Learners, whose responses tend toward the right side of the list, indicate a preference for FD, conversely, those who resemble more from the left show a preference for FI.

Presentation Format (for each section):

Presentation Format (for each section):

Name	Confidence	Pronunciation	Voca & Gra	Fluency	High grade	Medium grade	Low	Total marks	%
1.									
2.									
3.									
4.									
5.									
6.									
7.									
8.									
9.									
10.									
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22.									
2.									
24.									
25.									
26.									
27.									
28.									
29.									
30.									