

Investigating English Language Learning Habits and Preferences of Iraqi EFL University Students

Fatimah Jammal Al-Quraishi, Department of English Language,
College of Basic Education, University of Diyala, Iraq:

basiceng92@unodiyala.edu.iq

Hayder AbdulHasan Hamza, Electronic Techniques dep.,
Technical Instructor Training Institute, Middle Technical
University, Baghdad, Iraq: hayder-abdulhasan@mtu.edu.iq

Noora Adnan Tawfeeq, English Department, College of Art,
Mustaniriyah University, Iraq: nooraadnan@uomustansiriyah.edu.iq

استكشاف عادات تعلم اللغة الانكليزية وتفضيلات طلبة الجامعة العراقيين الدارسين للغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية

م.م. فاطمه جمال القريشي، قسم اللغة الانكليزية، كلية التربية الاساسية، جامعة ديالى، العراق؛

م.م. حيدر عبدالحسن حمزة، قسم التقنيات الالكترونية، معهد اعداد المدرسين التقنيين، الجامعة

التقنية الوسطى، بغداد، العراق؛

م.م. نوره عدنان توفيق، قسم اللغة الإنكليزية وآدابها، كلية الآداب، الجامعة المستنصرية، العراق؛

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الخلاصة

تحاول دراسة استكشاف عادات تعلم اللغة الانكليزية وتفضيلات طلبة الجامعة العراقيين الدارسين للغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية هي تقصي واجابة إذا ما كان الطلبة العراقيون الدارسون للغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية أية عادات لتحسين تعلمهم اللغة الإنكليزية، وأيضا إذا ما كان هناك فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية في هذه العادات وفقا للجنس. اهتمت البحوث السائدة في هذا الموضوع حيث أصبحت العادات وبنائها ومتابعتها من المحدثات الشائعة في الوقت الحاضر. اعتمدت الدراسات السابقة بشكل أساسي على كيفية توظيف المبادئ السلوكية النفسية في طرائق تدريس اللغة الانكليزية. ومن خلال هذا البحث، سنتقصى بعمق في تفضيلات الطلبة لهذه العادات. جُمِعت البيانات من طلبة قسم اللغة الإنكليزية في كلية التربية الاساسية جامعة ديالى على شكل استبانة مكونة من أربعة محاور، حيث يتكون كل محور من خمس نقاط. حُلِّلت النتائج باستخدام برنامج التحليل الإحصائي SPSS 26. اقترح الباحثون بعض الأفكار بناء على نتائج الدراسة. الكلمات المفتاحية: عادات، إنكليزي، لغة، تعلم

Abstract

Investigating English language learning habits and preferences of Iraqi EFL university students is a study that tries to explore and answer whether Iraqi EFL students have any habits toward improving their English language learning, and if there are any significant differences in language learning habits among Iraqi EFL students according to their gender. The dominant exploration for this trend has increased since habit formation and tracking habits are very trendy among people nowadays. Previous studies have primarily relied on how to employ behavioral psychology principles in methods of teaching English language. By investigating the habits of Iraqi EFL university students, we can have a deep exploration of the students' preferences. The data was collected from Iraqi EFL at the Department of English Language, University of Diyala through a questionnaire made out of four main themes; each one consists of five items. The results are analyzed through descriptive statistics of the data through SPSS 26 software program. According to the findings, the researchers recommend some ideas for each theme of the study. **Key Words: Habits, English, language, and learning.**

1. Introduction

Habits are the unseen builders of our everyday existence; they impact our decision-making, routine navigation, and, eventually, the course of our lives. These habitual actions, deeply ingrained in our lives, have a significant influence on both our personal and professional lives. Gaining insight into the complexities of habit and the process of habit development is a trip into the fundamental principles that drive human behavior rather than just an academic attempt. Clear (2018) defines habit as '*routine or behavior that is performed regularly-and in many cases, automatically*'. The formation of habits is a captivating journey through the neural pathways of the human brain. It involves a loop of cues, routines, and rewards, as explained by Charles Duhigg (2013) in his exploration of habit science; cues act as triggers, signaling the brain to initiate a particular behavior, followed by the routine — the behavior itself. The completion of the routine leads to a reward, reinforcing the loop and making the habit more likely to be repeated. This neurological dance is the foundation upon which habits are built, and understanding it shows the key to intentional habit formation. Habits formation has appeared in the process of English language learning and teaching since the development of The Audio-Lingual Method (Freeman and Anderson, 2011). Charles Fries (1945) in his try to apply principles of structural linguistics in developing a method of teaching referred to the "Michigan Method" earlier, the incorporation of Skinner's (1957) behavioral psychology principles claimed that it could help students to respond correctly through shaping and reinforcements. The students through these principles can overcome the habits of their native language and form the new habits required to be target language speakers. Scott H. Young (2019) explores the intricate relationship between habits and learning, contending that effective learning is not just about accumulating knowledge but also about forming and optimizing habits. Young argues that habits play a crucial role in the learning process, influencing the acquisition and retention of information. The central premise is that habits act as a catalyst for learning success. By establishing and reinforcing positive habits, individuals can enhance their ability to absorb and retain knowledge. Tanır (2023) highlights in his article the evolving understanding of language learning as a set of habits, drawing insights from psychological research on habits and language education studies on learning strategies and styles. It challenges the simplistic notion that language learning habits stem solely from repeated associations. Instead, he mentioned that learning styles, representing consciously employed strategies and personal information preferences, are indicative of habit formation. Habits, defined as mental representations shaped by regular external responses, manifest as observable behaviors. Language learning habits, driven by the pursuit of goals and benefits, persist beyond continuous exposure to stimuli. Upon habit formation, learners respond to cues related to these habits, consciously or unconsciously engaging in language-related activities. He ends with the statement that effective language learning requires frequent interventions in consistent contexts to establish habits aligned with learners' goals. From this sight, the researchers try to investigate the learner habit formation and preferences by considering variables hindering habit formation and designing satisfaction-enhancing learning activities in line with learners' objectives.

2. Method

To conduct this study, the researchers built a questionnaire consists of four main themes, each them consists of five main items. Cronbach's Alpha was calculated to test the reliability of the questionnaire items, 94 % is enough to admit the questionnaire for the students and handle the study.

2.1. Research Questions

This study tries to answer the following questions:

1. Do Iraqi EFL students have any learning habits toward improving their English language learning?
2. Are there any significant differences in language learning habits between Iraqi EFL students according to their gender?

2.2. Participants

The participants of the study are first, second, third, and fourth-year students of the English language Department, College of Basic Education, Diyala University; 200 participants 131 females and 69 males. The participation was on a volunteer base.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers developed a questionnaire with 20 items; each 5 related to a main theme to investigate. The themes are the purpose of learning English, learning space and style, learning manner, and learning time. The application process involved the responses of the questionnaire by the students for 15-20 minutes, after a verbal

explanation of the written instructions. The statistical analysis of the data was computed through SPSS 26 software program.

2.4. Findings

The questionnaire was analyzed and displayed statistically in six Tables, 1 – 5 to answer the first question, and Table 6 to answer the second question Table 1: Statistics of Learning Purposes theme

Learning Purposes		strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree	Mean	std. deviation	Rank
I only learn English language to pass my exams.	N	16	29	43	42	70	3.605	1.307	1
	%	8%	15%	22%	21%	35%			
I learn English language to use it outside the classroom.	N	53	75	33	22	17	2.375	1.222	4
	%	27%	38%	17%	11%	9%			
I learn English language to increase my opportunity getting a job.	N	72	51	38	18	21	2.325	1.323	5
	%	36%	26%	19%	9%	11%			
I learn English to enhance my mental capacity.	N	65	59	34	18	24	2.385	1.337	3
	%	33%	30%	17%	9%	12%			
I learn English for fun and to be a trendy and cool person.	N	51	63	36	20	30	2.575	1.362	2
	%	26%	32%	18%	10%	15%			
weighted mean							2.653		
std. deviation							1.31		

In Table 1, the findings of the students' learning purposes are displayed as seen, from which we find that the highest average to the first item: **(I only learn English language to pass my exams)** with mean 3.605 and Std. Deviation 1.307, followed by the fifth item: **(I learn English language for fun and to be a trendy and cool person)** with mean 2.575 and Std. Deviation 1.362, followed by the fourth item **(I learn English language to enhance my mental capacity)** with mean 2.385 and Std. Deviation 1.337, followed by the fourth item, followed by the second item **(I learn English language to use it outside classroom)** with mean 2.375 and Std. Deviation 1.307, while the lowest average was awarded to the third item **(I learn English language to increase my opportunity getting a job)** with mean 2.325 and Std. Deviation 1.323. The weighted average of the theme **(learning purposes)** is (Disagree), as a general tend according to 5-point Likert's scale as shown in table (1) since 2.653 lies in the interval [2.6 – 1.8]. So, the average of **(learning purposes)** is (2.653) which is considered a low level, since the intervals level as follow: Strongly agree level: 5 – 4.2 Agree level: 4.2 – 3.4 Neutral level: 3.4 – 2.6 Disagree level: 2.6 – 1.8 Strongly disagree level: 1.8 – 1 Table 2 Statistics of Learning Space and Style

Learning Space and style		strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree	Mean	std. deviation	Rank
I prefer learning English language at home (self-learning/ independent learning).	N	19	48	58	33	42	3.155	1.265	1
	%	10%	24%	29%	17%	21%			
The presence of other people does not disturb me.	N	19	54	45	51	31	3.105	1.230	2
	%	10%	27%	23%	26%	16%			
I can learn English language everywhere.	N	42	61	40	31	26	2.69	1.313	4
	%	21%	31%	20%	16%	13%			
I prefer learning English language outside (enrolling English language courses).	N	37	59	40	35	29	2.8	1.323	3
	%	19%	30%	20%	18%	15%			
I learn at different platforms (my college + English language courses + self-learning + using English language interactive apps + social-media English language learning pages.... etc.).	N	61	56	37	20	26	2.47	1.356	5
	%	31%	28%	19%	10%	13%			
weighted mean							2.844		
std. deviation							1.298		

In Table 2, the findings of the students' learning space and style are displayed as seen, from which we find that the highest average to the first item: (**I prefer learning English language at home (self-learning/ independent learning)**) with mean 3.151 and Std. Deviation 1.265, followed by the second item: (**The presence of other people does not disturb me**) with mean 3.105 and Std. Deviation 1.230, followed by the fourth item (**I prefer learning English language outside (enrolling English language courses)**) with mean 2.8 and Std. Deviation 1.323, followed by the third item (**I can learn English language everywhere**) with mean 2.69 and Std. Deviation 1.313, while the lowest average was awarded to the fifth item (**I learn at different platformsetc**) with mean 2.47 and Std. Deviation 1.356. The weighted average of the theme (**learning space and style**) is (Neutral), as a general tend according to 5-point Likert's scale as shown in table (2) since 2.844 lies in the interval [3.4 – 2.6]. So, the average of (**learning space and style**) is (2.844) which is considered a neutral level, as mentioned above. Table 3 Statistics of Learning manner

Learning manner		strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree	Mean	std. deviation	Rank
I prepare a time plan to learn English language.	N	28	32	47	29	46	2.865	1.256	2
	%	14%	16%	24%	15%	23%			
I set goals to learn English language.	N	62	72	56	37	47	2.71	1.243	3
	%	31%	36%	28%	19%	24%			
I break my goals into simple steps to ease my learning process.	N	46	42	48	65	48	2.61	1.288	5
	%	23%	21%	24%	33%	24%			
I strict to my learning routine.	N	37	30	26	38	39	3.025	1.255	1
	%	19%	15%	13%	19%	20%			
I reward myself after achieving each learning goal I set.	N	27	24	23	31	20	2.7	1.288	4
	%	14%	12%	12%	16%	10%			
weighted mean							2.865		
std. deviation							1.255		

In Table 3, the findings of the students' learning manner are displayed as seen, from which we find that the highest average to the fourth item: (**I strict to my learning routine**) with mean 3.025 and Std. Deviation 1.255, followed by the first item: (**I prepare a time plan to learn English language**) with mean 2.865 and Std. Deviation 1.256, followed by the second item (**I set goals to learn English language**) with mean 2.71 and Std. Deviation 1.243, followed by the fifth item (**I reward myself after achieving each learning goal**) with mean 2.7 and Std. Deviation 1.288, while the lowest average was awarded to the third item (**I break my goals into simple steps to ease my learning process**) with mean 2.61 and Std. Deviation 1.288. The weighted average of the theme (**learning manner**) is (Neutral), as a general tend according to 5-point Likert's scale as shown in table (2) since 2.865 lies in the interval [3.4 – 2.6]. So, the average of (**learning manner**) is (2.865) which is considered a neutral level, as mentioned previously. Table 4 Statistics of Learning Time

Learning Time		strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree	Mean	std. deviation	Rank
Time is not important in my English language learning habits.	N	30	41	60	33	46	3.15	1.396	1
	%	15%	21%	30%	17%	23%			
I prefer to set a specific time for each goal.	N	47	65	64	61	62	2.765	1.386	3
	%	24%	33%	32%	31%	31%			
I try to make my learning continuous and progress.	N	31	27	28	46	34	2.45	1.359	4
	%	16%	14%	14%	23%	17%			
I always check my timeline progress with my English language learning achievements.	N	47	34	22	33	29	2.8	1.277	2
	%	24%	17%	11%	17%	15%			
I use daily track to make my learning process as a daily habit.	N	45	33	26	27	29	2.665	1.357	5
	%	23%	17%	13%	14%	15%			
weighted mean							2.766		
std. deviation							1.355		

In Table 4, the findings of the students' learning time are displayed as seen, from which we find that the highest average to the first item: (**Time is not important in my English language learning habits**) with mean 3.15 and Std. Deviation 1.396, followed by the fourth item: (**I always check my timeline progress with my English language learning achievements**) with mean 2.8 and Std. Deviation 1.277, followed by the second item (**I prefer to set a specific time for each goal**) with mean 2.765 and Std. Deviation 1.386, followed by the third item (**I try to make my learning continuous and progress**) with mean 2.54 and Std. Deviation 1.359, while the lowest average was awarded to the fifth item (**I use daily track to make my learning progress as a daily habit**) with mean 2.665 and Std. Deviation 1.357. The weighted average of the theme (**learning time**) is (Neutral), as a general tend according to 5-point Likert's scale as shown in table (2) since 2.766 lies in the interval [3.4 – 2.6]. So, the average of (**learning time**) is (2.766) which is considered a neutral level, as mentioned previously. Table 5 Habits Themes

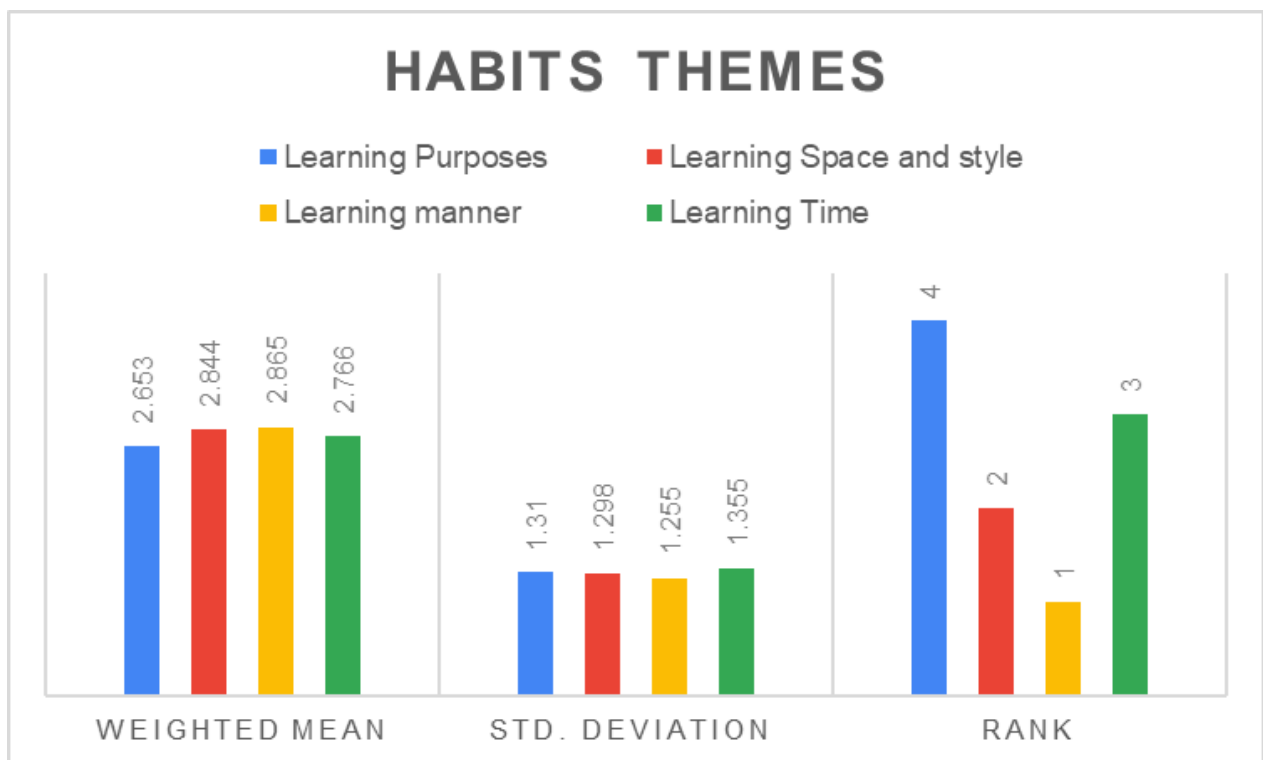


Table 6 T- Test statistics

Theme name	Gender	Number	Mean	std. deviation	sig.	df	t-value	Decision
Learning Purposes	male	69	2.8058	1.04486	0.595	198	1.575	Ho1 accepted
	female	131	2.5725	0.96898				
Learning Space and style	male	69	2.6725	1.01748	0.893		-1.791	Ho1 accepted
	female	131	2.9344	0.96475				
Learning manner	male	69	2.742	1.05334	0.587		-0.399	Ho1 accepted
	female	131	2.8031	1.01496				
Learning Time	male	69	2.7391	1.01998	0.167		-0.257	Ho1 accepted
	female	131	2.7802	1.09989				

Table 6 shows the students' habits preferences of learning English language. The analysis revealed for each theme different mean and standard deviation (Std.) with degree of freedom (df) of 198 and number of 131 female students and 69 male students. Since the observed significance level of each theme bigger than 0.05, the results indicated that there are no significant differences exist between males and females. Thus, the null hypothesis was accepted.

3. Discussion and conclusion

The study has concluded that, based on the descriptive statistics of Likert's scale, the answer to the first question of the study, and according to the students' responses to the built questionnaire, students have habits towards their English language learning according to the descriptive statistics that illustrated in Table 5. As seen the first rank goes for the **learning manner** theme with a weighted mean 2.856 and std. deviation 1.255; followed by **learning space and style** theme with a weighted mean 2.844 and std. deviation 1.298; followed by **learning time** theme with weighted mean 2.776 and std. deviation 1.355; while the last rank was awarded to **learning purposes** theme with a weighted mean 2.653 and std. deviation 1.31.

To answer the second question, the researchers assumed that there are statistically significant differences between males and females in their preferences to form habits toward English language learning. T- test for the independent sample is calculated to answer the second question, as seen in Table 6 which indicates that there are no significant differences exist between males and females.

3.1 Recommendation

On the basis of the conclusions, the following recommendations were written:

1. Learning Purposes

Recognizing the significance of students' changed learning purposes, teach ought to customize English dialect programs to adjust with these person objectives. Joining real-world scenarios, career-oriented dialect aptitudes, or other important settings can upgrade the intentionality of the learning encounter.

2. Learning space and style

Considering the learning space and style, learning English language ought to center on making flexible learning situations. This includes adaptable classroom setups, mixed media integration, and the arrangement of assets that cater to distinctive learning inclinations, hence progressing the general quality of the learning involvement.

3. Learning manner

Given that learning manner, learning English language ought to expand educating approaches inside English dialect programs. This involves joining a blend of intelligent sessions, mixed media assets, and hands-on exercises to oblige different learning styles and improve general engagement.

4. Learning time

Recognizing the importance of learning time, institutions should offer support and guidance on effective time management for language learning. This includes providing schedules, study plans, and conducting workshops to help students allocate ample time to improve their English language skills efficiently.

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