

Identifying students' learning style preferences regarding some variables in the EFL classroom: The case of Turkey

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Abstract

During the past decade, the identification of students' learning style preferences has gained importance in educational research. This study aimed at identifying the individual perceptions of the learner style preferences of Turkish EFL learners. Using learning style preference categories and a 28-item language learning preference questionnaire adopted from Willing, the authors focussed on a group of 60 students at the ELT Department, Onsekiz Mart University. As a further step, the emphasis was also placed on the variables such as sex, attendance to prep class and schools graduated. In doing so, the study sought to find out whether these variables were likely to have an impact on students' learning style preferences. Results showed the learning preferences of students in different learning style preference categories. The data obtained also revealed that a meaningful correlation was found with regard to the difference between the schools graduated and students' perceptions of learning style preferences.

Keywords: Learning Style, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Turkish Students

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Introduction

With Turkey's recent efforts geared towards the full membership of European Union and thus the country's consequent contact and communication with other nations, there has been a great interest among Turkish in English communicative competence. In order to cover this need, Turkish Ministry of Education has started to shift the focus of language instruction given at undergraduate level from the country's traditional grammar-based style of language instruction to the one that is more communication-based. These classes turn out to be merit for the language instruction as they involve a variety of classroom activities intended to encourage a great deal of interaction between both teacher-student and student-student. However, the implementation stage of these activities has not been without its problems. We do feel that one of the most important needs regarding the English education of Turkish school system is the identification of Turkish students' learning style preferences and the variables that are likely to have an impact on these preferences.

In recent years, as a result of the shift from a traditional instructional paradigm to a learner-centred approach towards language learning/teaching, coming to terms with the way students learn has been of vital importance and has been the key to educational improvement. During the past decade, educational research has focused on the identification of a number of factors that account for some of the differences in how students learn (Reid, 1987). One of these factors, learning styles or learning preferences, is broadly described as "cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment" (Keefe, 1979). There is no doubt that students perceive information in different manners. While some students prefer to learn individually, independent of their peers and teachers, others might enjoy interaction and relationship with them. Therefore, it is believed (e.g. Reid, 1987; Celce-Murcia, 2001) that learner styles or learning preferences basically refer to the different ways of how students take in and process information. To render learning and teaching process effective, teachers should arrange teaching activities that are compatible with the particular ways through which students are willing to learn any subject matter like English.

In most cases, teachers are worried that their teaching methods do not match their students' individual learning needs. Because most of the language teachers are not aware of their students' preferred way of language learning styles and are still reluctant to consult learners in introducing language learning activities in EFL classroom. Teachers, therefore, need to involve students actively in the teaching/learning process and explore the ways their students prefer to learn the language, hence being able to teach in a way that is appealing to most students. In addition, this information can be invaluable source for material and syllabus designers in devising a language learning syllabus that is supposed to be in line with students' perceptions and experiences.

Literature review

Considerable research in the area of students' learning style preferences has been conducted. In his well-known study, Knowles (1982) divides learning styles into four major categories: *analytical learning styles, concrete learning styles, communicative learning styles, and authority-oriented learning styles.*

Later, Willing (1988) used the same classifications in a study on learning style preferences among EFL learners. This study was administered to adult immigrant ESL learners in Australia in order to learn about their preferred methods of learning. On the basis of their responses, students were put into one of the four categories. For instance, subjects who had a preference for "studying grammar" were classified as analytical learning style learners. Those who indicated a preference for "learning by using games, pictures, and videos" were classified as concrete learning style learners.

In a large-scale study, Reid (1987) asked 1,338 students with different language backgrounds to identify their learning style preferences. Her study generated substantial results. She reported that there exists a high correlation between ESL students L1 and their learning style preference. She came to the conclusion that variables such as age, sex, level of education, TOEFL score are related to differences in learning style preference. In a parallel study, Hayashi and Cherry (2004) examined learning preferences of Japanese students of English by using learning preference categories first described by Knowles in 1982. Their study indicated that "the subjects in the study could not be placed neatly in any single preference category" (2004, p. 83).

Among recent studies is one by Kavaliauskiene (2003) that attempted to examine learners' preferences of the methodology of learning a foreign language. Results of her study showed that learners are concerned with passing their exams and getting good marks rather than improve their language skills for academic purposes. It follows that a group of studies aimed at investigating the correspondence between the learners' preferences and teachers' perceptions of them are worth mentioning as they revealed contradictory results. The data obtained from the studies conducted by Bada and Okan (2000) and Stapa (2003) suggested a need for a closer co-operation between students and teachers as to how learning activities should be arranged and implemented in the classroom. However, in the other set of surveys particularly carried out by Barkhuizen (1998) and Spratt (1999) it was found that the teachers' perceptions did not surprisingly match those of students.

In line with the studies illustrated above, a recent study conducted by Riazi and Riasati (2007) strived to investigate the learning styles preferred by the Iranian EFL learners. Compared to the previous studies, it was claimed "to attempt to examine the extent to which teachers are aware of the students' learning preferences" (Riazi and Riasati (2007, p. 5). The study showed the pressing need for such a detailed and comprehensive study of the learning preferences of Iranian EFL learners as it also reflected teachers' perceptions of the students' learning preferences as well as the students' individual preferred ways of language learning.

Along with all the surveys briefly revised above, the present study aims at identifying the individual perceptions of the Turkish students' learning preferences

involved in ELT classroom. In doing so, the main emphasis is placed on the variables that are likely to have an effect on their preferences. To this end this study with the following goals and objectives was designed.

Objectives of the study

The present study intended to investigate the learning style preferences of the Turkish EFL students in relation to different variables. Specifically, the study sought answers to the following questions within the framework of this fundamental purpose:

1. What are the distributions of the students' learning styles in relation to the most frequent preferences and the least frequent preferences?
2. Do the students' perceptions of their style preferences differ in relation to sex?
3. Do the students' perceptions of their style preferences differ as to whether they attended the prep class?
4. Do the students' perceptions of their style preferences differ in relation to the schools from which they graduated?

Methodology

Participants

Sixty language learners (38 males and 22 females) took part in the study. The students were asked to express their views regarding the extent of their awareness of their learning style preferences. The data were collected from 4 classes of the English Department, Faculty of Education, Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Turkey. Below, Table 1. provides general background information on the students with reference to sex, the type of secondary school and attendance to prep class:

Table 1. *Distribution of students in relation to sex, the type of secondary school and attendance at prep class*

<i>The characteristics of students</i>		f	%
Sex	Male	38	63.3
	Female	22	36.7
	<i>Total</i>	60	100.0
The school attended	<i>*Teacher High School</i>	15	25.0
	<i>*Anatolian High School</i>	17	28.3
	<i>*General High School</i>	28	46.7
	<i>Total</i>	60	100.0
Attendance at prep class	<i>Yes</i>	39	65.0
	<i>No</i>	21	35.0
	<i>Total</i>	60	100.0

Instrument

The instrument used in the study was 28-item language learning preference questionnaire adopted from Willing (1998). It consisted of one version designed for students. Students taking part in the study were supposed to state how they prefer to learn the language. Each item in the questionnaire indicated a statement of a learning preference, for example, *I like to learn English by talking in pairs*, followed by four choices *no / a little / yes / very much*. In addition, the following table provides substantial information in order to exemplify how the items involved in the questionnaire are classified in the light of their corresponding learning style. Furthermore, as can be seen in the section of the results, with the rating scale used in the study the students' learning preferences relating to their agreement or disagreement with the items in the questionnaire were displayed (Table 3 and Table 4).

* Teacher High School, Anatolian High School and General High School all refer to major secondary Turkish state schools.

Table 2: *The classification of learning preferences*

<i>The classification of learning preferences</i>	
Concrete Learning Style	<i>20. I like to learn English by seeing them.</i>
	<i>22. I like to learn English words by doing something</i>
	<i>3. In class, I like to learn by games.</i>
Analytical Learning Style	<i>1. In class, I like to learn by reading.</i>
	<i>18. I like to learn many new words.</i>
	<i>17. I like to study grammar.</i>
Communicative Learning Style	<i>28. I like to learn by watching / listening to native speakers of English.</i>
	<i>24. At home, I like to learn by watching TV in English.</i>
	<i>27. I like to learn by talking to friends in English.</i>
Authority-Oriented Learning Style	<i>6. I want to write everything in my notebook.</i>
	<i>9. I like the teacher to give us problems to work on.</i>
	<i>11. I like the teacher to tell me all my mistakes.</i>

Procedures for data collection and analysis

The English version of the questionnaire was provided with students to complete during their class session. However, instruction as to how to complete the questionnaire was given in Turkish in order to avoid any misunderstanding. The required data were collected in one session.

Results

The findings gathered from the study were investigated under the four headings below.

5.1 Listing 10 most frequent preferences and 10 least frequent preferences respectively

Table 3. *Ten most frequent preferences (the number in parentheses is the ratio of the subjects who circled yes or very much to all the subjects answering the item)*

1. In class, I like to learn by reading. (%94)
2. I like to learn by watching / listening to native speakers of English. (%91)
3. I like to learn English words by seeing them. (%88)
4. I like to learn many new words. (%86)
5. I like to learn English words by doing something. (%85)
6. At home, I like to learn by watching TV in English. (%83)
7. I like to learn by talking to friends in English. (%83)
8. I like the teacher to let me find my mistakes. (%82)
9. I like the teacher to help me talk about my interests. (%82)
10. In class, I like to learn by conversations. (%81)

Table 4. *Ten least frequent preferences (the number in parentheses is the ratio of the subjects who circled yes or very much to all the subjects answering the item)*

1. I want to write everything in my notebook. (%33)
2. At home, I like to learn by using cassettes. (%36)
3. I like to study grammar. (%38)
4. I like the teacher to give us problems to work on. (%41)
5. I like to learn English with the whole class. (%43)
6. In English class, I like to learn by reading. (%45)
7. I like to study English by myself (alone). (%45)
8. I like the teacher to tell me all my mistakes. (%47)
9. In class, I like to listen to and use cassettes. (%48)
10. I like to learn English by talking in pairs. (%51)

The statistically significant results relating to the students' perceived learning preferences displayed in Table 2 and Table 3 deserve some comment. To start with, the overwhelming majority of the students (%94) were convinced about the importance of reading activities taking place in the classroom. Additionally, %91 of the students reported that they preferred to learn by watching / listening to native speakers of English. On the other hand, the small number of the students (%33) pointed out that they wanted to write everything in their notebooks. Similarly, only %36 of the students indicated that they tended to learn by using cassettes at home.

More importantly, the small percentage of the students (%38) felt satisfied with the study of grammar.

A closer look at the 10 most frequent preferences and the least frequent preferences above indicates that one can not draw the conclusion that there is a single Turkish learning style. The subjects tend to have a preference for Communicative Type (items 2, 6, 7 and 10 in Table 2), but at the same time they also display a preference for Concrete Type (items 1 and 4 in Table 2), Analytical Type (items 3 and 5 in Table 2) and Authority-Oriented Type (items 8 and 9 in Table 2). Moreover, Table 3 enables us to identify the least frequent preferences as Analytical Type (items 2, 3, 6 and 7) and Authority-Oriented Type (items 1 and 8).

It follows that the classification of the students' learning preferences make the room for a further consideration of the learning types in accordance with the different variables such as sex, the prep school and the school graduated. At this point, it is pertinent to say that the results are intended to shed light on the possible relationship between the students' perceived learning styles and some variables that are likely to have a considerable impact on the students' ways of preference. In this context, Table 4 below attempts to examine statistically the existence of such a relationship between students' sexes and their perceptions of learning style preferences.

Table 5. *The findings regarding the difference between students' sexes and their perceptions of learning style preferences*

		n	\bar{X}	SK	t	Sig.
Concrete Learning Style	Female	38	9.1316	2.24	.442	.660
	Male	22	8.8636	2.29		
Analytical Learning Style	Female	38	7.7105	2.25	.112	.911
	Male	22	7.7727	1.71		
Communicative Learning Style	Female	38	9.1579	3.02	.372	.711
	Male	22	8.8636	2.81		
Authority-Oriented Learning Style	Female	38	8.0263	1.80	.550	.585
	Male	22	7.7273	2.37		

*The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

In the Table 5 above, the findings regarding the difference between students' sexes and their perceptions of learning style preferences were displayed. The students' views were treated as the four distinctive sub-dimensions and then interpreted along with the tables available. In this respect, as the table makes it clear, the students' views of learning style preferences did not differentiate in any sub-dimension concerning the variable of sex. Moreover, the values involved in the Table notably indicate that the means of students' views are quite close to each other. Therefore, no significant difference was found between the students' views of learning style preference and their sexes at the level of 0.05.

Table 6. *The Findings Regarding The Difference Between Students' Attendance at Prep Class and Their Perceptions of Learning Style Preferences*

		n	\bar{X}	SK	T	Sig.
Concrete Learning Style	Yes	39	8.9231	2.29	.364	.717
	No	21	9.1500	2.20		
Analytical Learning Style	Yes	39	7.5385	2.01	.898	.373
	No	21	8.0500	2.18		
Communicative Learning Style	Yes	39	9.0513	2.86	.124	.902
	No	21	8.9500	3.17		
Authority-Oriented Learning Style	Yes	39	7.8462	1.96	.640	.525
	No	21	8.2000	2.09		

*The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 6 illustrates the findings regarding the difference between students' attendance at prep class and their perceptions of learning style preferences. The students' views of learning style preference were investigated on the basis of the four sub-dimensions. The findings indicated that the students' views of learning style preference did not show any difference in any sub-dimension in terms of students' attendance at prep class. The values in the table also suggest that the means of the students' views were close to each other. Thus, a meaningful difference was not found between the students' sexes and their views of learner style preference at 0.05 level.

Table 7. *The findings regarding the difference between the schools graduated and students' perceptions of learning style preferences.*

		Sum of Squares	SD	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Concrete Learning Style	Between Groups	37.400	2	18.700	4.091	.022*
	Within Groups	260.533	57	4.571		
	Total	297.933	59			
Analytical Learning Style	Between Groups	.968	2	.484	.111	.895
	Within Groups	248.765	57	4.364		
	Total	249.733	59			
Communicative Learning Style	Between Groups	50.559	2	25.279	3.158	.050*
	Within Groups	456.291	57	8.005		
	Total	506.850	59			
Authority-Oriented Learning Style	Between Groups	.501	2	.250	.059	.942
	Within Groups	240.082	57	4.212		
	Total	240.583	59			

*The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 7 displays the findings regarding the difference between the schools from which the students graduated and their perceptions of learning style preferences. Along with the relevant data illustrated within the table, the student views of learning style preference were interpreted with reference to the four sub-dimensions concerned. As the table makes it clear, the views of the students who graduated from the different secondary schools had differences in various sub-dimensions in relation to learning style preference. The students reported different views as to learning style preference in the sub-dimensions of Concrete Learning Style and Communicative Learning Style. Thus, a meaningful difference was noted between their perceptions in these sub-dimensions and the variable of secondary school from which they graduated at 0.05 level.

In terms of the results of 'Tukey Test' which was conducted in order to identify the difference between students' views in respect of the schools from which they graduated, a meaningful difference between the views of the students who graduated from the Anatolian and other secondary high schools was found in favour of the students who graduated from the Anatolian and Teacher High Schools in relation to the sub-dimension of Concrete Learning Style. At the same time, with reference to the sub-dimension of Communicative Learning Style, a meaningful

difference was found in favour of the students of the Anatolian High School compared with the other state high schools. Table 8 below highlights the findings involving the meaningful differences on the basis of Tukey test results.

Tablo 8. *Tukey HSD results regarding the difference between the schools graduated and students' perceptions of concrete style and communicative style*

Dependent Variable	(I) school graduated	(J) school graduated	Mean Difference (I-J)	SD	Sig.		
Concrete learning Style	Anatolian High Teacher School	General High School	-	.68	*.029		
		Anatolian High School	1.79762(*)				
	General High school	Anatolian High School	-	.75	*.044		
		Anatolian Teacher High School	1.86275(*)				
		Anatolian High School	1.9762(*)				
	Anatolian High School	Anatolian High School	-.06513	.65	.995		
		Anatolian Teacher High School	1.86275(*)				
		General High School	.06513				
Communicative Learning Style	Anatolian Teacher High School	General High School	1.19048	.90	.393		
		Anatolian High school	-.96078			1.00	.606
	General High School	Anatolian Teacher High School	-1.19048	.90	.393		
		Anatolian High School	-			.86	*.043
		Teacher Anatolian High School	2.15126(*)				
	Anatolian High School	Anatolian High School	Teacher Anatolian High School	.96078	1.00	.606	
			General School	2.15126(*)			.86

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

On the other hand, as is obvious from table 7 above, a meaningful difference was not found between students' views of the sub-dimensions of Analytical Learning Style and Authority-Oriented Learning Style and the schools from which they graduated at 0.05 level. On the basis of this data, it is possible to make the point that the students had fairly similar opinions in connection with these two sub-dimensions.

Discussion

This study has attempted to explore the underlying characteristics of Turkish students' learning preferences in EFL classroom. Following the identification of this case, the next step is to develop a set of recommendations. The data obtained from the participants' opinions indicate that an overwhelming majority of the participants show a preference for some methods of learning that are associated with Communicative

Learning Style. Given this tendency on the part of the students, however, it is not fair to place the participants into a single language style preference as is apparent in the results of the survey. Interestingly enough, the participating students displayed a preference for Concrete Type, Authority-Oriented Type and Analytical Type at the same time, which in fact turns out to be a contradiction. This apparent contradiction may be attributed to the co-existence of two different factors: firstly, as the participating students are English majors, they are more likely to regard English as a means of English rather than a dry study of grammar, and secondly, in spite of the students' perceived tendency towards communicative style, the ongoing problems involved in the Turkish education system such as large classes, teacher centred educational style and multi-level classes put some constraints on the effective use of Communicative Style in the classrooms and in turn lead students to discover the alternative styles for educational purposes.

Hayashi and Cherry (2004) conducted a similar study which attempted to investigate the characteristics of Japanese students' learning preferences in EFL classroom. Their study also drew the same conclusion in the sense that Japanese students displayed different preferences for their learning styles. The results of their study revealed that Japanese students' favoured learning style was Authority-oriented because of some cultural factors such as 'Japanese collectivism', or 'a general shyness and unwillingness' among Japanese students to take risks although they showed a preference for Communicative Style.

Another significant point emerging from the results of the study concerns the Analytical Type which was ranked as the least important learning style by the participants. One reasonable suggestion for the students' dislike for Analytical Style methods might well be linked with the traditional structure of the Turkish education system that is still criticized for being based on memorization rather than on the students' creativity and active participation in the courses. Eventually, such a passive and one-way educational style experienced by those students is likely to hinder the efforts to construct their analytical learning styles.

With regard to the difference between students' sexes and their perceptions of learning style preferences it is possible to indicate that the perceptions of the students of English as to their learning style preferences are independent of the variable 'sex'. In other words, the sex as a variable does not influence the students' views' of their learning style preferences.

In terms of the difference between students' attendance at prep class and their perceptions of learning style preferences we can draw the conclusion that the opinions of the students of English about learner style preference did not differentiate in relation to the variable of their attendance to prep class. This can possibly result from the fact that the participating students are likely to have similar background knowledge level prior to the higher education.

The most significant finding elicited from the participants is concerned with the difference between the schools graduated and the students' perceptions of learning style preferences. The results of the Anova (F) test reveal that the students have different views as to learning style preference in the sub-dimensions of Concrete Learning Style and Communicative Learning Style. One can argue that the effective

or inadequate use of course materials such as pictures and videos in the schools concerned may have impact on the difference involving Concrete Style. In this case, students who are exposed to learning language by 'doing' or 'seeing' are supposed to benefit much from Concrete Learning Style. Of course, the availability of these materials like 'video' necessary for developing Concrete Learning Style is a crucial criterion regarding students' preferences together with its effective application in practice. On the other hand, the other reason in this framework can be linked with the issue of the amount of the experience in using these kinds of materials and peculiar methods of learning by 'doing' or 'seeing' which students are expected to have during their secondary school education. As for the reason for the other meaningful difference concerning Communicative Style, the schools in question can vary in both employing the teaching materials effectively and implementing different teaching hours. In this respect, the number and effectiveness of the facilities catered for the language needs of students by different schools can determine students' tendency towards using Communicative Learning Style. Thus, it should be noted that the quality of the training exposed to the participants in one of these secondary schools has do with the extent to which the students have the potential to use their individual learning styles throughout their higher education.

Recommendations

The principal recommendation arising from this research is to develop greater awareness about the identification of the Turkish students' different learning preferences, which in turn bring about the multi-level language classes. This calls for, in particular, a close cooperation between students and lecturers in designing and implementing the course syllabus and subject matter by taking into account of the students' different learning needs and language potentials. In a similar study investigating a group of Turkish students' language learning preferences, Bada and Okan (2000, p. 10) pointed out that "effective language teaching and learning can only be achieved when teachers are aware of their learners' needs, capabilities, potentials, and preferences in meeting these needs."

Another concern in this context is to foster students' analytical learning styles which are seen as the least important, as discussed in the previous section, in comparison with the other types of learning. One obvious step towards meeting this challenge is to encourage Turkish students to take active part in the lessons where English teachers are expected to free students from the constraints of traditional teacher-centred classrooms and engage them in purposeful, for instance, problem-solving or brain-based learning activities. Additionally, providing these students with professional strategy training (e.g., teachers, schools, universities) in line with their learning preferences might be helpful in both raising their awareness of the nature of the major learning styles and compensating for the lack of students' skills in using some of these styles.

Finally, some directions for further research are suggested. We need to carry out similar studies in different regions of Turkey in which the learning skills of Turkish students are investigated and compared. In addition, another study is needed in order to ascertain how other variables such as motivation relate to learning style preferences.

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