

An Investigation into Learning Style Preferences of Arab and Turkish Students at Tertiary Level

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Abstract: *Successful language learners usually understand their own learning styles and preferences. Learning styles are a strong influence on foreign language learning. Much research on the cross-cultural relationship between Arab and Turkish students' preferences for learning has not been done yet. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the minor and major learning style preferences preferred by the Arab and Turkish participants at the tertiary level. Quantitative research methods were employed in order to collect and analyze the data. A questionnaire in which 111 students studying English at preparatory schools participated was conducted to collect the data. This questionnaire aims to identify students' learning style preferences categorized as visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, group and individual. In the light of the findings, the major learning style preferred by Arab and Turkish students is kinesthetic. The least preferred learning style for Arab students is individual while it is group learning style for Turkish students. Both Arab and Turkish students like to learn by doing. It can be said that learners can learn best by using and producing language. Although Turkish students prefer to study in a group the least, Arab students prefer to learn individually the least. Arab learners can be said to be more sociable than their Turkish peers.*

Keywords: Learning styles, Preferences, Tertiary

1. Introduction

Each classroom contains a mixture of students with different backgrounds, different personalities and different learning style preferences. Some of them can achieve more success if they are exposed to visual materials. While some learners understand better if they work in groups, others prefer to work individually.

One of the steps to be taken to increase the quality of language education is to get to know the students. Studies show that students learn in different ways and individual differences impact learning [9].

Learning style is a characteristic which indicates how students learn and how they like to learn as well as instructional strategy informing the cognition, context and content of learning. Previous studies have reported that learning performance of students can be improved if suitable learning style dimensions are taken into consideration when the learning process is developed [7].

Therefore, teachers should not disregard the importance of choosing the appropriate teaching method to respond to students' learning styles, as both teaching and learning styles play a crucial role in language learning improvement and achievement.

The researcher hopes to gather crucial information to help teachers respond to their students according to their preferences by considering the learning style preferences for both Arab and Turkish students learning English as a foreign language.

Moreover, teachers will help students discover their learning, that is meta-learning, and develop successful and life-long

learners. Furthermore, students will benefit from the knowledge and awareness of their own learning styles and therefore, can take control of regulations or direct their own learning through modifying their study habits and materials for optimum learning. According to Sternberg (1997) [14], when learners learn in a way that suits them, improvements in the effectiveness of the learning process normally ensue.

The purpose of the current study is to determine the Turkish and Arab learners' learning style preferences at the tertiary level.

The study aims to answer the following key questions:

1. What are the major and minor learning style preferences of Arab undergraduates studying EFL?
2. What are the major and minor learning style preferences of Turkish undergraduates studying EFL?

2. Literature Review

Learning style is termed as the exclusive method used by learners when they are learning new information. Understanding and considering what the learners preferred styles are to learn, significantly influence not only their own performance but also the teachers' choices of the methods and techniques in the classroom.

Nowadays, different students who come from different cultural, instructional, and environmental backgrounds and who have different styles of learning are available at the university level. Thus, in many cases, there are gaps between the teachers' teaching method and the learners' learning styles which have been seen as crucial educational barriers that

cause implementing a different range of teaching styles and approaches to deliver a lesson [2].

According to Lubawy (2003) [10], The idea of applying a variety of different teaching styles for a lesson or for a course, which has been emphasized by many researchers, is just to make sure that every single individual benefit from the class. As a result, it would facilitate the selection of the teaching methods, approaches and techniques to be exercised in the class.

2.1 Definition of Learning Styles

It is crucial to define the term “style” before going over the related literature of learning styles. The term “style” refers to a set of common qualities of intellectual performance which differ from person to person. According to Brown (2000), it is “a term that refers to consistent and rather enduring tendencies or preferences within an individual” (p. 113) [1].

Learning styles have been defined by many researchers. For example, Keefe (1979) defines learning styles as “the characteristic cognitive, affective and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment” (p. 10) [8]. Additionally, learning styles are defined as the general strategies and ways that learners implement to master a new skill or deal with a problematic situation [12]. Finally, learning styles according to Stewart and Felicetti (1992) are teaching and learning settings in which a learner properly learns [15]. Consequently, learning styles have nothing to do with what students learn, but they are related to how they would rather learn.

2.2 Glimpse at the History of Learning Styles

To be able to understand learning styles, this topic has to be examined historically. Learning style was first recognized by Aristotle 334 BC, he thinks that “each child possessed specific talents and skills” [13]. After that, others start to form their ideas about learning styles like Lev Vygotsky, who comes up with his own theories. He believes that children first develop social interaction and their atmosphere in the place in which they grow up affects everything else they learn later including learning styles [11]. On the other hand, Piaget believes that children develop their knowledge from their own personal experiences [11]. After these theories, more and more theories have been formed about how children learn and what can affect their learning. For example, one of the most recent theories is developed by Howard Gardner (1983) [5], Neil Fleming (2011) [4], and David Kolb (2017) [3]. They believe that learning must be assessed to reach the point of multiple intelligence. According to Gardner, each learning style utilizes different parts of the brain. Different learners learn in different ways. For instance, kinesthetic learners learn through movement while visual learners prefer visuals to understand what they learn and some learners prefer interaction to learn. [13]. However, students can have more than one learning style. [6].

2.3 Types of Learning Styles

When you start setting to your students, you will understand that not everybody learns in a similar way. Every student employs a particular style(s) to learn a skill through which they feel comfortable. Thus, being aware of what type of learner one can be is a crucial step toward better learning and teaching.

According to Honey-Mumford Model of learning styles, learning styles can be classified as:

- Activists
- Reflectors
- Theorists
- Pragmatists

Activists learn best by doing. In lay term, they love being engaged in activities and being active (e.g. working in groups) rather than doing receptive skills. These individuals are easy-going about learning, passionate and are generally tired by doing one thing over and over again.

Reflectors are good observers. Before deciding, they would like to gather enough information to help them make a better decision. Reflectors tend to decide on their background information and other people’s ideas. One of the strong points of these learners is that they set meticulous while collecting the data and precisely analyzing it later before reaching any final conclusion. The decision-making process takes a longer time for them, but when they make a decision, they usually make a good one based on a sensitive and accurate data collection.

Theorists like to put their thoughts as a framework and have a chance to notice how their thoughts are associated with each other. In addition, they put an effort into constantly adding new information into that framework. Although they are not keen on dealing with vague issues, they will not stop working on something unless they deeply understand it and are able to illuminate it in simple words. These learners are rigorous and sensible in selecting their approach and they normally choose the more rational one.

Pragmatists prefer to utilize the new opinions. They try to find out the rational execution of the new opinions prior to making any decision. One of the main strong points of pragmatists is their high level of self-esteem and their ability to integrate the new opinions into their judgement.

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher sheds light on the methodology of the current research. It presents the research design, the participants in addition to the procedures used in data collection and analysis.

3.2 Research Design

The study was designed as a survey-based research. Quantitative research methods were employed to collect the data from the students. In quantitative research methods, numerical data is undeniably the basis for obtaining statistical results at the end of the analysis process. Among the quantitative research tools, a questionnaire was employed in the current study.

3.3 Participants of the Study

The study was conducted in two different preparation schools for a university and an academy in 2019 – 2020 academic year. The first location was the Prep. school, English Department at Istanbul Aydin University, and the other one was the Prep. school, English Department at ABC Horizon Academy which both are located in Istanbul, Turkey. The participants of the current study were a total of 111, consisting of both male and female students in the foundation year. Purposive sampling strategy was used when choosing the participants of the study.

3.4 Data Collection Instrument

The data of the current study was collected through the use of a questionnaire developed by Jack Richards (1996). The questionnaire involves 2 sections. The first section of the questionnaire includes 7 questions to collect demographic data about the participants of the study. The aim of the second section of the questionnaire is to find out the learning styles preferences preferred by students learning English as a foreign language. To achieve this aim, the participants are provided with 30 statements expressing learning style preferences based on a 5-point Likert-type rating scale. The response options are strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, strongly disagree.

3.5 Data Analysis

After the researcher collected the data from a questionnaire, the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire was subjected to the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software, version 19.

4. Findings

4.1 Findings on Major and Minor Learning Style Preferences of Arabs and Turkish Students

The respondents are asked to express their degree of agreement with 30 statements listed in the questionnaire so that their answers to numbers can be transferred to be able to measure their learning style preferences. This has been done by using the transformation metric prepared by the writer of the questionnaire. In the questionnaire, there are six learning styles to be measured and each response by a respondent will be given a numerical value as follows; SA = 5, A = 4, U = 3, D = 2, SD = 1. The total of the responses was collected for every individual for the six learning styles then it was multiplied by 2. The score we get ranges between 0 and 50.

Between 25 and 37 is considered Minor Learning Style Preference, and between 38 and 50 is considered Major Learning Style Preference.

4.1.1 Learning Style Preferences of Arab Undergraduates Studying EFL

Arab students' learning style preferences are divided into 3 major learning style preferences and 3 minor learning style preferences. The most preferred learning style by Arab undergraduate students is Kinesthetic (40.66), Group learning style comes next in the order of the most preferred learning styles (38.89), then Tactile (38). The three minor learning style preferences come in the following order; Auditory (37.97), Visual (36.49) and the least preferred learning style is Individual (32.72).

4.1.2 Learning Style Preferences of Turkish Undergraduates Studying EFL

Turkish students' learning style preferences are divided into 2 major learning style preferences and 4 minor ones. The most preferred learning style by Turkish undergraduate students is Kinesthetic (39.88), Auditory learning style comes next in the order of the most preferred learning styles (38.76). The four minor learning style preferences come in the following order; Individual (37.4), Tactile (34.76), Visual (34.6) and the least preferred learning style is Group (32.56).

5. Conclusion

The first research question of the study aimed at finding the major and minor learning style preferences of Arab undergraduates studying English as a foreign language. The findings of the current study revealed that Arab students' major learning style preferences are categorized according to the following order from the most preferred to the least; kinesthetic, group and tactile. While the minor learning style preferences of Arab students are categorized according to the following order from the most preferred to the least; auditory, visual and individual.

The second research question of the study aimed at finding the major and minor learning style preferences of Turkish undergraduates studying English as a foreign language. The analysis of the data revealed that Turkish students' major learning style preferences are confined to two learning styles categorized according to the following order from the most preferred to the least; kinesthetic and auditory. While the minor learning style preferences of Turkish students are categorized according to the following order from the most preferred to the least; individual, tactile, visual and group.

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