

# PERCEPTUAL LEARNING STYLE PREFERENCES OF GIFTED VS. NON-GIFTED TURKISH EFL LEARNERS

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## Abstract

This study aims to identify the perceptual learning style preferences of gifted secondary school EFL learners in Turkey related to their study of English and attempted to compare their preferences with their non-gifted peers' preferences. To this end, the "Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire" was given to 240 (107 gifted and 133 non-gifted) Turkish students from 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. The results of the quantitative analyses showed that gifted and non-gifted EFL learners were not very different from each other in terms of their learning styles preferences. The only slight differences were observed in some learning styles: non-gifted learners preferred auditory and kinesthetic learning styles more than their gifted peers. The other learning styles (tactile, group, visual, and individual learning) were preferred by both gifted and non-gifted learners in a similar level. The findings of the study are discussed along with the current literature on learning styles preferences in EFL learning and already existing giftedness theories. Certain implications for teacher education programs and some suggestions for both gifted and non-gifted language learners, language teachers, and gifted education specialists are specified.

Keywords: Gifted students, EFL learners, perceptual learning styles

## 1 INTRODUCTION

A student's perceptual strengths and weaknesses are extremely important, for no matter how motivated a youngster might be, inability to absorb and retain through an inappropriate sense tends to dampen motivation and, certainly, inhibits achievement. However, once a student's perceptual inclinations are recognized, all the teacher needs to do is assign the appropriate resource and permit grouping through a complementary sociological pattern (p. 244) [1].

More than three decades ago, the importance of identification of the perceptions of learners was cited, and to date, researchers and teachers have been looking for ways to discover the best learning opportunities for students. Perceptual learning styles of the learners are among the research interests to help learners find out about themselves and to be able to serve them at the highest levels of instruction. In this sense, learning styles can be defined as "characteristic cognitive, affective, and psychological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment" (p. xii) [2].

The ESL/EFL field has also benefited a lot from the developments related to learner characteristics, especially the learning styles of the ESL/EFL learners. As a seminal study in the field, Reid (1987) developed the Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPRQ) [3]. The perceptual learning styles, in this work, were identified as follows (p. x) [4]:

- Visual learning: Learns more effectively through the eyes (seeing)
- Auditory learning: Learns more effectively through the ear (hearing)
- Tactile learning: Learns more effectively through touch (hands-on)
- Kinesthetic learning: Learns more effectively through complete body experience
- Group learning: Learns more effectively through working with others
- Individual learning: Learns more effectively through working alone

In addition to developing the questionnaire, Reid (1987) measured ESL students' learning style preferences and discussed them according to certain variables such as native vs. non-native, L1 background, gender, length of time spent in the United States, major field of study, and level of education [3]. The quantitative analyses of the obtained data revealed that ESL students and native speakers of English were different from each other in terms of their perceptual learning style

preferences. It was observed that native speakers of English were less tactile in their learning style preferences than all nonnative speakers and were significantly less kinesthetic than Arabic, Chinese, Korean and Spanish speakers. Also, first language, educational, and cultural backgrounds of ESL students were found to be significantly different from each other as to the learning style preferences: while Korean students were likely to be visual and were significantly more visual than the US and Japanese learners, Japanese students were the least auditory of all and were significantly less auditory than their Arabic and Chinese peers. Moreover, graduate students were found to be more visual and tactile learners compared to the undergraduate students whereas undergraduate students were significantly more auditory than graduate students. Also, male students preferred visual and tactile learning significantly more often than female students. Finally, the researcher found that there was a positive correlation between students' length of time spent in the US and their preferences to be auditory learners: the longer the students had lived in the United States, the more auditory were their learning preferences. Following this work, Tabanlıoğlu (2003) conducted a study with 60 intermediate EAP students at a Turkish university. The results showed that auditory learning and individual learning were intermediate-level EAP students' major learning style preferences [5]. Besides, male students were more likely to be tactile learners compared to their female peers. The researcher implied that perceptual learning style preferences may vary in different contexts so that it should be studied thoroughly with students with different characteristics [5].

Gifted learners, on the other hand, have been the curiosity in the educational contexts including the language classrooms. Almost sixty years ago, gifted students in the language classroom were problems to teachers as they were bored because of the slow pace of their peers, they were inconsiderate and uninterested with poor study habits as threats for their teachers' class management [6]. Also, reliance on standardized tests or inequitable standards, cultural biases, and prejudices about [7] and population challenges, governmental support, existing programs, assessment tools, parental contribution, and personnel challenges [8] form the problems related to identification and training of gifted language learners.

A number of studies been conducted on the gifted learners as second/foreign language learners. For example, it was found that gifted students had higher levels of aptitude for language learning than non-gifted students; they also held a more positive attitude toward learning a foreign language than their non-gifted peers [9]. It was also seen that cognitively gifted ESL learners are sometimes underachievers, and their desires needed to be met by their teachers and program designers [10]. Furthermore, gifted foreign language learners' short-term memory and working-memory abilities were higher than the non-gifted foreign language learners. In another study, it was found that gifted learners and their non-gifted peers were not different from each other in terms of certain personal characteristics such as neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness for learning a foreign language successfully; and while foreign language aptitude factors did not correlate with personality factors for the gifted students, certain positive correlations were found in the non-gifted students [11]. Also, it was found that gifted students acquired second language vocabulary in a more efficient way with different types of music in the form of a suggestopedic learning [12].

Studies regarding the gifted students as foreign language learners in the Turkish context have also been observed in recent years. In an experimental design study, it was observed that gifted students were better foreign language learners when they were taught through metaphors [13]. It is also evident that gifted students hold generally positive attitudes towards learning English and are conscious about the prominence of learning English as a foreign language [14]. Moreover, gifted students were found to have liked like English, and they did not find it difficult to learn; what is more, they held the belief that English would possibly be beneficial for them in their future academic and social lives [15]. Besides, gifted EFL learners are aware of the language learning strategies and they use them from time to time whenever necessary, and they find a strategy-oriented language teaching very beneficial and effective [14]. Also, most of the gifted secondary school students do not agree with the idea that learning English causes a waste of time; however, they complain about the way they learn English: the rotten course books and dull activities which make English lessons boring [15].

Work on the learning style preferences of gifted learners, though, is quite limited. In a recent study, learning styles of the gifted students studying at secondary school level have been identified using a learning style inventory with three types of learning styles: visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning. The study asserted that gifted students preferred to use visual and kinesthetic learning styles more than non-gifted students; female students preferred auditory learning style more than male students; and eighth grade students preferred kinesthetic learning style more than sixth and seventh grade students [16]. In a similar study, gifted Turkish students had high levels of independent, cooperative,

competitive and participatory learning styles, and there was a positive correlation between participatory and dependent learning styles while there was a negative correlation between participatory and passive learning styles [17].

## 1.1 Significance of the Study and the Research Questions

Diverse profiles of gifted and the non-gifted EFL learners should be compared to see if these profiles establish a latent influence behind linguistic giftedness [18]. Considering the research on gifted EFL students and the established ground for the vitality of discovering perceptual learning styles of learners with various characteristics as well as the limited research in the field, this study aims to identify the perceptual learning style preferences of gifted secondary school EFL learners in Turkey related to their study of English and attempted to compare their preferences with their non-gifted peers' preferences. To reach this goal, the following research questions were formed:

1. What are the perceptual learning style preferences of gifted and non-gifted Turkish secondary school EFL learners?
2. Are there any differences between the preferences of the gifted and non-gifted ones?

## 2 METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 240 secondary school students from different public secondary schools in Eskişehir, Turkey. Their ages ranged from 11 to 14 as 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. 107 of them were the gifted ones, who were attending Eskişehir Center for Gifted Children (BİLSEM) in addition to their regular education in their schools. The rest (133 students) were selected from two different secondary schools as the non-gifted sample.

### 2.2 Identification of Giftedness

The main goal of BİLSEM, founded by the Ministry of Education, is to provide gifted children and their parents with the necessary educational facilities. It educates the gifted children who are selected based on a three-level identification process: nomination, screening and selection and placement [18]. In the first phase, BİLSEM sends observation forms to pre-schools, primary schools, and secondary schools. Each class teacher is asked to nominate the students in their classrooms as gifted by filling in the observation forms. In the second phase, an identification committee decides which students to be screened by means of a screening test according to the results of which the selected students are taken for a second screening: individualized screening. During the individual screening, the nominee students are given the WISC-R test as a widely accepted intelligent test. In the last phase, students who score 130 and above are considered as gifted and selected for the program in which they are trained according to their high abilities and talents.

### 2.3 Instrument

The Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPRQ) [3] was used as the research tool in this study. For the ease of understanding, the Turkish version of the instrument was utilized, which was translated and validated, and performed a high reliability level ( $\alpha = .82$ ) with Turkish learners [5]. The questionnaire is made up of 30 items in six categories (five statements per category) as the learning styles: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, group learning, and individual learning. The first four categories are the perceptual learning style categories and the last two constitute the social category. The participants answered the statements on a five-point Likert-type scale: from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. According to PLSPRQ, each learner's score is calculated separately by totaling up each answer from 1 to 5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree respectively) and multiplying the total score by two. The description of scores was as follows:

- 38-50 points: Major learning style
- 25-37 points: Minor learning style
- 0-24 points: Negative learning style

## 2.4 Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Data for this study were collected in two different types of settings simultaneously. First, for the gifted participants, the PLSPQ was given to the students with the help of BİLSEM teachers during the regular class hours of the students. Second, two secondary schools that show similar characteristics with the schools of the gifted ones were identified, and the PLSPQ was administered to the students via their English teachers during their English lessons. It was observed that it took approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire for the secondary school students. For the analysis, descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to answer the first research question while an independent samples t-test was run as an answer to the second research question.

## 3 RESULTS

In order to answer the first research question, frequency of students who chose a learning style as major, minor, or negative were computed with their percentages to the total number of the participants. Table 1 shows the frequencies and percentages of the major, minor, and negative learning style preferences of the gifted and non-gifted students.

The results revealed that gifted learners preferred group learning (90,7 %) and tactile (86 %) learning style as their major learning styles. These two were also the minor learning style for the gifted students (9,3 % and 12,1 % respectively). There were no students who indicated group learning as a negative learning style, and there were only two students who indicated tactile learning as a negative learning style. Furthermore, visual (78,5 %), auditory (66,4 %), and kinesthetic (63,5 %) learning styles were among the major learning style preferences. They were also selected as minor learning styles by a certain number of gifted students: visual by 21,5 %, auditory by 31,7 %, and kinesthetic by 32,7 %. Similar to the two aforementioned ones, these three learning styles were never or rarely identified as negative learning styles: no students for visual learning, two students for auditory learning, and four students for kinesthetic learning. Individual learning style, on the other hand, was the major learning style for less than half of the gifted students (42,1 %). 45 % of them, on the contrary, indicated individual style as a minor one while it was a negative learning style for 13 gifted students (12,1 %).

As for the non-gifted learners, the results revealed certain similarities and differences when compared to their gifted peers. For non-gifted students, the most frequently preferred major learning style was tactile learning (93,2 %). It was a minor choice by four students (3,1 %), and a negative learning style for five student (3,7 %). Visual learning (87,2 %), auditory learning (82,7 %), group learning (81,2 %), and kinesthetic learning (75,2 %) were the other highly preferred major learning styles. While some non-gifted students preferred visual learning (11,3 %), auditory learning (14,3 %), group learning (17,3 %), and kinesthetic learning (21,1 %) as their minor learning styles, only a few students indicated them as negative learning styles: only two students for visual learning, four students for auditory learning, two students for group learning, and five students for kinesthetic learning. Similar to the gifted group, non-gifted sample preferred individual learning as a major learning style less than others (48,9 %). It was indicated as a minor learning style by 41,5 % of the students while it was a negative learning style for 13 of them (9,8 %).

Table 1. Learning style preferences of gifted and non-gifted students.

Learning Styles	Gifted						Non-Gifted					
	Major		Minor		Negative		Major		Minor		Negative	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Visual	84	78,5	23	21,5	0	0	116	87,2	15	11,3	2	1,5
Auditory	71	66,4	34	31,7	2	1,9	110	82,7	19	14,3	4	3,0
Kinesthetic	68	63,5	35	32,7	4	3,8	100	75,2	28	21,1	5	3,7
Tactile	92	86,0	13	12,1	2	1,9	124	93,2	4	3,1	5	3,7
Group Learning	97	90,7	10	9,3	0	0	108	81,2	23	17,3	2	1,5
Individual	45	42,1	49	45,8	13	12,1	65	48,9	55	41,3	13	9,8

In order to answer the second research question, mean scores for each category in the questionnaire were computed for the statistical analysis. Table 2 presents the results of the independent samples t-test. The analysis indicated that gifted and non-gifted EFL learners were not very different from each

other in terms of their learning styles preferences. The only slight differences were observed in auditory and kinesthetic learning styles: non-gifted learners preferred auditory and kinesthetic learning styles more than their gifted peers. The other learning styles (tactile, group, visual, and individual learning) were preferred by both gifted and non-gifted learners at a similar level.

Table 2. Differences between the learning style preferences of gifted and non-gifted students.

	m-G	m-NG	md	F	t	df	Sig.
Visual	4,16	4,31	-,15167	,039	-1,883		,061
Auditory	3,97	4,19	-,21975	,121	-2,461		,015*
Kinesthetic	3,87	4,06	-,18425	1,999	-2,065	238	,037*
Tactile	4,31	4,45	-,14199	,081	-1,752		,081
Group Learning	4,24	4,25	,00399	8,308	-,056		,955
Individual	3,48	3,62	,13840	5,531	-1,341		,181

m-G= mean score for the gifted; m-NG= mean score for the non-gifted; md= mean difference

*\*Differences are significant at .05 level*

#### 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this quantitative study indicated that Turkish secondary school students, who were not identified as gifted, mostly perceived tactile, visual, and auditory learning styles as their major characteristics to respond to their learning behavior. In other words, these students were utilizing their own hands “through manipulation or resources, such as writing, drawing, building a model, or conducting a lab experiment” (p. 172) [20] as tactile learners. Also, they preferred to learn by means of the visual cues available to them. Thus, they like reading, which involves attention and time spent alone more than other learning opportunities) [21]. As auditory learners, they were found to revel in the oral-aural learning network. Therefore, they want to engage in discussions, conversations, and group work [21]. The gifted students in this study were likely to prefer group learning and tactile learning as major learning style preferences more than other learning styles. It is known that group learners are able to learn more successfully by working with others [22]; therefore, these gifted students liked to engage in activities that require work with their peers. Similar to their non-gifted peers, the gifted students preferred tactile learning as a major learning style more than other styles.

Bearing these findings in mind, it is safe to suggest that both gifted and non-gifted students need writing and drawing tasks as well as some laboratory work to foster their learning as tactile learners. Visual learners, on the other hand, require the visual prompt by bulletin boards, videos and movies as well as tasks calling for written directions to assist them in the language classrooms [21]. For auditory learners, it might be a good idea to conduct whole-class discussions, conversation tasks, and group work activities as these students are likely to participate in these kinds of classroom work, and they should be given oral instructions rather than written ones as they would only need these oral directions. The gifted students, in contrast to the non-gifted ones, might be provided with group-work and pair-work activities more than individual learning activities. This does not mean that non-gifted students should be given individualized tasks only as they were found to auditory learners who like to work in group activities. Besides, it is clear from the findings that both groups did not prefer individual learning as their major learning style, even it was negative for a number of them. When the context of a language classroom is considered, then, it is safe to assume that any language learner, especially in the secondary-school level, should be given the best opportunities to learn a foreign language by means of pair and group work activities. Debates, role-plays, discussions, consensus-seeking activities, and problem-solving tasks might be good examples to those activities.

As for the differences between the gifted and non-gifted groups, it was observed that non-gifted learners preferred auditory and kinesthetic learning styles more than their gifted peers. Indeed, auditory learning was a major learning style for both groups of students while kinesthetic learning was not among the major style preferences of either group. Although kinesthetic learning was not a major learning style for either group, the non-gifted students were significantly more likely to engage in kinesthetic-oriented learning environments. As kinesthetic learning “implies total physical involvement with a learning environment such as taking a field trip, dramatizing, pantomiming, or interviewing” (p. 172) [20], it might be a good idea to provide these learners with classroom tasks that will help them move in the classroom and learn accordingly.

The findings corroborate with the findings of previous research [5] on the grounds that Turkish EAP students held auditory learning styles while it disagrees in the point that the secondary school students did not prefer individual learning as a major learning style in contrast with the university-level EAP students. It might be because of the fact that secondary school students are used to work within groups in their learning context while the university level students who came together for an EAP course have rather individualized needs and expectations from the process of learning English as a foreign language. In response to the findings related to the gifted learners, the study was in line with the earlier work that suggests that gifted Turkish students had high levels of independent, cooperative, competitive and participatory learning styles [17] while the results were totally inconsistent with the previous work in which gifted students were announced to hold visual and kinesthetic learning styles more than non-gifted students [16]. As the classrooms in Turkish secondary schools are crowded and there are a lot of students moving around, probably the gifted students preferred to work in their seats with their peers rather than moving, pantomiming, or taking field trips as kinesthetic activities. Also, it is a known fact that gifted students are able to employ many learning styles at a time or whenever necessary, however, for the foreign language learning case, they might have not preferred to move. They rather see language learning as a mental, cognitive, and even a social activity rather than a physical one.

The study has some implications for gifted educators, curriculum designers for gifted education, researchers and, of course, for the foreign language teachers of the gifted students. First of all, learning styles of the gifted students should be addressed by making them aware of their own learning styles, by offering flexibility in learning practices, and by creating opportunities that accompany their learning styles [23]. Also, gifted students should, if possible, be taught developing syllabuses particularly tailored to their distinctive powers such as strong language, conceptualization, socialization, and productivity qualities [24]. Furthermore, since gifted children are potential skillful foreign language learners, foreign language training should start at an earlier age in order to meet their existing capabilities [25]. In response to this call, early intervention of gifted children with two foreign languages are considered in curriculum planning [26]. Another recommendation is about a self-regulated learning as it is suggested for gifted learners because this kind of a learning environment fosters creativity and is highly motivating for the gifted to develop their high abilities [27]. It is also essential to embrace emotional goals in the gifted programs for the reason that they are likely to personalize the learning, augmenting their self-confidence and personal contentment. This can be accomplished in the EFL classrooms as soon as an atmosphere that inspires positive attitudes and creative behavior is present [28]. Within this view, some of the personalized learning doors opened by Hargreaves (2004) are useful to schedule a program that meets the expectations of gifted students (p. 2) [29]:

- Language topics and activities should challenge and engage gifted pupils. They may particularly enjoy technical or creative topics and social issues.
- Learning skills and strategies help gifted pupils to become independent learners, able to re-use known language, use reference sources and adopt techniques for memorizing vocabulary and grammar.
- Gifted pupils benefit from accurate and challenging feedback, and are likely to enjoy evaluating their own and each other's work.
- The internet provides challenge for gifted pupils, who can learn at their own pace from target language web pages and online language learning resources. Gifted pupils often draw on strong ICT and multimedia skills to produce creative work in languages.
- Some gifted pupils are socially vulnerable and would benefit from support from older pupils, for example by working with them on enrichment activities.
- Gifted pupils often have strong views which can be harnessed, for example by preparing debates and writing opinion pieces. They are also likely to give honest and perceptive feedback on their experience of language learning.

Finally, BILSEM schools are very important for gifted children who are supposed to develop their foreign language skills. For one thing, there need to be certain standards for those institutions; and the administrators, teachers, and teaching programs in BILSEM schools are supposed to be evaluated and inspected considering the standards set for those schools [30]. For another thing, the foreign language teachers in these institutions should be equipped with the necessary skills, methodologies, and techniques to teach the foreign language in line with the specialized instruction that is tailored for the needs of those gifted children.

As a suggestion for future researchers, gifted students' perceived learning styles must be identified and these students should be made aware of their own learning style preferences. Then, some ways to assist them for a better learning should be looked for. Not only learning styles but also other possible individual differences such as language learning strategies, motivation, attitude towards foreign languages and cultures, language aptitude, language learning anxiety, etc. should be examined carefully to shed more light on the gifted students' foreign language learning processes.

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