

# A Study of Differences in Learning Orientations of EFL Students

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**Abstract:** This study reports on an investigation into differences in learning orientations of EFL students at Atatürk University located in Erzurum, Turkey, using Vermunt's (1977) Inventory of Learning Styles (ILS). The Inventory of Learning Styles (ILS) is an instrument aimed at measuring several components of student learning, namely, cognitive processing strategies, metacognitive regulation strategies, conceptions of learning, and learning orientations. This study focuses on determining patterns in student learning in only one learning style category: learning orientations. For statistical analyses, Mann Whitney U and Kruskal Wallis tests were used. No significant differences were found with regards to department. Some significant differences were present with respect to gender and class level.

## Introduction

Students in higher education differ in what they hope to achieve from being in higher education. Some wish to gain a qualification, while for others their main concern is to pursue an interest. The *orientation* of the students towards learning and the higher education study is a significant determinant of what students in higher education attend to, how they study, and finally what they learn. Beaty, Gibbs, and Morgan (1997) introduced four *learning orientations* based on four main functions of higher education—academic, vocational, personal and social. They define learning orientations as “all those attitudes and aims which express the student's individual relationship with a course of study and the university. It is the collection of purposes which form the personal context for the individual student's learning. The idea of an orientation assumes that students have an active relationship with their studying. From the point of view of learning orientation, success and failure is judged in terms of the extent to which students fulfill their own aims” (p. 76).

The work of Beaty and her colleagues on learning orientations overlaps with dimensions within Vermunt's (1998) Inventory of Learning Styles (ILS), discussed later, and also with the literature on goal orientation theory; however, it differs in important ways. Goal orientation theory has typically focused on students' perceptions of *why* they are trying to achieve in academic settings with most of the research being centred on the study of task goals and ability goals (Urdan & Maehr, 1995). In contrast, learning orientations focus more on students' perceptions of *what* they are trying to achieve in their studying (Entwistle & Peterson, 2005). The concept of “learning orientation” refer to the whole domain of personal goals, intentions, motives, expectations, attitudes, concerns, and doubts students have in following a educational programme or a course (Gibbs, Morgan & Taylor, 1984). They are long-term general educational goals students set for themselves. There will thus always be a mixture of motives for attending higher education and choosing a particular set of courses. As students progress through higher education, their orientations usually change. This tends to happen with changing circumstances and in re-evaluating their own capabilities and intentions and develop when an individual interacts with a given higher education context at a particular time in her/his life (Webber, 2004).

In the ILS, the learning orientation domain (motivation) has five scales: personally interested, certificate oriented, self-test oriented, vocation oriented, and ambivalent. These sub-sections focused upon in this study are:

1. *Personal interests* where students are motivated from perceived intrinsic benefits to themselves. Students with this orientation are motivated by their interest in the subject and their own personal development;

2. *Certificate directed interests* where learning is seen as being a means to an end – to pass exams or obtain a certification. Students with this orientation see education primarily as a means of obtaining a certificate or qualification;

3. *Self-test directed interests* where learning is seen as a personal challenge. This includes studying to test one’s own capabilities and to prove to oneself and others that one is able to cope with the demands of higher education.

4. *Vocation directed interests* where learning is a means to advance in a profession or trade learning. Students with this orientation see education primarily as a means of acquiring skills for a specific occupation and for securing employment;

5. *Ambivalent directed interest* where the process is perceived as too challenging and/or inappropriate. Students with this orientation have an insecure, hesitant attitude towards education and little confidence in their learning abilities. Table 1 shows sample items from the subscales.

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1. *Personally Interested*

60. The only aim of my studies is to enrich myself.

73. I do these studies because I like to learn and study.

2. *Certificate Directed*

63. What I want in these studies is to earn credits for a diploma.

75. To me, written proof of having passed an exam represents something of value in itself.

3. *Self-Test Directed*

53. I want to prove to myself that I am capable of doing studies in higher education.

67. I want to discover my own qualities, the things I am capable and incapable of.

4. *Vocation Directed*

62. For the kind of work I would like to do, I need to have studied in higher education.

68. What I want to acquire above all through my studies is professional skill.

5. *Ambivalent*

54. I doubt whether this is the right subject area for me.

70. I wonder whether these studies are worth all the effort.

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**Table 1.** Sample Items from ILS

## The Study

### The Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to determine differences in learning orientations of EFL students with respect to selected variables, such as department, class level and gender. The research question guiding the present study is: Are there any differences in learning orientations of EFL students with respect to department, gender and class level?

### Participants

EFL students at Departments of English Language Teaching (ELT) and English Language and Literature (ELL) were invited to participate in this study. Interested students were given a brief and informative overview of the nature and purpose of the study during a lesson. A total of 308 EFL students volunteered to participate in this study. Of these, 157 were ELT (50, 6%) and 152 were ELL (49, 4%). Of the participants, 79 (25, 6%) were male, 229 (74, 4%) were female. The total sample consisted of 74 (24%) sophomores, 89 (28, 9%) juniors and 145 (47, 1%) seniors. Freshmen students were not included in the study because they were absent

### Instrument

The Inventory of Learning Styles (ILS) (Vermunt 1998) has been developed in the context of higher education, and helps to determine three different levels of student learning. Vermunt (1996,1998) uses the term ‘learning style’ as a superordinate concept in which the cognitive and affective processing of subject matter, the metacognitive regulation of learning, mental models of learning, and learning orientations are united. The Inventory of Learning Styles has both 100-item and 120-item versions and provides scores on four learning styles and four domains. The four learning domains were identified as cognitive processing strategies (cognition), metacognitive

regulation strategies (metacognition), conceptions of learning (views about teaching and learning), and learning orientations (motivation). Each of these had five scales (Vermunt, 1996, 1998, 2005). This study focuses on determining patterns in student learning in only one learning style category: learning orientations. The survey instrument consisted of 25 items. Students were asked to indicate on a five-point scale (1. *Disagree entirely*, 2. *Disagree for the most part*, 3. *Undecided*, 4. *Agree for the most part* and 5. *Agree entirely*) the degree to which the described items correspond to their own practice, views or motives.

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 16, 0). Since the aim of the study is to assess whether there are significant departmental, gender and class differences in respondents' perceptions and the data for the ILS consisted of ordinal variables, the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney and Kruskal Wallis tests were used. The Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test (also called the Wilcoxon rank sum test or the Mann-Whitney U test) is a non-parametric test and is analogous to the parametric two sample t-test. The Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test is used to test whether the difference between the medians of the two groups is significant. The Kruskal-Wallis test is used to determine whether differences among three or more groups are significant in situations that do not meet the assumptions necessary for ANOVA. These tests are used when the normality assumption is questionable and/or when data is ordinal, i.e. when the data can be ranked. Thus, they are most suitable for an analysis in this study.

## Findings

Results of the Mann Whitney U-test for learning orientation scores of ELT and ELL groups are presented in Table 2. Mann-Whitney U-test ( $P < .05$ ) test showed that ELT and ELL students do not appear to differ in their learning orientations. Most of the differences found between departments were very small. Some moderate differences were: ELT students were more personally interested, certificate directed and self-test directed. ELL students were slightly more vocation directed and ambivalent.

Subscale	Department	N	Mean	Z	Asymp.
			Rank	Sig.	
PersonallyInterested	ELT	156	161,38	1,380	-,167
	ELL	152	147,44		
	Total	308			
CertificateDirected	ELT	156	155,39	-,178	-,859
	ELL	152	153,59		
	Total	308			
SelfTestDirected	ELT	156	156,15	-,330	-,741
	ELL	152	152,81		
	Total	308			
VocationDirected	ELT	156	152,25	-,452	-,652
	ELL	152	156,81		
	Total	308			
Ambivalent	ELT	156	153,68	-,164	-,870
	ELL	152	155,34		
	Total	308			

**Table 2.** Results of the Mann Whitney U-test for Learning Orientation Scores of ELT and ELL Groups

In regard to class level differences, Kruskal-Wallis test ( $p < .05$ ) revealed that sophomores had the highest

rank on personal interest (170, 24), Self-test directed (164, 79) and vocation directed (170, 57) scales. Seniors had the highest rank on certificate-directed (168, 99) and ambivalent (164, 92) scales. Juniors occupied the middle rank position on all five scales. Table 3 displays the results of the Kruskal-Wallis test.

Subscale	Class	N	Rank	Mean	Sig.	Asymp.
PersonallyInterested	Sophomore	74		170,24		,059
	Junior	89		161,44		
	Senior	145		142,21		
	Total	308				
CertificateDirected	Sophomore	74		129,47		,007
	Junior	89		151,71		
	Senior	145		168,99		
	Total	308				
SelfTestDirected	Sophomore	74		164,79		,487
	Junior	89		153,89		
	Senior	145		149,62		
	Total	308				
VocationDirected	Sophomore	74		170,57		,047
	Junior	89		162,04		
	Senior	145		141,67		
	Total	308				
Ambivalent	Sophomore	74		137,88		,095
	Junior	89		151,34		
	Senior	145		164,92		
	Total	308				

**Table 3.** Kruskal Wallis Test results of Class Level Differences

Table 4 shows the results of the Mann-Whitney U-test ( $P < .05$ ) that was used to test for group differences between male and female students. With respect to gender, the results of the Mann-Whitney U test showed there were significant differences in the perceptions of female and male students. Female students were found to be more personally interested more self-test directed and more vocation directed than male students. However, male students scored high on ambivalent and certificate-directed scales.

Subscale	Gender	N	Rank	Mean	Z	Sig.	Asymp.
PersonallyInterested	Female	229		163,97	3,192	-	,001
	Male	79		127,05			
	Total	308					
CertificateDirected	Female	229		150,97	1,188	-	,235
	Male	79		164,73			
	Total	308					
SelfTestDirected	Female	229		162,15	2,576	-	,010
	Male	79		132,32			
	Total	308					
VocationDirected	Female	229		161,95	2,509	-	,012
	Male	79		132,91			
	Total	308					
Ambivalent	Female	229		150,42	1,372	-	,012
	Male	79		166,32			
	Total	308					

**Table 4.** Results of the Mann Whitney U-test for Gender Differences

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to determine whether there are differences in learning orientations of EFL with respect to department, class grade and gender. The results show that both departments in this study generally held similar views about what motivates them to learn. For that reason, it seems possible to conclude that learning orientations of EFL students do not vary by educational context. The results showed that gender and class level are important sources of variations in learning orientations. For example, female students were found to have more personal interest than male students and male students are more certificate-directed than female students. It seems that in Turkish culture, gender is still a key variable that may directly influence or even determine attitudes or motivations or behaviors (Tercanlıoğlu, 2005). Another finding is that as students progress through higher education, they more likely become less personally interested, self-test directed, vocation-directed and more certificate-directed and ambivalent.

Although the results of this study are limited in terms of sample size and generalization, it gives some insight into what motivates students to learn in an academic environment and the motives, objectives and attitudes they may have with regard to their studies. Students may display several goals for studying, for instance gathering knowledge, passing exams, avoiding failure, pleasing parents, and qualifying for later studies or a future profession. These orientations are believed to influence the way learning takes place (Boekaerts, 1996 and Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). To understand the academic behaviors of university students, researchers and educators must begin by understanding what motivates university students to engage in such behaviors in the first place. Therefore, a *learning orientation* provides a useful construct for understanding a student's personal context for study (Beatty et al, 1997) and contributes to our understanding of what students learn. As France and Beatty (1998) point out, they provide a means of gaining a better understanding of the complexities of learner motivations and how these influence learning.

An understanding of learning orientations may be extremely useful to both educators and students in understanding student motivations and making the most of learning opportunities. Focusing on orientations to learning could prove an effective means of helping students to challenge their own assumptions about higher education and explore possibilities which they would otherwise not have considered.

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