

LEARNING PREFERENCES ACROSS GENDER

Sedaqatgoftar, Nasrin*

Abstract

This study investigated whether language learning preferences of Iranian EFL learners differ across gender. To this end, 200 highly proficient language learners (100 male and 100 female) EFL learners took part in the study. A questionnaire was administered to intact classes. The obtained data was subjected to t-test. The results of the t-test analysis contribute to the present body of knowledge advocating a learning-centered approach to materials, syllabus design, and language teaching. It was found that male and female students differ in their language learning preferences. The findings feed into classroom practice and provide guidance for students and teachers as well as materials designers and syllabus planners.

Key words: language learning preferences, gender, EFL learners, syllabus design, language teaching.

* MA graduate of TEFL; Urmia State University

I. Introduction

The way individuals learn or understand new information and their preferred learning methods have been a popular subject in the past. It has also been the focus of a number of studies in recent years (Reid, 1995; Barkhuizen, 1998; Riazi & Riasati, 2007). There is no doubt that learners come to the class with different likes and dislikes, attitudes regarding language, and learning, and with different manners of taking information in and comprehending it. So, teachers need to discover their students' preferred ways of learning the language (Riazi & Riasati, 2007).

On the other hand, quite many researchers (Siebert, 2003; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Tatarinceva, 2007) believe that gender is among the main factors contributing to differences in leaning styles of the language learners asserting that males and females learn differently from each other. Tatarinceva (2007) argues that language teachers face a more extreme gender divide than many other subject areas, and adds that gender is among the most important factors that influence learning style. Similarly, Kolb (1976) holds that males and females score differently on the Learning Style Inventory.

The importance of these personal characteristics to ESL teachers is that the same teaching method or technique may be effective for some learners and not so much effective for others (Hyland, 1993). It is, therefore, crucial to find out the ways through which students prefer to learn the language regarding their gender. However, few if any empirical studies have researched this area in Iranian context. So, there was a pressing need for further and expanded research. To this end, this study has investigated if there is any significant difference in language learning preferences of Iranian EFL learners across gender.

II. Review of the related literature

Research regarding gender differences in language learning style is sparse and shows contradictory findings. Many researchers (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Siebert, 2003; Cavanaugh, 2002) assert that males and females learn differently from each other. Tatarinceva (2007) analyzed the influence of gender factor on some of the aspects of students' lives including their learning styles. To do so, a questionnaire including 64 questions was given to the students of

different high schools of Latvia during the 2007 academic year. The subjects were 192 students aged from 18-33 (66 male and 79 female students). The findings revealed that females had better developed auditory skills. In this study, females favored individual work and preferred to learn independently more than males. They also liked to get the main idea at first and then come to details. Male students were more interested in group work, preferred unstructured learning tasks, and were less visual than females in that they did not prefer working with illustrations while learning. She suggests that males tend to be more kinesthetic, tactual, and they need more mobility in a more informal environment than females. Males are more non-conforming and peer- motivated (competitive) than females. They tend to learn less by listening. On the other hand, females tend to be more auditory and authority-oriented than males. They need more quiet while learning, they are more self- and authority-motivated, and are more conforming than males. One of the drawbacks of this study is the wide age-range she has included in her study without considering the age as either an independent or a moderate variable.

"Present body of knowledge suggests that, on the average, men and women score differently on the Learning Style Inventory. Women tend to score higher on concrete-experience orientation, while men toward abstract-conceptualization" (Kolb, 1976, p. 27). Female students see the orders that males give them as unnecessarily provocative, challenging and aggressive, while male students see the suggestions that females make as infuriating and bossy (Cavanaugh, 2002). Moreover, females are better than males on language learning tasks connecting with remembering verbal information, faces, names, object locations, and landmarks along a route, they have better episodic memory than males who do better with the travel directions tasks (Colley, 2001).

Petrovsky (1999) asserts that females show advantages over males in verbal tasks, vocabulary and quality of speech, but males do better on writing, tasks connected with logic, and problem-solving situations. Yu-rong (2007), also, reported on the findings of a survey concerning the learning style preferences of Tibetan EFL learners. The survey samples were selected from Tibetan National College. They were 200 sophomore students from 7 departments, with their age ranging from 18 to 23. Among the subjects, 110 were males and 90 were females. The instrument employed was a self-reported questionnaire. Questionnaire findings showed that

various learning styles distributed unevenly among Tibetan EFL learners. Concerning the overall profile of Tibetan EFL learners, the data indicated that hands-on, independent, reflective, individual-oriented, and serialist were the most preferred learning styles. Auditory style was surprisingly regarded negligible. The data also suggested significant differences existed between female and male Tibetan learners in 3 learning style variables. The female learners were more oriented to visual, dependent and individual-oriented learning styles than their male counterparts. Yu-rong, finally, attributed these gender differences to the differences in their socialization and brain lateralization.

In an attempt to replicate Reid's (1987) study of the learning style preferences of ESL learners in the US, Hyland (1993) administered Reid's (1987) questionnaire, asking students to express their perceptual learning preferences, to 440 students at 8 universities in Japan either in Japanese or in English. His female learners demonstrated stronger preferences than males in each modality and were significantly more tactile than males. Neither group identified a major learning style but both males and females chose auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, and individual learning as negative styles. Males and females only differed in the order of their choices by favoring tactile and auditory learning respectively. He concluded that the extent to which learning styles are malleable is uncertain, but it appears that Japanese students adapt to different learning experiences and that the modification and extension of learning styles occur to facilitate this. It is important to note, however, that these generalizations do not apply to all Japanese learners in a stereotypical way. On the other hand, in Reid's (1987) study, with regard to the effect of sex, males preferred visual and tactile learning significantly more than females. Contradictory findings of these two studies may be attributed to the different socio-cultural contexts of the study.

As the presented body of literature demonstrates, there is no consensus among researchers whether gender has any significant relationship with learning style preferences of the learners or not. However, most of the authors contend that males and females learn differently. Along with all of the studies stated, the present study strived to examine whether gender has any significant relationship with the language learning preferences of Iranian EFL learners.

III. Methodology**A. Participants**

To accomplish the objectives of this study, two hundred male and female language learners within the age range of 17-25 learning English as a foreign language at Iran Language Institute (ILI) Branch in Bushehr took part in the study. The student sample included 100 highly proficient male and 100 highly proficient female students. The data was collected from 12 intact classes. In order to ensure that the participants were from the right proficiency level, the placement and achievement tests of ILI were considered as the criteria for selecting high proficiency classes. From among the fifteen levels the adult learners should go through in the ILI institute, the last five levels were considered as high proficiency levels in this study.

B. Instrumentation

In order to be able to access the opinions of a large and potentially diverse population, a questionnaire was used. The questionnaire was adapted from three different questionnaires: 'What Are Your Preferred Ways of Learning English?' designed by Mary Spratt (1999, pp. 153-154), 'Language Teaching Activity Preference Survey' based on Willing (1998, pp. 106-107), and 'Language Teaching/Learning Beliefs Questionnaire' introduced by Jams Dean Brown and Theodore S. Rodgers (2000, p. 121) in their book entitled 'Doing Second Language Research'. The items which seemed appropriate and in line with the purpose of the study were chosen from each questionnaire and put together. Then the items were randomized. To construct the questionnaire, the items were reviewed and modified three times after its pilot administration.

The questionnaire contained 53 items and used a five-point Likert scale, as follows:

Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree no experience

The items in the questionnaire were all classroom activities that learners could be requested to carry out by their teachers either in or out of the classroom. The students were supposed to state how they preferred to learn the language.

C. Procedure

The present study was deemed to examine whether gender had any significant relationship with the language learning preferences of Iranian EFL learners. To do so, 100 male and 100 female students from among highly proficient learners studying English in ILI Branch in Bushehr completed the questionnaire. The data was collected from intact classes. The questionnaire was distributed among the learner subjects at the end of their class session. Instruction as to how to complete the questionnaire was given in Persian. In order to stimulate the learners to recall their beliefs, each item in the questionnaire was explained orally to them and examples were provided when needed. The data gathered included learners' views and preferences as to how they like to learn English language.

D. Data analysis

This study used a 5-point Likert scale and the responses to the items in each category of the questionnaire were summed up to calculate the means on each category for each group of the participants. Thus, SPSS .17 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) was used to analyze the data. A t-test was employed to examine the differences in learning preferences across gender.

IV. Results and Discussion

Results of each item in the questionnaire are presented in this section. Some of the responses received rendered significant results, while some others did not. This section will present those responses which were statistically significant. The tables display the results of items for which the differences between the responses has been statistically significant.

The results of t-test showed that generally males' and females' learning preferences are different. Cavanaugh (2002) reported similar results. He claimed that males and females learn differently from each other. Tatarinceva (2007), also, argues that the gender divide is much more significant in the area of language teaching, and gender is one of the most important factors influencing the learning preferences. This discrepancy, as Yu-rong (2007) put it, may be due to the fact that men

and women are psychologically different. Yu-rong (2007) attributed this gender divide to the differences in their socialization and brain lateralization. Similarly, Maccoby and Jacklin (1975) support the idea that biological differences between the male and female brain play a role in the development of learning preferences. The results of t-test are illustrated in the table below:

Table 4.1: Total difference between male and female learning preferences

Category	Gender	X	SD	df	t. obs.	P
Total	Male	11.98	21.13	202	2.93	.001
	Female	11.06	14.57			

The first 4 items asked students whether they preferred to study English individually, in pairs, in small groups or with the whole class. Results of the tests showed the significant difference 0.02 between the responses of the students. To compare the differences in learning preferences of males and females the mean for each item of the questionnaire was also calculated for males and females separately. The results showed that male students rated whole class work significantly higher than their female counterparts. From their strong preference for whole class learning it can be concluded that male learners are more communicative than female learners. This finding is in line with Tatarinceva's (2007) findings who claimed male students were more interested in group work. One reason, as Tatarinceva (2007) believes, may be the fact that male students are more peer-motivated than females.

Table 4.2: Preference for grouping across gender

Category	Gender	X	SD	df	t. obs.	p
Grouping	Male	9.82	2.41	202	2.11	.02
	Female	9.14	2.15			

Table 4.3: Mean results on grouping preference across gender

Item	Female	Male
1	2.57	2.77
2	2.59	2.71
3	2.09	2.29
4	1.88	2.16

It can be concluded from the results that male learners favor a communicative approach to language learning more than female learners by showing reluctance to work on their own. It seems that they feel more comfortable, productive, and relaxed working in larger groups. This can be a message for teachers not to get male students work alone. Rather it is more fruitful to encourage them to have interaction with each other and share ideas. One advantage of this practice may be the fact that such interaction provokes greater involvement and participation than working individually among male learners. It fosters learner responsibility and independence, can improve motivation and contribute to a feeling of cooperation and warmth in a class of male students.

Vocabulary learning is a complicated task, though many may perceive it as simple. The learner has to perform several tasks when learning a new word: spelling, pronunciation, stress, grammatical class, semantic category, in combination with other semantic and grammatical elements in the sentence, and possible contextual occurrence in various situations. Thus, a language learner, attempting to learn a word, may overlook these characteristics of the word, and remain content with one or two. (Bada & Okan, 2000) Items 14 to 18 delved into the ways learners would like to learn new vocabulary, and the significant difference of 0.001 was found between the responses of the respondents with two different sexes.

Table 4.4: Vocabulary learning preference across gender

Category	Gender	X	SD	df	t. obs.	P
----------	--------	---	----	----	---------	---

Vocabulary learning	Male	9.48	2.56	202	2.79	.001
	Female	8.52	2.28			

Table 4.5: Mean results on vocabulary learning preference across gender

Item	Female	Male
14	1.31	1.36
15	1.76	1.94
16	2.20	2.20
17	1.65	1.97
18	1.65	1.95

As it can be understood from the mean results, the most remarkable discrepancy was in the case of kinesthetic vocabulary learning. The results showed that males like to learn the new words kinesthetically, through doing something, much more than females. Similarly, Tatarinceva (2007) suggests that male students tend to be more kinesthetic, tactual, and need more mobility in a more informal environment than their female counterparts. Another finding worth mentioning is that females prefer to learn vocabulary visually rather than kinesthetically. Items 15 and 17 asked the students whether they like to learn new vocabulary through seeing them or doing something respectively. The mean values for male responses on these items were 1.92 and 2.00 respectively. It can be concluded that males are more kinesthetic rather than visual. The mean values for female responses on the same items were 1.75 and 1.65 respectively. This shows that females prefer to learn vocabulary visually rather than kinesthetically. Females in the present study like females in previous studies (e.g. Yu-rong, 2007) were more visually-oriented. In other words, males are more of a kinesthetic nature and prefer body movement when learning. They are inclined to be involved in classroom interactions and not just sit and see what is going on; Whereas, females are visually-oriented and learn better when they are exposed to visual input. This is the reason why most of the time the teachers feel more comfortable controlling female classes. Visual females can sit quietly for a long time in the class without feeling bored while

kinesthetic males feel bored when they have to sit on a chair and just listen to the teacher. This is a message for language teachers to take steps that would enable students to be as much involved in what is happening in classroom as possible. So teachers should be aware to associate the activities with body movement in male classes and to use visual input like pictures, maps and graphs in female classes.

Regarding ways to learn grammar, catered for in items 19 to 23, test results showed the significant difference 0.001 between the responses of male and female students. It was found out that males, who believe that learning grammar is the most important part of learning a new language, valued form more than females. Item 21 asked the students if they favored implicit grammar learning. The mean value for males on this item was 3.18 and for females it was 2.86. This shows that males favor implicit grammar learning more than females. It can be concluded that male students like communicative language teaching more than females. The results are displayed in the following table:

Table 4.6: Preference for learning grammar across gender

Category	Gender	X	SD	df	t. obs.	P
Learning grammar	Male	12.18	2.64	202	3.35	.001
	Female	10.89	2.04			

Table 4.7: Mean results on learning grammar across gender

Item	Female	Male
19	1.54	2.01
20	2.14	2.69
21	2.89	3.26
22	1.99	1.97
23	2.36	2.33

As in any other field, errors in language teaching, learning, perception and production are inescapable. What is important though is coping with them in such a way that they do not frustrate, inhibit and/or discourage language learners. (Bada & Okan, 2000) Items 24 to 28 asked the students about the way they like their mistakes to be corrected. Whether they like to self-correct their mistakes or they prefer their teachers to correct their mistakes or they like to be peer-corrected. The significant difference 0.001 was found. The following table shows the results:

Table 4.8: Error correction preference across gender

Category	Gender	X	SD	df	t. obs.	p
Error correction	Male	12.87	2.94	202	3.01	.001
	Female	11.74	2.34			

As is apparent from mean results both male and female students preferred to be corrected later, and not during practice. This shows that students are against immediate correction. It seems that students do not want their instructors to correct them immediately in front of everyone. They may think that correcting students' errors directly may not necessarily lead to more correct language usage in the future, and even worse, it may result in negative affective feelings that hinder learning especially for shy learners. This is in line with Bada and Okan's (2000) findings claiming that the majority of the students in their study preferred to be corrected by their instructors in private. Moreover, comparing the means it was clear that males prefer peer-correction to self-correction but females favored both methods of correction equally.

Table 4.9: Mean results on error correction preference across gender

Item	Female	Male
24	1.95	2.07
25	2.40	2.60
26	2.29	2.51

27	2.77	3.09
28	2.40	2.76

As a tool for language teaching/learning, media have undoubtedly always facilitated the task of language learning and teaching. All language teachers seem to agree that media can and do enhance language teaching and learning (Riazi& Riasati, 2007). The seventh category asked the students about the kind of media they like to be used in their class to facilitate their learning. The tests showed the significant difference 0.001. The overall mean value on this category for males was 13.35 and 11.07 for females. This shows that on the average male learners prefer to use media more than female learners. It was apparent from mean results that male learners prefer visual media like pictures and posters and watching TV in English remarkably more than female learners. In other words, television, being a powerful media, is one of the most popular media with male language learners. According to Celce-Murcia (2001), the reason may be the fact that such media bring a slice of real life into the classroom and present language in its more complete communicative context; hence, they are much more motivating and involving.

Table 4.10: Media preference across gender

Category	Gender	X	SD	df	t. obs.	P
Media	Male	13.35	3.88	202	4.57	.001
	Female	11.07	3.08			

Table 4.11: Mean results on media preference across gender

Item	Female	Male
29	1.96	2.44
30	1.38	1.55
31	2.69	3.05
32	2.03	2.34
33	1.72	2.19
34	1.37	1.85

Comparing the means separately for each group made it clear that both male and female learners favor listening to radio the most. This finding is in contrast to what Riazi and Riasati (2007) reported in their study. The students in their study favored television and video as their most popular media. However, male students prefer to use cassettes and tapes as their second preference. The rationale might be the fact that tapes are relatively cheap and easy to use and carry. Furthermore, they are the main sources (other than the teacher) of spoken language texts in most classrooms. Female students favor written material as their second preference. This reiterates the fact that females are visual.

Items 35 to 46 delved into different learning activities learners find very useful in the classroom. They include games, repetition, role-plays, talking to friends in English, practicing conversations, studying English books, watching and listening to native speakers, and using English in daily life. There was a significant difference 0.001 among female and male responses. The overall mean value on this category for males was 25.96 which in comparison to its female counterpart (21.63) reiterates the fact that males are more kinesthetic and it's more difficult for them to just sit on their chairs and follow the book step by step while it is easier for females to stick to the book. Comparing mean results of the two groups on these items made it apparent that males preferred role-playing remarkably more than females. This is another indication of the fact that males are much more kinesthetic and need more body movement. So, in male classes teachers should be careful to use activities that need more mobility like games and role-plays. The results are shown below:

Table 4.12: Learning activity preference across gender

Category	Gender	X	SD	df	t. obs.	P
Learning activities	Male	25.96	8.24	202	4.05	.001
	Female	21.63	6.08			

Table 4.13: Mean results on learning activity preference across gender

Item	Female	Male
35	1.54	1.83
36	1.80	2.19
37	2.31	2.39
38	1.47	1.67
39	1.51	1.90
40	1.62	1.99
41	1.25	1.54
42	1.76	2.27
43	2.35	2.87
44	2.42	3.07
45	1.97	2.55
46	1.76	2.30

Items 49 to 53 asked the respondents whether they like to have homework and how they like to do it. Item 49 asked them if they like the teacher to assign homework for them and item 50 asked them if they prefer not to have homework and just to prepare for the next class. The tests showed the significant difference 0.001. Mean results showed that male students prefer to prepare for the next class while female students favored having homework to do at home. Another finding inferred from the mean results was that males favored written exercises as their homework more than female students. However, comparing the mean results separately for each group made it apparent that both male and female students preferred to review the day's work as their homework. The following tables illustrate the results:

Table 4.14: Preference for homework across gender

Category	Gender	X	SD	df	t. obs.	P
Homework	Male	11.45	3.75	202	2.79	.001
	Female	10	3.31			

Table 4.15: Mean results on homework preference across gender

Item	Female	Male
------	--------	------

49	2.01	2.29
50	1.93	2.35
51	2.12	2.40
52	2.00	2.23
53	1.95	2.33

V. Conclusions and Implications

Some major points concluded from the study are summarized below:

- * Generally speaking males and females had different learning preferences.
- * Males were more communicative than females and they were more interested in group work.
- * Males liked to learn the new vocabulary kinesthetically more than females while females preferred to learn new words visually more than males.
- * Male students prefer implicit grammar learning more than female students. This is another indication that male learners are more communicative.
- * Regarding error correction, male students preferred per-correction to self correction but female students rated both the same. However, both male and female students preferred their teachers to correct their mistakes later in private.
- * Among different kind of media, male learners preferred posters and pictures as their primary preference and TV as their secondary preference while female learners preferred written material.
- * The learning activity most favored by male students was role-playing and they favored body movement.
- * Regarding homework females preferred to have written assignment to do as their homework but their male counterparts liked to prepare for the next class.

References

- Bada, E., & Okan, Z. (2000). Students' language learning preferences. *TESL E-J*, 4 (3).
- Barkhuisen, G. P. (1998). Discovering learners' perceptions of EFL classroom teaching/learning activities in a South African context. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(1), 85-108.
- Bernat, E., & Lloyd, R. (2007). Exploring the gender effect on EFL learners' beliefs about language learning. *Australian Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology*, 7, 79-91.
- Cavanaugh, D. (2002). *Hemispheric preference*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Celce-Murcia, M. (2001). *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (3rd ed.). Dewey Publishing Services: NY.
- Colley, C. (2001). *Learning styles, including hemispheric dominance: A comparative study of gifted students*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Hyland, K. (1993). Culture and learning: A study of the learning style preferences of Japanese students. *RELC Journal*, 24(2), 69-91.
- Kolb, D. A. (1976). *The learning style inventory*. Boston: McBer.
- Maccoby, E., & Jacklin, C. (1975). *The psychology of sex differences*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Petrovsky, A. (1999). *Fundamentals of theoretical psychology*. Moscow: Infra-M.
- Reid, J. (1987). The learning style preferences of ESL students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21(1), 87-111.
- Reid, J. (ed.) (1995). *Learning styles in the ESL/EFL classroom*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Riazi, A., & Riasati, M. J. (2007). Language learning style preferences: A students case study of Shiraz EFL institutes. *Asian EFL Journal*, 9(1), 97-125.
- Siebert, L. L. (2003). Student and teacher beliefs about language learning. *The ORTESOL Journal*, 21, 7-39.
- Spratt, M. (1999). How good are we at knowing what learners like? *System*, 27, 141-155.
- Tatarinceva, A. (2007). *Citizenship Education in Society: Proceedings of the ninth conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network* (Ed.) Ross A. Published by CiCe (London).
- Willing, K. (1988). *Learning styles in Adult Migrant Education*. Sydney: NSW Adult Migrant Education. Sydney: NSW Adult Migrant Education Service.
- Yu-rong, H. (2007). A survey on the learning style preference of Tibetan EFL learners in China, *US-China Foreign Language*, 5(4), 39-42.