HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CLASSROOM LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN AN EFL CONTEXT

Ali GOKSU

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Abstract

Classroom learning environment as a research area has been of a great interest to researchers for decades. Although many studies have been carried out in the world from various aspects of the classroom learning environment, the subject of classroom learning environment is a novel research field in terms of foreign language teaching. This study examined Turkish high school students' perceptions of actual classroom learning environment in English language teaching with its focus on gender and grade differences. The study was conducted on 166 high school students from different grades. The data were gathered by conducting "What Is Happening in this Class? (WIHIC) questionnaire, classroom observations and interviews, and analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The results indicated that all participants had positive perceptions on their learning environment in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. The findings also revealed that there were no differences among the grades in students' perceptions of actual learning environment on six out of the seven dimensions in WIHIC. Moreover, in general there was not statistically significant difference between genders. This research provides an in-depth understanding of the high school students' classroom learning environment. In addition, it also enables teachers, students, school authorities and researchers to see clearly what is happening in EFL classroom.

Keywords: classroom learning environment, EFL, high school students, perceptions.

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Introduction

Classroom learning environment has attracted many researchers' attentions with its rich history of nearly four decades (Dorman, Aldridge & Fraser, 2006; Fraser, 2002, 2000, 1998a, 1998b; Goh & Fraser, 1998; Gür, 2006; Sungur & Güngören, 2009; Taylor, Fraser & Fisher, 1997; Telli, Cakiroglu & den Brok, 2006; Yang, 2013; Psycharis, Chalatzoglidis, & Kalogiannakis, 2013; Budak, & Kaygin, 2015; Yang, Wang, & Chiu, 2015). The classroom is the central organizing unit of most schools. Organizing students into classes is intended to promote learning by allowing teachers and students to spend significant amount of time with activities that result in learning (Schaper, 2008). Fraser (2000) also emphasized that students spent approximately 20.000 hours in classrooms when they finish their university education. This time devoted to the schooling is mainly focused on the academic achievement of students. In addition, taking the students' devoted years to the schooling into account, one can easily comprehend the importance of the school. According to Schaper (2008), the classroom has led to various research methods and tools which provide to quantify and qualify the experiences of people who spend time there. This research therefore explored high school students' perceptions of actual classroom learning environment in EFL classes with its focus on gender and grade differences.

Classroom learning environment

Classroom learning environment also known as educational environment or classroom climate is a social atmosphere where learning takes place (Arisoy, 2007). It promotes learner autonomy and the control of learning process, leads students to realize the connection between their effort and success, and enhances the development of mastery goal orientation (Sungur & Güngören, 2009). According to Ulker, et al. (2013) designing a classroom learning environment which meets the needs and perception of students ensures an effective communication and learning environment. The classroom learning environment has a strong influence on students' outcomes and plays an important role in improving the efficiency of learning in all levels of classrooms (Arisoy, 2007; p.22). Classroom environment has two aspects: One is the physical environment (the material setting of the classroom such as furniture, lighting, spaces, desks, chairs) that affects the safety, the comfort of students, and learning and personal development of students. The other is the psychological environment referring to the social quality of the school and classroom. It is concerned about the perceptions and feelings about social relation among students and teachers (Arisoy, 2007; Atbas, 2004).

The classroom learning environment, which is one of the aspects of psychological environment, has drawn several researchers' attention for over four decades

(Aldridge, Fraser & Huang, 1999; Atbas, 2004; Arisoy, 2007; Fraser & Fisher, 1983; Dorman, Aldridge & Fraser, 2006; Gür, 2006; Telli, den Brok, Tekkaya & Cakiroglu, 2009). Concerning classroom learning environment, while some studies were related to the students' perception of their science learning environments (Fraser,1998a; Rakici, 2004; Schaper, 2008), some of them focused on investigating science laboratory learning environments (Kim, Fisher & Fraser, 1999), the perceptional differences between gender (Ferguson & Fraser, 1998; Gherasim, Butnaru & Mairean, 2013), cross-national and cross-cultural studies (Aldridge, Fraser & Huang, 1999) teacher interpersonal behaviour (Goh & Fraser, 1998; Rakici, 2004) and differences between students' and teachers' perceptions of the same learning environment (Arisoy, 2007; Gür, 2006).

In most of the classroom learning environment studies, the relationship between students' perceptions of their classroom learning environment, and their cognitive and affective outcomes have been investigated (Fraser, 1998a; Gür, 2006; Oran, 2006; Rakici, 2004; Schaper, 2008). Many studies on this issue have controlled for background variables with students' perceptions of the classroom environment accounting for appreciable amounts of variance in learning outcomes. Common result of these studies is that students learn better when they perceive their classroom environment positively (Dorman, Aldridge & Fraser, 2006). Furthermore, there have also been several studies focusing on the role of teachers' and students' perceptions of the classroom environment in influencing cognitive and affective outcomes. The findings of these research indicated that there has been a strong connection between student outcomes and their perceptions of learning environment (Fraser & Fisher, 1982). In one of the previous studies, Dorman (2008) attempted to find out students' perceptions of actual and preferred classroom environment by conducting WIHIC. Results of the study revealed that there were statistically significant differences between actual and preferred environments, and that the gap between actual and preferred environment was smaller in positive classroom environments. In another research, Ferguson and Fraser (1998) searched students' perceptions of the generalist learning environment of the primary school compared to their perceptions of the specialist science learning environment of secondary school. The role of student gender and change in school size were also examined. The results indicated that both school size and student gender were found to be influencing factors for changes in the perceptions of some learning environment dimensions. It was also seen that learning environment perception changes during transition were related to transition pathways (defined by change in school sizes). Furthermore, the study also showed that girls were more positive than boys overall.

Language Teaching and Classroom Learning Environment

Classroom learning environment has been studied in different disciplines such as Biology (Telli, Cakiroglu, & den Brok, 2006), Maths (Goh & Fraser, 1998; Schaper, 2008), visual art and drawing courses (Ulker, et al. 2013), science classroom environments (Fraser, 1998a), computer-assisted instruction classrooms, constructivist classroom environments (Taylor, Fraser & Fisher, 1997) cross-national studies of science classroom environments studies (Aldridge, Fraser & Huang, 1999). It has also been examined in terms of foreign/second language learning. These studies have focused on the effect of classroom learning environment on foreign/second language learning (Atbas, 2004; Schneider, 2007), differences between teachers' and the students' perceptions of their actual and preferred classroom learning environment (Gür, 2006), the relationship between students' perceptions of classroom environment and their motivation (Kesin, 2008; Wei & Elias, 2011), comparing the effects of one learning environment over another and attainment of various aspects of language learning (Torti, 2006). In research, it is emphasized that classroom learning environment plays a vital role in language learning classrooms, language learning is affected by their learning environment, and further research should focus on conceptualising and assessing its determinants and effects (Gür, 2006). For example, the relationship between students' perceptions of classroom environment and their motivation in learning English language was researched by Wei and Elias (2011). The findings of the study indicated that the majority of the students perceived their learning classroom as having affiliation and they were extrinsically motivated. The results also revealed that students' affiliation and task orientation in the classrooms were positive and significantly correlated with their motivation whereas students' involvement was negatively correlated with their motivation. Gür (2006) also attempted to find out the differences between teachers' and students' perceptions of their actual and preferred classroom learning environment at university level. The results revealed that there was statistically significant difference between the teachers' actual and preferred classroom learning environment. Furthermore, the findings indicated that both the students and teachers preferred a more positive environment, and teachers' actual and preferred scores were more positive than the students.

Research on classroom learning environment in Turkey

Classroom learning environment is a novel research field in Turkey a few related studies which focus on the different aspect of the classroom learning environment (Arisoy, 2007; Erturan, 2007; Rakici, 2004; Sungur & Güngören, 2009; Ulker, et al., 2013), although various aspects of the classroom learning environment have been carried out in many countries (Aldridge, Fraser & Huang, 1999; Fraser, 1998b; 2002; Goh & Fraser, 1998). The study conducted by Rakici (2004) is one of the prominent research done in Turkey. In the study, the students' perceptions of science learning environment, teachers' interpersonal behaviour, and the relationships of these with students' cognitive and affective outcomes were explored. The results indicated that the students perceived a positive science classroom learning environment in Turkey. In addition, the findings argued that there was a relationship between students' perceptions of classroom environment and students' cognitive and affective outcomes, and also girls rated their learning environment and teacher interpersonal behaviour more favourably than boys do. Another study by which What Is Happening In This Class (WIHIC) scale was translated and adapted into Turkish was conducted by Telli, Çakýroglu and den Brok (2006). They investigated both the perceptions of Turkish high school students and their attitude towards science course. The study showed that teacher support, task orientation and equity perceptions were perceived as more visible than other elements of the scale.

Although many previous studies on classroom learning environment in Turkey have focused on basic/applied sciences such as Biology (Telli, Çakýroglu, & den Brok, 2006), Mathematics (Erturan, 2007), visual art and drawing courses (Ulker, et al., 2013), there have been limited research in the field of foreign/second language education (Atbas, 2004; Gür, 2006; Oran, 2006; Kesin, 2008). In addition, there have not enough research focusing on the perceptions of high school students' classroom learning environment in EFL classes in Turkey. This study is of great importance since it focuses on the high school students' perception of their actual classroom learning environment in terms of English language teaching. Furthermore, the quantitative research methods in classroom learning environment studies are commonly used by the researchers, however, combining quantitative and qualitative methods which include interview and observation have been less common (Fraser, 2002, 1998). The purpose of this study was to explore the Turkish high school students' perceptions of their actual classroom learning environment in English language teaching in terms of grades and gender within seven dimensions namely; student cohesiveness, teacher support, involvement, investigation, task orientation, cooperation, equity from What Is Happening In This Class? (WIHIC) questionnaire. Besides, this study also contributes to the literature on classroom learning environment with a specific reference to English Language Teaching context.

Methodology

Research Questions

- What are the differences among grades in the perception of high school students on their actual classroom learning environment in EFL classes?
- Is there any difference between genders in the perception of high school students on their actual classroom learning environment in EFL classes?

Participants

The participants consisted of a total of 166 high school students at 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grades (Male: 80, Female: 86). The participants have studied in a high school in Ankara, Turkey and learned English as a Foreign Language. Their ages ranged from 13 to 17. Gender was considered as a variable for this study. The data for the study were collected from eight EFL classes each of which involved 20-30 students. The participants' language proficiency levels in terms of four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) have varied from A2 to B2 according to Common European Framework of References for Languages.

Instruments

What is Happening in This Class? (WIHIC) Questionnaire. Instruments used for this study comprised of the questionnaire entitled What Is Happening in This Class? (WIHIC), classroom observations and interviews. Regarding the questionnaire, What Is Happening in This Class (WIHIC) is the most commonly used instrument in classroom environment research (Fraser, 1998b). The WIHIC developed by Fraser, Fisher and McRobbie (1996) has contained seven dimensions of classroom psychosocial environment in high schools. It focuses on secondary classrooms and measures high school students' perceptions of their classroom environment as a whole by considering seven dimensions of classroom learning environment. It consists of seven subscales such as Student cohesiveness, Teacher support, Involvement, Investigation, Task orientation, Cooperation, Equity (Dorman, 2003; Gür, 2006). The WIHIC questionnaire adapted to Turkish and validated by Telli, Cakiroglu, and den Brok (2006) was held in Turkish for this study. Moreover, the WIHIC was conducted on the participants in the form of five Likert scale with no reverse scored items. In order to collect data on the students' classroom learning environment, the WIHIC has been validated and used by many researchers from different countries such as China (Chua, Wong & Chen, 2009), Taiwan (Aldridge, Fraser, & Huang, 1999), Korea (Kim, Fisher, & Fraser, 1999), Turkey (Telli, Cakiroglu, & den Brok, 2006) as well as Brunei, Indonesia, Australia. Furthermore, the WIHIC originally in English has been translated into

many languages such as Chinese, Taiwan, Singapore, Korean, Indonesian, Malay languages as well as Turkish (Fraser, 2002). Regarding the reliability of the scale, Cronbach alpha coefficients of both WIHIC scale and its seven dimensions were also computed for this research. While the Cronbach alpha value of WIHIC scale was .84, its seven dimensions' values were .88 for Student Cohesiveness; .88 for Task Orientation; .87 for Cooperation; .87 for Investigation; .86 for Equity; .85 for Teacher Support; .85 for Involvement. It is clearly seen that all dimensions in the scale were positively related to each other.

Classroom Observation. Qualitative data for this study consisted of classroom observations and interviews. In order to support the data collected from the questionnaires, students' classroom learning environments were also observed by the researcher. The classroom observation form developed by the researcher and conducted in the form of five Likert scale focused on the characteristics of actual classroom learning environment and student behaviour. A total of 15 items in observation form were classified as seven dimensions (Student cohesiveness, Teacher support, Involvement, Investigation, Task orientation, Cooperation, Equity) with regard to the subscales in WIHIC. Each item was reviewed by 3 experts who are experienced in EFL field and revised on the basis of views of the experts. The sample items from observation form were as follows: (1) The teacher is sensitive towards the students' feelings; (2) The students work in pairs/groups during the assignments/activities; (3) The teacher helps each student equally.

Interview. Another instrument for qualitative data was the interview. The interview containing 14 structured questions in relation to the questionnaire and observation items was used to gain an in-depth understanding of students' actual classroom learning environments at their English course. On the basis of questionnaire items and observation form, the questions of the interview were prepared by the researcher and reviewed by 3 experts who are experienced in EFL field. The questions of the interview were also classified as seven dimensions (Student cohesiveness, Teacher support, Involvement, Investigation, Task orientation, Cooperation, Equity). The interview was held in Turkish to help participants express their thoughts in a better way. In order to see all participants' views, the interview was applied in the written form to all students at school. The sample questions from interview were as follows: (1) *Does your teacher take your opinions/views into consideration in the classroom? (2) What do you think about your friendship in the classroom? (3) Do you express your ideas or opinions during the class discussion?*

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The data for this study including not only quantitative but also qualitative methods were collected from high school students via questionnaire, observation form and interview. Firstly, the WIHIC questionnaire was applied to all students

at school, and then the observation was carried out each classroom (8 classrooms). Finally, all students answered the structured questions within interview. With the instruments used for data collection, this research was triangulated to secure an in-depth understanding of the high school students' English learning environment.

As for data analysis procedure, the scores obtained from WIHIC questionnaire were quantitatively analysed by using SPSS 22. Concerning the grades, it was observed whether there was a significant difference among them. Besides, the gender was also compared and it was observed if there was a significant difference between them. On the other hand, with respect to the qualitative data, the analysis procedure consisted of two parts including classroom observation and the interview. Considering seven dimensions in WIHIC scale, the classroom observation was qualitatively analysed. The descriptive statistics of each dimension in observation form were also computed. In addition, the interview was also classified into seven sections parallel with the seven dimensions in WIHIC scale and analysed according to the answers given to each question. In the presentation of qualitative data results, students' citations about the questions within interview were used, and participants were given numbers according to the interview range such as S1. S2. S3.

Results

The results of WIHIC questionnaire

The scores obtained from WIHIC questionnaire were quantitatively analysed in SPSS 22. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of grades of students at high school.

Table 1. *The results of descriptive statistics among grades*

Grades	N	$\overline{X}$	Sd	Min.	Max.
9th grade	53	3.85	.60178	2.73	4.93
10th grade	38	3.81	.47976	2.73	4.59
11th grade	35	3.73	.58150	2.59	4.70
12th grade	40	3.82	.48671	2.57	4.55
Total	166	3.81	.54168	2.57	4.93

The descriptive statistics among grades indicated that there were a total of 166 high school students (53 students in 9th grade, 38 students in 10th grade, 35 students in 11th grade and 40 students in 12th grade) in the study. In addition, it was also seen that the students had positive learning environment perceptions in EFL classes (X: 3.85 for 9th grade; X: 3.81 for 10th grade; X: 3.73 for 11th grade and X: 3.82 for 12th grade).

One-Way ANOVA test among grades was conducted to see high school students' perceptions of their actual classroom learning environment in EFL classes.

Table 2. *The results of One Way ANOVA among grades*

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p*
	Between Grades	.330	3	.110	.371	.774
Total	Within Grades	48.083	162	.297		
	Total	48.414	165			

*p>.05

As seen in Table 2, there was not any considerable change among grades (F=.371; p>.05). This means that there are no differences among grades in students' perceptions of their actual learning environment in English course.

In order to see the differences in detail among grades in terms of the dimensions of questionnaire, One Way ANOVA test was computed again.

Table 3. *The results of One Way ANOVA among grades for seven dimensions in WIHIC*

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p*
Student Cohesiveness	Between Grades	.930	3	.310	.790	.501
	Within Grades	63.527	162	.392		
	Total	64.456	165			
Teacher Support	Between Grades	5.309	3	1.770	2.155	.095
	Within Grades	133.025	162	.821		
	Total	138.334	165			
Involvement	Between Grades	3.207	3	1.069	1.785	.152
	Within Grades	97.000	162	.599		
	Total	100.207	165			
Investigation	Between Grades	3.237	3	1.079	1.575	.198
	Within Grades	111.012	162	.685		
	Total	114.249	165			
Task orientation	Between Grades	4.294	3	1.431	4.498	.005
	Within Grades	51.544	162	.318		
	Total	55.837	165			
Cooperation	Between Grades	.917	3	.306	.688	.561
	Within Grades	72.002	162	.444		
	Total	72.920	165			
Equity	Between Grades	.345	3	.115	.155	.926
	Within Grades	119.930	162	.740		
	Total	120.276	165			

*p>.05

Table 3 shows that there were not statistically significant differences among grades in almost all dimensions (F=.790 for Student cohesiveness, F = 2.155 for Teacher Support, F = 1.785 for Involvement, F = 1.575 for Investigation, Fâ.688 for Cooperation, F = .155 for Equity) (p>.05). However, the analysis also indicates that there was a statistically significant difference among grades in only Task Orientation dimension (F = 4.498; p<.05).

Concerning the homogeneity of variances, the participants in grades were homogeneous (p>.05). Furthermore, a Tukey test was also carried out in order to determine which variables caused significant differences with respect to Task Orientation dimension. The findings for Task Orientation showed that there were significant differences between 9th grade (X = 3.85, p<.05) and 10th grade (X = 3.81, p<.05); and 9th grade (X = 3.85, p<.05) and 12th grade (X = 3.82 p<.05)

Independent Sample t-test was also conducted on the scores of participants in order to see whether there was a significant difference between genders.

Table 4. *The results of Independent Sample t-test between genders*

Gender		N	$\overline{X}$	Sd	t	Df	p*
Total	Female	86	3.87	.48368	1.503	152.581	.135
	Male	80	3.74	.59386			

*p>.05

As seen in Table 4, there was not a statistically significant difference between genders t(152.581)=1.503 p>.01. The findings also show that there was no diffe-rence between female (X= 3.87) and male (X= 3.74) on the perceptions of high school students at different grades concerning their actual classroom learning environment.

In order to see the difference in detail between genders in terms of seven dimensions of WIHIC, the Independent Sample t-test was computed again.

Table 5. *The results of Independent Sample t-test between genders for seven dimensions*

Gender		N	$\overline{X}$	Sd	t	Df	p*
Student Cohesiveness	Female	86	3.94	.68270	.081	164	.204
	Male	80	3.93	.56070			
Teacher Support	Female	86	3.93	.79184	2.130	149.364	.015
	Male	80	3.63	1.01414			
Involvement	Female	86	3.73	.70533	.294	164	.052
	Male	80	3.70	.85587			
Investigation	Female	86	3.38	.82849	.856	164	.775
	Male	80	3.27	.83740			
Task Orientation	Female	86	4.12	.49956	2.356	164	.102
	Male	80	3.91	.64432			
Cooperation	Female	86	3.95	.64523	.869	164	.353
	Male	80	3.86	.68620			
Equity	Female	86	4.05	.79508	.995	164	.061
	Male	80	3.92	.91278			

*p>.05

The findings presented in Table 5 demonstrate that there were not statistically significant differences between genders for most of the dimensions (Student Cohesiveness: t(164)= .081, p>.01; Involvement: t(164)= .294, p>.01; Investigation: t(164)= .856, p>.01; Task orientation: t(164)= 2.356, p>.01; Cooperation: t(164)= .869, p>.01; Equity t(164)= .995, p>.01) although there was a considerable change between genders for Teacher Support dimension: t(149.364)= 2.130, p<.01).

The results of Classroom Observation

The each dimension of the classroom observation was qualitatively analysed. Mean(X) scores of each dimension were also computed. The results indicated that almost all participants at different grades perceived their actual learning environment positively for almost all dimensions. According to the findings of observation, all students have known each other and they have been helpful each other (X: 4.71 for Student Cohesiveness); there have been a positive interaction between students and teachers (X: 4.79 for Teacher Support); almost all students have had an interest for the classroom discussions related to the lesson and have tried to join to them (X: 4.00 for Involvement); the majority of students have attended to the lessons actively and have tried to answer the teacher's questions (X: 4.07 for Investigation); there have been a good cooperation among students and they have enjoyed pair/group work in the classroom (X: 4.50 for Cooperation); and most of the students agree that the teacher has given the same amount of help to each student (X: 4.93 for Equity). However, Task Orientation (X: 3.43) was perceived differently among the grades. It was observed that lower grade (9th grade) students'

interests to English course were also weaker than the other students besides being shy and unwilling on performing tasks in the classroom.

The results of Interview

The analyses of interviews were presented in seven sections. Regarding the first section of the interview, when interviewees were asked about how well the students work with their classmates and whether they like assisting their classmates in the classroom, their answers were generally positive. They stated that they enjoyed working together and assisting each other. On this issue, the participant, S63 said:

> *"We have a good interaction among us. I have many close friends in my classroom and we generally do our homeworks together. In addition, I am happy for this close friendship situation and working together in the classroom" (S63).*

In response to the questions, *"Does your teacher take your opinions/views into consideration in the classroom?"* and *"What do you think about the contribution of the teacher to English course?"* the majority of the students expressed that there was a positive relationship between teacher and themselves, and English course hours passed very fruitful for them. The following extract shows these findings.

> *"My teacher treats everyone equally in the classroom. As far as possible, she tries to take both my views and my friends' thoughts and opinions into consideration during the lesson. Therefore, I am brave enough to express myself in addition to be active during the lessons" (S41).*

The third section was about involving in the classroom discussion and discussing with their classmates to solve problems. Most of the students stated that they liked joining in the discussions as far as possible, and the discussion is a good way to solve their problems. S135 underlines these findings as follows:

> *"I try to involve in the classroom discussion as far as possible. I think that I can improve my English during this discussion. In addition, we are helpful to each other in order to solve our problems, because when I sometimes have some problems concerning pronunciation of the words, one of my friends helps me. As a result, we can ask easily for a support from each other" (S135).*

Regarding the forth section, it was asked if students have carried out an investigation in English course and how they find out answers to questions in the classroom. The responses given by the students showed that every student made at least a research related to the language teaching. Besides, the findings indicated that the means adopted by the students changed. The answers of S95 and S29 to the forth sections are as follows:

"Yes, I make research with respect to our English course time to time. For example, I investigated the cities where there have been heavy traffic problems. The other was the effect of the technology to these days" (S95).

"While investigating, in general I try to find out the answers myself in addition to asking to my friends and to looking up the dictionary. Moreover, I have used the internet actively" (S29).

In response to the questions, *"Do you know what is expected of you in English course?"* and *"Do you try to carry out the tasks in classroom?"* some students expressed that they joined actively in the tasks and enjoyed performing the tasks, whereas some of them complained that although there have been many required tasks and activities, they do not have enough time to carry out them. Besides, they also stated that expressing their ideas and thoughts was difficult for them because of their shyness and bashfulness. The following examples, taken from the interviews, show the evidence that regarding task orientation there was a dilemma among students:

"I am aware of the expectations of my parents and teacher. I have actively attended to the courses and I carry out the tasks as far as possible. I think that I can improve my English while performing activities" (S150).

"Actually I like performing activities, however, there are many requirements and expectations I should perform and achieve. For this reason, I cannot carry out all of them because of insufficient time" (S91).

"While performing the activities, I cannot express myself properly though I have a desire to do so. Perhaps, I am a bit shy of expressing myself" (S55).

The sixth section was about cooperating students with each other and working in pair/groups. Many students pointed out that they like cooperation and working together with their friends since they felt relaxed with their friends. On this issue, S5 said:

"I think that the cooperation is a significant point for every single student. While working in pairs or groups, I can express my thoughts more clearly. In general, when I come across an unexpected situation or a problem, I can ask for help from my friends" (S5).

Finally, the seventh section was concerned with getting an equal help from the teacher in the classroom and equal opportunity for attending to the course. The responses of the students were positive. They stated that the teacher treated equally to the whole class and support them with same opportunity and help. S46 underlines these findings as follows:

"I agree that our teacher of English deals with every single student who needs a help. She also encourages each student in order to join to the activities and classroom discussions. Nobody deny that she treats everyone equally" (S46).

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to investigate high school students' perceptions of their actual classroom learning environment in EFL classes in terms of seven dimensions of WIHIC with the focus of gender and grade differences. Firstly, it was confirmed again WIHIC is still a reliable instrument to reflect the perceptions of high school students on classroom learning environment. Secondly, based on the research questions, the statistical results initially indicated that all high school students had positive classroom learning environment perceptions on their English language learning environment. This finding is also consistent with the previous studies examined in different courses (Arisoy, 2007; Dorman, Aldridge & Fraser, 2006; Telli, den Brok, Tekkaya & Cakiroglu, 2009). Besides, the participants of this study had similar perceptions on their classrooms learning environment in terms of Student cohesiveness, Teacher support, Involvement, Investigation, Cooperation, Equity dimensions. Furthermore, the obtained qualitative data from classroom observations and interviews also revealed that the actual learning environment perceptions of the students at different grades were quite positive for the same dimensions such as Student Cohesiveness, Teacher Support, Involvement, Investigation, Cooperation, and Equity. It was also clearly seen that 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grades students at school perceived positively their English learning environment in the same way in terms of Student Cohesiveness, Teacher Support, Involvement, Investigation, Cooperation, and Equity dimensions. All findings of questionnaire, observations and interviews regarding students' perception of classroom learning environment among grades in terms of seven dimensions overlapped with each other. However, although all participants of the study had positive perceptions on their actual learning environment in EFL classes, they perceived their learning environment differently on one out of the seven dimensions. The results obtained from questionnaire revealed that some students, especially lower grade (9th grade), perceived their English learning environment differently in terms of task orientation. This point of the study is also emphasized by Ferguson and Fraser (1998) who argued that there could be changes in some dimensions related to the learning environment perceptions of students. Moreover, the results of observations and interviews providing qualitative data also supported that lower grade students did not have enough time as well as being shy and unwilling in order to perform tasks and activities.

As for gender, the analyses of data showed that there was not a significant difference between genders in the perceptions of high school students on their

classroom learning environment in EFL classes. These findings are also in parallel with the previous study (Oran, 2006) that explored the students' perceptions of educational environment in relation to students' perceptions in terms of various aspects in an EFL context. However, it was also seen that girls and boys perceived their actual learning environment differently in terms of teacher support dimension. The results indicated that although the majority of the students have perceptions that are appreciated and cared by the teacher (Schaper, 2008), female students perceived their learning environment with a greater teacher support than boys did. The reason behind the difference between male and female students might be that the teachers do not have enough time to deal with every single student in the classroom due to large class size (Telli, den Brok, Tekkaya, & Cakiroglu, 2009). Moreover, the findings of the present study are also in line with previous research (Ferguson & Fraser, 1998) which underlined that school size and student gender were also some of the influencing factors for changes.

To sum up, all findings obtained from quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed that Turkish high school students perceived their actual learning environment positively in their EFL classes. The results indicated that the students at different grades had similar perceptions on their English classroom learning environment on six out of the seven dimensions in WIHIC except for task orientation. The reason for this finding is that expressing ideas and thoughts in the tasks and activities was difficult for some students because of their shyness, unwillingness and insufficient time provided for them. Besides, even though both female and male students had positive perceptions on their actual learning environment for Student Cohesiveness, Teacher Support, Involvement, Investigation, Cooperation, and Equity dimensions, it was observed that girls perceived their actual learning environment differently and were more positive than boys in terms of teacher support dimension. Regarding the reason under this result, it was seen that large class sizes were important factors which influence the perceptions of students on their learning environment. As Arisoy (2007) emphasized, understanding the perceptions of students' actual classroom learning environments and the factors associated with their perceptions provide us to find out some alternative ways that enhance the student's learning process. This research also provided an in-depth understanding of the high school students' classroom learning environment in terms of English language teaching. Furthermore, the results also demonstrated that the students having positive learning environment perceptions can learn better and improve their language learning. This finding is also consistent with the previous study (Dorman, Aldridge & Fraser, 2006) which pointed out if students perceive learning environment positively, it promotes students to learn the subject effectively. What's more, this research was also triangulated with the instruments used for data collection.

This research has also several implications. Considering learning environment as an important factor influencing language learning in the classroom, this research

has demonstrated that the students' positive learning environment perceptions and the interactions between student-teacher, student-student, student and other variables such as involvement, investigation, task orientation etc. in the classroom might contribute to EFL learners to improve their language learning. Furthermore, this study has highlighted that teachers, researchers, and other authorities in the field of education should also consider gender and grades variables in order to provide a better learning atmosphere to students and enhance their foreign/second language learning. Besides the strengths of the study, it had also some limitations. While this research specifically focused on the actual learning environment of the students in EFL classes, future research can be conducted as cross-national and cross-cultural studies both by taking grade and gender into the account. Moreover, further studies by adopting the mixed data collection methodology can also focus on the students' perceptions of their actual learning environment in terms of achievement and attitude.

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