

STUDENTS' LANGUAGE LEARNING STYLE PREFERENCES AT ENGLISH LITERATURE STUDY PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

Learning style is one of the factors contributing to students' success on second or foreign language learning. This present research attempted to identify various learning styles used in learning English by administering *Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ)* for 121 EFL students at English literature study program. The result of descriptive analysis showed that the overall students' preferred learning style was found to be auditory ($M= 37.5$, $SD = 4.48$). Based on gender differences, a majority of male students were auditory students ($M = 38.6$, $SD = 4.27$) and most of the female students were observed to have tendency to be in the category of kinaesthetic students ($M = 3.69$, $SD = .49$). The individual learning style became the least frequent style used by the students ($M = 35.2$, $SD = 7.53$). The findings contribute to the improvement of teaching practice quality. Educators are recommended to employ various teaching styles and design variety of activities that enable students to activate their own learning styles more effectively.

Keywords: learning style, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), *Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ)*

ABSTRAK

Gaya belajar merupakan salah satu faktor yang berkontribusi terhadap kesuksesan siswa dalam pembelajaran bahasa kedua maupun bahasa asing. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi berbagai jenis gaya belajar dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris dengan menggunakan kuesioner *Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ)* kepada 121 siswa Program Studi Sastra Inggris. Hasil analisis deskriptif menunjukkan bahwa auditori ($M= 37.5$, $SD = 4.48$) merupakan gaya belajar yang diminati oleh mayoritas siswa. Sementara itu, dilihat dari perbedaan gender, siswa laki-laki merupakan pembelajar auditori ($M = 38.6$, $SD = 4.27$) sedangkan siswa perempuan lebih cenderung masuk ke dalam tipe kategori pembelajar kinestetik ($M = 3.69$, $SD = .49$). Gaya belajar individu merupakan gaya belajar yang paling sedikit digunakan oleh siswa ($M = 35.2$, $SD = 7.53$). Hasil penelitian diharapkan mampu berkontribusi terhadap perbaikan kualitas mengajar. Pendidik disarankan untuk dapat menerapkan berbagai jenis gaya dalam mengajar dan merancang beragam aktivitas pembelajaran sehingga memungkinkan siswa menggunakan jenis gaya belajar secara efektif.

Kata Kunci: Gaya belajar, pembelajaran bahasa kedua, *Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ)*

A. INTRODUCTION

As a medium of instruction, English is mostly spoken in the interaction between teachers and their students. However, knowing the fact that it is not their first language, some students are presumably more proficient than others when engaging in classroom activities which result in their language performance. Due to their different language background, students are observed to have distinct styles that influence how they learn English in the class. Learning styles are defined as students' preferred ways of processing information based on particular situations and goals in learning (VanPatten & Benati, 2015). In other words, learning style is considered to be one of many factors contributing to students' success in learning second or foreign language which also covers a lot of learning style models.

In respect to various learning models, students may have combination of their learning styles, but the others may prefer one dominant style. Moreover, according to Felder (1993,2010), students will feel more comfortable in the class when various learning styles are applied during teaching and learning activities because these are very helpful to strengthen their skill in less preferred areas of language. For example, students may have particular interest on one of the language subjects, but lack in other areas.

Most successful students, however, are expected to be able to accommodate different learning styles for the purpose of processing information or select the best language learning style preference. This phenomenon has attracted a number of researchers to investigate it more thoroughly. Instruments as well as learning style models have been developed and adapted by a number of researchers to measure the learning style preferences in the second and foreign language learning context. In this study, the researchers attempted to know which learning styles applied by both male and female students in the English class because it is possible that they perform significantly different in their ways of responding and interacting with their lecturers as well as classmates during specific subjects. Among various instruments, Reid's *Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire* (1987) was used to reveal students' particular style preferences in foreign language learning consisting of visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, tactile, group and individual areas.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Language Learning Styles

Learning style is one of many factors that determines how well students learn a second or foreign language. Every language expert and researcher defines learning styles from different perspectives. Learning style is defined as "the variations among learners in using one or more senses to understand, organize, and retain experience" (Reid, 1987, p. 89). In addition, the term 'learning style' concerns individual preferences for obtaining, processing and retaining information (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Similarly, it is an approach used by students both in acquiring a new language and learning any other object (Oxford, 2001). Learning styles can also be described as the different ways in which learners perceive, absorb, process and recall new information and skill (VanPatten & Benati, 2015). Shortly learning styles are associated with the fact that individuals learn best in

different ways and these might influence their language performance during learning activities.

Some experts have continued exploring the basic concepts of learning style. For instance, Sternberg (1997) believes that learning style is not an ability but it is the choice of the students when using their abilities and the reflection of the students' way of thinking. Even though students may show identical ability but they will perform different learning style. Oxford (2001) defines learning style as the general way selected by the students when learning a specific course, acquiring a language, or dealing with a difficult problem. In further explanation, Oxford (2003) points out that learning style is the construction of frequent pattern that provides wide-ranging direction to learning and makes the same instructional method that can be considered exciting by some students or tedious by others. Another expert mentions learning style as "an individual's preferred and habitual modes of perceiving, remembering, organizing, processing, and representing information" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 125 cited in Purpura, 2014). Each learning style preference contributes to provide students with what so called 'comfort zone', and attempts to stretch their comfort zone through practice (Oxford, 2001). Rather than seeing all students as equal, understanding the language learning style concepts is potential to enhance learning and make learning more enjoyable and successful. Their choice on particular style somehow may affect their success in learning depending on how they want to use it at their best potential.

2. Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ)

Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire or known as PLSPQ developed by Reid (1987) in Dörnyei (2005) was the first learning style measure widely known in the L2 field, specifically to measure the six learning style preferences which include visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, group learning, and individual learning. According to Reid (1987:91) before her PLSP questionnaire, "there has been no published research that describes the perceptual learning style preferences of Non- Native English speakers (NNSs)". The questionnaire is very user-friendly, with an accompanying self-scoring sheet and a short explanation of learning style preferences that also contains practical suggestions for learners. In addition, Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire in Reid's study (1987) was the pioneer for perceiving the perceptual learning style preferences of ESL/EFL learners at the university level (Vaseghi, Ramezani, & Gholami, 2012).

Reid's *Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire* consists of 30 items with 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree (5 points), agree (4 points), undecided (3 points), disagree (2 points), strongly disagree (1 point)". The learning styles are grouped into three categories: major learning style preference (38-50), minor learning style preference (25-37) and negligible (0-24). Each sensory learning style is described as follows:

a) *Visual Learning Style*

Students with this type of learning style "like to read and obtain a great deal from visual simulation" (Oxford, 2001). They remember and understand information from conversations, lectures and oral instructions better with visual backup such as taking notes and reading books. In addition, according to Reid (1987) in Dörnyei (2005), the visual learners are those who prefer to see ideas through written materials such as reading the handouts. The questionnaire items that mostly relate to visual learners are "I learn better

by reading what the teacher writes on the chalkboard" (Item 6), "When I read instructions, I remember them better"(Item 10), "I understand better when I read instructions" (Item 12), "I learn better by reading than by listening to someone" (Item 24) and "I learn more by reading textbooks than by listening to lectures" (Item 29).

b) *Tactile Learning Style*

Students with tactile learning style learn best when having the opportunity to do "hands-on" experiences with materials such as working on experiments in a laboratory and handling and building models. Questionnaire items that relate to tactile learners are "I learn more when I can make a model of something" (Item 11), "I learn more when I make something for a class project (Item 14), " I learn better when I make drawings as I study" (Item 16), "When I build something, I remember what I have learned better" (Item 22) and "I enjoy making something for a class project" (Item 25).

c) *Auditory Learning Style*

Auditory students prefer direct lectures, conversations and oral instructions even without any visual input (Oxford, 2001). For the learners who perform the auditory style, they favor to listen when learning something, for example listening to oral explanation or discussion. They enjoy interacting with classmates during role play activities and participating in class discussion. Auditory learning styles appear in "When the teacher tells me the instructions I understand better" (Item 1), "I learn better in class when the teacher gives a lecture" (Item 7), "I remember things I have heard in class better than things I have read"(Item 9), "I learn better in class when the teacher gives a lecture" (Item 17) and "I learn better in class when I listen to someone" (Item 20).

d) *Kinaesthetic Learning Style*

Similar to tactile students, kinaesthetic type of students enjoy "lots of movement and working with tangible objects, collages and flashcards" (Oxford, 2011). In other words, students learn best by physically involving in classroom activities. Kinaesthetic learning styles appear in the questionnaire statements "I prefer to learn by doing something in class" (Item 2), "When I do things in class, I learn better"(Item 8), "I enjoy learning in class by doing experiments" (Item 15), "I understand things better in class when I participate in role-playing" (Item19) and "I learn best in class when I can participate in related activities" (Item 26).

e) *Group Learning Style*

Students prefer interaction and working with other students in completing tasks. They tend to receive and understand new information better from their peers by working in groups. Questionnaire items that concern with group learning style are "I get more work done when I work with others" (Item 3), "I learn more when I study with a group" (Item 4), "In class, I learn best when I work with others"(Item 5), "I enjoy working on an assignment with two or three classmates" (Item 21), and "I prefer to study with others" (Item 23).

f) *Individual Learning Style*

Individualistic students learn best when working alone. They make better progress when studying without any interference from others. Individual learning styles appear in the questionnaire statements "When I study alone, I remember things better" (Item 13),

“When I work alone, I learn better” (Item 18), “In class, I work better when I work alone” (Item 27), “I prefer working on projects by myself “ (Item 28), and “I prefer to work by myself” (Item 30).

C. METHODOLOGY

To identify the language learning styles used by the English literature students, descriptive quantitative study was applied to report information through numerical form. Reid's *Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire* (PLSPQ) was administered to 121 students consisting of 48 male students (39.7%) and 73 female students (60.3%). The variables of descriptive statistics such as the Mean (M), the standard deviation (SD), maximum, minimum, and frequency distribution of the variables were calculated.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Findings

a) The Overall Students' Preferred Learning Style

As the general approaches to learn languages, EFL's particular learning styles are essential to be viewed in second or foreign language teaching and learning process. Learning styles are “the overall patterns that give general direction to learning behaviour (Cornett, 1983, p.9 in Oxford, 2001). Some studies have discovered that ESL/ EFL learners varied in their types of learning which they are comfortable with. A number of 121 students participated in this study employed different styles in learning English which is shown in the following table.

Table 1. Frequency of Students' Perceptual Learning Style Preferences

	VISUAL	TACTILE	AUDITORY	KINAESTHETIC	GROUP	INDIVIDUAL
N Valid	121	121	121	121	121	121
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	36.2479	36.9256	37.5868	37.4380	36.7603	35.2893
Std. Deviation	4.85503	5.21563	4.48640	5.08739	6.21963	7.53153
Minimum	22.00	22.00	26.00	24.00	18.00	12.00
Maximum	50.00	50.00	50.00	48.00	50.00	50.00

Note: major learning style preference (38-50), minor learning style preference (25-37) and negligible (0-24)

The minimum score for all categories was 12.00 and the maximum one was 50.00. Among six perceptual learning style preferences, generally, most of the students used auditory learning style (M= 37.5, SD = 4.48). The second most preferred learning style category was kinaesthetic style (M = 37.4, SD = 5.08). The other learning styles such as tactile (M = 36.9, SD =5.21), group (M = 36.7, SD = 6.21) and visual (M= 36.2, SD = 4.85) came respectively as the third, fourth and fifth styles preferred to learn English. The least frequent style used by students was individual learning style (M = 35.2, SD = 7.53).

In the statistical analysis of frequency, students' learning style preferences ranged from 35.2 to 37.5. Based on the cut off points stated in Reid (1987), all students' learning

style preferences fell into the category of minor learning style preference with scores ranging from 25 – 37. This category indicated that students can function well in specific areas or in other words, a very successful student can learn in several different ways.

b) Learning Style Preferences Based on Gender

The other finding also revealed what types of learning styles mostly preferred by both male and female students. The normal distribution was the first phase to carry out in order to look at how the values of a variable are distributed. The Shapiro-Wilk test is more appropriate for small sample sizes (< 50 samples) with sig.>0.05. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is used for greater sample sizes (> 50 samples) with sig. >0.05. Table 2 presents the normal distribution of gender variable.

Table 2. Statistical Analysis of Normality Test

		Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
Gender		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
LS	Male	.066	48	.200*	.991	48	.963
	Female	.091	73	.200*	.967	73	.056

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

Based on the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk normality test, the gender variable was normally distributed (Male : .963>0.05, female : .200>0.05). Next phase was the analysis of how male and female students applied language learning styles. Table 3 shows differences between male students' learning styles and female students' learning styles.

Table 3 Frequency of Students' Perceptual Learning Styles Based on Gender

Perceptual Learning Styles	Gender	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
Visual	Male	48	36.5	4.64
	Female	73	36.0	5.00
Tactile	Male	48	37.7	5.27
	Female	73	36.3	5.13
Auditory	Male	48	38.6	4.27
	Female	73	36.8	5.13
Kinaesthetic	Male	48	38.2	5.22
	Female	73	36.9	4.95
Group	Male	48	37.9	5.64
	Female	73	36.0	6.49
Individual	Male	48	35.5	7.31
	Female	73	35.0	7.71

Note: major learning style preference (38-50), minor learning style preference (25-37) and negligible (0-24)

According to the statistical analysis above, both groups, male and female students applied different learning styles. A majority of male students were auditory students ($M = 38.6$, $SD = 4.27$) in comparison with the female ones ($M = 36.8$, $SD = 5.13$). The female students were observed to have tendency to be in the category of kinaesthetic students ($M = 3.69$, $SD = .49$) although the mean score was still lower than that of the male students ($M = 3.82$, $SD = .52$). Individual learning style appeared to be the least frequent style used by the students.

The range of learning style frequency for both groups was between 35.0 and 38.6. Visual, tactile, group and individual learning styles were categorized as minor learning style preference group (25 – 37) which indicated that the use of these different styles was helpful to engage in the English learning activity. Auditory and kinaesthetic styles were favoured by male students and these two fell into major learning style preference (38 – 50). Major learning style preference indicated that students could learn best when applying certain styles they were comfortable with.

2. Discussion

Generally, the results of this study showed that EFL students strongly preferred auditory learning style especially male students. Auditory students are described to be comfortable in learning without any visual backup and therefore advantageous of unembellished lectures, conversations and oral instructions (Oxford, 2001). The other learning style category favored by most of the students was kinaesthetic style with the students doing physical activities as well as working with tangible objects, collages and flashcards (Oxford, 2011). Students favour kinaesthetic style to process information while pacing around the room or moving their body parts such as tapping a pencil, fidgeting, kicking a leg, etc (Galbraith and James cited in Higbee and Ginter, 1991). These results were similar to some previous studies which revealed that most of their participants were either auditory or kinaesthetic (Reid, 1987; Melton, 1990; Reid, 1995; Tabanlıoğlu, 2003; and Isemonger and Sheppard;2003).

Besides investigating the most preferred learning styles, it was also found in this study that the EFL students disfavoured individual learning style. They least preferred working on projects and doing tasks by themselves. The result was similar to Jones (1997) who administered *Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire* to 81 Chinese students. He found that individual learning style was the least preferred learning style. Basically, individualistic students make better progress when studying alone or without any interference from others (Reid, 1987). However, some learners found it hard working on task by themselves. With respect to English as a foreign language taught in university, the difficulty of absorbing spoken or written information without the help of teachers/lecturers and other students could lead to distress and anxious feelings. In addition, the EFL students may have combination of their learning styles, but the others may prefer one dominant style. Felder (1993, 2010) adds that when teachers introduce various styles to students during English instruction, this will help them strengthen their skill in less preferred language areas and make them feel more comfortable in the class.

The overall learning style preferences in this study fell into the same category. As the most preferred learning styles, both auditory and kinaesthetic learning styles fell into the minor learning style preference. Although individual learning style was least frequently used in class, it was also reported that it was in the same minor category with

the preferred learning styles used by the EFL students. Minor preference relates to the application of any learning method in which the learner can function adequately according to the demand of the tasks (Reid, 1987).

E. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Learning style is one of the factors that has a great influence on second or foreign language learning. Learning style models and scales are developed to identify learning style preferences among EFL students. One of the instruments created for Non-Native English Speakers (NNSs) and mostly used to perceive the perceptual learning style preferences of ESL/EFL learners at the university level is *Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire* (PLSPQ) by Reid (1987) which consists of visual, tactile, auditory, kinaesthetic, group and individual areas. Concerning the EFL students' learning style preferences, it was revealed that auditory and kinaesthetic styles were mostly preferred based on the overall analysis. It was also found that the EFL students used individual learning style least frequently in class.

The purpose of applying learning styles is to facilitate language learning effectively by finding the best ways to learn. Studies have revealed that learners may use one dominant style or employ various styles in learning language. Therefore, future researchers are recommended to:

1. include more aspects that are likely influence students' learning style preferences such as age, gender, achievement, proficiency, etc. Finding how these variables relates to learning styles will provide more descriptions and information on the SLA studies.
2. employ larger student samples from different levels of education. For instance, students from different semesters will include as research participants in order to observe how learning styles are used in class.

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