

Exploring Learners' Learning Styles Preferences: Finding Out the Best Way to Teach ESP

Saptin Dwi Setyo Hastuti^{1, 2}

Yogyakarta State University¹, Sekolah Tinggi Pariwisata AMPTA Yogyakarta², e-mail: saptin27@gmail.com

Abstract

One important key to successful English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is through managing the classrooms. Identifying learners' learning style preferences can assist teachers in creating a learning environment that is appropriate for the learners. The aim of this study is to explore learners' learning styles and their impacts on the teaching of ESP. This study involved 284 learners from three different departments, i.e., the tour and travel business department, the tourism department, and the tourism department. The data was collected by using Reid's Perceptual Learning Styles Preferences Questionnaire (PLSQ). This questionnaire divided learning styles into 4 categories, i.e., auditory, kinaesthetic, visual, and tactile learning styles. It also divided the learning styles into two, i.e., group and individual. This study revealed that most learners were auditory and kinaesthetic learners. Only a few learners were visual and tactile learners. This study also reveals that most learners preferred to work in groups rather than work individually. Considering these findings, learners must participate in determining the activities and environment for teaching a learning process to avoid mismatching between learners' learning styles and teaching-learning methods. This study offers six recommendations that can be used as a guideline when conducting ESP in the various learning styles preferences.

Keywords: learning styles, preferences, teaching ESP

INTRODUCTION

Classroom management is believed to be one of the keys success of teaching and learning process (Baker, Lang, & Lawson, 2002; Palumbo & Sanacore, 2007; Beaty-O'Ferrall, Green, & Hanna, 2010; Wong, Wong, Rogers & Brooks, 2012). Wright (2005) points out that classroom management involves the management of time, space, participation, and engagement. As one of the classroom management elements, managing learning engagement is vital because it may help teachers define the strength of learners' motivation for learning (Wright, 2005). Knowing the learners' learning styles preferences may help teacher in this regard. Conducting a study to explore learners' learning styles provides teachers with information that helps them combine and adjust their teaching style with the learners' learning style (Awla, 2014). However, there has been controversy around the study of learning styles. Some scholars argue that

learning styles theory has no bearing on the teaching and learning process, as well as the achievement of students. They agreed that the learning styles theory is flawed (Newton & Miah, 2017). One of the weaknesses being pointed out is the mismatch between learning styles and real-life practice. Dörnyei (2005) found that there are six possible mismatches, such as those between the student's learning style and the teacher's teaching style, the learners' learning style and the syllabus, the learners' learning style and the language task, the learners' learning style and his or her beliefs about learning, and the learners' learning style and the learning strategies applied.

Despite this issue, the study of learning styles is still necessary because it can provide learners with the conditions they need to learn best. It is vital because one of the most important signals in learning is to learn to be autonomous, that is, for the individual to take responsibility for his/her own learning (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). Therefore, learning styles are very advantageous for students in order to understand their own strengths and weaknesses in learning. The concept of learning styles represents a profile of the individual's approach to learning, a blueprint of the habitual or preferred way the individual perceives, interacts with, and responds to the learning environment (Dörnyei, 2005). Analyzing learners' learning styles will be very beneficial for the learners by aiding them in becoming more focused on being attentive students, and it will allow learners to determine their own personal strengths and weaknesses and learn from them (Gilakjani, 2012). It aids learners in perceiving and processing information. It helps them to see the world and reality, then internalize them into their own experiences through concrete experience, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Palaniyammal & Shanmugam, 2018).

In the context of teaching ESP, it is important for the teacher to create a semi-realistic environment for the learners. The goal of teaching ESP is to prepare students for real-world work situations. Knowing what the real work demands are and the learners' needs is the first step that teachers have to go through. It can be done by conducting a needs analysis. On the other hand, Pourshahian et al. (2012) add that conducting learning style analysis is as important as conducting needs analysis. Therefore, this study aims to explore the learners' learning styles and provide alternatives for teaching and learning activities in the ESP classroom.

METHOD

Respondent

This study was survey research. It involved 284 freshmen from the tourism department, tour and travel business department, and hotel department (Table 1). In this college, the English program is aimed at preparing learners to face the real work situation.

Table 1. The distribution of respondents

No	Department	Respondents
1	Tour and Travel Business	100
2	Tourism	100
3	Hotel	84
Total Respondents		284

Instrument

The instrument for collecting the data was a questionnaire. It was adopted from Reid's (1987), namely the Perceptual Learning Styles Preferences Questionnaire (PLSQ). PLSQ is intended for foreign language learners. As a result, this questionnaire was appropriate for this study because English is considered a foreign language in Indonesia.

Consisting of 30 questions, the questionnaire was divided into six categories such as visual learning styles (questions numbers 6, 10, 12, 24, and 29), auditory learning styles (questions numbers 1, 7, 9, 17, and 20), kinaesthetic learning styles (questions numbers 2, 8, 15, 19, and 26), tactile learning styles (questions numbers 11, 14, 16, 22, and 25), group learning styles (questions numbers 3, 4, 5, 21, and 23), and individual learning styles (questions numbers 13, 18, 27, 28, and 30).

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted by following the calculation provided in the PLSQ. Five options are provided for each of the questions, namely: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). The value for each option ranges from 5 to 1 (Table 2). The scale in table 3 helps to determine the learners' learning styles. The score of each category must be consulted with the scale.

Table 2. The option's value

Option	SA	A	N	D	SD
Value	5	4	3	2	1

Table 3. Learning styles preferences scale

No	Learning Style Preferences	Range
1	Major learning style preferences	38 – 50
2	Minor learning style preferences	25 – 37
3	Negligible	0 – 24

In this study, the data gathered from the questionnaire was analyzed by using descriptive statistics to get the means and average. The use of descriptive statistics was to find the learning styles of the learners as a group rather than as individuals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Learners' Learning Styles Preferences

The finding shows that the major learning style preferences fall into auditory, kinaesthetic, and group categories, and the minor learning style preferences fall into visual, tactile, and individual. Table 4 will show this finding.

Table 4. The total score of each learning styles

No	Learning Styles	N	Mean	Total Score
1	Visual learning styles	284	18.35	36.70
2	Auditory learning styles	284	20,08	40.15
3	Kinaesthetic learning styles	284	19.73	39.46
4	Tactile learning styles	284	18.84	37.68
5	Group	284	19.54	39.07
6	Individual	284	17.32	34.63

Considering table 4, the total scores of auditory and kinaesthetic learning styles are within the range of major learning styles; the total scores are 40.15 and 39.46. Meanwhile, the visual and tactile learning styles are considered minor learning styles preferences with a total score of 36.70 and 37.68. Moreover, the learners' preferences on working in a group are considered the major ones, and the individual is considered minor, with the total score of 39.07 and 34.63.

Table 4 displays the total score of each category as a whole. Meanwhile, every category has five questions that represent the nature or characteristics of the learning

styles. The value and the level of the mean can be used as references to interpret how dominant each character is. The following results will show the dominant characteristics of each learning style category.

Visual learning styles

As presented before, visual learning styles are included in the minor style preference. It means that there were few learners considered visual learners. The characteristics of a visual learner are represented in five questions. The highest mean is placed in the first column to show the most dominant character. The findings are shown in the following table.

Table 5. The description of visual learning styles character

No	Question	N	Mean	Total Score
1	When I read instructions, I remember them better.	284	3.99	7.99
2	I understand better when I read instructions.	284	3.95	7.91
3	I learn better by reading what the teacher writes on the chalkboard.	284	3.75	7.50
4	I learn better by reading than by listening to someone.	284	3.44	6.89
5	I learn more by reading textbooks than by listening to lectures.	284	3.21	6.42

From table 5, it can be inferred that the most prominent character among visual learners was that they remember and understand better through reading. They also learnt better from reading what the teacher wrote on the whiteboard, or in this case, in a powerpoint presentation. However, the learners did not learn better when they read a textbook and preferred listening to lectures over reading.

Auditory learning styles

As has been discussed, auditory learning styles were considered the major preference. It means that the learners were considered auditory learners. The characteristics of an auditory learner are reflected by five questions. The highest mean is placed in the first column to show the most dominant character. The findings are shown in the following table.

Table 6. The description of auditory learning styles character

No	Question	N	Mean	Total Score
1	When the teacher tells me the instructions, I understand better.	284	4.56	9.12
2	When someone tells me how to do	284	4.13	8.27

	something in class, I learn it better.			
3	I learn better in class when I listen to someone.	284	3.89	7.79
4	I learn better in class when the teacher gives a lecture.	284	3.88	7.76
5	I remember things I have heard in class better than things I have read.	284	3.61	7.79

It can be concluded that the most dominant characteristic found in auditory learners was that they learnt and understood better when listening to the teacher's instruction and explanation. They also learnt and remembered the lesson by listening to the teacher's lectures.

Kinaesthetic learning styles

According to the previous description, kinaesthetic learning styles are also considered the major preference. It means that most of the learners were also considered kinaesthetic learners. The characteristics of a kinaesthetic learner are reflected by five questions. The question with the highest mean is placed in the first column to show the most dominant character. The findings are shown in the following table.

Table 7. The description of kinaesthetic learning styles character

No	Question	N	Mean	Total Score
1	I prefer to learn by doing something in class.	284	4.22	8.44
2	I learn best in class when I can participate in related activities.	284	4.00	8.00
3	I enjoy learning in class by doing experiments.	284	4.00	8.00
4	When I do things in class, I learn better.	284	3.87	7.73
5	I understand things better in class when I participate in role-playing.	284	3.64	7.28

The table above shows that the most prominent characteristic of the kinaesthetic learners was that they preferred learning by doing some activities in the class. They were enjoying the activities and learning best through participation in them. They also understood the lesson by doing role-playing in the classroom.

Tactile learning styles

As presented previously, tactile learning styles were considered the minor preference. It means that there were very few learners considered tactile learners. The

characteristics of a tactile learner are reflected by five questions. The question with the highest mean is placed in the first column to show the most dominant character. The findings are shown in the following table.

Table 8. The description of tactile learning styles character

No	Question	N	Mean	Total Score
1	I learn more when I make something for a class project.	284	4.01	8.03
2	I learn more when I can make a model of something.	284	3.88	7.77
3	When I build something, I remember what I have learned better.	284	3.82	7.64
4	I enjoy making something for a class project.	284	3.74	7.49
5	I learn better when I make drawings as I study.	284	3.38	6.76

According to the findings presented in table 8, it can be summarized that the most prominent characteristic of tactile learners was that they could learn more when they made a class project. When they made or built a model in the classroom, they could remember what they had learnt during that activity. Moreover, they also enjoy the project-making process. However, they did not learn better through drawing.

Group Learning Preferences

As has been concluded, group learning preferences fell into major style preferences. It means that most of the learners prefer working in groups to working individually. The question with the highest mean is placed in the first column to show the most dominant effect of the group learning styles on the learners' learning or the dominant type of activities that the learners preferred. The findings are shown in the following table.

Table 9. The description of group preference character

No	Question	N	Mean	Total Score
1	I enjoy working on an assignment with two or three classmates.	284	4.04	8.07
2	I get more work done when I work with others.	284	3.97	7.94
3	I learn more when I study with a group.	284	3.91	7.82
4	I prefer to study with others.	284	3.84	7.68
5	In class, I learn best when I work with others.	284	3.91	7.82

It can be inferred from table 9 that the most dominant type of activity that the learners preferred was working on an assignment with two or three other classmates. When they worked together in a group, they got more work done and could learn better.

Individual Learning Preferences

As has been presented before, individual learning preferences were considered minor style preferences. It means that only a few learners preferred to work individually rather than in a group. The question with the highest mean is placed in the first column to show the most dominant effect of the individual learning styles on the learners' learning or the dominant type of activities that the learners preferred. The findings are shown in the following table.

Table 10. The description of individual preference character

No	Question	N	Mean	Total Score
1	When I study alone, I remember things better.	284	3,86	7,72
2	When I work alone, I learn better.	284	3,62	7,25
3	In class, I work better when I work alone.	284	3,50	7,00
4	I prefer to work by myself.	284	3,17	6,35
5	I prefer working on projects by myself.	284	3,16	6,32

According to the table above, the most significant effect of individual work activities was that learners remembered the lesson better when working alone. Furthermore, they preferred to work alone on projects.

The Characteristic of the Learners

According to the findings of this study, it is clear that most of the learners were considered auditory and kinesthetic learners. Most of them also preferred working in groups to working individually. Thus, there were few learners who were considered visual and tactile learners. However, the gap between the major and minor style preferences is small. Therefore, in this study, the minor style preferences were also taken into consideration to avoid the mismatch between the learners' learning styles and the teachers' teaching styles. Before deciding on the activities of the teaching learning process, it is better to be well informed of the learners' characteristics as viewed from their learning styles.

The first and foremost learning style was auditory. According to the findings, most of the learners learnt and understood better from listening to the teachers' instruction. Dörnyei (2005) suggest that auditory input is better in the form of lectures or audiotapes, listening activities, and reciting. The findings also reveal that most of the learners were also considered kinaesthetic learners. The most prominent characteristic of these learners was that they preferred doing some activities during the lessons. Dörnyei (2005) explained that they need frequent breaks during the lessons to avoid being fidgety due to sitting motionless for hours. Therefore, learners with kinaesthetic learning styles enjoyed doing activities during the lessons.

As discussed earlier, there were few learners considered to be visual or tactile learners. Even though these two learning styles are considered minor preferences, the school and teacher must also facilitate and help them in the learning process. In this study, the most prominent trait of visual learners was that they would learn and understand better when they read. Dörnyei (2005) emphasized that they absorb information effectively through visual channels like films, videos, handouts, and transparencies (which nowadays are powerpoint presentations). Different from visual learners, tactile learners learn best when they make a class project. This is their most egregious character. He further explains that tactile learners prefer a hands-on or touching learning approach through creating or making posters, collages, or artwork.

According to the findings presented earlier, most of the learners preferred working in groups to working individually. They liked to do the assignment in a group of two or three. It can be inferred from the findings that these learners could finish the assignment much faster. They also learn better when they work in groups. Different from these learners, learners who preferred to work individually found out that by doing the work alone they learned and remembered the lesson much better. They also worked better when they were alone.

According to the discussion above, the characteristics of learners can be summarized as follows:

1. Most of the learners learn better through listening the lectures
2. Most of the learners better by discussing in group
3. Most of the learners enjoy doing some activities during the lesson
4. Most of the learners learn better by doing some activities during the lesson

5. Most of the learners prefer working in group
6. Most of the learners finish assignments much faster when doing it in group
7. Most of the learners learn better when working in group
8. Some learners learn and understand better by reading
9. Some learners learn better by making or creating project
10. Some learners learn and remember better when working alone

An Alternative for Teaching ESP

As has been discussed before, there is a crucial issue around the work of learning styles. The most prominent issue is the mismatch between learners' learning styles and teachers' teaching styles. Due to this issue, Dörnyei (2005) and his fellow scholars propose some possible alternatives by examining the benefits of studying the learning styles as follows:

1. The teacher can modify their learning tasks to bring out the best in their students by taking into account their learning styles preferences.
2. The teacher suggests learners take a learning styles questionnaire and discuss the result with them to help them identify their strengths and power that they can use in learning language.
3. Teachers must also know their own learning styles in order to understand the maxim "that teachers teach the way they learned best". However, it might not be beneficial to do so because the teacher will compare her/his learning styles with the learners' learning styles.
4. Teachers can help learners learn how to operate outside of their preferred styles.
5. Teachers can assist learners to find and develop their own learning strategies that suit their learning styles.
6. Teachers can create and develop special syllabuses for different circumstances.

Teachers play a very important role in creating an accessible environment for all learners who normally have different learning preferences. It may not be very successful if the school does not give a hand on this. Every school has the authority to establish a curriculum that can accommodate learners with different learning styles. De Vita (2001), according to his findings, suggested that the institution must create a curriculum that facilitates the implementation of inclusive instruction, which encourages learners to

take responsibility for their own learning and development and can act as a building block towards the formation of a more autonomous learner. Moreover, the institution must also help the teacher understand the importance of identifying learners' learning styles and also facilitate the learners' taking the learning styles test. This can be done by supporting them by conducting a workshop on the importance of learning styles for the teacher and organizing a learning styles test for the learners (Hussain & Ayub, 2012).

In the context of teaching and learning English, knowing learners' learning styles may have some benefit. As Razawi et al. (2011) pointed out, identifying learning styles may have a significant impact on teaching and learning ESL as follows:

1. Teachers will be able to identify their own learners' learning styles and preferences in classroom
2. Teacher can reflect on their own awareness of the diverse learning styles that exist in the classroom
3. Teacher can prepare a better lesson plan to accommodate the diverse learning styles among the learners

In the context of this study, the learners' learning styles analysis was conducted in order to find an alternative to teaching English for specific purposes. Considering Peacock's recommendation (as cited by Dörnyei, 2005), teachers must keenly involve learners in planning lessons and tasks. He further explains that it will give the learners more control over their learning. To be able to engage learners in the negotiation of the teaching-learning process, the teacher must provide a set of learning environments and activities that can move flexibly to accommodate all learners with diverse learning preferences. Regarding the results of this study, the following recommendations can be used in the ESP classroom:

1. Considering that most of the learners are auditory learners, the language input must be in the form of an audiotape. However, the teacher may also provide videos, which not only facilitate auditory learners but also visual learners as well. Here, the teacher also has the responsibility of explaining the language input in the audiotapes and videos. The material that can be explored is spoken interpersonal text, i.e., conversations that usually occur in the tourism industry.
2. Considering that most learners learn better when they discuss, the teacher must create an activity that requires a discussion. For example, the teacher gives an

issue about the most current trends in the tourism industry. Here, learners not only learn the language but also learn to think critically.

3. Considering that most learners enjoy and learn better by doing some activities in the classroom, the teacher must create an interesting activity during the teaching and learning process. One of the examples is making the learners do a role-play about transferring tourists from airport to hotel. A teacher may play a video as language input.
4. Considering that some of the learners enjoy and learn better through reading, the teacher must also provide written text such as powerpoint presentations or handouts. It is not only beneficial for visual learners. Auditory learners can also take this for granted to enrich what they have learned from the audiotapes or lectures.
5. Considering that some of the learners enjoy and learn better by creating projects, the teacher must create an assignment such as making posters, flyers, web or other advertisement medium to advertise their project. For example, learners must create a tour and travel agency profile and they have to post it on social media. This kind of activity will activate learners' critical thinking and make them more creative.
6. Considering that most learners learn better when doing assignments or working on projects in groups, the teacher must create an activity that can be done in a group. However, the teacher must also provide individual activities in order to see the progress of each individual in learning English.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite some controversy around the work of learning styles, identifying learners' learning styles is crucial in order to find the best way to teach ESP. Practically, the institution and teacher must be able to accommodate all the learners with diverse learning styles and preferences to avoid the mismatch between learners' learning styles and teachers' teaching styles. There were six recommendations that can be used as references for conducting ESP classes. A teacher must involve learners in deciding the learning environment and process that fit best for them.

This study is far from perfect. This study is limited on identifying learners' learning style preferences. It would be better for the following study to also conduct teachers' teaching styles to get better understanding on what they prefer to do in the classroom. Therefore, the most beneficial teaching learning process for both teacher and learners that is meaningful learning can be achieved.

REFERENCES

- Awla, H. A. 2014. Learning styles and their relation to teaching style. *International journal of language and linguistics*. 2(3). 241 – 245.
- Baker, W., Lang, M., & Lawson, A. 2002. Classroom management for successful student inquiry. *The Clearing House*, 75(5), 248-252. Retrieved May 4, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/30189753
- Beatty-O'Ferrall, M., Green, A., & Hanna, F. 2010. Classroom management strategies for difficult learners: Promoting change through relationships. *Middle School Journal*, 41(4), 4-11. Retrieved May 4, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/23044778
- Boström, L. 2011. Learners' learning styles compared with their teachers' learning styles in upper secondary school – a mismatched combination. *Education inquiry*. 2(3). 475 – 495.
- De Vita, G. 2001. Learning styles, culture and inclusive instruction in the multicultural classroom: A business and management perspective. *Innovation in education and teaching international*. 38(2). 165 – 174.
- Dörnyei, Z. 2005. *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Gilakjani, A. P., & Ahmadi, S. M. 2011. The effect of visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic learning styles on language teaching. *International conference on social science and humanity*. 5. 469 – 472.
- Gilakjani, A. P. 2012. Visual, auditory, kinaesthetic learning styles and their impacts on English language teaching. *Journal of studies in education*. 2(1). 104 – 113.
- Hussain, N., & Ayub, N. 2012. Learning styles of learners and teaching styles of teachers in business education: A case study of Pakistan. *International conference on education and educational psychology (ICEEPSY)*. 1737 – 1740.
- Newton, M. P., & Miah, M. 2017. Evidence-based higher education – is the learning styles 'myth' important. *Frontiers in psychology*. 8. 1 – 9.
- Palaniyammal, R., & Shanmugam, L. 2018. Interactive teaching method and learning style. *Journal of applied and advanced research*. 3(1). 7 – 10.
- Palumbo, A., & Sanacore, J. 2007. Classroom management: Help for the beginning secondary school teacher. *The Clearing House*, 81(2), 67-70. Retrieved May 4, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/30189959
- Pourshahian, B., Gholami, R., Vaseghi, R., Kalajahi, S.A. (2012). Needs of an ESL context: A case study of Iranian graduate learners. *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 17(7), 870 – 873.
- Razawi, et.al. 2011. Learners' diverse learning styles in learning English as a second language. *International journal of business and social science*. 2(19). 179 – 186.
- Reid, M. J. 1987. The learning styles preferences of ESL learners. *TESOL Quarterly*. 21(1). 87 – 111.

Exploring Learners' Learning Styles Preferences: Finding Out the Best Way to Teach ESP

- Wong, H., Wong, R., Rogers, K., & Brooks, A. 2012. Managing your classroom for success. *science and children*, 49(9), 60-64. Retrieved May 4, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/43747385
- Wright, T. 2005. *Classroom management in language education*. Fifth Avenue, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.