

## Learning Styles of Indonesian EFL Students: Culture and Learning

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### Abstract

Learners' success in language learning is affected by many factors, including age, aptitude, and intelligence, cognitive style, attitudes, motivation, and personality. Besides, learning strategies and learning styles also help to succeed in language learning. This paper discusses the learning style preferences of the first-year students at English Department Universitas Brawijaya Malang, Indonesia. There were two problems that attempted to be answered; first, what are the learning styles used by the students, and second, how influential is culture to the students' learning. Barsch Learning Styles Inventory (BLSI) was employed as an instrument for 73 respondents. The results showed that more than 50% of respondents prefer visual mode, and the remaining were auditory learners, kinesthetic, and bimodal learners who combine visual and auditory modes in learning English. This might be affected by the culture of Indonesian learners that, in general, are accustomed to listening and reading instead of giving spaces to practice knowledge. Understanding the styles of learning can be very useful for the students to learn in the way they learn best through the activities. It will enable them to understand the course contents more comfortably so it can improve their motivation and language abilities, enjoy the learning process, decrease stress, and eventually get better achievement.

**Keywords:** auditory, bimodal, Barsch Learning Styles Inventory, culture, kinesthetic, learning styles, visual

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## Introduction

Learning styles contribute to the success of language learning. This statement is not overrated since students learn best by seeing how vital the information presented in the classroom and how valuable the materials for them. If there is no interest in the material, there will be no learning process occurs. As stated by Gilakjani (2012), achieving the ultimate goal of student learning needs a combination of teaching methods and ways to make the classroom environment as stimulating and interactive as possible. There are many factors affecting learners' success in language learning. The general factors that affect language learning are age, aptitude and intelligence, cognitive style, attitudes, motivation and personality (Ellis, 2008). In addition, learning strategies and learning styles also help to succeed in language learning.

Learning style is one of the factors affecting language learning. Steward and Felicetti (1992, as cited in Asiry, 2016, p.1) state that learning style is those educational conditions under which students are most likely to learn. Learning a foreign language is actually not very easy. It needs strategies to cope with the learning processes. Some learners might be successful and some of them might be unsuccessful. Successful learners might be able to find many strategies that are beneficial so they can deal with their weaknesses and they can take advantage of their strengths. On the other hand, unsuccessful learners might not recognize the problems they have or evaluate their weaknesses in learning. Thus, a learner should have awareness and knowledge about their learning style.

In taking information, everyone has preferences in how they learn best. To help all students learn, teachers need to teach as many of these preferences as possible (Oxford, 2003). It needs to be considered that students learn in many different ways. Some students are visual learners, while others are auditory. Visual learners learn visually by means of charts, graphs, and pictures. Meanwhile, auditory learners learn by listening to lectures and reading. Kinesthetic learners learn by doing. Students can prefer one, two, or three learning styles. Due to these different learning styles, teachers need to incorporate in their curriculum activities related to each of these learning styles so that all students are able to succeed in their classes.

Some studies in this field have been conducted. Gilakjani (2012) investigated language learning styles used by the students majoring in English Translation at the Islamic Azad University of Lahijan in Iran and its impact on English Language Teaching. His study revealed that mostly the students preferred the visual learning style. They who preferred this learning style had the highest academic achievement in their educational major. In addition, teachers needed to know the students' learning styles, therefore teachers could help the students learn more effectively. Furthermore, Phantharakphong (2012) examined language learning styles and the relation of high and low-performance of the Faculty of Education at Khon Kaen University in Thailand. His study revealed that high-performance students preferred kinesthetic learning styles, while low-performance students preferred multimodal learning styles. High-performance students thought that practicing or doing the activities helped them understand the contents more than remembering. Taking action also was similar to practicing four English skills. Thus, they could get high scores in English learning. On the other hand, low-performance students preferred multimodal since they liked to do various activities.

This paper discusses the learning styles used by the first-year students of the English Department Universitas Brawijaya. The freshmen in this department are exposed to English as the medium of instruction in the classroom. They are urged to speak English in class, and eventually, they are expected to master English. Thus, it is vital for the students to be aware of their learning styles because by doing so, it can help them to prepare some strategies to succeed in their study. Moreover, Barsch Learning Style Inventory questionnaire was used as the survey tool to collect the data. Meanwhile, DePorter & Hernacki's (2009) theory was used to explain deeper about learning styles.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Definition of Learning Styles***

Learning styles may be defined in many ways. Reid (1995) states learning style is an individual's natural, habitual and preferred ways of absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skill. He adds that learning styles have been used as a focus for assisting students in higher education to realize their full learning potential. Brown (2000) defines learning styles as the manner in which individuals perceive and process information in learning situations. He argues that learning style preference is one aspect of learning style, and refers to the choice of one learning situation or condition over another. In addition, Larkin and Budny (2005) mention that learning style is a biologically and developmentally imposed set of personal characteristics that make the same teaching and learning methods effective for some and ineffective for others. Celce-Murcia (2001) defines learning styles as the general approaches—for example, global or analytic, auditory or visual—that students use in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subject. The manner in which a learner perceives interacts with and responds to the learning environment. Learning style is sometimes defined as the characteristic cognitive, affective, social, and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment (MacKeracher, 2004).

### ***General Learning Styles***

There are three main learning styles; visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (DePorter & Hernacki, 2009). The definitions of these learning styles are as follows:

#### **a. Visual Learners**

These learners are learning best through a visual channel such as images, bulletin boards, videos, and movies. They depend on the teacher's nonverbal cues such as body language and facial expression to help with understanding. They sometimes preferred to sit in front of the classroom to avoid visual obstructions. They also like to take descriptive notes when the material is presented by the instruction, so they can absorb the maximal information. Visual learners also like to read a lot, which requires concentration and time spent alone.

#### **b. Auditory Learners**

Learners who have auditory learning styles are the ones who absorb the material through verbal lectures, discussions, group work, and conversations through listening to what others say. They discover information through listening and interpreting information through listening to the tone of pitch, voice, emphasis, and speed. They have a weakness in which they cannot absorb well to written information; however, these learners are best when they are reading the text out loud in

the classroom. Therefore, written information is not a good choice to teach them. These students typically require only oral directions.

### c. Kinesthetic Learners

Kinesthetic learners are the best learning through a “hands-on” approach. They like to make physical movement and interaction. Therefore, they are very active, and they may feel hard to sit for an extended period in the classroom and doing nothing. They imply total physical involvement with a learning environment such as taking a field trip, dramatizing, pantomiming, or interviewing. When remembering something, they like to walk around and when reading the book, they like to use the index finger. Most of the kinesthetic learners have a difficult time staying on target and become unfocused effortlessly.

Learning style is vital for many reasons; however, there are three vital ones. First, since everyone is in nature different from one another, people’s learning styles will vary. Second, it offers the opportunity to teach by using a wide range of methods in an effective way. Sticking to just one model unthinkingly will create a monotonous learning environment, so not everyone will enjoy the lesson. Third, teachers can manage many things in education and communication if they really recognize the groups they deal with. Of course, knowing every detail is not possible; however, being aware of students’ learning styles, psychological qualities, and motivational differences will help teachers regulate the lessons appropriately and according to the conditions (Coffield, Moseley, Hall & Ecclestone, 2004).

### *Previous Studies*

Many scholars have conducted studies dealing with learning styles. Gilakjani (2012) from the English Language Department, Islamic Azad University; Lahijan, Iran was one of them. He analyzed learning style which was preferred by 100 EFL university students in Language Translation Department majoring in English Translation. The participants consist of 60 female and 40 male students between 23 and 28 years old. The purpose of the research was to determine which of the three types of learning styles (visual, auditory and kinesthetic) was preferred. The Perceptual Learning Style Preferences Questionnaire (PLSPQ) developed by Reid (1987) was chosen as the survey tool in this research. Through the process of the test, it was indicated that 50% of Iranian EFL University students preferred the visual learning style, 35% preferred auditory learning style, and 15 % preferred kinesthetic style for learning. Based on the finding of this previous study, it can be stated that EFL University Students of Azad University of Lahijan, Iran majoring in English Translation preferred learning through visual learning style, and the students who chose this style also got the highest academic achievement in their educational major.

Another study by Kharb, Samanta, Jindal & Singh (2013) took participation from the medical students in the School of Medical Sciences and Research, Sharda University, Greater Noida, India. The participants were totally 180 and they came from the first and seventh semesters. Visual, Auditory, Read/Write and Kinesthetic (VARK) Inventory distributed to the participants to determine their learning style. The result revealed that the most preferred unimodal instructional style of the first semester students was auditory, and that of seventh-semester students was kinesthetic. In relation to gender in both semesters, female students preferred auditory mode of learning style as compared to male students who preferred kinesthetic mode.

## **Method**

### ***Research Design***

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach while incorporating numbers in the form of percentages. Maxwell (2010) states quantitative data can help researchers to identify patterns that are not apparent simply from the unquantized qualitative data, or even to participants, and it may adequately present evidence for the interpretations. The data that has been collected in the form of numbers is then calculated into a percentage to be then explained descriptively.

### ***Participants***

This research was conducted in the Faculty of Cultural Studies at Universitas Brawijaya, Malang, Indonesia. The data were collected from the Barsch Learning Styles Inventory (BLSI) questionnaire filled by the first-year students majoring in English. The participants were the 2016/2017 academic year students of the English Department, so they are freshmen in the time this study was conducted.

### ***Research Instrument***

Barsch Learning Styles Inventory (BLSI), which is a questionnaire developed by Jeffrey Barsch was used as the instrument for collecting data. There are 24 statements provided in this questionnaire about the way students learn English. The statement in number 1, 5, 8, 11, 13, 18, 21, 24 represents auditory learning style. The statement in number 4, 6, 9, 12, 15, 17, 19, 23 represents a kinesthetic learning style. The statement in number 2, 3, 7, 10, 14, 16, 20, 22 represents a visual learning style. The statements indicate a visual learning style such as “like to write things down or takes notes for a visual review”, “can understand and follow directions through maps”, “feel the best way to remember is to picture it on your head” and so on. While the statements indicate auditory learning style, for instance “can remember more about a subject through listening than reading”, “require explanations of the diagram, graphs, or visual direction”, “can tell if sounds match when presented pairs of sounds” and soon. Moreover, the statements indicate kinesthetic learning style are like “bear down extremely hard with a pen or pencil when writing”, “enjoy working with tools” and “play with coins or key in the pocket”.

The measurements of this questionnaire were concluded 5 points for answering often, 3 points for answering sometimes, and 1 point for answering seldom. The measurement showed the students’ preferences for learning style. Then, all the points were summed up to get the result. The learning type which got the highest total point, it would be the learning type that the students preferred to use.

The reasons underlying the choice of this questionnaire are because this questionnaire is one of the quick assessments and it is related to DePorter & Hernacki’s (2009) theory in classifying the types of learning styles.

### ***Data Collection***

To collect the data, the following steps were taken: First, BLSI questionnaire was distributed to the students. They are given an explanation about the purpose of the study and then are asked to fill it insincerely and honestly according to their own experience of learning English. The researcher emphasized that the questionnaire would not change or affect their academic report.

### **Data Analysis**

After the data were collected, the steps of analyzing data were as follows: firstly, each statement was converted into a number because every statement has different points: 5 points for often, 3 points for sometimes, and 1 point for seldom. The next step was calculating the points from each category to get the total point. From the total point, the highest point would be the preferences. This would be the type of learning style which was used by the participant. After the quantitative was ready, it was then described and discussed.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The findings are to provide the answers which are related to the research problems. After distributing the BLSI questionnaire to the participants, the students' learning style preferences were identified. The inventory was classified into three categories, namely visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. The measurements of this questionnaire were 5 points for often, 3 points for sometimes, and 1 point for seldom. The highest score from the questionnaire would be the learning style which was preferred by them. Therefore, they learned the best with the learning style they desired to use.

Table 1. *Students' learning preferences*

Learning Preferences	Students	%
Visual	45	61.7
Auditory	18	24.6
Kinesthetic	4	5.5
Bimodal	6	8.2
Total	73	100

Table 1 provides the calculation of students' learning preferences. There were only 73 students returned the questionnaire sheet. It can be seen from the table that the majority of students prefer visual learning (61.7%). The highest scored statement was number 22 "I obtain information on an interesting subject by reading relevant materials". Meanwhile, the lowest scored statement was number 7 "I am skillful with and enjoy developing and making graphs and charts". The second learning style preference favored by the students was auditory. Of 73 students, 24.6% preferred to use auditory styles in their learning. In auditory mode, there was a statement that got the highest point, which is number 13 "I learn to spell better by repeating the letters out loud than by writing the word on paper". Meanwhile, the lowest point went to statement number 21 "I prefer listening to the news on the radio rather than reading about it in a newspaper". The third learning style preference favored by the students was kinesthetic. In kinesthetic mode, there were 5.5% of the students who preferred it as their learning style. The statement taking the highest score was number 9 stating "I remember best by writing things down several times", while the ones having lowest point were number 12 (I play with coins or keys in pocket) and 19 (I am good at solving and working on jigsaw puzzles and mazes). Finally, 8.2% of the students were apparently bimodal if seen from the results of the questionnaire, and this number outweighs kinesthetic learners. Bimodal learners displayed equal numbers in their visual and auditory mode results.

### **Discussion**

The research finding displayed four learning style preferences used by the freshmen of English Department Universitas Brawijaya Malang, namely visual, auditory, kinesthetic and bimodal. It

can be seen from the total number of participants who favor each learning style, 45 students were visual, 18 students were auditory, 6 students were bimodal and four students were kinesthetic. It shows that individuals are unique because they have their own preference in learning English. Besides, an individual also has a different ability to understand materials, to be taught on the way they learn best, and to face obstacles in learning.

There were 67 students who prefer one type of learning style and there were 6 students preferred to learn in bimodal type. The variety of learning styles indicated that the learning preference of each individual was the result of their customs and culture; it is biologically innate, and it is related to personality so each individual possesses different learning styles. There are certain things that cannot be changed in a person no matter how hard they force themselves to practice, but there are also things that can be practiced and adapted to the environment, but it cannot be changed (Susilo, 2009). Thus, learning style cannot be changed, but it can be used to the maximum potential to increase someone's ability by doing activities that are related to the preferences. Different learning style also leads to different needs of a learner.

It is stated by DePorter & Hernacki (2009) that someone basically possesses the three types of learning style, however, he or she has the most dominant mode. In this mode, it can be easier to receive information when learning. Students should prepare themselves to face any learning conditions. The habits of learners might also be influential, yet learners should be able to adapt to their environment, situation, and especially the technique which is used by the lecturers in the classroom. Furthermore, the success of the learning process can be measured from the evaluation of students' understanding of a course. Learning process is categorized successfully if the lecturer provides the needs of his students. Ideally, the material should be delivered by adjusting to students' preferences. The lecturer can guide the students to learn the way they learn the best. So, all things can be done to support the learning process and it goes in the same direction which is to establish a condition where the learning process is mutually beneficial.

It is also shown by the data finding that the most dominant type of learning style used by the participants was visual mode (61.7%). It means that the participants prefer to learn by using visual channels such as pictures, videos, presentations, and magazines. They are interested in following written instruction and they like to spend their time and read as much as they need. Visual learning style might become the most dominant type since this is a modern era where everything is made to help people's life easier and more practical. The effect of it can be found in educational institutions. The technology is used to make the lecture process to be efficient.

It also happened to the English Department students, where almost all their lectures have used multimedia such as powerpoint in the learning process. In the classroom, they are also facilitated by visual media such as LCD projectors. Thus, the lecturer should prepare an interesting powerpoint or use videos and play a movie. Thus, visual learners are interested to see the material so they would be easier to receive the material, since the most dominant learner are visuals. This is in line with DePorter & Hernacki's (2009) statement assuming that visual learners are very sensitive to see colors, pictures, videos because they like to make visualization in their mind so it helps them to remember something better. Visual learners also like to take descriptive notes while their lecturer explains materials. It is because they are not good to follow verbal instruction while

they like to take notes so they can read any time since spending time to read books also favored by them. For the participants in this study, visions take a vital role that should be employed because it can help them to establish their understanding of the material. They can learn better from everything that they have seen and it makes them easier to absorb information. Furthermore, from a statement in the questionnaire “I obtain information on an interesting subject by reading relevant materials” that got the highest point showed that visual learners mostly liked to read materials rather than, probably, to listen to it. Since it was the highest point from all statements that indicated visual activities, it means that visual learners in this study often do the activity in the learning process.

The finding was related to DePorter & Hernacki’s (2009) that visual learners liked to spend their time to read a lot and they were better to follow written instruction since they were not good in following verbal instruction. Moreover, the statement “I am skillful with and enjoy developing and making graphs and charts” got the lowest points from all the statements that indicated visual activities in the questionnaire. It might happen because they did not learn by using graphs or charts. Graphs, charts, diagrams were usually found in something which was quantitative or numeric; however, in the English Department, Universitas Brawijaya, the materials were mostly not about numbers and statistics. Therefore, this statement had the lowest points since they did not really often deal with this activity. The result of this research was in line with the findings of Gilakjani (2012) who reported that the visual learning style got the first place as students’ preferences. He observed Iranian learners of English Department Faculty majoring in the Language Department were mostly visual learners. The result might be similar because English was used as the main tool for communication of each department.

Next, there was an auditory learning style that got the second largest number of participants. There were 18 students (24.6%) who favored this mode. The auditory learners like listening to the audio, speaking about their opinion, involving in a discussion and debating since ears take a vital role in the success of their learning. Auditory learning style may get the second place as the dominant learning style because the students like to have a discussion. The questionnaire result showed that auditory learners thought of having a discussion in class, they could share opinions, give comments or suggestions about the current related topics to their subject so it was very effective. It was in accordance with DePorter & Hernacki’s (2009) theory that auditory learners are those who learned best through discussion or debate. Their strengths are in verbal communication; however, they do not prefer written instruction because they are not good in understanding it. Moreover, listening and speaking skills could not be separated from mastering English. Those are the two fundamental skills in language learning. When they are learning English, they should be able to deal with listening in which, for some students, is quite challenging. Nonetheless, auditory learners enjoy listening and speaking. They can listen to the different tone, pitch, voice, emphasis, and sound. Yet, they are very easy to be disturbed by noise and it is able to make them lose their focus. To establish a proper environment, they should learn without any noise that can disturb them.

This present research also revealed the statements which showed auditory activities used by the auditory learners. Statement number 13 got the highest points while statements 21 got the lowest point. The statement in number 13 was “I learn to spell better by repeating the letters out

loud than by writing the word on paper” while the statement number 21 was “I prefer listening to the news on the radio rather than reading about it in a newspaper”. From the highest point of the statements, it can be said that auditory learners liked to have verbal activities. They had the power of listening and they can understand better if the material presented by verbal explanation. It is related to the theory since it stated that auditory learners like to listen. Therefore, verbal explanation, discussing, debating are the teaching methods that could be used to teach them. However, the lowest point indicated that the reading is not so preferable for them. The auditory learners preferred lectures through discussion or verbal explanation from the lecturer. They would feel comfortable listening to the explanation, even they should read books. Because their lecturer also taught them through verbal explanation, it was very beneficial to auditory learners. It was related to the lecturer’s method of learning, so they could learn best to support their needs.

With regard to the kinesthetic mode which was the least frequent preference, there were only 4 students (5.5%) who chose this mode of learning. It might happen because of some reason. First, learning by doing is not Indonesian culture. Indonesian learners, in general, have habits such as sitting then listening, and reading instead of giving some spaces to involve us to practice anything to apply our knowledge. Whereas, kinesthetic learners are those who need to do physical movement to make them easier to remember something. They are very active and sensitive to touch. Thus, they like to do field trips, study tours, role-playing, and drama. Second, being a kinesthetic learner need more power. They need power to be able to do the physical movement. When reading, they like to make a movement, such as walking around instead of sitting for a long period of time, so they will not end up in boredom. From the data collected from the questionnaire, kinesthetic learners mostly liked to write many times and they also liked to have physical movement and touch. Since the statements “I remember best by writing things down several times” was the statement that had the highest points, it could be said that kinesthetic learners frequently do those activities while learning. They might better understand if they do it. They liked to do the physical movement, such as touching something real, and they also enjoyed writing the materials several times because it made them make a movement.

This finding was related to the theory since it is stated that kinesthetic learners are those who like to do physical movement and very sensitive about touching. They learned better if they were learning while doing physical movement at the same time. In contrast, Phantharakphong (2012) in her findings revealed that kinesthetic style was the most learning styles preferred by the participants. She investigated the learning style used by the students of the Faculty of Education at Khon Kaen University, Thailand. She found the students mostly favored kinesthetic style because they preferred doing activities in class with real experiences. Her participants thought that learning by doing would be sustainable learning and they could apply it in the future. They also did not like it when the lecturer taught by using the lecturing method without practicing. By practicing they could improve four English skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). Moreover, students in that faculty were preparing themselves to be a teacher in the future so they should extend their exercise so they will be more confident to teach their future students.

The last type of learning style that could be found was the bimodal mode. There were six students (8.2%) indicated as bimodal learners. These learners combined both visual and auditory mode in learning, and in the calculation, both modes got the same total points. Bimodal learners

were unique because they were able to use both of their vision and ears to receive information. In addition, they can gain advantages through the combination of both visual and auditory abilities to be able to admit the lecturer's teaching method in every situation. Presentation and verbal explanation cannot be separated from the learning process because it was the primary tool used by the lecturer to transfer knowledge to the students. While the lecturer does a presentation, the bimodal could focus on the power point, using their vision to see the material presented. Then, to help them memorize it better, taking a descriptive note would be a vital part. When taking notes, they should listen to the voice so they are able to write all the necessary words. On the other hand, if the lecturer asks them to have a discussion in class, they could use their auditory mode which deals with verbal communication. Hence, they should be aware when they use their vision and when they use their speaking ability.

Some of the students might be bimodal learners due to their future orientation of jobs. Having good proficiency in reading, listening, and speaking, they are able to have a job related to their study or may have a better job. Nevertheless, bimodal learners might not always use visual and auditory styles in every learning process. Based on the results of the questionnaires, bimodal learners were good to understand maps, they liked to picture something in their mind, as well as to read relevant materials. Moreover, in auditory activities, they mostly liked to listen to their lecturers' explanation and listen to the audio to get a better understanding. In addition, bimodal learners also liked to read materials out loud than writing words in a paper and liked to listen to the verbal explanation. So, it could be seen that bimodal learners really combined both of visual and auditory activities in learning to help them to receive materials easier.

Kharb, et.al's (2013) research revealed a comparable result. They assumed that the bimodal type which mostly favored by the first-year students was auditory kinesthetic. The data were taken from Medical students at the School of Medical Sciences and Research, Great Noida. The result might be different since the object of the study was different. In this current research, the data collected from the first-year students of English Program students. Medical students might use auditory kinesthetic due to their needs. They should gather information from the lecture, tutorial, and listening. It means they must listen very well to their tutor when the tutor gave an explanation about what they would do in the laboratory later. They had much time to practice and focused on it because in the future, their job required them to do direct practice, so they must practice it by themselves. In contrast, the bimodal mode found in this department was visual auditory. It might occur as a result of teaching methods because the lecture was presented in the form of presentation, discussion, debating, and video watching.

## Conclusion

As has been discussed in the discussion, all three types of learning styles were used by the freshmen of the English Department, Universitas Brawijaya. Visual is the most dominant mode, followed by auditory and kinesthetic modes. Some students were also identified as bimodal learners since they combined two learning styles namely visual and auditory. To sum up, every participant had their own learning style to learn English. The activities related to their preferences can help them to absorb and understand the material better. Recommendations are made for students to maximize their potential in learning by using the strategies related to their learning style preferences. The students can face any teaching method that is used by lecturers also any learning environment if

they prepare themselves by knowing their strengths and the strategies that they could use. It can be very useful for them to learn the way they learn best through the activities that enhance them to understand the material easier, so it can improve their motivation, language abilities, enjoy the learning process, decrease stress, and then get the better achievement. In addition, lecturers in the Department were suggested to develop effective teaching methods to enhance the process of learning. By understanding their students' learning preferences, the lecturers can create enjoyable and effective teaching.

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