

Examining Learning Styles and Differentiated Instruction in English Teaching for Grade 5 Students at SDN Kalinganyar 1

Rofiatun Muzahira¹
Universitas Islam Malang
e-mail: rofiatunmuzahira@gmail.com¹

Dzul Fikri
Universitas Islam Malang
e-mail: dzulfikri@unisma.ac.id²

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the learning styles of fifth-grade students in the English subject at SDN Kalinganyar 1 and explores their implications for differentiated instruction within the Merdeka Curriculum. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were gathered through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and a VAK (Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic) questionnaire. The findings show a relatively balanced distribution of learning styles: 37.9% visual, 31.0% auditory, and 31.0% kinesthetic. Each style significantly influences student engagement, comprehension, and vocabulary retention. The study concludes that aligning teaching strategies with these learning preferences enhances instructional effectiveness and supports the goals of inclusive, student-centered education as promoted by the Merdeka Curriculum.

Keywords: *learning styles, VAK model, differentiated instruction, English education, Merdeka Curriculum, elementary school*

INTRODUCTION

Primary education plays a foundational role in shaping students' knowledge, skills, and character, particularly in building learning motivation and engagement at an early stage (Amalia et al., 2024). Nevertheless, Indonesia's education system continues to encounter difficulties in comparison to global standards, particularly with regard to the delivery of effective and student-centred instruction (Qadir et al., 2022). Within this context, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum seeks to provide greater flexibility and autonomy to teachers, allowing learning to be adapted to students' developmental stages and individual characteristics (Aimah & Suhartoyo, 2024; Rahayu et al., 2022)

A significant challenge in primary education is the creation of instructional designs that not only support academic achievement but also respond to students' learning diversity (Fitria, 2021; Wardani et al., 2024). Innovation in learning strategies is critical to improve both engagement and outcomes, particularly when supported by technology ((Niza Tadzkiratun

Nafisah et al., 2024). In the context of English language education at the elementary level, this becomes an even more crucial consideration. The introduction of English from an early age is recognised to enhance long-term language competence and global literacy (Pane et al., 2022)

The present study explores the learning styles of fifth-grade students at SDN Kalinganyar 1 and examines how these preferences can inform the implementation of differentiated instruction in English language learning. The objective of this study is to provide insight into how teachers can design student-centred instruction that reflects the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum and enhance the effectiveness of English education at the primary level. Despite the increasing emphasis on differentiated instruction in the national curriculum, its practical implementation in many elementary schools remains limited and underexplored, particularly in the context of English language teaching. Previous studies have often focused on higher education or secondary schools, leaving a gap in the understanding of how young learners' individual learning styles affect language acquisition and engagement in primary settings. SDN Kalinganyar 1, as a public school implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, provides a relevant and timely case to investigate how learning preferences can be integrated into classroom practices to improve student outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning is an individualised process influenced by various internal and external factors, including how students prefer to absorb information. One such factor is learning style, defined as the preferred way individuals receive and process information (Lestari & Djuhan, 2021). (DePorter & Hernacki, 1992) seminal work introduced the concept of learning styles, which were categorised into three types: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (VAK). It is imperative that educators develop a comprehensive understanding of these styles in order to formulate effective instructional strategies. This understanding enables teachers to align teaching methodologies with the preferences of their students, thereby enhancing the efficacy of the educational process.

Visual learners process information best through images and spatial understanding, auditory learners prefer spoken instructions, while kinesthetic learners learn optimally through movement and hands-on activities. This classification has been widely used in various studies to inform instructional planning, particularly in language learning contexts. In addressing learning diversity in the classroom, the promotion of differentiated instruction as an effective approach is recommended, with teaching tailored based on readiness, interest, and learning

profiles (Suwartiningsih, 2021). Learning profiles are defined as individualised student profiles, incorporating VAK tendencies. (Nurzaki Alhafiz, 2022) posits that the identification of students' learning styles can facilitate self-management and engagement, thereby aligning with the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum to promote inclusive and adaptive education.

Several previous studies have also confirmed that differentiated instruction enhances student participation and learning outcomes when matched with learning styles, although such research in Indonesian primary schools remains limited.

RESEARCH METHOD

The present study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with the aim of exploring the learning style tendencies of Grade V students at SDN Kalinganyar 1 within the context of English language instruction under the Merdeka Curriculum. As outlined by (Sugiyono, 2013), qualitative research seeks to describe phenomena in detail through observation and interpretation. (Morse et al., 1996) emphasize its role in uncovering social realities and generating theories. In accordance with this, (Anggiasari et al., 2024) describe the method as narrative-based and contextually grounded, suitable for investigating educational behaviour.

The research was conducted at SDN Kalinganyar 1, a public school that has opted to implement the Merdeka Curriculum independently. All 29 students in the fifth grade participated as research subjects, selected through purposive sampling (Amin et al., 2023) to ensure relevance to the research focus. The study adopted a chronological research design, incorporating the following elements:

1. Preliminary Observation

The study was conducted with the objective of gaining an understanding of the classroom context and identifying the diverse behaviours and learning responses of students (Nisa et al., 2021).

2. The following data collection procedures are to be observed:

Three primary techniques were employed in this study:

- 1) The present study will entail the observation of classroom activities, in addition to the interaction between students and their reactions to English instruction.
- 2) Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of students from each learning style group (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic) to ascertain their personal learning preferences.

- 3) The VAK learning style questionnaire has been constructed on the basis of the framework developed by (DePorter & Hernacki, 1992). A small sample group was selected for the purpose of testing the questionnaire for validity and clarity.

3. The following essay will present a data-driven analysis of the subject at hand.

The analysis was conducted utilising thematic analysis, encompassing data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Rahayu et al., 2022). The responses of the students were categorised based on the predominant learning styles and correlated with classroom performance and instructional implications.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study utilized source and technique triangulation and documented all procedures systematically. The researcher acted as the key instrument, engaging directly with the research environment to ensure contextual depth and accuracy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

a. Finding

Based on the analysis of data collected through observation, interviews, and learning style questionnaires, it was found that fifth-grade students at SDN Kalinganyar 1 demonstrate diverse learning style tendencies which fall into three main categories: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.

From the questionnaire results, out of 29 students:

- 11 students (37.9%) were identified as having a visual learning style. These students showed a preference for information presented in the form of images, diagrams, colors, and written instructions. They appeared to be more engaged during learning sessions that involved visual media such as pictures, flashcards, videos with subtitles, and concept maps.
- 9 students (31.0%) demonstrated a preference for the auditory learning style. These learners showed strong responses to verbal instruction, class discussions, and the use of storytelling or songs. They tended to retain information better through listening and often asked questions to clarify what they had heard.
- 9 students (31.0%) were categorized as kinesthetic learners, showing more engagement during hands-on activities, role-playing, and learning games. They benefited significantly from

practical activities such as constructing word cards, moving around the classroom, and participating in dramatizations of English vocabulary.

Observational data confirmed that students who were taught using methods aligned with their dominant learning style showed higher levels of participation, motivation, and retention. For instance, kinesthetic learners responded more actively during games or movement-based vocabulary reviews, while visual learners often referred back to visuals or drawings on the board to guide their understanding. Semi-structured interviews further revealed that students were aware of the methods they preferred. Visual learners mentioned they could remember English words better when accompanied by pictures. Auditory learners expressed enjoyment in listening activities and songs, while kinesthetic learners reported that “moving while learning” helped them remember better.

For example, one visual learner stated, *"I remember English words faster if there's a picture next to them."* An auditory learner shared, *"I like it when the teacher tells stories or sings, I can remember the words better."* Meanwhile, a kinesthetic student commented, *"I like playing and acting. When I move, I don't forget easily."*

These statements were consistent with classroom observations. During a vocabulary game using role-play, kinesthetic students showed high enthusiasm and participation, while visual learners remained focused on illustrations and diagrams displayed on the board. Auditory learners often repeated new vocabulary aloud or asked the teacher to repeat phrases. Such patterns consistently appeared across different English learning sessions and confirmed their individual learning style preferences.

b. Discussion

The findings lend support to the theoretical basis of differentiated learning as proposed by Tomlinson (Suwartiningsih, 2021), which emphasises adapting instruction based on students' learning profiles, including their learning styles. The findings of this study indicate that, in a standard fifth-grade classroom setting, learning style diversity is distributed relatively uniformly, suggesting that a universally applicable teaching methodology for English may not be optimal. The preponderance of visual learners corresponds with the assertion by (DePorter & Hernacki, 1992) that younger learners tend to rely on visual inputs to process and store information, thereby underscoring the significance of visual-based teaching media in early language learning.

Moreover, the balanced distribution of auditory and kinesthetic learners signifies the necessity for diversified instructional methodologies. As posited by (Astiti et al., 2021), auditory learners demonstrate notable advantages when engaging with storytelling, discussions, and audio media, while kinesthetic learners exhibit optimal learning outcomes when learning is integrated into physical or experiential activities. These results are consistent with observations and interviews, in which students exhibited clear preferences and positive responses when instructional methods aligned with their dominant learning styles.

These results are in line with observations and interviews, and this study lends further support to the notion that differentiated instruction is a relevant pedagogical approach within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasises flexibility and a student-centred approach to learning. The Merdeka Curriculum places significant emphasis on the promotion of student diversity and autonomy in learning, thus providing an ideal framework for the implementation of strategies that cater to different learning styles.

Furthermore, the alignment of instruction with learning styles has the potential to enhance students' engagement, comprehension, and retention in English learning, particularly at the fundamental level. (Nurzaki Alhafiz, 2022) posits that differentiated learning not only caters to individual learning preferences but also fosters learner independence and self-awareness in managing their learning processes.

In conclusion, the implementation of differentiated instruction based on students' learning profiles at SDN Kalinganyar 1 is highly relevant and has the potential to optimise English learning outcomes. Teachers are encouraged to integrate visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements within their lesson planning. The integration of diverse instructional media, active learning techniques, and flexible assessment methods is pivotal in ensuring that the learning process becomes more inclusive, effective, and meaningful in accordance with the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that fifth-grade students at SDN Kalinganyar 1 exhibit diverse learning style tendencies – visual, auditory, and kinesthetic – which significantly influence their comprehension and retention of English language material. The recognition of these preferences enables educators to design instruction that is more responsive to students' individual needs, thereby enhancing engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. The

findings indicate that the implementation of differentiated instruction based on the VAK model fosters an inclusive, adaptive, and meaningful learning environment. This strategy is conducive to the development of active and independent learners and is congruent with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasises student-centred learning and instructional flexibility.

It is recommended that teachers integrate multimodal strategies into lesson planning and assessment. These adjustments may encompass the provision of visual aids, the integration of music or storytelling, and the design of hands-on classroom activities to cater to diverse learning styles. Educational institutions are encouraged to apply differentiated instruction more broadly to support diverse learners, not only in English language classrooms but across subjects. It is recommended that future research examine the effectiveness of differentiated instruction across different grade levels or in rural versus urban school settings. This would contribute to the continued advancement of inclusive teaching practices.

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