

# LEARNING STYLE PREFERENCES OF ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY ENGLISH FOR GENERAL ACADEMIC PURPOSE (EGAP) PROGRAMME

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## INTRODUCTION

At present language teaching is moving more toward the learner-centered approach where individual learner differences too are considered as an important factor. According to the educational research there are a number of factors that account for learner differences. Among these factors learning style plays a major role. Learning style can be defined as the characteristic cognitive, affective, social and physiological behaviours that function as relatively firm indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment (MacKeracher, 2004). It shows that the individuals learn in different ways such as by seeing and hearing; reflecting and acting; reasoning logically and intuitively; memorizing and visualizing (Reid, 1987). Learning English language plays a crucial role as it is one of the predominant factors that influences the academic success of the Sri Lankan undergraduates. Therefore, for ESL practitioners it is important to have an awareness of their students' learning style preferences as it can contribute greatly in curriculum design, material development, teacher training and student orientation.

## Learning Style Models

During the last three decades educational theorists and researchers have formulated a number of learning style models and instruments to recognize individual learning styles. Accordingly, Reid (1995) has developed learning style modes based on how students learn best using their perceptions- visual, auditory and kinesthetic preferences, and also two social aspects of language learning- group and individual preferences.

### *Perceptual Learning Styles*

- Visual: Visual students like to read and obtain information from visual stimulation. These learners prefer using pictures, imageries, and spatial perceptions.
- Auditory: Auditory students are comfortable without visual input and learn from straightforward lectures, conversations, and oral directions.
- Kinesthetic: Kinesthetic students like lots of hands-on movements and enjoy working. They favour using body, hands, and tactile sense.

### *Social Learning Styles*

- Group (interpersonal): They favor learning in groups or with other people.
- Individual (intrapersonal): They prefer to work alone and to be self-readers.

The current study examines the predominant learning style preferences of ESL learners of the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) in the English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) Programme. Furthermore, it investigates the learning style preferences of these ESL learners with respect to their gender and field of study.

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## METHODOLOGY

Two hundred and fifty OUSL students from the EGAP Programme were selected as the sample of this study. These students represent four different degree programmes: B.Sc Health (45), B. Technology (66), B. Sc / B.Ed Natural Sciences (56) and B. Management Studies (61). These students learn English as a second language. As the current study is descriptive in nature, a survey method was adopted to collect data. The Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ) developed by Reid (1987) was adapted and utilized as the research instrument. Although the questionnaire was administered to 250 students only 228 were completed and returned. Twenty five items that comprised the questionnaire were randomly arranged into sets of 5 statements that were related to visual, auditory, kinesthetic, group and individual learning style preferences. The individual student variables and the responses from the questionnaire were statistically analyzed by utilizing descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. With the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 18) the data obtained were analyzed while calculating frequency distribution and percentages to identify the learning preference of students. To observe the significant differences if any among the field of studies Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Multiple Comparison of Means Tests (Scheffé test) were used. At the same time, Independent Samples Test was employed to investigate whether there is any difference between learning style preferences of female and male students. Preference means for each set of variables were classified into three ranges: major (means 13.50 and above), minor (means of 11.50 -13.49) and negative (11.49 or less) learning style preferences (Reid, 1987). Analysis of variance and Multiple Comparison of Means Tests were run on the preferences means ( $p < .05$ ). Significance from the multiple comparison of means analysis was applied on the basis of the Scheffé test which is the most valid test for unequal sample sizes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Question 1: What is the predominant learning style preference of the Open University ESL learners in the EGAP Programme?

**Table 1.** Perceptual Learning Style Preference of ESL Learners in the EGAP Programme

Learning Style	Frequency	Percentage
Visual	37	16.2
Auditory	35	15.4
Kinesthetic	58	25.4
Group	55	24.1
Individual	43	18.9
Total	228	100.0

According to the percentage analysis score for each learning style, the majority of the learners favoured a kinesthetic learning style (25.4%) followed by group learning style (24.1%) as the secondary learning

style preference. Next to group learning style, students preferred individual learning style (18.9%) and visual learning style (16.20%) respectively. Auditory learning style (15.4%) became the least preferred learning style of the EGAP students. Thus, it shows that kinesthetic learning style is the predominant learning style of the Open University ESL learners in the EGAP Programme. These results support the results of Reid's (1987) investigation on learning and cognitive styles for both native and non-native speakers of English as she too found that ESL students strongly preferred kinesthetic and tactile learning styles.

Question 2: Is there any difference in the learning style preferences of ESL learners in the EGAP Programme with respect to their gender and field of study?

Table 2 shows the results of the Independent Samples Test that was carried out in order to observe whether there is any difference in the learning style preferences of ESL learners in the EGAP Programme with respect to their gender.

**Table 2.** Perceptual Learning Style Preference Means According to Gender

Learning Style Preference	Mean		P value
	Female	Male	
Visual	19.27	18.00	.000
Auditory	18.99	18.22	.039
Kinesthetic	19.74	19.10	.112
Group	19.26	19.13	.769
Individual	17.98	17.80	.738

Note: Preference means 13.50 and above = major learning style preference; means of 11.50-13.49 = minor learning style preference; means of 11.49 or less = negative learning style preference.

According to Table 2, in general all five learning styles were selected as 'major learning preference' by both male and female students. When compared to the mean values of the learning style preferences of the female and male students, females indicated a marginally higher preference for all five learning styles than males. In addition to that, females preferred visual and auditory learning significantly more than males,  $t = 4.268$ ,  $p = .000$  and  $t = 2.081$ ,  $p = .039$  respectively. Accordingly, females were significantly more visual and auditory than males. That means female students may prefer to learn through reading, studying charts and

listening to lectures, audiotapes etc. than male students. However, in general female students demonstrated that they prefer more experiential and total physical involvement learning whereas male students indicated that they favour learning in groups.

Table 3 illustrates the results of the Multiple Comparison of Means Tests that were carried out in order to examine whether there is any difference in the learning style preferences of ESL learners in the EGAP Programme with respect to their field of study.

**Table 3.** Perceptual Learning Style Preference Means According to Field of Study

Field of Study	Learning Style				
	Visual	Auditory	Kinesthetic	Group	Individual
Health Sc.	19.68 a*	18.95	19.91	18.77	17.60
Engineering Tech.	17.87 a*b*	18.25	19.54	19.63	16.77 c*
Natural Sc.	18.60	18.60	19.44	19.16	18.12
Management Studies	19.26 b*	19.06	19.18	19.13	19.19 c*
<b>F- value</b>	7.387	1.102	.534	.680	4.391

Note:1- a=visual learning style preference of Health Sc. Students different from visual learning style preference of Engineering Tech. students,  
 b= visual learning style preference of Management Studies different from visual learning style preference of Engineering Tech. students,  
 c= individual learning style preference of Management Studies different from individual learning style preference of Engineering Tech. students

Note:2- Significance level; \* $p < 0.01$

Of all fields of study, Health Sciences ( $p = .001$ ) and Management ( $p = .006$ ) students were the most visual in their learning style preferences; they were significantly more visual than Engineering Technology students (Scheffé test,  $p < .01$ ). Once again Management students

became the most auditory learners although any significant differences were not reported within the other fields. Both Health Sciences and Natural Sciences students indicated that they strongly preferred to learn kinesthetically. Engineering Technology students selected group learning as their major learning style preference and they were the strongest group learners as well. On the other hand, Management students were the most individual in their learning style preferences; they were significantly more individual than Engineering Technology students (Scheffé test,  $p = .006 < .01$ ).

## CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall results show that students from different fields of study appear to have multiple major learning style preferences while supporting the results of the related studies (Karthigeyan & Nirmala, 2013; Gilakjani, 2012; Reid, 1987). These studies demonstrated that irrespective of the field of study, students' preferences have represented all the categories of learning styles. In general, the majority of the learners of the current study revealed that they preferred to learn kinesthetically indicating that they would like to learn through active participatory experiences. That means majority of the EGAP students do not like conventional teaching, and they learn best by being involved physically in classroom experiences. Furthermore, it revealed that ESL students from different fields of study and gender sometimes differ significantly from each other in their learning style preferences. Although the university offers a common English Programme for majority of the undergraduates irrespective of their field of study, the outcome of the study shows that some learners might need instruction presented more visually, while others might require more auditory, kinesthetic, group or individual types of instruction. Specially, Management students showed that learning style preferences are very diverse. If the Open University ESL teachers do not have adequate knowledge about their individual students' learning style preferences, they cannot systematically deliver the needed instructional variety. Thus, the results of the current study point out the necessity of the teacher training to make them aware of the different leaning styles of their ESL learners and to train them to employ a broad instructional approach. Moreover, constant monitoring of the teaching is also very important as the OUSL employs a considerable number of external ESL teachers for the EGAP Programme. These findings stress that the learning style diversities should be taken into account in course material development as the EGAP Programme caters to undergraduates from different disciplines in the Open Distance Learning mode as well. Finally, the current study shows the importance of ESL practitioners investigating OUSL learners' learning styles and adapting the teaching methods to suit all the students. Otherwise, there can be a mismatch between the classroom teaching and students' learning potential and their attitudes toward learning English.

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