ANALYZING THE LEARNING STYLES OF JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND THE IMPLICATION TO ENGLISH TEACHING: A CASE STUDY AT SMPN I DAGANGAN MADIUN

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ABSTRAK

Tidak ada cara mudah untuk menguasai bahasa, terutama bahasa yang bukan bahasa pertama kami. Dalam proses belajar bahasa khususnya bahasa kedua, ada banyak variabel yang menentukan keberhasilan pembelajaran; salah satu variabel yang gaya belajar. Dalam kelas terdiri dari berbagai gaya belajar, itu selalu diperlukan untuk guru bahasa untuk mengidentifikasi, hormat, dan bekerja pada keragaman perbedaan peserta didik. Studi ini meneliti gaya belajar yang beragam yang digunakan oleh siswa ESL dari SMPN 1 Dagangan, Kabupaten Madiun Jawa Timur. Para siswa diklasifikasikan menjadi tiga tingkatan kompetensi: tinggi, menengah, dan kompetensi tingkat rendah. Mereka juga diklasifikasikan berdasarkan jenis kelamin: laki-laki dan perempuan. Satu set kuesioner dibagikan kepada lima belas siswa. Untuk mendapatkan interpretasi yang lebih dalam tentang gaya belajar mereka, siswa juga diwawancarai. Preferensi gaya belajar siswa diidentifikasi berdasarkan tingkat kompetensi mereka dan gender dalam rangka untuk menyelidiki perbedaan mereka. Data dianalisis secara kualitatif. Temuan mengungkapkan bahwa gaya belajar siswa dapat dikategorikan ke dalam visual, auditori, kinesthethic, taktil, individu, dan peserta didik kelompok. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ada beberapa perbedaan dalam menggunakan gaya belajar dengan siswa dari tingkat tinggi, menengah dan rendah kompetensi. Perbedaan kecil juga ditemukan pada siswa pria dan wanita dalam menggunakan gaya belajar. Dengan demikian, penting bagi guru untuk menyadari siswanya gaya belajar. Hal ini jelas kemudian bahwa salah satu faktor yang dapat menyebabkan keberhasilan proses belajar-mengajar bahasa adalah pertandingan antara gaya belajar siswa disekolah dan metode pengajaran yang digunakan oleh guru.

Kata kunci: *gaya belajar, tingkat kompetensi, tinggi - menengah - rendah, jenis kelamin.*

ABSTRACT

A language is probably the most difficult set of skills a person could ever struggle to learn. There is no easy way to master a language, particularly a language which is not our first language. In the process of learning a language particularly a second language, there are many variables that determine the success of learning; one of the variables is learning styles. In a class made up of various learning styles, it is always necessary for language teachers to identify, respect, and work on the diversity of the learners' differences. The study investigated the diverse learning styles employed by ESL students of SMPN 1 Dagangan, Madiun Regency of East Java. The students were classified into three levels of

competence: high, middle, and low level competence. They were also classified based on gender: males and females. A set of questionnaire was distributed to fifteen students. To get deeper interpretation on their learning styles, the students were also interviewed. The students' learning style preferences were identified based on their levels of competence and gender in order to investigate their differences. The data was analyzed qualitatively. The findings revealed that the students' learning styles can be categorized into visual, auditory, kinesthethic, tactile, individual, and group learners. The results of the study indicated that there were some differences in using learning styles by the students of high, middle and low levels of competence. A little difference was also found in male and female students in using learning styles. Thus, it is important for teachers to be aware of their students learning styles. It is clear then that one factor which can lead to the success of a language teaching-learning process is the match between students` learning styles and the teaching methods used by the teachers.

Keywords: *learning styles, levels of competence; high – middle – low, gender*

INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to identify learning style preferences of the students at SMPN 1 Dagangan Madiun and their implication to English teaching. SMPN 1 Dagangan is one of the state secondary schools in Madiun Regency. It is located in Banjarsari Kulon Village, about 15 km from Madiun City, East Java. The school has 632 students and most of their parents are farmers. Living in a village makes the students tend to be ashamed and low motivated, especially in learning English. Thus they have many kinds of learning styles. The ways how to learn are influenced by their backgrounds; where they live, what their parents are and how they do their lives.

In the process of learning the language, there are many variables that determine the success of a language learner. Language learning success is associated with a range of factors including age, gender, motivation, intelligence, anxiety level, learning strategies and language learning styles (Sharp, 2004). In a class made up of various learning styles, it is always necessary for the teachers, particularly the language teachers to identify, respect and work on the diversity of the learners' differences.

The success of teaching-learning process is not only determined by how the teachers teach but also, most importantly and principally is determined by how the students learn. Language learning styles is one of the main factors that help determine how the students learn a second or foreign language.

A previous study was conducted by Stapa (2003) concerning teachers' awareness of ESP students' learning preferences. In this study, it was discovered that students' tendency towards working in pairs or small groups was well perceived by teachers. In a more recent study, Felder and Silverman (2005) formulated a learning style model that comprises of four dimensions including sensing and intuitive learners, visual and verbal learners, active and reflective learners as well as sequential and global learners. Later, another study was conducted by Hoque (2008) who investigated the learners' strategies and preferences in learning EFL. It was discovered that most of the students studied English due to its curriculum requirement, and that they studied English just for the sake of examinations.

Based on the previous studies, it is necessary that this study be done using a slightly different set of sample. Therefore, this study was carried out in SMP Negeri 1 Dagangan Kab. Madiun which is located in the rural area where the majority of the students find that English

is not a major priority and learning it would only add to their burden while studying for the examinations.

One of the popular researchers emphasizing sensory modes is Reid (1987). She focuses on 'perceptual' and 'sociological' learning style preferences. Further, she developed her model and presented it in a questionnaire called Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ). She divides her learning style instrument into six categories to address visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, as well as group and individual learning (Reid, 1987: 88).

(1)   Visual Major Learning Style Preference

They learn well from seeing words in books, on the chalkboard, and in workbooks. They remember and understand information and instructions better if they read them. They do not need as much oral explanation as an auditory learner, and they can often learn alone.

(2)   Auditory Major Learning Style Preference

They learn from hearing words spoken and from oral explanation. They may remember information by reading aloud or by moving their lips as they read, especially when they are learning new material. They benefit from hearing audiotapes, lectures, and class discussion. They benefit from making tapes to listen to, by teaching other students, and by conversing with their teacher.

(3)   Kinesthetic Major Learning Style Preference

They learn best by experience, by being involved physically in classroom experiences. They remember information well when they actively participate in activities, field trips, and role-playing in the classroom.

(4)   Tactile Major Learning Style Preference

They learn best when they have the opportunity to do "hands-on" experiences with new materials. That is, working on experiments in laboratory, handling and building models, and touching and working with new materials provide them with the most successful learning situations.

(5)   Group Major Learning Style Preference

They learn more easily when they study with at least one other student, and they will be more successful completing work well when they work with others. They value group interaction and class work with other students, and they remember information better when they work with two or three classmates.

(6)   Individual Major Learning Style Preference

They learn best when they work alone. They think well when they study alone, and they remember information they learn by themrselves. They understand material best when they learn it alone, and they make better progress in learning when they work by themselves.(Reid, 1995: 162-167)

Based on the background above, the writer raised some questions research questions as follows (1) Do the three level competence Students have different learning styles?, (2) What is the kind of learning style mostly applied by the high level competence Students, (3) What is the kind of learning style mostly applied by the middle level competence Students, (4) What is the kind of learning style mostly applied by low level competence students?, (5) Are there any differences of using learning styles by the students based on gender?

RESEARCH METHOD

In this research method, the writer presents the point of research method, namely: (a) type of research, (b) subject of the study, (c) data and data source, (d) technique of data collection, (e) technique of data analyses and (f) checking the reliability and validity of the data.

Type of Research: The writer analyzes the data using qualitative case study method that does not include any calculating and enumerating. Besides that, there is no data manipulation because all analyzes based on real condition.

Subject of the Study: The subject of this study was 15 Students of the third year from Class 9A and 9H of SMPN 1 Dagangan Madiun in the 2013/2014 academic year. They are divided into 3 groups of competence. Each group has 5 Students. They are: (1) High level competence Students (5 Students), (2) Middle level competence Students (5 Students), (3) Low level competence Students (5 Students).

Data and Data Source: The data used in this study were documentation (The Students' test scores), the results of questionnaire, the results of interview. And the data source in this study was fifteen Students taken from class 9A and 9H of SMP Negeri 1 Dagangan Kab. Madiun, East Java.

Technique of Data Collection: (1) Documentation, the list of Students' marks or study reports, the result of a test, and any items that support the research. The researcher used the study reports of the Students to identify the three levels of competence; high level competence, middle level competence, and low level competence. The achievement test was used to ensure result of the identification of the level competence. (2) Questionnaire, a written or printed form used in gathering information on some subject or subjects consisting of a list of questions to be submitted to one or more persons. The researcher used Reid's Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ). (3) A focused interview, the students were interviewed for only a short time, and the questions asked came from the case study protocol which was adopted from the questions in PLSPQ. (4)

The researcher analyzed the data through the following steps: (1) Selected a case which the researcher found in class as an issue to be investigated in this study. The case was that there were differences in the students' English test scores at the same class taught by the same teacher; (2) Built an understanding of the issue by relating it to a theory such as learning style in this research; (3) Relied on experience and the literature to present the evidence in various ways, using various interpretations. This becomes necessary because statistical analysis is not necessarily used in all case studies. This case study employs a series of statistical tests to help in the presentation of the data to the reader; (4) Examining, categorizing, and tabulating the data taken from the data source, and recombining the evidence to address the initial propositions of this study.

Checking the reliability and validity of the data: To check the reliability and validity of the data in this study, the researcher did the followings: (1) Cross-referenced the documents of the students' English test grades from the academic years of 2011/2012 and 2012/2013 with the results of achievement test given by the researcher in 2014; (2) Cross-checked the results of questionnaire with the results of interview. The researcher found that most of them were in congruent.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Learning Styles of the Three Level Competence Students
The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed to establish frequency distribution in the form of descriptive statistics. Based on the data from the questionnaire and interview results, the participants in this study, indicated that the most preferred style was group learning style, visual learning style ranked the second. The third place in the ranking order was taken by the individual, and the fourth was kinesthetic learning style. Auditory learning style ranked the fifth in questionnaire but it ranked the sixth in interview. Tactile learning style ranked the sixth in questionnaire but it ranked the fifth in interview.

2. Learning Styles of High Level Competence Students

The finding result of questionnaire showed that Individual learning style ranked the first, and then followed by visual one. The third rank was group learning style. The next rank was tactile learning style. Kinesthetic learning style ranked the fifth, and auditory ranked the last. The results of interview showed that almost all students of high level competence used individual learning style.

3. Learning Styles of Middle Level Competence Students

The results showed that there were any differences in using learning styles between the high level and middle level competence students. The middle level competence students like Group learning style most. This finding was different from the high level competence students who preferred Individual learning style as their first choice. Based on the results of the questionnaire, none of the middle level competence used Tactile learning style when they were studying.

4. Learning Styles of Low Level Competence Students

The finding showed that the low level competence students preferred Group learning style than others. The results of questionnaire were in line with the results of interview that Group learning style got the most response from them. The results of interview to the students with low level competence indicated that all of them like to study in groups.

5. The Students' Learning Styles Preferences based on gender

Based on the results of questionnaire, males had preference for the group style as well as females. Male and female enjoyed working in the group style so they learned best when working with other, this style helped them to learn and understand new material better.

There was a little difference between the results of questionnaire and the results of interview. The results of interview showed that all male students used individual as their learning style but female students used group learning style, which was suitable with the results of questionnaire.

The results showed that males have preference for the individual style while females prefer the group learning style. Males enjoy studying alone. They preferred working on their own and they learned new information by themselves and they remembered the materials better if they learned it alone. But females enjoyed working in the group style so they learned best when working with others. However the average results of the questionnaire and interview showed that both males and females chose group learning style as their preference.

DISCUSSION

Based on the first finding on this study, the dominant learning style preferences of SMPN 1 Dagangan students indicated that the majority of SMPN 1 Dagangan students considered themselves as Group learners. This finding was not congruent with Reid's study. Reid (1987), investigated Japanese, Malay and Korean EFL students and showed that a large number of these students preferred tactile and kinesthetic learning styles. This might happen because of the different background of traditions between the students of Indonesia and the students of Japan, Malaysia and Korea. One of the Indonesian traditions is "Gotong Royong" or working together in doing something. The Indonesian students could be influenced by this tradition even when they are studying English.

The second finding showed that the students with high level competence preferred Individual learning style. This finding was not congruent with Tuan's study. Tuan (2011) examined EFL students' preferred learning styles, and the relationship between learning style

preferences and individual attributes.

The third finding showed that the students with middle level competence preferred Group learning style. This finding was not congruent with any other researcher's study since this kind of research, exploring learning style of the students with middle level competence, has never been conducted yet. The previous studies, conducted by the researchers, investigated the high level and low level students.

The fourth finding figured out that the students with low level competence preferred Group learning style. Even all of them like to study in groups. It was very common among them to look for help from other classmates in order to complete tasks and share ideas about the development of some activities.

The last finding of this study was that male students preferred Group learning style but they also preferred Individual learning style. It means that male students sometimes like to learn alone and sometimes in groups. They liked the teacher to make variation in their teaching strategy that enabled them to study English individually at one time and in group at another time. Whereas the female students preferred Group learning style to Individual one.

CONCLUSION

Based on the perceptual learning styles' classification which is categorized by Reid (1995), the dominant learning style preferences of SMPN 1 Dagangan students indicated that the majority of SMPN 1 Dagangan students considered themselves as Group learners.

The followings are the perceptual learning style preferences of SMPN 1 Dagangan students based on their competence levels and gender:
1. The students with high level competence preferred Individual learning style. They learned best when they work alone. They could think well when they studied alone, and they could remember information they learned by themselves.
2. The students with middle level competence preferred Group learning style. They enjoyed working in the group style so they learnt best when working with other.
3. The students with low level competence preferred Group learning style. Even all of them like to study in groups. It was very common among them to look for help from other classmates in order to complete tasks and share ideas about the development of some activities.
4. The male students preferred Group learning style. But they also preferred Individual learning style. It means that male students sometimes like to learn alone and sometimes in groups. Whereas the female students preferred Group learning style to Individual one.

The results of this study indicated that there was difference of learning styles used by the high level competence students, middle level competence students and low level competence students of SMPN 1 Dagangan Madiun. But there wasn't difference of learning styles used by male and female students.

In line with the results obtained, the writer suggested that teachers should teach in a way which matches the students' preferred learning styles. In this research, the writer found that it would be better for the English teacher of SMPN 1 Dagangan to devide the students into classes based on their level of competence; high, middle, and low. The division was so important that the teacher could teach in a way which matches their learning styles.

Since this study was restricted to a small group of the students, i.e. 15 students, it is recommended that it can be replicated and the sample size be increased by including a large number of students from the same school and/or other schools to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Further research should not only investigate the students' learning style preferences but also find out the teaching styles used by their teachers and see whether they match the students' learning styles.

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