

EFL Learners' Preferences for Multimodal Learning Materials at the Secondary School Level

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ABSTRACT

This study explores secondary school EFL learners' preferences for multimodal learning materials, which addresses the need for learner-centered strategies in 21st century education. Although existing research highlights the general benefits of multimodal teaching, few studies have examined students' specific preferences for text, audio, and video formats. Using a quantitative descriptive design, data was collected from 132 junior high school students in Indonesia through a VARK-based questionnaire and Likert-scale items. The results showed that video was the most preferred medium (50.8%), followed by text and audio. Students reported that video materials were more engaging and effective in improving comprehension and motivation. Although the VARK model provides background insights, this study shows that learners' actual media choices have more influence on instructional design. This demands the use of multimedia resources that reflect students' preferences and enhance engagement in EFL learning.

Keywords: *Multimodal learning, EFL students, VARK model.*

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of 21st-century education, students are expected to develop four essential competencies—critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication—collectively known as the 4Cs. These skills are fundamental for success in a rapidly evolving global society. Consequently, teaching practices must shift from traditional, text-based approaches to more innovative strategies that actively engage learners in diverse and meaningful ways (Ravi, 2022). As digital technology becomes increasingly embedded in students' daily lives, they exhibit a growing preference for receiving information through audio-visual formats, making it imperative to adapt instructional design accordingly (Nicolaou et al., 2022).

Multimodal learning, which integrates various modes such as text, images, sound, and movement, has emerged as a powerful response to this pedagogical challenge. It offers multiple entry points for learners to engage with content, thus enhancing motivation and comprehension. Jewitt (2008) emphasized that learning is inherently multimodal, as meaning is made not only through language but also through visual, spatial, and auditory elements (Jewitt, 2008). Similarly, Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) argue that multimodal communication reflects how individuals naturally construct knowledge in contemporary contexts (Kress et al., 2001). This perspective aligns with the multiliteracies framework proposed by Cope and Kalantzis (2009), which advocates for diverse and flexible literacy practices in classrooms to meet the demands of today's learners (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), multimodal materials—such as educational videos, podcasts, infographics, and interactive media can significantly improve student engagement, language retention, and overall learning outcomes (Lim, 2004; Mills,

2010). These resources provide learners with dynamic, real-world exposure to English, supporting both receptive and productive language skills. Furthermore, the integration of digital media encourages student-centered practices and enables personalized feedback, which is critical in language acquisition.

EFL education plays an important role in a globalized world, especially in secondary schools where students prepare for future academic and professional opportunities. As English continues to be the lingua franca in many fields, the ability to communicate effectively in English becomes essential for students. Research shows that English proficiency not only improves students' academic performance but also broadens their career prospects in an increasingly competitive job market (Izatullah et al., 2022). Educators are therefore challenged to adopt innovative pedagogical approaches that can address the needs of 21st-century learners, especially in environments where English is not the primary language of communication (Hendrawaty et al., 2024).

One such approach involves the utilization of multimodal learning materials, encompassing different styles such as text, audio, and video (Firmansyah, 2021). These materials accommodate various learning methods and preferences, thereby enhancing the accessibility and enjoyment of language acquisition. Studies indicate that the incorporation of multimodal resources in EFL instruction can significantly enhance student motivation and engagement, resulting in improved language competency (Apriani & Morgana, 2021). Multimodal resources also facilitate a comprehensive and varied learning environment, allowing students to understand complex linguistic concepts and improve knowledge retention.

Comprehending EFL learners' preferences for these multimodal resources is essential for teachers aiming to enhance their instructional methodologies (Julinar, 2019). According to research, students frequently have distinct preferences for specific types of learning materials, which might impact their overall learning experience (Susdarwono & Peradaban, 2022). By examining these preferences, teachers can modify their instructional strategies to accommodate student needs, cultivating a more adaptive and efficient EFL learning environment (Safithri Armin, 2023).

The goal of multimodal techniques is to address the many cognitive and affective demands of students by combining textual, visual, audio, and interactive elements (Szawerna, 2023). The recognition that students have varying learning preferences is reflected in this pedagogical shift. For instance, some studies found female EFL learners preferred auditory learning, while visual modalities were less favored (Jambi et al., 2022). Students' responses to instructional content are often influenced by their sensory learning preferences—as conceptualized in the VARK model (Fleming & Mills, 1992). Aligning instructional materials with students' VARK preferences has been shown to enhance vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension (Nurhaliza & Sari, 2023). A significant number of learners also exhibit preferences for multimodal or bimodal input, underscoring the need to diversify instructional methods (Laadem & Mallahi, 2020).

The VARK model (Visual, Auditory, Read/Write, and Kinesthetic) is a commonly used framework for assessing sensory learning preferences and supporting the development of tailored instruction. Research has shown that matching materials with learners' dominant styles improves academic achievement, engagement, and satisfaction, particularly in virtual and student-centered contexts (Chinnapun & Narkkul, 2024; Vanegas et al., 2024). Its application across various contexts—including secondary and medical education—has resulted in improved comprehension and retention, especially among students with multimodal preferences (Cabual, 2021; Mirza, 2025). Research across Southeast Asia and Africa also supports the adaptation of VARK instruments to culturally diverse secondary school contexts (Isma'il & Sodangi, 2025; Tadayonifar & Valizadeh, 2021). Despite debates over the empirical basis of learning style theory, recent findings support the VARK model's role in promoting individualized instruction and boosting learner motivation, autonomy, and outcomes (Cabual, 2021; Mirza, 2025).

The combined use of multiple modalities has demonstrated significant improvements in student engagement and learning outcomes. When multimodal strategies align with students' preferred learning styles, they foster the development of critical thinking and enhance classroom engagement (Subagja & Rubini, 2023). Students also report greater satisfaction when educational materials reflect their individual preferences (Li et al., 2023). In addition, the inclusion of multimodal input enhances comprehension and promotes learner independence.

The integration of digital technologies in multimodal instruction has also emerged as a key factor in increasing student autonomy and reducing language anxiety. For example, multimodal composition tasks involving vlogs have been found to improve writing proficiency while supporting more relaxed and participatory classroom environments (Xie et al., 2021). Similarly, digital storytelling activities have enhanced speaking skills by encouraging students to express ideas with confidence and creativity (Yuniarti et al., 2022). These practices demonstrate the transformative potential of multimodal approaches in shaping student-centered and inclusive learning environments. Multimodal literacy not only improves motivation and academic performance but also supports learners in becoming independent and confident users of the English language (Pavlidou, 2022; Tang, 2023).

Despite the increasing body of evidence supporting the benefits of multimodal instruction, most existing research focuses on general outcomes rather than individual learning preferences (Firmansyah et al., 2021). There remains a lack of analysis regarding which specific media – text, audio, or video – are most effective for different learner profiles. Other studies emphasize discourse strategies or teacher-related factors (Ramadhan & Waloyo, 2018), and few have explored students' perspectives using structured models such as VARK. Thus, research investigating how EFL learners' dominant learning styles influence their perceptions and preferences for different types of multimodal learning materials remains limited.

This study seeks to explore two key aspects of secondary school EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' engagement with learning. First, it aims to identify the dominant learning style preferences among these students, focusing on the VARK model – visual, auditory, reading/writing, and kinesthetics. Second, it examines their preferences and perceptions toward multimodal learning materials, specifically the use of text, audio, and video formats. By understanding both their preferred learning styles and their responses to diverse media, the study intends to provide insights that can inform more effective, learner-centered instructional strategies in EFL classrooms.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative descriptive design to examine the dominant learning style preferences and multimodal material preferences among EFL learners at the secondary school level. Quantitative methods are approaches that emphasize objective measurements and the statistical, mathematical, or numerical analysis of data collected through instruments such as surveys or questionnaires (Creswell, 2009). The research aimed to identify students' tendencies based on the VARK learning style model (Fleming, 2001) and their preferences for text, audio, or video materials in learning English. This method was selected to enable the researcher to statistically describe and relate learning styles to multimedia preferences.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on seventh-grade students from seven classes in a single public junior high school in Banyumas, totaling 132 students. The researcher chose this grade level due to their early-stage exposure to various multimodal inputs in English learning, making them suitable subjects for identifying emerging learning tendencies.

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of four sections: demographic information, VARK-based learning style identification, media preference selection, and Likert-scale items measuring students' perceptions of text, audio, and video-based learning. The instrument was validated

through expert judgment by an English education lecturer and an experienced English teacher who teaches seventh-grade learners in the school studied. The validation ensured content relevance and language clarity for the targeted age group.

Data collection was conducted in May 2025, during which the researcher distributed the questionnaire with the help of teacher. Before completing the questionnaire, students were clearly informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. This information was included at the beginning of the Google Form. Students gave their consent by agreeing to continue and submit the form. To encourage honest answers and protect privacy, all responses were collected anonymously. The responses were then processed and analyzed using SPSS version 25, applying descriptive statistics to answer the first research question and cross-tabulation analysis to address the second, which explored the relationship between students' learning styles and their preferred media types.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Although the primary objective of this study focuses on students' media preferences, the VARK model was used to provide a general overview of learners' sensory tendencies. The following results are presented as contextual background.

Dominant Learning Style Preferences among Secondary School EFL Learners

Learning styles play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of instructional delivery, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In this study, data were collected from 132 secondary school students using a Likert-scaled VARK-based questionnaire, as adapted from Fleming's VARK model. The instrument included 8 items covering four modalities: Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic, and Reading/Writing. The SPSS frequency analysis revealed the following descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of VARK Preferences

Learning Styles	Mean	Median	Mode	Sum
Visual	6.86	7.00	6	906
Auditory	7.31	7.00	7	965
Kinesthetic	7.52	8.00	7	992
Reading/Writing	6.96	7.00	6	919

As shown in the table, Kinesthetic learning scored the highest mean value ($M = 7.52$), followed by Auditory ($M = 7.31$), Reading/Writing ($M = 6.96$), and Visual ($M = 6.86$). This shows that Kinesthetic is the most dominant learning style preference among the participants, indicating a general preference for active and hands-on learning strategies such as role-playing, simulations, and experiments.

This result is in line with the theory proposed by Fleming (2001), which states that kinesthetic learners learn best through physical experience and hands-on engagement. The findings also reflect the general tendency of EFL learners to favor hands-on and interactive learning experiences, especially in environments that encourage active participation.

Moreover, the relatively high mean scores across all styles suggest that most students exhibit multimodal preferences, albeit with a dominant tendency towards kinesthetic strategies. This can be explained by the current shift towards more dynamic and participatory methods in language classrooms, especially where students are increasingly exposed to technology-rich environments.

These findings provide important insights for EFL teachers in secondary schools. Understanding that kinesthetic and auditory modalities are preferred can guide teachers to incorporate more movement- and listening-centered activities, such as storytelling, peer

dialogue and experiential learning. In addition, integrating multimodal materials can meet the diverse needs of students and promote inclusive pedagogical practices.

Overall, the findings indicate that incorporating multimodal approaches particularly those that involve physical activity and auditory input can enhance both engagement and learning outcomes for secondary-level EFL learners. This underscores the importance of designing lessons that respond to students' unique ways of learning and experiencing information.

Preferences and Perceptions toward Multimodal Learning Materials

This section presents the findings related to students' preferences and perceptions of multimodal learning materials, particularly the use of text, audio, and video formats in English language learning. The data were derived from multiple-choice items, Likert-scale statements, and open-ended responses.

Media Preferences

The distribution of media preferences revealed that video was the most favored medium, followed by text and audio.

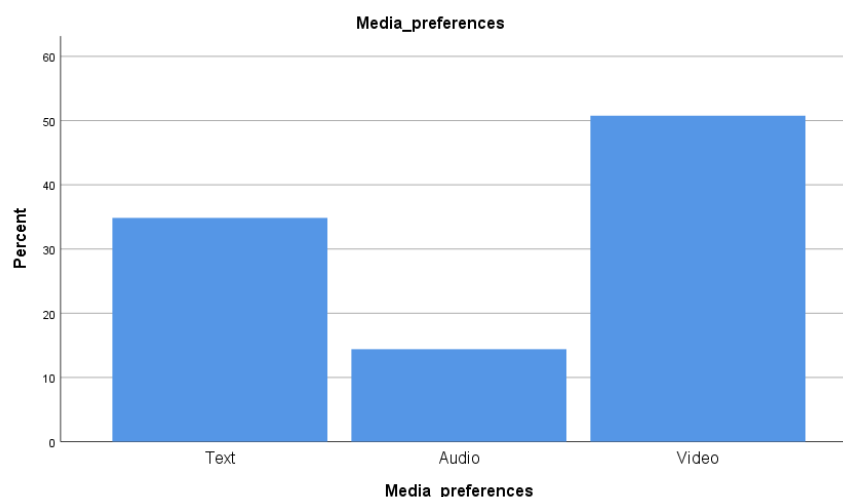


Figure 1. Distribution of Students' Preferred Media Type

Based on the analysis of 132 student responses, the majority of secondary school EFL learners demonstrated a clear preference for video-based learning materials. Specifically, 67 students (50.8%) selected video (e.g., educational clips, films, YouTube content) as their most preferred medium for learning English. Following video, 46 students (34.8%) chose text-based materials such as books or digital reading modules, while only 19 students (14.4%) preferred audio-based media, such as listening recordings or podcasts. This pattern suggests that visual and dynamic content tends to be more engaging for students compared to static reading or purely auditory formats.

To further understand students' reasons behind their media preferences, open-ended responses were analyzed. Learners who preferred text-based materials often cited clarity and focus as their main motivations. One respondent shared, "I can clearly understand the correct spelling when I read, and I get distracted when watching videos because they feel like movies." Another noted, "Reading helps me focus better than watching videos or listening to audio." Others mentioned that reading allows them to "understand the material by imagining it in the mind" or that "it is easier to comprehend when reading attentively."

Students who favored audio-based materials highlighted the importance of pronunciation and focused listening. Some responses included statements such as, "Listening helps me learn how to pronounce the words and know their meaning," and "It feels like a

challenge where I must really focus." Another student explained, "It's easier to understand when I hear it directly."

Among those who preferred video-based learning, many emphasized its multimodal advantages. One respondent remarked, "It's easier to understand through video because I can see examples and repeat if I don't get it." Another shared, "I prefer video because it already includes correct English pronunciation, which I can imitate." One student added a more reflective comment: "To improve English skills, we need to balance theory with listening and conversation. If we only learn theory, it becomes difficult to apply it in real life." Others simply noted that "video makes learning more fun and easier to follow."

These qualitative insights support the quantitative findings, reinforcing the idea that while students have varied preferences, video content offers a more dynamic and engaging learning experience for many secondary school EFL learners.

Perceptions Based on Likert-scale Statements

To further explore learners' perceptions, six Likert-scale items were analyzed. The results reaffirmed the preference for video-based instruction, with the statement "Video helps me understand English materials better" scoring the highest mean ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.82$). This was followed by "Video is interesting and easy to follow" ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.84$). These findings suggest that students not only enjoy video but also perceive it as effective for language learning.

Perceptions of audio-based learning were moderate, with scores reflecting appreciation for its practicality but lower overall engagement. Text-based learning received mixed feedback – while seen as helpful for comprehension ($M = 3.52$), it was rated the least engaging ($M = 2.68$ for reversed item on text-only learning).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Perceptions toward Learning Media

Statement	Mean	SD	Mode
Text materials help me understand English more easily.	3.52	.842	3.00
I feel more comfortable learning English through audio.	3.23	.828	3.00
Video learning helps me understand English materials better.	3.76	.821	4.00
I often choose video learning because it is more interesting and easy to follow.	3.58	.847	3.50
I prefer audio because I can listen while doing other activities.	3.30	.947	3.00
Text-only learning is less engaging than video or audio. (Reversed as: Text-only learning is engaging)	2.68	.876	3.00

These findings highlight the importance of integrating video and other multimodal content into EFL instruction to align with student preferences and improve engagement. While VARK-based learning styles provide initial insights into how students may interact with different modalities, these findings underscore that actual media preferences - especially towards video content are important in informing effective multimodal teaching in the EFL classroom.

CONCLUSIONS

This study found that secondary school EFL learners have a variety of preferences for multimodal learning materials, with video emerging as the most popular media. While early VARK model results indicate a preference for kinaesthetic and auditory learning methods, students' real preferences emphasise the usefulness of visually rich and interactive content. These findings emphasise the pedagogical value of incorporating dynamic and diverse media formats, especially video and audio, into the teaching of English in order to improve engagement and understanding. As a result, EFL teachers are encouraged to use multimodal strategies that reflect students' living experiences and technical proficiency. Future research may look into how these preferences change across educational contexts and how multimodal designs might be optimised for differentiated instruction.

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