

Bridging Perception and Practice: How Primary Teachers Adapt Instruction Based on Student Learning Styles

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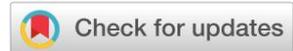
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates how primary school teachers adapt their instructional strategies based on their perceptions of students' diverse learning styles in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. Conducted at IBC School Makassar, Indonesia, the research involved classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with six primary teachers, one principal, and one school supervisor. The findings reveal that while teachers recognize the importance of tailoring instruction to accommodate various learning styles, visual, auditory, reading/writing, and kinesthetic, adaptation in practice is shaped by a combination of personal experience, professional training, and contextual constraints. Teachers consistently employed multimodal strategies, blending visual aids, interactive discussions, and hands-on activities. However, no formal diagnostic tools were used; rather, teachers relied on intuition and continuous classroom observation. Institutional factors such as large class sizes, limited resources, and time constraints often impeded the full implementation of differentiated instruction. Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated flexibility and creativity, using adaptive strategies that reflected a pragmatic response to classroom realities. This study highlights the dynamic interplay between perception and instructional practice in primary education. It underscores the need for ongoing professional development and institutional support to enhance teachers' ability to personalize instruction. The findings offer implications for educational policy and teacher training, particularly in implementing student-centered approaches under curriculum reforms like Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka.

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1. Introduction

In primary education, acknowledging and responding to students' learning diversity is essential to effective classroom instruction. One significant aspect of this diversity is students' learning styles, their preferred ways of receiving and processing information. Fleming's VARK model (1992) identifies four common learning styles: visual, auditory, reading/writing, and kinesthetic. While the theoretical value of aligning instruction to learning styles has been debated (Newton & Miah, 2017; Rogowsky et al., 2020), many teachers continue to see learning styles as a practical lens to guide their classroom strategies.

Teachers' perceptions of learning styles significantly influence the way they plan and implement instruction in the classroom. As Robbins (2013) notes, perception guides how individuals interpret information and make decisions, which, in an educational context, means that a teacher's understanding of their students' preferred learning methods can shape their instructional choices. When educators perceive that students learn best through visual, auditory, or kinesthetic means, for instance, they are more likely to adapt their teaching strategies to accommodate these preferences (Rahman & Weda, 2019; Weda et al., 2021; Yaumi et al., 2023). This alignment between perception and instructional design can enhance student engagement and learning outcomes, highlighting the importance of teachers developing accurate and reflective understandings of how their students learn (Said et al., 2021; Sachiya et al., 2025; Youngsun et al., 2024).

Moreover, when teachers have a strong awareness of diverse learning styles, they are better equipped to create inclusive and differentiated learning environments. This awareness allows them to use a variety of instructional techniques—such as visual aids, hands-on activities, group discussions, and individualized tasks—to meet the needs of all learners (Anggawirya et al., 2021; Kaharuddin et al., 2025; Cahyani et al., 2025). Conversely, if teachers hold rigid or

inaccurate perceptions about learning styles, they may unintentionally limit student potential by relying on narrow teaching methods. Therefore, continuous professional development and reflective practice are essential for teachers to refine their perceptions and ensure their instructional approaches support the diverse ways in which students process and understand information.

However, in practice, there is often a gap between perception and implementation. Research in Indonesian primary schools has shown that although teachers recognize the importance of differentiated instruction, they face challenges in applying it consistently due to time constraints, large class sizes, and limited resources (Agustrianita et al., 2019; Shareefa et al., 2019). These barriers are particularly relevant in the context of Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka, which encourages student-centered and differentiated approaches but often lacks structural support.

While previous studies have focused on identifying students' learning styles or measuring their academic performance, fewer have examined how teachers interpret and act upon their perception of learning styles in real classroom practice, especially in early-grade contexts. This study addresses that gap by focusing specifically on how primary teachers at IBC School Makassar adapt their instruction based on their perceptions of students' learning styles.

By investigating this single focus, the study aims to understand how perception is translated into classroom practice, what factors influence instructional choices, and how teachers exercise creativity and flexibility in adapting to student needs.

2. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach aimed at exploring how primary school teachers adapt their instructional strategies based on their perceptions of students' learning styles. The qualitative method was selected to gain a deep understanding of teacher experiences, instructional decisions, and contextual factors influencing classroom practices. The data in this study were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), which involves three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. This approach is considered suitable for identifying patterns and meanings within complex classroom settings and for capturing how teachers translate their perceptions into practical teaching strategies in real-time learning environments.

3. Result and Discussion

This section presents the results of how primary school teachers at IBC School Makassar adapt their instructional strategies based on their perceptions of students' learning styles. The analysis is structured thematically based on data from classroom observations and teacher interviews. The discussion section follows to interpret the findings and situate them within relevant literature and theoretical frameworks.

3.1 Adoption of Multimodal Instructional Strategies

All six teachers implemented multimodal instructional strategies to address the diversity of learning styles among their students. These strategies included the integration of visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and reading/writing elements within a single lesson.

Ms. Dorotea (Grade 1) explained:

"I see that first-grade students really like pictures and movement. They understand better when they are asked to sing and move." (Interview, June 18, 2025)

This indicates her awareness of both visual and kinesthetic preferences. During observations, her class sessions included visual flashcards, songs with accompanying gestures, and movement-based games, showing a conscious attempt to reach multiple learner types simultaneously. Her strategy was grounded in developmental appropriateness, recognizing that young learners often benefit from multisensory input.

Ms. Mirna (Grade 2) employed short videos and dramatic intonation in her storytelling:

(Observation note): "Students responded more attentively when the teacher changed her voice or added short visual videos to support the story."

This practice catered especially to auditory and visual learners, and sustained student engagement during longer lessons. The teacher's varied tone and facial expressions added emotional cues that helped students process meaning beyond the text itself.

Ms. Yunika (Grade 5) stated:

“Many students like writing notes. They say they remember better when they write things down.” (Interview, June 21, 2025)

Her instruction favored students with reading/writing preferences. Observations confirmed that she regularly included individual note-taking, summary writing, and structured writing prompts, which encouraged students to process and internalize information through personal documentation.

These findings demonstrate that although teachers were not formally trained in multimodal design, they intuitively employed strategies that aligned with multiple learning styles, often adjusting their approach within a single lesson.

3.2 Informal Identification of Student Learning Styles

None of the teachers used formal diagnostic tools like the VARK questionnaire. Instead, they relied on informal observation and trial-and-error to identify individual learning preferences.

Ms. Yayu (Grade 3) noted:

“Some students understand faster when reading independently, some through discussion, and others through practice. I adjust based on their reactions.” (Interview, June 20, 2025)

This quote highlights a dynamic and reflective approach. She observed students' behaviors who participated actively in discussions, who preferred working alone, and who were more engaged during physical or hands-on tasks and then adapted her instruction accordingly. Rather than labeling students by type, she remained flexible, modifying her teaching from lesson to lesson.

Across other classes, similar informal strategies were evident. For example, when some students showed boredom or fidgeted during verbal instruction, teachers quickly changed the method to involve drawing, movement, or peer collaboration. These shifts suggest that while not systematic, teachers used continuous formative assessment to gauge and respond to learning preferences.

3.3 Constraints in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

Although teachers demonstrated a clear understanding of their students' learning preferences, they also identified significant constraints that limited their ability to fully implement differentiated instruction.

Ms. Welsy (Grade 4) explained:

“I used to focus on pictures and movement. Now, I combine them with texts and discussions. But I learn from the children when I see they're bored, I change my method.” (Interview, June 21, 2025)

Her comment reflects the tension between pedagogical intention and contextual limitations. While she initially favored visual and kinesthetic activities, constraints such as syllabus demands and large class sizes forced her to rely more heavily on reading and oral explanation. Her responsiveness to student boredom reflects adaptive teaching, but also reveals how time pressure prevents sustained multimodal instruction.

Other teachers cited similar barriers, including a lack of visual aids, insufficient classroom space for movement-based activities, and the limited number of hours allocated for English instruction. Observations showed that classrooms were often crowded, with minimal digital equipment or hands-on learning materials.

The school supervisor echoed these concerns, acknowledging that while national curriculum frameworks like *Kurikulum Merdeka* encourage differentiated instruction, schools often lack the infrastructure and resources to support its implementation.

3.4 Teacher Adaptability and Instructional Innovation

Despite institutional and material constraints, teachers displayed a high level of adaptability, creating their own materials and modifying lesson formats on the spot to maintain student engagement.

Ms. Airah (Grade 6) stated:

"I use group discussions, reading tasks, and sometimes music. It depends on how the students are responding in that day's lesson." (Interview, June 22, 2025)

This highlights her flexible approach to instructional design. If students appeared disengaged during reading, she might switch to music-based activities or group work. Her method reflects real-time responsiveness rather than pre-planned differentiation.

Observation data confirmed that teachers often improvised. For instance, Ms. Mirna created vocabulary cards from magazine cutouts due to the lack of printed resources. Ms. Dorotea repurposed classroom objects to teach prepositions (e.g., placing a pencil *under* or *on* a chair). These strategies show how teachers exercised professional judgment to bridge the gap between ideal and actual classroom conditions.

Adaptability also manifested in student-centered practices. Some teachers allowed students to select activities based on interest or to work in small, interest-based groups. Such innovations reflect a genuine effort to meet students where they are, even without formal structures for differentiation.

3.5 Reflections on Practice

While none of the teachers had formal training in learning styles or differentiated instruction, their reflections suggested a high level of pedagogical awareness built through experience.

Teachers frequently mentioned that understanding student needs came not from workshops or courses, but from years of practice:

"I observe first. I see which students respond better to writing or group work. Then I adjust."
(Summary from field notes)

This illustrates how perception, as discussed in Robbins' theory (2013), is constructed through contextual experience and interpersonal observation. Teachers also expressed a desire for professional development:

"It would be helpful to have more training or tools. Most of what we do is based on experience." (Teacher comment, Interview Summary)

These reflections reinforce the importance of institutional support. Without adequate training or diagnostic instruments, teachers rely on intuitive knowledge. While effective to a degree, such reliance may limit consistency and scalability in implementing learning-style-based instruction across classrooms or schools.

3.5 Discussion

The findings reveal that teachers' awareness of learning styles translated into flexible teaching practices, albeit with some compromises. Their consistent use of multimodal strategies aligns with Tomlinson's (2001) theory of differentiated instruction, which emphasizes tailoring content, process, and product to student needs. This also reflects Robbins' (2013) view that perception guides behavior. In this case, instructional design.

However, unlike what VARK theory might suggest (Fleming & Mills, 1992), teachers did not rigidly assign students to one learning style. Instead, they valued a dynamic, inclusive classroom where students experienced varied inputs, a practice that recent studies (Newton & Miah, 2017; Rogowsky et al., 2020) support as more effective than matching styles.

The informal identification of learning styles via observation and student interaction demonstrates how teacher perception becomes a practical assessment tool. While not empirical, these judgments were grounded in experience and often accurate, confirming Robbins' notion of perception being constructed through context and interaction.

Challenges in implementation time, class size, materials. Mirror previous studies in Indonesia (Agustrianita et al., 2019; Shareefa et al., 2019), indicating that policy-level expectations (e.g., Kurikulum Merdeka) are not always supported by structural conditions on the ground.

Despite constraints, the creative strategies observed at IBC School reflect teacher resilience and professional judgment. The commitment to inclusive teaching, even when unsupported by diagnostic tools or institutional investment, demonstrates a valuable blend of awareness and practice.

These findings suggest that perception alone is insufficient without institutional support, but when paired with teacher creativity, it can still foster meaningful, differentiated learning experiences

4. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how primary school teachers adapt their instructional strategies based on their perceptions of students' learning styles. The findings show that teachers demonstrate strong awareness of learning style diversity and respond through flexible, multimodal approaches, integrating visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and reading/writing strategies into their instruction.

However, the adaptation process is shaped by contextual constraints such as large class sizes, limited resources, and the demands of the national curriculum. Teachers primarily rely on informal identification methods, such as daily observations and student responses, in the absence of formal diagnostic tools.

Despite these limitations, teachers exhibited creativity, professional agency, and a commitment to student engagement. Their ability to translate perception into practice, although imperfect, reflects a pragmatic and responsive approach to teaching. These findings highlight the need for systemic support, including access to diagnostic tools, targeted training in differentiated instruction, and school environments that facilitate instructional personalization. Bridging the gap between perception and practice requires not only teacher initiative but also institutional reinforcement.

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