

Deconstructing the Learning Styles Myth in English Language Learning from the Perspective of Santrock's Educational Psychology for Evidence-Based Practice

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ABSTRACT

This literature review deconstructs the learning styles myth in English language teaching through Santrock's educational psychology framework. Many English teachers believe that aligning instruction with students' dominant learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) improves the students' academic achievement. However, empirical evidence does not support this practice. This study employs a narrative literature review method to examine existing research on learning styles and evidence-based practices. This article deconstructs the learning styles myth by comparing it with evidence-based practices such as retrieval practice, spaced learning, formative assessment, and collaborative learning. Findings from global and Indonesian studies consistently highlight that evidence-based strategies consistently enhance retention, engagement, and achievement in English language learning. These insights are expected to encourage teachers in Indonesia to shift from myth-based paradigms toward more scientific, contextual, and effective teaching practices.

Keywords: Learning Styles Myth; Educational Psychology; Evidence-Based English Language Learning

INTRODUCTION

The concept of learning styles has been widely accepted in the field of English language teaching for decades. Teachers around the world, including those in Indonesia, have been taught to identify students as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learners and to adapt their teaching methods accordingly. This belief has shaped countless teacher training programs and classroom practices, fostering the idea that instructional success depends on matching teaching techniques to individual learning preferences. Despite its popularity, a growing body of scientific evidence shows that learning styles do not actually improve learning outcomes. The persistence of this myth represents one of the most significant misconceptions in education today, particularly in contexts like Indonesia, where traditional approaches often overshadow evidence-based pedagogical innovation.

From an educational psychology perspective, the idea of learning styles is appealing because it seems to value learner diversity and personalization. However, this surface-level appeal masks its lack of empirical support. Santrock (2021) argues that learning is not determined by fixed sensory preferences but by a combination of cognitive development, motivation, prior knowledge, and active learning strategies. His framework emphasizes that students learn best when they are cognitively engaged, when instruction builds on their existing knowledge, and when motivation is fostered through meaningful and challenging tasks. This understanding contrasts sharply with the simplified notion that one's sensory modality determines learning success. According to Santrock, effective learning is a dynamic process that requires interaction among psychological, social, and environmental factors.

Evidence from international and local studies reinforces this perspective. Husmann and O'Loughlin (2019) conducted a systematic review that revealed no consistent relationship between teaching to a supposed learning style and improved academic achievement. Their findings indicate that even when teachers accurately identify students' preferred learning styles, adapting lessons accordingly does not lead to measurable gains in performance. Instead, what enhances learning is the use of strategies that promote active engagement, retrieval practice, spaced repetition, and feedback. These methods are grounded in cognitive science rather than assumptions about sensory modality.

In the Indonesian educational context, however, the learning styles theory continues to dominate both teacher beliefs and instructional practices. Research by Fitriani and Suendarti (2021), Riana et al. (2023), and Darmita (2024) shows that many English teachers still classify their students into visual, auditory, and kinesthetic categories. This is often done during lesson planning or student assessments. Such classification influences how teachers design their teaching materials and classroom activities. Yet, none of these studies have provided experimental or empirical evidence proving that these approaches actually improve student outcomes. The continued reliance on learning styles can be traced to outdated training materials, a lack of access to current educational research, and the assumption that personalization inherently leads to better results.

At the same time, research on evidence-based practices in language learning is steadily growing and has produced consistent results. Studies on retrieval practice, such as those by Terai et al. (2021), show that recalling information through practice tests or active questioning strengthens long-term memory and understanding. Noor et al. (2021) demonstrate that spaced learning where lessons are distributed over time instead of being delivered in one session enhances retention and comprehension of English vocabulary and grammar. Similarly, Syifa and Alrahman (2025) found that blended learning, which integrates digital tools and classroom instruction, significantly improves students' participation and motivation. These findings highlight that approaches grounded in empirical

research produce measurable gains, unlike those based on untested assumptions such as learning styles.

This study seeks to address a crucial gap in Indonesian English language education. While many studies have focused on identifying students' learning styles, there is a noticeable lack of research testing whether adapting instruction to these styles truly enhances learning outcomes. Moreover, very few studies have directly compared the effectiveness of learning style-based instruction with evidence-based practices such as retrieval practice or spaced repetition. The absence of such comparative analysis limits teachers' ability to make informed decisions about which instructional methods actually work. This article aims to fill this gap by critically examining the learning styles myth through the lens of Santrock's educational psychology and by advocating for a shift toward practices supported by scientific evidence.

Santrock's framework provides a valuable foundation for understanding why learning styles fail to explain real learning differences. He emphasizes that student success depends on factors such as attention, motivation, cognitive load, and the use of metacognitive strategies. These elements determine how learners process and retain information. For example, a student who understands how to monitor their comprehension, manage distractions, and apply retrieval techniques will likely outperform a student who relies solely on materials designed to match a supposed sensory preference. From this perspective, effective instruction should not be about catering to labels like "visual" or "auditory," but about helping students build skills to learn in flexible and adaptive ways.

The novelty of this study lies in connecting Santrock's educational psychology with the growing call for evidence-based practice in English language education. While discussions of learning styles have been widespread, few studies in Indonesia have analyzed the issue through a psychological and empirical lens. By applying Santrock's theory, this article moves beyond critique and offers a constructive framework that teachers can use to understand learning more realistically. It invites educators to reflect on their instructional decisions and to ground their teaching in methods that have been validated by research rather than intuition.

In conclusion, the enduring appeal of learning styles reflects a deep desire among teachers to respect individual differences. Yet, without scientific validation, this approach risks wasting valuable classroom time and misdirecting instructional effort. By examining the learning styles myth through Santrock's educational psychology, this study argues for a paradigm shift toward evidence-based English language teaching in Indonesia. The findings support a move away from the illusion of personalized learning toward practices that truly foster comprehension, memory, and motivation. Ultimately, embracing evidence-based pedagogy can empower both teachers and students to achieve more meaningful and lasting learning outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Deconstructing the Learning Styles Myth Through Santrock's Educational Psychology Framework

The concept of learning styles, particularly the VAK (Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic) model, has permeated educational discourse despite lacking empirical support. Newton (2015) revealed that over 90% of university lecturers believe in learning styles effectiveness despite weak scientific evidence. This widespread belief exemplifies what Yfanti and Doukakis (2021) categorize as a "neuromyth", misconceptions about brain functioning that mislead educational practices. The learning styles approach contradicts cognitive psychology principles by suggesting that individuals learn primarily through one sensory modality, when research shows the brain processes information through multiple channels simultaneously. In Indonesia, this myth persists strongly, with English teachers frequently implementing learning style-based approaches (Fitriani & Suendarti, 2021; Riana et al., 2023). However, such practices may limit students' learning experiences by restricting them to single modalities, ignoring the complex and multidimensional nature of learning (Coffield et al., 2004).

Santrock's (2021) educational psychology framework offers a more scientifically grounded alternative that directly challenges the learning styles concept. Rather than endorsing rigid learning style categories, Santrock emphasizes that learning is influenced by the interaction of cognitive development, motivation, and learning strategies. He argues that students can utilize various learning modalities simultaneously, making classifications such as "visual learner" an oversimplification. This perspective is supported by cognitive science research showing that the brain operates in an integrated manner when processing information, with multiple regions activated regardless of how information is presented. For instance, effective English learning typically involves reading texts (visual), listening to conversations (auditory), and practicing speaking (kinesthetic). Santrock's framework contradicts the learning styles approach by emphasizing the importance of developing all learning modalities rather than focusing on supposed strengths.

Santrock's perspective aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2017), which emphasizes that intrinsic motivation, namely curiosity and interest in material, more significantly impacts learning success than matching instruction to learning preferences. This is evidenced in Indonesian contexts, where Yuda et al. (2025) found that students with high intrinsic motivation were more engaged in English learning regardless of their supposed learning styles. The theory suggests that when students are motivated, they engage more deeply with material regardless of presentation format, directly contradicting the learning styles assumption that presentation format must match individual preferences.

Furthermore, Santrock (2021) highlights the importance of self-regulation-based learning strategies, encompassing students' ability to set goals, monitor progress, and reflect on their learning process. This approach contrasts with learning styles by emphasizing active cognitive processes rather than passive reception of information in preferred formats. Research by Lasut and Baureh (2025) in North Sulawesi demonstrated that high school students who employed self-regulation strategies showed significant improvements in English learning outcomes. This evidence suggests that rather than diagnosing learning styles, teachers should focus on developing students' self-regulation abilities and intrinsic motivation, as these are factors that consistently correlate with academic success across diverse learning contexts.

Evidence-Based Practices in English Language Learning

Evidence-based practices offer scientifically validated alternatives to learning style approaches. Retrieval practice, which involves recalling information through short tests or questions, strengthens long-term memory more effectively than passive review methods (Terai et al., 2021). This approach contradicts learning styles by demonstrating that the act of retrieval itself enhances memory regardless of how information was initially presented. In Indonesia, Lindawati and Sengkey (2017) found that quizzes and role-playing methods in English vocabulary learning helped students retain new words more effectively.

Similarly, spaced learning, which involves repeating material at specific intervals, proves superior to massed practice for long-term retention (Noor et al., 2021). This strategy works by creating desirable difficulties that strengthen memory consolidation, a process that operates regardless of individual learning preferences. Halizah and Anggraini's (2024) study in Medan demonstrated that spaced repetition significantly improved English vocabulary mastery among junior high school students, providing local evidence for this universal learning principle.

Formative assessment represents another evidence-based approach that enhances learning outcomes. Black and Wiliam (2018) showed that continuous feedback helps students address weaknesses directly, improving overall performance. This approach focuses on the learning process rather than supposed learning styles, emphasizing that all students benefit from timely feedback regardless of how they prefer to receive information. In Indonesia, Nurjain et al. (2025) found that implementing formative assessment in English language learning encouraged student engagement and increased confidence in speaking.

Collaborative learning also demonstrates significant benefits, with Kusmiarti and Yuniati (2020) confirming its effectiveness in improving communication skills, problem-solving, and conceptual understanding. This social constructivist approach aligns with Santrock's view that learning is inherently social and contextual, not merely an individual cognitive process determined by learning preferences. Perawati's (2021) research on the Think Talk Write model in Indonesian English

classrooms showed that small group discussions encouraged students to speak more confidently and actively use new vocabulary. These evidence-based strategies provide a more robust foundation for English language instruction than unproven learning style approaches.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This research employed a narrative literature review methodology to critically examine the concept of learning styles in English language education. A narrative literature review was chosen over a systematic review or meta-analysis because it allows for a more comprehensive exploration of theoretical perspectives and critical analysis of concepts across diverse studies. This approach is particularly suitable for deconstructing established educational paradigms like learning styles, as it enables the researcher to synthesize findings from different theoretical traditions and identify underlying assumptions. The aim was to deconstruct the learning styles myth by comparing previous research findings with Santrock's educational psychology perspective and evidence-based practices. The data sources consisted of seven international articles and twelve local publications from English language education journals in Indonesia, selected to provide both global and local perspectives on the topic.

Instrument and Procedure

The literature search was conducted through academic databases including Google Scholar, ERIC, and Garuda using keywords such as "learning styles myth," "evidence-based teaching," "English language learning in Indonesia," "retrieval practice," and "formative assessment." Selection criteria included articles that were (1) relevant to the research topic, (2) published between 20015 and 2024, and (3) based on empirical research or valid theoretical studies. This systematic approach ensured that the review included current, high-quality literature addressing both the learning styles concept and alternative evidence-based approaches.

Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted using a narrative thematic approach with the following sequential steps: First, all selected articles were thoroughly read and initial notes were taken on key concepts and findings. Second, the literature was coded and grouped into three main themes: (1) the myth of learning styles, (2) Santrock's psychological perspective, and (3) evidence-based practices. Third, within each theme, sub-themes were identified and patterns across studies were noted. Fourth, the findings were synthesized to draw implications for English language learning in Indonesia. As a narrative literature study, this review acknowledges its limitations compared to systematic reviews or meta-analyses, as it involves potentially subjective selection of literature according to the research objectives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Learning Styles Versus Evidence-Based Practices

Literature analysis reveals a significant contradiction between the popularity of the learning styles concept and its lack of empirical support. Newton (2015) asserts that despite the very weak scientific evidence, belief in this myth thrives in higher education. This mistaken belief, which Yfanti & Doukakis (2021) categorize as a neuromyth, poses a serious obstacle to implementing truly effective pedagogy.

Table 1. Comparison of Learning Styles Paradigms and Evidence-Based Practices

Paradigm Aspect	Learning Styles Paradigm	Evidence-Based Practice
Theoretical Basis	Individual sensory preferences	Cognitive psychology & learning principles
Teaching Focus	Matching methods with learning styles	Applying effective strategies for all
Impact	Potentially limits the learning experience	Enhances long-term retention and understanding

Table 1 clearly maps the fundamental differences between the two paradigms. The learning styles paradigm is based on the mistaken assumption that each student has a dominant information-receiving channel. However, the human brain operates in an integrated manner, and effective learning involves multiple representations. For teachers, this means that rather than preparing different materials for supposed visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learners, they should focus on implementing strategies that work for all students. The evidence-based approach offers a more efficient and effective teaching model that doesn't require teachers to diagnose individual learning styles but instead implement universally effective strategies. This comparison highlights how evidence-based practices align more closely with Santrock's educational psychology framework, which emphasizes cognitive processes and contextual factors over fixed learning preferences.

Table 2. Recommended Evidence-Based Strategies for English Language Learning

Strategy	Brief Description	Application Example
Retrieval Practice	Actively recalling information from memory	Short vocabulary quiz at the beginning of a lesson
Spaced Learning	Reviewing material with time intervals	Reviewing grammar material periodically

Strategy	Brief Description	Application Example
Collaborative Learning	Learning through discussion and cooperation	Group discussion to analyze a text
Blended Learning	Integration between face-to-face classroom sessions and online/digital learning activities	Studying material independently via an online/digital platform before attending class

Table 2 presents practical evidence-based strategies that English teachers can implement immediately. For Indonesian educators working with limited resources, these strategies offer accessible approaches that don't require specialized materials for different learning styles. For instance, retrieval practice through simple vocabulary quizzes can be implemented with minimal preparation, while collaborative learning leverages existing classroom resources. The table serves as a practical guide for teachers transitioning from learning style-based approaches to evidence-based practices. These strategies align with Santrock's emphasis on active learning processes, self-regulation, and social interaction in educational contexts.

Santrock (2021) does not support rigid categorizations such as learning styles. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of dynamic contextual and cognitive factors, such as motivation, self-regulation, and metacognition. Effective English learning is determined more by the extent to which students are cognitively engaged and motivated to practice the language, rather than by whether the material is presented visually or auditorily. This perspective directly challenges the learning styles approach by suggesting that all students benefit from engaging, cognitively demanding activities regardless of their supposed learning preferences.

Research in Indonesia on learning styles tends to be descriptive rather than experimental. While several studies identified and categorized student learning styles, none presented concrete evidence that matching teaching methods to specific learning styles directly improves English achievement. Instead, the data indirectly strengthens the argument for abandoning learning style-based approaches. A study by Puspita et al. (2025) at SMAN 1 Tebas, while identifying the dominant kinesthetic learning style, ultimately acknowledged the difficulty of assessing the true impact of learning styles on achievement. The study explicitly mentioned other opinions that stated that learning styles do not influence learning outcomes and referred to the study by Nurnaifah et al. (2022) which found no significant differences in academic achievement between students with visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learning styles. This underscores that research in Indonesia tends to be descriptive-correlational in mapping learning styles, rather than experimental, specifically testing the validity of the matching hypothesis. More influential are factors such as frequency of practice and student self-confidence, which aligns with Santrock's emphasis on motivation and context.

One of the most powerful evidence-based strategies is retrieval practice. This strategy, as listed in Table 2, stimulates the brain to strengthen memory pathways. In the English context, short, low-stress role-playing method has been shown to be far more effective for long-term vocabulary retention than simply matching learning to learning styles (Lindawati & Sengkey, 2017). This approach aligns with Santrock's emphasis on active cognitive processes and self-regulation in learning. Spaced learning is another key strategy. Instead of learning grammar in a single, intensive session, repetition spaced over several days or weeks has proven superior. Halizah and Anggraini (2024) demonstrated its effectiveness in the Indonesian context, where students who studied sentence structures at regular intervals demonstrated better comprehension. This strategy reflects Santrock's understanding of memory consolidation and the importance of distributed practice in cognitive development.

Collaborative learning positions students as active agents in constructing knowledge, a principle aligned with social constructivism from the perspective of Santrock (2021). Group discussions and collaborative projects in English learning not only hone speaking skills but also encourage deeper information processing, as observed in Perawati's (2021) research. This approach embodies Santrock's emphasis on the social context of learning and the importance of interaction in cognitive development. Similarly, blended learning strategies that integrate face-to-face learning with digital components have also demonstrated significant effectiveness. This approach is able to optimally encourage student motivation and engagement. Research by Yuda et al. (2025) found that students with high intrinsic motivation were more active in learning English through a blended learning model, regardless of their learning style. This suggests that the flexibility offered by blended learning in accessing online materials and utilizing them in face-to-face sessions can meet diverse learning needs without being tied to learning style categorizations. This approach aligns with Santrock's emphasis on contextual factors and motivation in learning.

Although not listed in the short table, formative assessment is another pillar of evidence-based practice. This assessment aims to provide rapid, formative feedback during the learning process, allowing teachers and students to identify weaknesses and make immediate improvements (Nurjain et al., 2025), something the learning styles approach does not provide. This strategy reflects Santrock's emphasis on self-regulation and metacognition in learning. This paradigm shift shifts the teacher's role from being a diagnostician of students' learning styles to being an architect of learning experiences. Teachers are required to design activities that incorporate various evidence-based strategies, such as incorporating retrieval practice and collaborative learning into a single lesson, rather than preparing separate materials for visual or kinesthetic groups. This role transformation aligns with Santrock's view of teachers as facilitators of learning processes rather than mere transmitters of information.

The biggest challenge is changing entrenched mentalities. Many teachers and even textbooks in Indonesia still teach learning styles as truth. Therefore, ongoing training and scientific literacy outreach are needed for teachers to introduce these more effective alternative strategies. Deconstructing the myth of learning styles is a crucial step toward a more rational and impactful English language pedagogy. By adhering to the principles of educational psychology by Santrock (2021) and empirical evidence from within and outside the country, educators can abandon unproven practices and shift to strategies that truly empower the learning potential of all students.

This analysis contributes to improving English teaching practices in Indonesia by providing a clear alternative to the learning styles paradigm. By connecting Santrock's educational psychology framework with practical evidence-based strategies, this research offers teachers a theoretically grounded and empirically supported approach to English language instruction. The recommended strategies are particularly valuable in Indonesian contexts where resources may be limited, as they can be implemented without requiring specialized materials or extensive diagnostic processes. Furthermore, this research highlights the importance of teacher training and curriculum development in promoting evidence-based practices over educational myths.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that tailoring instruction to students' learning styles in English language learning is a persistent educational myth without a solid empirical foundation. Across various studies, including those conducted in Indonesia, there is consistent evidence that aligning teaching methods with students' visual, auditory, or kinesthetic preferences does not lead to significant improvements in academic achievement. Instead, student success is influenced by more complex psychological and pedagogical factors. Drawing on Santrock's educational psychology framework, this study emphasizes that learning outcomes are shaped by internal elements such as intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and cognitive strategy use. These factors determine how students process, retain, and apply knowledge far more effectively than presumed sensory preferences.

Evidence from recent studies supports this position. Research on retrieval practice, spaced learning, formative assessment, and collaborative learning consistently shows measurable benefits for language acquisition and learner engagement. These findings indicate that English language instruction grounded in evidence-based principles offers more substantial and lasting learning gains than approaches built on unverified assumptions. Therefore, Indonesian English educators need to critically reevaluate long-held beliefs about learning styles and consciously transition toward research-supported teaching practices. Such a shift will not only enhance classroom effectiveness but also strengthen the pedagogical and theoretical foundation of English education in the country.

This study also underscores the need for systemic reform at the institutional level. Teacher training programs and curriculum policymakers should revise professional development materials to integrate evidence-based instructional strategies and exclude outdated theories such as learning styles. This transformation requires continuous dialogue between researchers, educators, and policymakers to ensure that classroom practices are aligned with current educational psychology and empirical research. Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. As a narrative literature review, this study may involve subjective selection of sources and relies primarily on published research. Future studies should include experimental and longitudinal research to directly compare learning style-based approaches with evidence-based methods and explore how teachers adapt to this paradigm shift in practice. This research contributes to advancing a more scientific and reflective approach to English language education in Indonesia. By embracing evidence-based practices and moving beyond untested educational myths, teachers can foster more meaningful, equitable, and effective learning experiences for all students.

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