



## Differentiated Instruction in L2 English: A Learning Styles Approach

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### Abstract:

This conceptual paper examines persistent proficiency gaps in L2 English learning within Indian schools, where English remains a compulsory second language. Uniform classroom instruction frequently overlooks diverse learner needs, exacerbating underachievement particularly among rural and disadvantaged students, as evidenced by declining reading comprehension in PARAKH Rashtriya Sarvekshan 2024 and ASER 2023 findings. Synthesising theoretical literature on learning styles—particularly the VARK model (visual, auditory, read/write, kinaesthetic), alongside Kolb (1984) and Tomlinson (2014)—it argues that mismatches between predominant teaching methods and learners' perceptual preferences significantly contribute to disengagement, poor retention, and suboptimal outcomes in the four core linguistic skills. Differentiated instruction provides a practical, inclusive solution by proactively adapting content presentation, learning processes, and assessment products to individual styles, thereby fostering greater motivation, skill acquisition, and long-term proficiency in heterogeneous classrooms. The paper concludes with some recommendations: integrating learning styles into teacher training programmes, developing multimodal resources, redesigning curricula for flexibility, and securing institutional support to embed learner-centred L2 pedagogy effectively.

### Keywords:

Differentiated instruction;  
Learning styles;  
L2 English;  
VARK model;  
Inclusive pedagogy

## Introduction

The linguistic history of India under foreign rule shows that Persian was the official language of the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughal Empire, and their successor States from the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century till the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It ceased to be so in 1839 by the British. The British first arrived in India in the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and established trading posts in a number of cities under control of The East India Company. They introduced English in India with an aim to serving its own administrative purpose. Initially English was taught only to the local population by Christian missionaries. There was no official attempt to force the language on the Indian masses. By the 1700s, English had firmly established itself as the language of the British administration and many educated Indians like Rammohan Roy, were demanding instruction in English as a means of social advancement in India. It was Lord Macaulay who first stressed on teaching English language in India in his famous "Minute of Education" in 1835. According to the Minute, there was need to form "a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect" (Bailey 1991, 138). Lord Bentinck, the then Governor-General, expressed his full support for the 'Minute', declaring that the funds "administered on Public Instruction should be henceforth employed in imparting to the native population

a knowledge of English literature and science through the medium of the English language" (ibid). In 1854, Sir Charles Wood in his famous 'Despatch' stated that English could be a suitable medium of higher education in India.

It was thought that the end of the British Raj would herald slow but sure demise of English language in India. This, of course, did not happen. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of Independent India, held that:

"I would have English as an associate, additional language, which can be used not because of facilities, but because I do not wish the people of non-Hindi areas to feel that certain doors of advancement are closed to them. So, I would have it as an alternative language as long as people of India require it" (Nehru 1963).

Hindi, in which most of the Indians used to speak, was designated by the Constitution as the language of communication between and within the States. It was to replace English within 15 years. The plan was that Hindi would be promoted so that it might express all parts of the "composite culture of India" (Spolsky 1978, 56). But in a linguistically colourful country like India with more than a thousand languages, it was difficult to choose a single national language as the State language. As a result, due to continuous opposition of the non-Hindi-speaking States like Tamil Nadu, this replacement was not feasible. In 1967, a law was passed which allowed use of both Hindi and English for all official purposes in India and that situation still exists (Fasold 1984, 24). Therefore, although English is not an indigenous language in India, under Article 343 of the Constitution of India, and the Official Language Act of 1963, English is the 'Associate Official Language' alongside Hindi, used for communication, legal matters, and administration. Besides, the Constitution recognizes 22 languages, including Bengali, Gujarati, Urdu, in the Eighth Schedule.

Accepting the merit of English language, it is now being taught as a compulsory second language in India to government and government-aided school children whose mother tongue is other than English. In West Bengal, where most of the learners' vernacular is Bengali, English is taught as a compulsory second language subject from class I and it continues to be so up to class XII in formal schooling system.

### **The current status of English language teaching and learning in India**

At present, English language is widely used in Indian public fora, media, higher education and governance. According to a 2025 report, India is now home to approximately 265 million English speakers, representing about 19% of its population, solidifying its position as the largest English-speaking nation globally (Status of Spoken English in India - 2025 Report, 2025).

Obviously, English in India has come a long way from its colonial past. The functional domains of its use have now encompassed employment and formal as well as informal communication. It is used widely as a link language in offices and among the educated Indians. It is not only a compulsory second language subject at almost all school levels, but also a medium of instruction at college and university levels to a large extent. It is the language of higher education in science and technology, medicine, trade and commerce and what not! English plays an important role in promoting changes and accepting new trends in the modern Indian society. It is the de facto 'lingua franca' and the 'window to the world' in India. English is required to exchange views on and gain from various international schools of thought, diverse cultures and world literature as well as also to interpret Indian thought abroad. It has been playing a significant role in the overall development of individuals and society to share knowledge, skill, information and feelings in this country.

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 repositioned English language teaching within a flexible three-language formula that prioritises mother tongue/regional language as the medium of instruction preferably up to Grade 8. However, the Policy retains English as a key language for communication, higher education, and global engagement. Rather than functioning as the dominant medium, the Policy recommended to treat English as one component of a multilingual ecosystem that balances cultural rootedness of India with global

connectivity. Further, the Policy advocated communicative, activity-based, and technology-enabled pedagogy over rote grammar-translation methods, emphasising speaking, listening, reading, and writing competencies (Ministry of Education 2020).

## **Aims and objectives of English teaching in India**

Regarding the aims of teaching English, Thompson and Wyatt (1952) held that, the Indian pupil should not only understand English when it is spoken or written, but also, he/she should be able to speak and write it. With a change in position of English in the new set up of India, the aims and objectives of teaching English have naturally undergone a change. English is now taught as a skill subject as opposed to literary subject. So, the objectives of teaching English in schools are acquisition of linguistic or communicative skills. The four skills of English that the learners are supposed to acquire are:

- i) **Listening skill:** It means ability to understand English when spoken. Thus, the objective of teaching English is to enable the pupils to understand ordinary daily English speech spoken at a normal speed. They will be trained in grasping what is being said.
- ii) **Speaking skill:** Speaking skill means ability to speak English correctly and easily. The pupil will have a command over English vocabulary and sense of correct intonation and pronunciation. This can be achieved gradually through regular practice.
- iii) **Reading skill:** This skill refers to the ability of understanding English when written. The pupil should achieve the ability to understand simple and non-technical English first; then he/she is likely to appreciate literary English.
- iv) **Writing skill:** The students, on leaving high school, should be able to write correct English. It is expected that they should be able to write on matters of their personal experiences, interest and needs correctly in simple English.

These four linguistic skills are closely related to one another and one assists work towards another. They should be developed in continual interrelation of the language activities of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

## **Extent to which English teaching objectives have been achieved: Evidence and shortfalls**

English is now being taught as a second language subject in India at the formal system of school education. But acquisition of an adequate level of proficiency in English is one of the main challenges for Indian students. The problem is acute particularly in schools located in rural areas. Incompetence in English has been a major cause of students' failure in either pursuing higher studies in this subject or securing a foothold in the job-market. Experience shows that, in spite of the best possible efforts by language teachers for effective classroom teaching, not all the learners in a class can attain the targeted learning objectives in equal fashion. It has always been the main concern of teachers and parents that their students and children come out as much successful as possible in this subject. Yet many a time, teachers fail to achieve their mission of enhancing academic achievement in the subject in every student in a class. Recent large-scale assessments reveal persistent gaps in English language learning across Indian schools. The PARAKH Rashtriya Sarvekshan 2024 found that reading proficiency declines as students' progress: a whopping 60% of class III students could read and comprehend short stories, compared to 58% in class VI and 54% in class IX, with average language scores of 57% (class VI) and 54% (class IX) (PARAKH 2025). These trends indicate weakening foundational literacy at higher grade levels. Evidence from the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2023 further underscores the crisis: 42% of rural youth aged 14–18 cannot read simple English sentences, and comprehension remains limited even among those who can (ASER Centre 2024).

The challenge is sharper among disadvantaged learners. Rural education studies identify systemic barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and limited home support, alongside grammar-focused pedagogy disconnected from learners' realities (Parashar 2025). The employability implications are serious. A major report on state public universities notes that inadequate English proficiency restricts youth employability and contributes to talent outflow, especially since these institutions serve over 80% of higher education students (NITI Aayog 2024).

### **Key factors contributing to learners' achievement in English: Role of learning styles**

Learning is an interactive process that occurs within a specific environment and is shaped by multiple variables influencing the teaching-learning process. Among these, individual differences play a decisive role in determining learners' academic achievement. In classroom teaching-learning processes, numerous psychological factors are involved. However, on the part of the learners, cognitive abilities, as developed in recent cognitive psychology, such as motivation, personality traits, and learning styles—are critical in comprehending the complexities of second language acquisition (L2) and ultimately determining L2 learning outcome.

The root of learning styles theories can be traced out in the works of Piaget, Allport, Guilford and Thurstone. These theorists were concerned primarily with the developmental aspects of individual differences. Their works hold that each individual processes and learns new information in different ways. However, the term was first used in the 1960's by Frank Riessman. He identified 'the style of learning' as "the idiosyncratic style elements in the learning process" (Reissman 1964, 448). In general, it refers to the uniqueness of how each learner receives new information through his/her senses. Other phrases used interchangeably with learning styles are perceptual styles, learning modalities and learning preferences.

The term 'learning style' has been defined in different ways. A comprehensive definition of learning styles was adopted by a national task force in the USA, comprised of leading theorists in the field and sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. This group defined learning styles as "the composite of characteristic cognitive, affective and physiological factors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how a learner perceives, interacts with and responds to the learning environment" (Griggs 1991, 7). Besides, the concept of learning styles has been defined by various scholars. Claxton and Ralston (1978) defined learning styles as a learner's consistent way of responding and using stimuli in the context of learning. According to Kolb (1984), psychological attributes, resulted from individual differences, determine the particular strategies a person chooses while learning.

Based on the definitions stated above, it may be concluded that, learning styles usually refer to a learner's preferred way of learning. It implies that each individual has a natural inclination towards learning in a particular way and if that preference can be identified, teaching and learning experiences can be provided to help that individual learn more effectively.

### **Educational implications of learning styles in L2 English**

The main premise of learning styles theory is the recognition that students learn in diverse ways. Recent empirical studies in the Indian context reinforce the importance of accommodating diverse learning styles in the classroom. Research shows that aligning instruction with learners' preferred styles—such as visual, auditory, read/write, and kinaesthetic (VARK model)—significantly enhances English language achievement, with multimodal preferences often predominant among learners and associated with better outcomes when instruction corresponds to these preferences (Faisal 2019). For instance, auditory and verbal styles have been found to contribute most strongly to academic performance in English among undergraduate students, while kinaesthetic approaches support practical language skills (Udu and Mwuese 2025). Conversely, mismatches between teaching methods and students' preferred styles contribute to underperformance, underscoring the

need for differentiated strategies to address individual differences in second language acquisition (Payaprom and Yupares 2020).

Given the Indian multilingual context, the significance of learning styles becomes even more pronounced. Linguistic distance between learners' mother tongue and English creates varying levels of cognitive demand, while environmental exposure and quality of instruction function as crucial mediating factors in L2 proficiency outcomes. Personalised instruction responsive to diverse cognitive and sensory preferences of the learners is essential for addressing the varied learning profiles present in Indian classrooms. Scholars have long argued that awareness of learning styles has significant pedagogical implications. Alfonseca et al. (2006) stressed that knowledge of students' learning styles facilitates adaptation of suitable techniques and methods to match their preferred ways of learning. Recognising students' learning styles aids teachers in becoming more sensitive to individual differences, thereby enhancing teaching practices. Cuthbert (2005) similarly maintained that awareness of students' learning styles is vital for adjusting pedagogic approaches. Teachers who understand the diverse learning style domains of their students, tend to employ more student-centred activities and promote active learning strategies. Such knowledge of teachers provides valuable insights into students' strengths and weaknesses, their preferences for certain activities, their behaviour in group work, and their approaches to problem-solving. Instructors can arrange materials and engage learners in activities that accommodate varied styles, while also reconsidering learning problems resulting from mismatches between teaching methods and learner preferences. Felder and Eunie (1995) argued that students learn more effectively when information is presented through multiple approaches. Moreover, when teaching styles are compatible with learners' styles, students retain information longer, apply it more efficiently, and develop more positive attitudes towards the subject (Felder 1993). In contrast, serious mismatches between these two may lead to boredom, discouragement, poor performance, and eventual withdrawal from the subject (Smith and Renzulli 1984). Entwistle (2013) cautioned teachers to recognise the range of learning styles students exhibit and to avoid privileging a single approach that may exclude others. Coffield et al. (2004) further suggested that responding to learners' strengths and weaknesses can improve retention and achievement rates while cultivating 'learning to learn' skills essential for lifelong learning. Reid (2005) as well as Felder and Spurlin (2005) likewise emphasised that understanding learner preferences promotes inclusive teaching practices and sensitivity to classroom diversity.

Awareness on learning styles also benefits learners psychologically. It fosters self-awareness, helping students understand how they learn and how they differ from peers. This awareness supports strategic learning, enhances self-esteem, and strengthens motivation—key attributes for sustained engagement in L2 English learning.

## **Concept and implication of differentiated instruction in L2 English**

Building upon the educational implications of learning styles, the practical pathway for operationalising this awareness in the L2 English classroom lies in differentiated instruction (DI). DI is not a single strategy but a philosophy that proactively plans for diversity by tailoring instruction to meet individual students where they are, rather than expecting them to conform to a uniform approach (Tomlinson 2014).

In the context of L2 English, DI implies adapting three key elements of instruction: content (what students learn), process (how they engage with learning), and product (how they demonstrate understanding). It recognises that learners differ in readiness, interests, and learning profiles—including learning styles—and therefore, require flexible pathways to achieve common learning goals.

DI also aligns with inclusive education frameworks, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocates multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. By encouraging flexible, learner-centred teaching methods—such as varied instructional materials, digital tools, collaborative tasks, and inclusive assessments—DI creates equitable opportunities for language learning. Importantly, this framework

acknowledges that learning styles are not static but evolve over time; hence, instructional strategies must remain adaptable and responsive to learners' changing needs.

## **How learning styles can corroborate to differentiated instruction in teaching-learning of L2 English**

When viewed through the lens of learning styles, DI provides a structured means of translating theory into practice. Awareness of learners' perceptual preferences enables teachers to design instruction that varies content presentation, learning processes, and assessment products. For example, in teaching a grammatical concept such as the present perfect tense, a teacher adopting a learning-styles approach to DI might present the rule visually through charts and colour-coded diagrams, auditorily through verbal explanations and examples, and kinaesthetically through physical activities that represent the connection between past and present actions. The learning process could be differentiated by offering choices: completing written exercises (visual/read-write), participating in group discussions (auditory/interpersonal), or creating skits and timelines (kinaesthetic/visual). Assessment products might include a written paragraph, an oral presentation, or a pictorial narrative, thereby allowing students to demonstrate mastery through modalities aligned with their strengths. Multi-sensory resources—auditory, visual, tactile, and kinaesthetic—can be incorporated to ensure broader engagement. For visual learners, teachers may emphasise written texts, diagrams, and timelines; for auditory learners, discussions, debates, and oral reports; and for tactile/kinaesthetic learners, hands-on projects, role play, and movement-based activities. By integrating diverse methods within a single lesson, teachers can address multiple learning styles simultaneously while encouraging learners to develop flexibility across modalities. Such integration minimises the risks associated with mismatches between teaching and learning styles, reducing disengagement and enhancing achievement (Smith and Renzulli 1984). In this manner, learning styles may serve not as rigid categories, but as guiding principles that inform differentiated pedagogical design in L2 English classrooms.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

The moot point is that learning styles, when understood alongside broader cognitive and motivational variables, constitute a key factor contributing to learners' achievement in L2 English. Recognising and accommodating diverse learner profiles is, therefore, not merely a pedagogical preference but a necessary condition for enhancing L2 proficiency in heterogeneous classroom contexts. Integration of learning styles within the framework of differentiated instruction offers a concrete and actionable pedagogy capable of fostering inclusive and effective L2 English teaching. A learning-styles-informed approach to differentiated instruction strengthens the bridge between theory and practice, ensuring that diversity in the L2 English classroom becomes a resource for enrichment rather than a barrier to achievement. In this regard, a few recommendations may be forwarded:

- i) Teacher education programmes should incorporate systematic training on learning styles and differentiated instruction, equipping teachers with both theoretical understanding and practical tools for inclusive pedagogy.
- ii) Institutions should provide infrastructural and technological support for multi-sensory and flexible learning environments, including access to digital tools that cater to varied modalities.
- iii) Classroom practitioners should assess learners' style preferences using standardised tools and reflect critically on their own teaching styles to avoid privileging a single approach.
- iv) Curriculum designers and textbook developers should embed multimodal content and differentiated tasks within instructional materials to support inclusive practices.

Further research in the Indian context is needed to explore the interaction of learning styles with socioeconomic background, multilingual competence, and technological exposure of the learners, thereby developing contextually grounded models of differentiated instruction for L2 English classrooms.

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