



Understanding Bamyan EFL Students' Learning Preferences and Instructional Adaptation in Challenging Classrooms

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Abstract

This study examines the learning style preferences of English language students at Bamyan University and explores how these preferences affect classroom participation and academic performance. It also examines instructors' awareness of diverse learning needs and their ability to adapt teaching practices. The research used a mixed-methods approach. Data were gathered through a VARK questionnaire, classroom observations, and a student focus group. Teacher interviews and an analysis of academic records provided additional context. Results indicate a strong preference for visual (38%) and auditory (27%) learning. Reading/writing (20%) and kinesthetic (15%) styles were less common. Students with visual or auditory preferences participated more and earned higher grades in traditional lectures. In contrast, kinesthetic learners often struggled due to a lack of hands-on learning opportunities. Teachers understood that students learn differently. However, they reported major obstacles to adapting their methods, including large class sizes, a fixed curriculum, and limited resources. While methods like flipped learning were seen as helpful, they were not widely used due to technological and training constraints. The study underscores the critical need for adaptable, student-centered teaching strategies and practical policy measures to enhance engagement, fairness, and the effectiveness of English-language education in resource-limited contexts, thereby demonstrating the value of learning style theory in such settings.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Learning styles, Student engagement, Academic performance, VARK model (Visual, Auditory, Reading/Writing, Kinesthetic)

Introduction

This study examines the learning style preferences of English language students at Bamyan University. More specifically, it explores how these preferences affect their classroom participation and academic performance. Additionally, it attempts to evaluate instructors' awareness of these different needs and their capacity to adjust teaching

methods. Understanding this dynamic is crucial in the Bamyan context, where English proficiency is increasingly vital. For students, mastering English is a key to accessing global academic opportunities, international scholarship programs, and wider professional networks. This makes effective English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction a central part of higher education.

For example, in post-conflict Afghanistan, higher education institutions face severe infrastructural deficits that directly affect English language instruction. According to a recent study at the same university, only 25% of students regularly access the library, just 18% use language labs, and a mere 15% can utilize online learning platforms due to frequent power outages and unreliable internet connectivity (Islam & Qasemyar, 2025). Furthermore, class sizes often exceed 100 students, and most classrooms lack basic visual aids or digital tools (Islam & Qasemyar, 2025). As a result, these systemic constraints not only limit the variety of teaching methods but also exacerbate the mismatch between traditional lectures and students' diverse learning preferences.

However, there is a recognized challenge. Common teaching methods in many Bamyan universities often rely heavily on traditional lectures and teacher-centered practices. This approach may not align with the varied ways in which students naturally learn. When teaching methods do not align with a student's preferred way of learning, it can lead to lower engagement and create unfair learning disparities. This study seeks to address this issue by investigating the specific learning styles present in the classroom and how they interact with common teaching practices.

The idea that students have different learning styles is supported by several well-known theories. Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences suggests that intelligence is not just one single ability. Instead, he proposed that people can be intelligent in different areas, like words, pictures, music, or physical movement. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory describes learning as a cycle that involves doing something, reflecting on it, understanding the concept, and then trying out new ideas. People often prefer different parts of this cycle. The model used directly in this research is the VARK framework. Developed by Fleming and Mills, VARK categorizes learning preferences into four main sensory styles: Visual (learning through seeing), Aural (learning through hearing), Read/Write (learning through text), and Kinaesthetic (learning through doing and moving). Another useful perspective comes from Witkin's work on cognitive styles, which describes how some learners are more field-dependent (relying on context and social cues) while others are more field-independent (preferring to work analytically on their own). Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding learner diversity.

Research from around the world shows that paying attention to these styles matters. Studies indicate that when teaching methods align with student learning preferences, classroom engagement, motivation, and academic performance can improve. For example, research by Unsal (2018) and by Rinekso (2021) supports this connection, showing higher achievement and more positive attitudes in aligned classrooms. In many educational settings similar to Afghanistan, such as other parts of Asia, visual and auditory styles are frequently reported as most common, which may be influenced by traditional teacher-centered methods (Natividad & Batang, 2018). When classrooms do not offer variety and only cater to one style, students with other preferences can become disengaged and perform less well. This is particularly impactful in language learning, where active use and confidence are essential.

To address diverse needs, educators often suggest more innovative, student-centered methods. Approaches like flipped learning, where students review material before class and use session time for active practice, are seen as helpful because they can more easily accommodate different activities. Research by Kim (2017) notes the potential of such methods to increase preparation and participation. Similarly, task-based language teaching, which focuses on completing meaningful tasks, naturally integrates visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic elements. However, their successful use often depends on specific resources, infrastructure, and teacher training, which are not always available.

In Afghanistan, unique local factors shape how students learn and what teachers can do. Many students arrive at university from school systems that have emphasized memorization and listening to teachers. This background may make auditory and reading/writing styles more familiar and comfortable for them. In contrast, kinaesthetic or experiential methods might feel unfamiliar at first. Furthermore, factors including gender, rural versus urban upbringing, and prior exposure to technology can also influence learning preferences. At the university level, instructors report facing significant practical challenges in adapting their methods, even when they recognize different student needs. Large class sizes, a fixed national curriculum, and limited teaching materials are frequently reported as major obstacles. While some teachers see the value in new approaches like flipped learning or group projects, practical constraints such as unreliable technology, insufficient time, or a lack of training make widespread change very difficult. These constraints are documented in local situational analyses, such as those by Bamyan researchers like Khoshnaw (2022), who highlight infrastructure deficits as a major barrier to pedagogical innovation.

It is also important to consider a thoughtful critique of learning styles theory. Some scholars advise against labeling students with one fixed, rigid style. Researchers like Popescu (2009) and Felder (2020) argue that learning is fluid and that the best instruction often helps students become flexible by engaging them through multiple methods. This perspective does not dismiss the value of understanding preferences but encourages a balanced, multimodal teaching approach. This means using a mix of strategies, combining visuals, discussions, hands-on activities, and text within a single lesson, to benefit all students and help them develop a wider range of skills. This critique aligns with the broader educational goal of fostering adaptable, lifelong learners who can thrive in various settings.

This research connects all these broader ideas and findings to the specific, real-world context of Bamyan University. By identifying students' common learning styles through a survey and understanding the challenges teachers describe in interviews, the study aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The goal is to move from general principles to useful, practical insights that respect local constraints. The findings are intended to inform teaching practices, teacher training programs, and educational policies. Ultimately, the study offers evidence-based suggestions for making English language education more engaging, effective, and fair for all students, even in settings with limited resources. It contributes to the ongoing discussion on inclusive pedagogy by providing data from an underrepresented context, suggesting that even small, context-sensitive adjustments in teaching methods can have a meaningful impact on student success and equity in the classroom.

To achieve this, the present study pursues four interconnected objectives: identifying the dominant learning styles of Bamyan EFL students; examining the relationship between these styles, student engagement, and academic performance; exploring teachers' awareness of and adaptation to learning styles in their teaching; and recommending practical strategies for supporting diverse learners in Bamyan higher education. Guided by these objectives, the study addresses three research questions: what are the predominant learning styles of EFL students at Bamyan University; how do these styles influence students' engagement and performance in English classes; and to what extent do teachers recognize and adapt to students' learning styles? By answering these questions, the study aims to generate evidence-based insights that can help align instructional practices with learner diversity within the constraints of this resource-limited context.

Material and Method

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate the relationship between Bamyan EFL students' learning styles and their classroom engagement, and to explore instructors related instructional practices. The mixed-methods approach was selected to integrate the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research, enabling the identification of broad, measurable trends alongside the collection of rich, detailed experiential data from participants. As noted by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), this design is particularly valuable in educational research for providing a comprehensive understanding of complex classroom dynamics.

The rationale for using mixed methods stems from the multifaceted nature of the research problem. A solely quantitative approach would have captured trends but overlooked the nuanced understandings of classroom interactions and pedagogical challenges. Conversely, a purely qualitative approach might have lacked the generalizability provided by statistical patterns. By integrating both, this study achieves a balance, capturing measurable distributions and correlations while also giving voice to the contextualized experiences of students and teachers. This integration enhances the validity and depth of the conclusions, aligning with scholarly recommendations on the utility of mixed methods in educational inquiry (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Ultimately, this methodological framework not only addresses the core research questions but also provides a robust foundation for deriving context-sensitive recommendations to enhance teaching and learning within resource-constrained Bamyan EFL classrooms.

Samples Collection

The research was conducted at the Department of English Language and Literature at Bamyan University in Afghanistan. This site was chosen purposively for its diverse student body and prevalent use of lecture-based instruction, providing a relevant context to examine the alignment between teaching methods and student learning preferences. Participants consisted of two groups: approximately 120 undergraduate students, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across academic years and genders, and 10 EFL instructors, chosen for their direct involvement in teaching core English courses. This sampling strategy aimed to capture a wide range of student learning profiles and to incorporate the perspectives of the teachers who shape the learning environment.

Data were collected through multiple instruments to strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings. First, a standardized VARK questionnaire (Fleming & Mills, 1992) was administered to students to identify their dominant learning style preferences (Visual, Aural, Read/Write, or Kinesthetic). This was supplemented with survey items measuring self-reported levels of classroom engagement and perceived academic performance. Second, structured classroom observations were conducted using a checklist to document instructional methods, levels of student participation, and the degree to which lessons catered to different learning modalities. Third, semi-structured interviews were held with instructors to explore their awareness of learning styles, their instructional adaptations, and the challenges they face in diversifying their teaching. Fourth, focus group discussions were conducted with students to gather in-depth insights into their perceptions of classroom engagement, preferred teaching strategies, and their views on instructional effectiveness. Finally, academic records, including exam scores and assignment grades, were collected with participant consent to examine objective correlations between learning preferences and academic performance.

Statistical Analysis

Data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data from the VARK questionnaire and academic records were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, percentages) were calculated to map the distribution of learning styles. Inferential statistics, including correlation analyses and ANOVA tests, were used to examine relationships between learning styles, engagement metrics, and performance outcomes. Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and observation notes were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, following the systematic process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012). This involved coding the data and identifying recurring themes related to instructional practices, learner experiences, and barriers to engagement. The quantitative and qualitative datasets were then integrated through a convergent parallel design, comparing and synthesizing findings to develop a holistic understanding of the research questions.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations were central to the study's design. Approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Bamyan University prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent, and stringent measures were implemented to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Participation was entirely voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Academic records were accessed only with explicit permission and were handled with strict confidentiality protocols.

Findings

Preferred Learning Styles of Bamyan EFL Students

A survey of 120 Bamyan EFL students revealed a mixture of learning styles, with clear preferences emerging. The figure 1 demonstrates that visual learning was the most common preference (38%), followed by auditory styles (27%). Reading/writing was next at 20%, and kinesthetic learners comprised 15%. This distribution aligns with other studies suggesting visual learning is prominent for second language learners (Unsal, 2018; Rinekso, 2021). Focus group discussions provided deeper insight. Many students stated they understand material better when instructors use diagrams, slides, or board drawings

a practice tied to common teaching methods in Bamyan universities. Others emphasized that careful attention to a teacher's verbal explanation is crucial, particularly given the standard lecture format in higher education. Students who preferred reading and writing connected this style to exam preparation, while those favoring hands-on learning expressed frustration over insufficient opportunities for practical activities. These comments highlighted how the current instructional system can disadvantage some students.

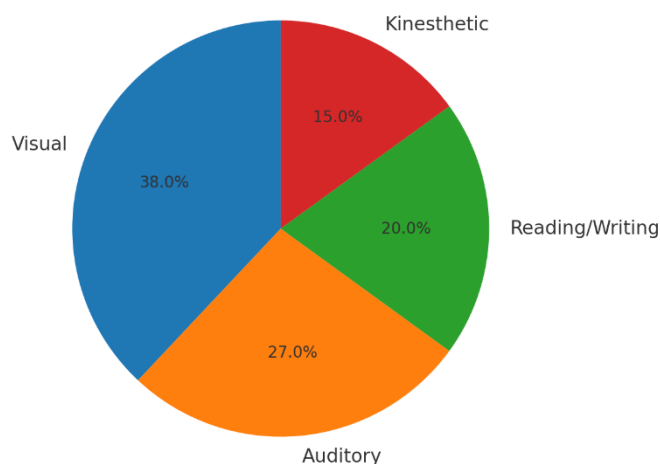


Figure 1 (Predominant Learning styles of Bamyan EFL Students)

Impact of Learning Styles on Engagement and Performance

Data analysis indicated a weak but statistically significant relationship ($p < .05$) between students' learning style preferences and their reported engagement (see Figure 2). Visual and auditory learners typically reported higher engagement and performed better on written tests than kinesthetic learners, who struggled more in lecture settings. Further focus group discussions illuminated this trend. Students noted that their engagement depended not only on their learning style but also on how instructors presented the material. One student stated, "When the teacher just lectures, I zone out. But when she adds pictures or asks us to do activities, I pay more attention." This indicates that a monotonous teaching style leads to disengagement, whereas varied instruction maintains student interest and motivation. It also became apparent that students felt more confident and driven when teaching methods considered their preferred learning styles.

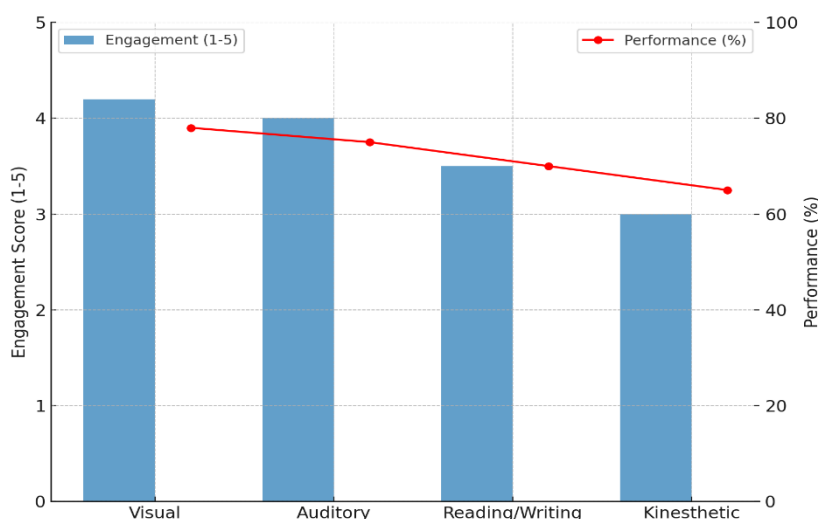


Figure 2 (Impact of Learning Style on Engagement and Performance)

Teachers' Awareness and Adaptation

Interviews with 10 teachers revealed that their awareness of different learning styles varied considerably and they received little institutional support to meet these needs. Most teachers acknowledged that students learn in different ways, but none used structured tools, including the VARK questionnaire, to identify individual learning preferences. They relied instead on personal judgment or informal classroom observations. This approach often supports visual and auditory learners, as chalkboard and lecture methods are predominant. Teacher survey data corroborated this; scores indicated frequent use of visual (4.2/5) and auditory methods (4.0/5), but kinesthetic strategies scored lower (2.5/5). Interviews revealed challenges : class sizes often exceeding 50 students, a lack of resources, and insufficient time to cover the required material. One teacher summarized, "With over 50 students, there's no way to cater to every learner. We stick to lecturing, which is easier." Classroom observations confirmed extensive lecturing with note-taking and minimal group work or interactive activities. Overall, a gap exists between teachers' awareness of student diversity and their actual classroom methods.

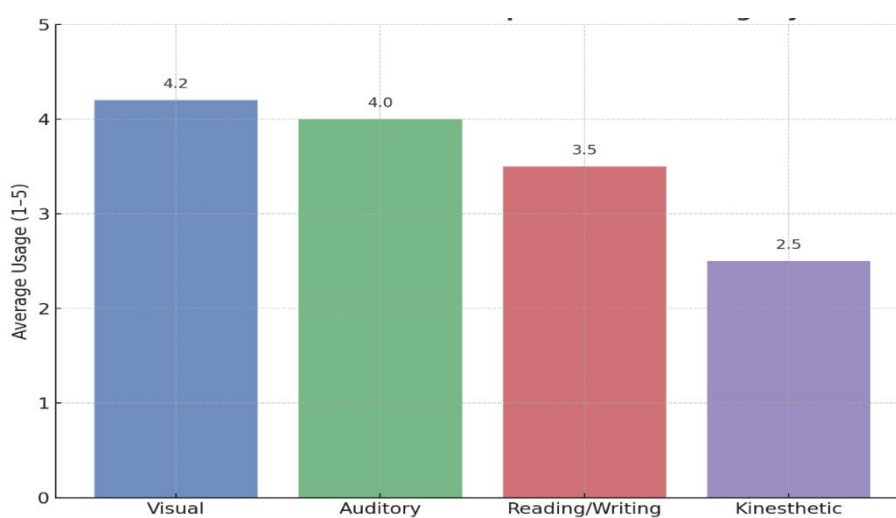


Figure 3 (Teachers' Awareness and Adaptation of Learning Styles)

Effectiveness of Teaching Strategies

Despite challenges, several teaching strategies exhibited potential (see Figure 4). Survey results and interviews highlighted techniques including flipped learning and blended learning. These were underutilized but positively received when implemented. Instructors who incorporated video lectures, group discussions, or collaborative projects observed notable improvements in student participation and understanding. Students echoed this in focus groups, noting that flipped tasks aided class preparation and provided more active English practice. However, significant challenges prevented widespread adoption. Issues included poor internet connectivity, lack of institutional support, and inadequate teacher training in blended methodologies. Consequently, flipped learning often remained an occasional experiment rather than standard practice. Nevertheless, a strong consensus indicated that a mixed-method approach incorporating discussions, visuals, and active tasks substantially improved student engagement and success. One student concluded, “When the teacher mixes it up sometimes lecturing, sometimes discussing, sometimes doing activities we all learn a lot better.”

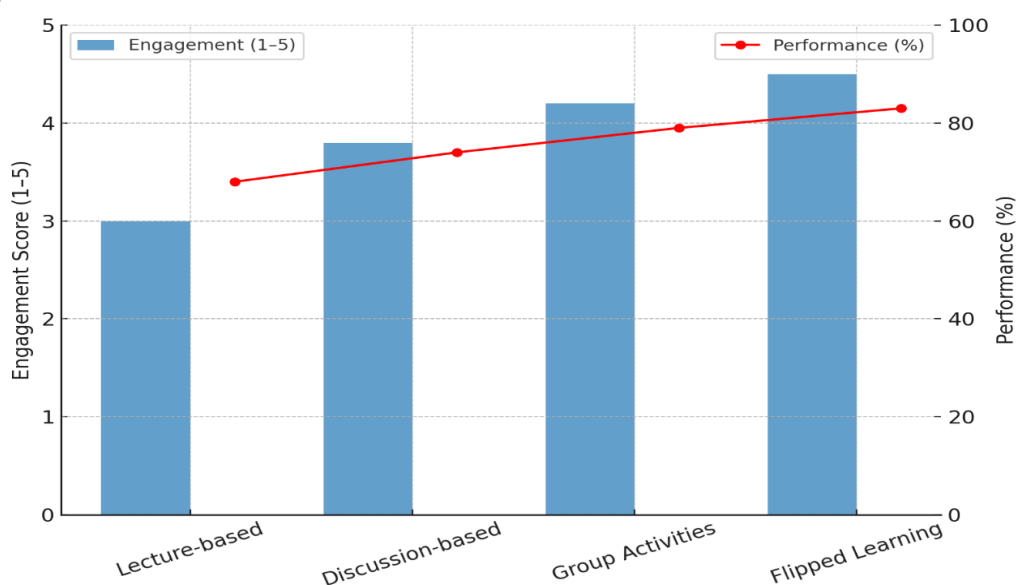


Figure 4 (Effectiveness of Teaching Strategies)

Challenges in Bamyān EFL Classrooms

The study identified broader systemic problems that impede the alignment of teaching with student learning needs:

1. Limited resources: Most classrooms lacked projectors or multimedia tools, hindering the use of varied teaching methods.
2. Large class sizes: Classes often contained over 50 students, making interactive, engaged learning difficult to facilitate.
3. Lack of teacher training: Few instructors had received training on adapting their teaching to focus on students' learning needs, leading to a reliance on traditional methods.
4. Curriculum rigidity: Instructors felt pressured to cover the entire syllabus in a limited time, leaving little flexibility to adapt teaching based on how students learn best.

Discussion

This study explored the learning styles of English language students at Bamyan university. It examined how these preferences affect classroom engagement and academic performance. A further aim was to evaluate teachers awareness of these different needs and how they adapt their methods. The results showed that most students prefer visual or auditory learning. Kinesthetic learners, however, often struggled in the traditional lecture setting. When teaching methods aligned with student preferences, engagement and performance improved. Teachers also noted that using a wide variety of methods positively influenced engagement.

The common preference for visual and auditory styles matches global trends in language learning. Traditional teaching often focuses on oral explanation and written texts, which supports these styles (Unsal, 2018; Rinekso, 2021). In Afghanistan, the frequent use of blackboards and PowerPoint slides reinforces this pattern. Students stated that diagrams, notes, and verbal explanations were key to their understanding. Conversely, kinesthetic learners reported few chances for hands-on activity. This issue is common in resource-limited settings, where teaching often overlooks physical learning (Natividad & Batang, 2018). Not including kinesthetic strategies is more than a teaching gap; it is a matter of fairness, as it disadvantages students who learn best by doing.

Supporting this view, recent empirical work at Bamyan University demonstrates the value of moving beyond one-size-fits-all instruction. Specifically, Islam and Qasemyar (2025) found that scaffolded instruction – such as step-by-step writing support, structured outlines, and peer feedback – improved student writing scores by 22% ($p = 0.286$, $p < .001$). In addition, culturally responsive teaching that incorporated Afghan folktales and local poetry increased classroom engagement by 15%, with participation rising from 70% to 85% and attendance from 75% to 90% (Islam & Qasemyar, 2025). Remarkably, these gains were observed even under severe resource limitations, suggesting that adapting teaching methods to learners' needs – whether by learning style or cultural background – yields measurable benefits. However, the same study reported that instructors lacked formal training in such approaches and that rigid curricula, large classes (often exceeding 100 students), and unreliable technology hindered widespread implementation (Islam & Qasemyar, 2025). Consequently, these findings directly echo our own results: both studies identify a gap between teachers' awareness of learner diversity and their capacity to adapt due to systemic constraints.

An important finding was that learning styles are not rigid. Students often mixed different strategies based on the task. They switched between visual, auditory, and kinesthetic methods as needed. This supports the critique that labeling students with fixed style can be too simplistic (Felder, 2020). A more flexible approach that uses multiple methods is more effective. For Bamyan classrooms, this means moving beyond lectures and embracing varied, multimodal teaching. The connection between learning styles, engagement, and performance was clear. Visual and auditory learners were more engaged and performed better on standard tests. Kinesthetic learners faced challenges in less interactive settings. Focus group discussions revealed a key insight. Students felt most engaged not only when teaching matched their style but when teachers used a lively mix of strategies. This aligns with student-centered teaching principles, which state that variety

and active learning boost motivation (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Therefore, teachers should build a diverse classroom environment that benefits all learners.

Teachers showed a general awareness that students learn differently. However, few used formal tools like the VARK questionnaire to identify preferences. Most relied on personal observation, which led to a strong focus on auditory and visual methods. Classroom observations confirmed this, showing mostly lectures, note-taking, and teacher-led questions. Group work and physical activities were rare. Teachers cited large class sizes, a strict curriculum, and limited resources as major obstacles. These barriers are familiar in many developing educational contexts, where system constraints hinder learner-centered practice (Popescu, 2009).

Despite these challenges, some innovative approaches showed promise. Flipped learning and blended methods were viewed positively. Instructors who used pre-class videos or group projects saw better participation and understanding. Students agreed, noting that flipped tasks helped them prepare and practice English more actively. However, poor internet access, limited institutional support, and a lack of training prevented wider use. Similar constraints are found in other resource-limited settings, where infrastructure often limits educational innovation (Kim, 2017).

These findings have important implications for students and teachers at Bamyan University. Teachers need professional development in multimodal and student-centered methods. Simple changes can help, such as using more diagrams, facilitating peer discussion, or adding brief interactive tasks. Institutions must invest in basic resources, offer flexible curricula, and provide ongoing teacher training. Supportive policies are also needed to encourage instructional diversity. At a broader level, systemic issues including overcrowding and poor digital infrastructure must be addressed.

The study also suggests a theoretical shift. Models like VARK are useful, but learning is dynamic and context-dependent. Engagement comes from varied teaching, student interaction, and responsiveness, not just from matching a single style. In Afghanistan, theoretical models must be adapted to account for local socio-cultural and resource realities.

This study has limitations. This study focused on a single university, so the findings may not represent all higher education institutions in Bamyan province. Self-reported data from surveys and focus groups can also introduce bias, though classroom observations helped balance this. Future research should include multiple institutions and examine changes over time. Investigating technology-supported strategies for multimodal learning in low-resource environments is another valuable direction.

Conclusion

This study examined the learning style preferences of EFL students at Bamyan University and how these preferences relate to their classroom engagement and academic performance. It also explored whether their teachers are aware of these different ways of learning and can adapt their teaching. The results showed that most students prefer to learn by seeing or listening. Students who learn best through hands-on activities, called kinesthetic learners, were often left behind in classrooms that rely mostly on lectures. Using a mix of teaching methods helped students become more involved and improved their grades. However, teachers reported facing many obstacles. These included

overcrowded classrooms, too few materials, a rigid curriculum, and insufficient training. Because of these challenges, teachers found it difficult to change their instructional practices. Even though instructors understood that students learn in different ways, they predominantly used methods aligned with visual and auditory learners. Notably, newer approaches such as flipped learning have demonstrated positive results. These methods helped students participate more and understand the material better. This proves that using a variety of teaching styles can work, even in situations with very limited resources. The study highlights two important needs. First, teachers require continuous professional development. This training should focus on student-centered teaching and using multiple methods. Second, universities need to invest in better facilities, more flexible programs, and supportive policies. These steps are necessary to make teaching more inclusive. Ultimately, recognizing different learning styles is only the first step. To truly improve English language education in Afghanistan, the entire system must support teachers. Teachers need the freedom, training, and resources to use diverse strategies. By doing this, classrooms can become fairer and more engaging for every student. This is how Bamyan higher education can help all students stay motivated and achieve academic success.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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