

An Investigation of the Perceptual Learning Style Preferences of Thai University Students in the EFL Learning Context

การศึกษารูปแบบการเรียนรู้ของนักศึกษาระดับปริญญาตรีในบริบทการเรียนของชาวไทยผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ

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Abstract

Learning styles are some of the influential factors affecting language learning. Therefore, English language teachers should have information of their students' learning style preferences in order to create appropriate lesson plans and teaching techniques that suit with their students learning style preferences. This research aimed to examine Thai university EFL students' learning style preferences by employing a Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ) as a research instrument. The participants were 174 second year students at a university in southern Thailand. The collected data were analyzed by using mean and the standard deviation. The results showed that Group learning was the most preferred learning style among Thai EFL university students ($\bar{X}=4.27$) followed by Auditory and Kinesthetic, Visual, and Tactile learning styles respectively while Individual was the less preferred learning style of the participants in this study ($\bar{X}=2.37$). It is evident from the findings that each student preferred a different style of learning. Based on this, it is recommended that English language teachers should be aware that they should offer a variety of teaching technics for their students and encourage them to use appropriate learning strategies for their successful language learning. Last but not least, it is recommended for English language teachers to study about their students' learning styles

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preferences at the beginning of the course, which may also help students to be self-aware of their own learning styles preferences.

Keywords: learning styles; successful language learning, Thai EFL learners

บทคัดย่อ

รูปแบบการเรียนรู้เป็นปัจจัยสำคัญอย่างหนึ่งส่งผลต่อการประสบความสำเร็จในการเรียนภาษา ดังนั้นผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษควรทราบข้อมูลเกี่ยวกับรูปแบบการเรียนรู้ที่ผู้เรียนของตนเองพึงพอใจ เพื่อจะได้ใช้ข้อมูลในการเตรียมแผนการสอนและเทคนิคการสอนที่เหมาะสมกับรูปแบบการเรียนรู้ของผู้เรียนตนเอง งานวิจัยครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษารูปแบบการเรียนรู้ของนักศึกษาระดับมหาวิทยาลัยโดยใช้แบบสอบถามเกี่ยวกับรูปแบบการเรียนรู้ที่พึงพอใจเป็นเครื่องมือวิจัยในการศึกษา กลุ่มตัวอย่างคือนักศึกษาชั้นปีที่สองของมหาวิทยาลัยแห่งหนึ่งในภาคใต้ ข้อมูลที่ได้จากการเก็บแบบสอบถามนำมาวิเคราะห์โดยใช้การแจกแจงค่าเฉลี่ยและส่วนเบี่ยงเบนมาตรฐาน ผลการศึกษาพบว่ารูปแบบการเรียนรู้โดยการทำงานร่วมกันเป็นกลุ่มเป็นรูปแบบที่นักศึกษาระดับมหาวิทยาลัยพึงพอใจมากที่สุด ($\bar{X}=4.27$) รองลงมาคือ รูปแบบการเรียนรู้โดยการฟัง รูปแบบการเรียนรู้โดยการปฏิบัติตนในสถานการณ์ต่างๆ รูปแบบการเรียนรู้โดยการใช้สายตา และรูปแบบการเรียนรู้โดยการทำตามลำดับ ส่วนรูปแบบการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองเป็นรูปแบบที่กลุ่มตัวอย่างพึงพอใจน้อยที่สุด ($\bar{X}=2.37$) ผลการศึกษาค้างนี้แสดงให้เห็นอย่างชัดเจนว่าผู้เรียนแต่ละคนพึงพอใจรูปแบบการเรียนรู้ที่แตกต่างกัน ดังนั้นผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษควรมีการเตรียมวิธีการสอนที่หลากหลายและควรสนับสนุนให้ผู้เรียนใช้กลวิธีการเรียนที่เหมาะสมกับตัวเองเพื่อให้ประสบความสำเร็จในการเรียน ข้อเสนอแนะประการสุดท้ายจากการวิจัยในครั้งนี้คือ ครูภาษาอังกฤษควรศึกษารูปแบบการเรียนรู้ที่พึงพอใจของผู้เรียนตนเองตั้งแต่ครั้งแรกที่สอน เพื่อจะสามารถช่วยให้ผู้เรียนตระหนักถึงรูปแบบการเรียนรู้ที่ตนเองพึงพอใจ

คำสำคัญ: รูปแบบการเรียนรู้, การประสบความสำเร็จในการเรียนภาษา, ชาวไทยผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ

Introduction

In our 'globalized' world, the rapid growth of English as a lingua franca and its crucial role in all spheres of social life are not deniable. In Today's modern world, The English Language, in many countries, especially those stated by Kachru (1985) in his expanding circle, has been accepted as an important language not only for international education and business contexts but also for

intra-national purposes. As a result, English has become a preferred language by everyone throughout their formal and informal education. In fact, since many of these EFL countries all across the world are struggling to compete in the rapidly growing global economy and to try to be part of some sort of economic union, English language education has undoubtedly become a crucial part of human capital to invest in so as to develop human resources

who are skilled in and capable of being successful economic competitors.

In the current new global economy, such a national mandate requires Thai students to improve their English proficiency in four skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as English has and will become a communicative language tool at an international scale. Since there is a mandatory need for such improvement in Thailand's higher education to meet its national expectation, this seems to be an urgent matter. Thai EFL students are encouraged to study English at all education levels. However, a number of research studies have revealed that Thai students lack English communication and that the low English proficiency of Thai EFL students in Higher education is brought on by a variety of imperfect circumstances. (Tasanameelarp & Girgin, 2020; Tipmontree & Tasanameelarp, 2018)

It was stated by Ellis (1985) that many general factors such as learning age, aptitude, intelligence, cognitive style, attitudes, motivation and personality influence second /foreign language learning. Thus, to create effective English language lessons, English language teachers must consider many factors affecting students learning such as the language level of their students, their educational and cultural background, levels of motivation, and their language learning styles. Among these factors, learning styles, being a main factor in psycholinguistic studies, have

aroused a great deal of attention over the last three decades (Harmer, 2011).

There is a strongly held view that the manner in which individuals choose to or are inclined to approach a learning situation has an impact on performance and achievement of learning outcomes (Cassidy, 2004). Since each student differently acquires and approaches new knowledge in learning, it is very important that English language teachers should prepare their lesson plans by considering different kinds of learning behaviors of their students and design their lesson plans accordingly (Shaw & Marlow, 1999).

It is stated by several scholars that learning styles are internally based on characteristics broadly referring to individual differences of learners and not often perceived intentionally or consciously used by learners during the process of intake and comprehension of new information. Learning style is described by Kolb (1984) and Honey and Mumford (1992) as the preferred or habitual ways that an individual uses while processing and transforming knowledge. It is stated by Kolb (1984) that individual differences and psychological characteristics are closely related to each other and how specific strategies an individual chooses when learning are determined by psychological characteristics, Keefe (1987) describes learning styles as cognitive, affective, and psychological indicators that show how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment. Learning styles are divided into

three main categories, which are, sensory styles that focus on physical channels such as ears, eyes, and touch, personality styles that are related to individual's behaviours, and lastly, cognitive styles that are grounded on learner's thinking process (Christison, 2003).

According to the model constructed by Reid under sensory styles. There are six learning style preferences that describe learners' characteristics, which are as follows:

1) Visual: those who have visual learning style learn better and more effectively through the eyes

2) Auditory: those who have auditory learning style learn better and more effectively through the ears

3) Tactile: those who have tactile learning style learn better and more effectively through touch

4) Kinesthetic: those who learn better and more effectively through complete body experience

5) Group: those who learn better and effectively through working with others

6) Individual: those who learn better and more effectively through working alone

Due to the aforementioned advantages of knowing students' learning styles, this research attempted to examine Thai EFL undergraduate students' Perceptual Learning Style Preferences in one public university of Thailand to gain information for more effective lessons and activity preparation. It is expected that the results

of the study will be beneficial for both teachers and students. Thus, teachers are able to employ the techniques that they think will fit well with the preferred learning styles of their students, thereby encouraging them to use proper learning strategies in the class.

Objective of the Study

This current study was conducted to investigate Thai EFL undergraduate students Perceptual Learning Style Preferences.

Research Methodology

Participants

For the purpose of convenience, one course of 174 English for Business Communication students at one public university in Thailand were chosen to participate in this study. The data were collected in the first semester of the 2020 academic year. The participants were asked to fill in the questionnaires voluntarily and then sent the questionnaires back to the researchers.

Research Instruments

Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ)

A Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ) was adopted from Reid, (1987). This instrument was used to evaluate preferred learning styles of students based on how students learn best using their perceptions: Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic, and Tactile preferences, and two social aspects of learning: Group and Individual preference. In

fact, there are many frameworks of learning styles, but in this study a Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ) was chosen as the instrument as it has been extensively employed by many studies to investigate learners' perceptual learning style preferences especially in EFL contexts. Moreover, the questionnaire has a high reliability in general (Wintergerst, DeCapua, & Verna, 2002).

The questionnaire consisted of 30 items. Each dimension had five items. For the visual dimension, it included items 6, 10, 12, 24 and 29. Auditory covered 1,7, 9, 17 and 20. Kinesthetic, involved items 2, 8, 15, 19 and 26. Items 11, 14, 16, 22, and 25 were under Tactile. The Group was from items 3, 4, 5, 21 and 23. Lastly, Individual was related to items 13, 18, 27, 28 and 30. The PLSPQ was in a form of a typical five-level Likert item. The meaning of each scale was as follows: 1-strongly dislike, 2- dislike, 3- undecided, 4-prefer, and 5-strongly prefer.

Data collection procedure

At the beginning of the semester, the researchers made an appointment with the second-year students who enrolled in the 936-216 Critical Reading course to ask for their interests in joining the study. In the meeting, the researchers explained the research objective as well as the procedures. The participants were also informed that all of their answers *would be kept strictly confidential and would not affect their grades in the course. Then, the Perceptual Learning Style*

Preference Questionnaires were delivered to the participants and were collected back a week later. There were 174 questionnaires to be analysed.

Data analysis

The scores from *the* Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics. The mean and standard deviation were used to interpret the level preference results by using the following scales based on means.

| | |
|-----------|------------------|
| 4.21-5.00 | Strongly prefer |
| 3.41-4.20 | Prefer |
| 2.61-3.40 | Undecided |
| 1.81-2.60 | Dislike |
| 1.00-1.80 | Strongly dislike |

Results

The data obtained from the Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaires were analysed in order to present Thai EFL undergraduate students' Perceptual Learning Style Preferences. The results of this analysis are shown below.

There were 174 students participating in this research, with ages ranging from 19 to 21 years old. They all were the second-year students majoring in English for Business Communication.

The majority of the participants were female (82.84%), and the minority were male students (17.16%).

As shown in Table 1, of the six learning styles, group learning with a mean score of

4.27 was the most preferred learning style by the participants over Auditory (3.79), Kinaesthetic (3.76), Visual (3.55), and Tactile (3.33) and Individual (2.36). For the Individual learning style, most of the students reported

that they disliked this aspect of learning style (\bar{X} =2.36). The average score of the learning styles preferences was at the prefer level (\bar{X} =3.51).

Table 1 *the Participants' Perceptual Learning Style Preference of each dimension*

| Learning Styles | Mean | S.D. | Level Preferences |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------|
| Visual | 3.56 | 0.98 | Prefer |
| Auditory | 3.79 | 0.98 | Prefer |
| Kinesthetic | 3.76 | 0.98 | Prefer |
| Tactile | 3.33 | 0.98 | Prefer |
| Group | 4.27 | 0.88 | Strongly prefer |
| Individual | 2.37 | 1.16 | Dislike |
| Average | 3.51 | 0.99 | Prefer |

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this study indicated that of the six learning styles categories, the predominant learning style as preferred by Thai University EFL students was the Group learning style. The students' least preferred learning style was the Individual learning style. Based on the results, it can be implied that the participants in this study preferred Group learning style more than Individual learning style. In other words, they prefer to study in groups rather than individually. One possible explanation for this is that the Thai nature of collectivist cultures leads Thai EFL students to prefer to learn in groups rather than as individuals (Thongprasert, 2005).

Besides, since the concept of social hierarchy in Thai culture is one of the main influential factors affecting the learning styles of Thai EFL students, they are more likely to choose to be passive learners and to shy away from asking questions or to share their ideas in the class with their teachers (Kirkpatrick & Young, 2014). They tend to interact more with their peers rather than with their teachers. Unsurprisingly the second most preferred learning style by the participants in this study was Auditory learning style. Apparently, the students were familiar with the traditional teaching method in which most of the Thai teachers play an active and central role in the class, acting as the sole supplier of knowledge

and viewing students as empty vessels who passively receive information.

To sum up, the present study provides useful information regarding Thai university EFL students' learning styles. It is shown that the majority of Thai EFL students prefer more teacher-centered learning styles since Thai culture and the students' experiences of learning affect their preferred styles of learning. It is very challenging for Thai EFL teachers, especially those who teach in the tertiary level, to create effective lessons and provide appropriate activities in order to immerse their students in participating more actively in learning. That being said, it is of great importance that Thai EFL teachers should create appropriate learning environments by offering varieties of teaching methodologies that will match up with their students' learning styles and support them to employ other learning styles in their learning process for better learning outcome.

Recommendation for Further Study

This research aimed to provide information on the preferences of Thai university EFL students' learning styles. It is suggested that other individual variables such as gender or English proficiency influencing the learners' learning styles should also be examined. Thus, more information on this field can be obtained.

Moreover, it is recommended to investigate both learning style preferences and learning strategies in language learning as well as examining the correlation between them. Thus, the results can be more useful for EFL teachers how to effectively approach their language instruction.

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