

A Special Edition: The Pilot Case Study of Learning Styles for EFL Learners Preparing for International Context: Shinawatra International University (SIU)

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Abstract

Since the educational paradigm has shifted from the language teaching methodology focusing on teacher-centered to be more student-centered, recent research regarding learners' preferred learning styles has been increased and conducted by scholars among the field of ELT in this century. This paper aims to investigate learning styles of ASEAN EFL students by using Perceptual Learning Styles Preferences Questionnaires (PLSPQ) as a research instrument. One hundred and forty (N=140) Thai EFL freshmen in English Major at the School of Liberal Arts, Mae Fah Luang University enrolled in an academic year 2012 were selected as participants of this study. The results showed that the participants employed a kinesthetic learning style the most, followed by auditory, visual, tactile, group and individual learning accordingly.

Keywords: Learning styles / ASEAN / GMS / MFU / PLSPQ

INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that English is the Global Language used by people around the world. It is used for business, media, communication and education (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006).

Most importantly, ASEAN Community including 10 nations: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Viet Nam, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Cambodia and Thailand has already started in 2015 until now. In this current era, English has been used as the working language, as stated 'the working language of ASEAN shall be English' (Article 34, ASEAN Policy). This shows how importance of English is. People among the ten nations can freely trade and work

with other nations among ASEAN, apart from their only own countries. That is why workflows have occurred. For those who have high proficiency in English, they will have gotten benefits to work in any other nations. Unfortunately, how those who have low English proficiency in this current era can survive should be considered the most.

According to Crystal (2003) and Graddol (2006), the English language proficiency problem has still occurred among non-native speakers of English, especially in Southeast Asia because it is not used as their mother tongue. This seems to encounter with the English language proficiency problem among 10 ASEAN nations since English is only learned as a second language or foreign language. It is not used as their mother tongue language as well as never used as the official language when compared to some ASEAN nations such as the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia that English is used as the official language in their nations. From this, it shows drawbacks of Thais' English language proficiency. So, how this problem can be solved is still questioning. Many scholars, teachers, educators, as well as researchers have tried to find its solutions, as well as the researcher, and also an English teacher now.

As the researcher has been responsible for teaching English, she has wondered how she should prepare herself for teaching, and solve this problem. These questions have always come up in her mind since her teaching career has got started. That is why to prepare herself sooner, the better.

Since Mae Fah Luang University (MFU) is located in the hub of Greater Maekhong Sub-region (GMS) including Thailand, Myanmar, Laos PDR, Cambodia, Vietnam and Southern China (Yunnan), English is used as the medium of instruction

at this university. MFU students are required to study in English for most subjects. Also, it seems that English is the main language of the instruction for Shinawatra International University (SIU) because of the international context. As one of English teachers, she had tried to find the methods for teaching and learning in the School of Liberal Arts (SOLA), the School of Management (Huaxia International College), and Thai Programme in the School of Nursing (SON), etc. The followings are what the researcher had seen to answer her doubts.

In order to teach English successfully, English teachers have tried to find the methods to teach English effectively. Currently, since the educational paradigm has shifted from the language teaching methodology focusing on teacher-centered to be more student-centered, recent research regarding learner characteristics has been increased, as Erton (2010) mentioned:

“In the history of language teaching, there used to be a hot debate about which methods the teachers need to apply to the teaching-learning process. However, in modern language teaching today, relating individually with the students on an academic basis and trying to learn more about the student profile provides further advantages for the language learner and the teacher to meet the program goals and objectives... learning style is one of students’ individual preferences that should be focused on how they learn and acquire language” (p.115).

In Thailand, student-centered method has also been focused. It is stated in Thai Act of Parliament regarding education policy in 1999, policy 4 no. 22 that “To administer education in our country effectively, we must focus on the learners, they can learn and develop themselves; learners are seen as the most important person in this era. We should support them to take initiative in their learning with their full potential” (สำนักงานคณะกรรมการการศึกษาแห่งชาติ, 2542 [English Translation]).

Nevertheless, since each student differently perceives and processes information (Shaw & Marlow, 1999), a student’s learning style preference is one of the main individual differences that influences towards how the student approaches new knowledge (Alharbi, Paul, Henskens & Hannaford, 2011).

In order to better prepare and design appropriate activities for students in learning English, observing students’ learning profile, and their needs are the most considered importantly for every teacher (Dornyei, 2001).

Learning styles are the internal factor that teachers can bring into their consideration to plan their English courses whether or not these can fit well with their students’ interest because each of them is motivated from what they are interested in (Krashen, 1982; Dornyei, 2001). Many researchers have explored learning styles in various studies regarding its importance in the field of the second/foreign language since they are considered as one of the affective factors contributing to learners’ language learning, their learning outcome, and achievement (Reid, 1987; 1998, Bidabadi & Yamat, 2010; Khamkhien, 2011; Njoku and Abdulhamid 2016).

From all information mentioned above, it shows the importance of learning style towards language learning, and teaching in this new era.

Since learning styles have influenced towards language learning, and teaching in this new educational paradigm, the researcher has prepared herself by exploring her students’ preferred learning styles to help her plan classroom lessons. Thus, she will be able to bring a suitable teaching approach, and provide effective course materials that suit her students. This will help them learn best from their favorites. Therefore, conducting this research will not only help her teaching, but also many related concerned people in various cultures.

Furthermore, since there has not been any published research on learning styles that has been conducted at Mae Fah Luang University before, this research may have been contributed some useful information about students’ learning styles towards this university at ASEAN context, as well as for L1 English teacher from foreign countries.

In addition, the findings from this study might also be beneficial for other researchers to get some useful information for their further studies regarding this field.

Most importantly, this research might help EFL students, teachers, educators, researchers, institutions, and government to get more insightful viewpoints concerning the importances of learning styles towards English language teaching. This might help them prepare readiness of each country, and citizens for the ASEAN Community, AEC, since 2015.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of this study were 140 Thai freshmen (male = 30 and female = 110) in English Major at the School of Liberal Arts, Mae Fah Luang University. They studied in ASEAN Studies class in the first semester of the academic year 2012.

Instrument

The instrument of this data collection for this study is Perceptual Learning Styles Preferences Questionnaires (PLSPQ), which is developed by Professor Joy M. Reid.

The PLSPQ was developed by Joy Reid in 1987. She designed the survey to study the learning styles of ESL/EFL learners. She has been the most influential scholar among non-native speakers of English after she conducted her research regarding learning styles of non-native speakers of English in the United States of America. Her study has been the most popular, and influential research on learning styles among other researchers in the field – the context of non-native speakers of English to follow her study.

Reid’s questionnaire consists of five statements on each of the six learning styles to be measured: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, group learning, and individual learning, totaling 30 questions. This instrument is a five Likert scale. Participants are asked to rank how much they agree with each item on a scale from 1 to 5: (5) strongly agree, (4) agree, (3)

undecided, (2) disagree, and (1) strongly disagree.

This questionnaire was selected for this study because “this instrument has been used extensively in many studies across different cultures, especially non-native speakers of English” (Alkhatnai, 2011, p. 56). Moreover, it has been “the most widely used learning styles instrument for non-native speakers of English” (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004; Khamkhien, 2011). It has become one of the popular instruments to explore ESL/EFL students’ learning styles, which is related to the present study (Khamkhien, 2011, p. 66). Most importantly, it was already passed the process of checking its validity and reliability. Khamkhien used Cronbach’s Alpha to check the internal consistency of the questionnaire. The reliability of this questionnaire is 0.873, which is considered to be high in comparison with the acceptable reliability coefficients of 0.70 (Khamkhien, 2011). This strongly supports the high validity and reliability of this research instrument.

Therefore, this existing research instrument was adapted by the researcher and used for assessing students’ perceptual learning style preferences in this research because it is suitable to be used in order to investigate learning styles of students in this context: Thailand, the non-native speakers of English.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected with a permission from the lecturer, and students in ASEAN Studies class. In the questionnaires, the researcher provided the objectives of the study, and instructions on how to complete the questionnaire. The lecturer of ASEAN Studies class helped the researcher distribute the questionnaires. Then, the questionnaires were distributed to 180 Thai freshmen in English Major at the School of Liberal Arts, Mae Fah Luang University. 140 completed questionnaires were returned back to the researcher to obtain data, and analyze the findings. The data obtained from the questionnaires were statistically analyzed by descriptive statistics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Overall Perceptual Learning Styles

Learning Styles	Mean (\bar{x})	Standard Deviation (SD.)	N*
Visual	18.08	3.03	140
Auditory	18.16	3.08	140
Kinesthetic	18.34	2.81	140
Tactile	18.00	2.80	140
Group	17.93	3.45	140
Individual	17.70	4.07	140

From the table 1, it shows that students preferred Kinesthetic Learning the most with the mean score (\bar{x} = 18.34), whereas the least preferred learning style is Individual Learning with the mean score (\bar{x} = 17.70). Besides, apart from the most and the least preferred learning styles, students employed Auditory (\bar{x} = 18.16), Visual (\bar{x} = 18.08), Tactile (\bar{x} = 18.00) and Group Learning (\bar{x} = 17.93) accordingly.

Table 2: Overall Perceptual Learning Styles of This Study Comparing to Reid’s Study

Learning Styles	Reid’s Study	Present Study
Visual	13.55	18.08
Auditory	14.09	18.16
Kinesthetic	14.62	18.34
Tactile	14.52	18.00
Group	11.15	17.93
Individual	12.41	17.70

To discuss the results, table 2 shows the overall perceptual learning styles of this study comparing to Reid’s study. As indicated in the table, it shows that the results of the present study are parallel with Reid’s study in two issues. First, participants employed Kinesthetic Learning Style the most in Reid’s study (\bar{x} = 14.62) as same as the present study (\bar{x} = 18.34). Second, the result is also parallel between the finding of Auditory Learning, and Visual Learning. In the Reid’s study, students employed Auditory Learning rather than Visual Learning with the mean scores (\bar{x} = 14.09), and (\bar{x} = 13.55), which was found the same in the present study since the mean scores of Auditory and Visual Learning were 18.16 and 18.08 accordingly.

To critically analyze the findings, these might be implied that Thai students seem to learn best from trial and error experiences. They might be able to create, and develop what they have learnt from those experiences, as seen from the most preferred learning style: Kinesthetic. Also, it might be implied that Thai students seem to prefer learning via listening rather than reading since they have been taught by audio-lingual approach in Thai’s English language learning classroom (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004). That is why they seem to be familiar with classroom lectures by listening to their teachers, and audio tapes which have always been used in learning English since they were young.

In this study, however, there is contradictory result of the present research comparable to Reid’s study. It can be seen that Thai students in the Reid’s study preferred Individual Learning (\bar{x} = 12.41) rather than Group Learning (\bar{x} = 11.15). In contrast, the finding of this study contradicted to Reid’s study since the result of the present study shows that participants employed Group Learning (\bar{x} = 17.93) rather than Individual Learning (\bar{x} = 17.70). This might be implied that learning styles of students can be changed if they are in a different learning environment. Since Thai culture is collectivism, it seems Thai students might be familiar with learning in groups. Meanwhile, when Thai students study in the United States of America, they seem to adjust their learning style to fit for different learning environment. This can be seen from the result that Individual Learning was employed rather than Group Learning when Thai students move to study in America, which was found in Reid’s study.

Table 3: Perceptual Learning Styles and Gender

Learning Styles	Male (N = 30)	Female (N = 110)	N*
Visual	17.67	18.19	140
Auditory	17.80	18.26	140
Kinesthetic	18.10	18.40	140
Tactile	18.10	17.97	140
Individual	17.53	17.75	140
Group	17.63	18.01	140

From the table 3, it shows that the results were not different from the table 1 since both male and female students preferred Kinesthetic Learning the most, and the least preferred learning style is Individual Learning. Therefore, this might be implied that genders are not the variable affecting learning styles of students. Also, there was interesting finding among Kinesthetic Learning, and Tactile Learning. It can be seen that male students employed both Kinesthetic, and Tactile Learning the most with the same mean score ($\bar{x} = 18.10$). This might be implied that male students seem to learn best via body and hands-on experience. They seem to prefer experimental learning by touching, and learning from their trial and error experiences.

CONCLUSION

This research was conducted to investigate learning styles of Thai freshmen in English Major at the School of Liberal Arts, Mae Fah Luang University. Observing students' learning styles in their first year can help MFU teachers including the researcher to plan classroom lessons, and provide course materials that suit them throughout their study in MFU.

From the results, it can be seen that even though students are in the same major and the same year, each individual does not have the same learning styles. Each learning style was employed variously by students. Thus, each student's learning styles is needed to be observed, and kept in the record since they first enroll in the university. Furthermore, the important responsibility of teachers is to provide effective classroom lessons, and materials that fit for students' learning. That is why learning styles of students, and their characteristics have been needed to be crucially considered, and understood by the teachers before teaching them.

According to Krashen (1982), learning styles have been seen as one of the important factors affecting on language acquisition, especially the second language acquisition (SLA); it affects English language learning, and English Language Teaching (ELT). In line with this, Haley and Rentz (1999) claimed "according to Krashen, 'the true causative variables in second language acquisition derive from the input hypothesis and affective filter - the amount of comprehensible input the acquirer receives and understands, and the strength of the affective filter, or the degree to which the acquirer is 'open' to the input'" (p.95). From this, it can be concluded that it seems learning styles can be seen as the affective filter

because it is related to learners' preferences, and feeling to acquire language. This shows how teachers can provide the 'input' which is appropriate for learning styles of learners.

Since the result of this study shows that students employed Kinesthetic Learning the most, experiential learning, and total physical involvement in learning should be provided for students in order to help them learn best, and achieve their own learning. Besides, group activities should be provided for Thai students prefer Group Learning rather than Individual Learning. Teachers should provide activities, and materials that students like to learn because they will be motivated to take initiative to learn by themselves, and after that they will become autonomous learners. To support the statement above, the research shows that learners will be motivated to learn best from their favorite habit (Dörnyei, 2001a; Dörnyei, 2001b).

Nevertheless, teachers should not avoid other learning styles of students even though most of them prefer Kinesthetic Learning. It is claimed that learning styles of students can be changed, and adjusted all the time if they are in different learning environments. Thus, teachers should encourage their students to be familiar with various learning styles. For example, even though students of this study preferred Auditory Learning rather than Visual Learning, teachers might provide video clips including both sounds, and pictures that students already like to learn by hearing, and at the same time, students can be trained to learn by Visual Learning (Fourier, 1984; Ramburuth, 1998; Reid, 1995; Wasanasomsitthi, 2000).

To conclude, it can be claimed that the study of learning styles employed by the second, and foreign language learners can help educators, researchers, teachers, and those involving in each educational field realize that learning style is one of the important factors influencing towards the success of teaching and learning. As mentioned, one of the teacher responsibilities is to provide effective classroom lessons, and course materials for helping students learn best. The researcher strongly believes that teachers can adjust their teaching styles, provide classroom lessons, and materials to serve their students' needs after investigating learning styles of their students, and understanding them more. Also, students should be encouraged to try various learning styles, and adjust themselves to be familiar with each learning style. This helps students become autonomous learners, and it is the basis of the current educational paradigm focusing on learner-centered approach nowadays (Wasanasomsitthi, 2000).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Further investigation into other variables affecting on learning styles, as well as the relationship between teaching and learning styles have been always highly recommended. Further research should be conducted to investigate each teaching, and learning styles whether or not there are any similarities and differences among them, or this matches or mismatches with each other. Furthermore, information from open-ended questions for interviewing participants should be investigated in order to be able to give concrete examples of the activities for each learning style. Also, non-Asian students,

as well as non-English major students' learning styles should be observed, and conducted because of various background of students in each context.

So, the target groups of examples were tentatively proposed from Chinese, and Thais at Shinawatra International University (SIU), Thailand with the authorized permitted approval consent before the research will be done and conducted.

I was proposing the integrated case studies of the differentiations between Eclectic Teaching Approach broadly with CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) for further research covering four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing studying from British Council (2019-2020).

As have been seen from the previous case study of Senior Project that emphasizing on which American contributed accent, nowadays, using English to communicate with others is very important for Thai EFL learners because it is an international language spoken by many people around the world (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006; Eiamworawuttikul, 2013; Eiamworawuttikul & Luksaneeyanawin, 2014; Eiamworawuttikul & Hatfield, 2017; Yosraveevorakul, Ekkayokkaya, Sangsuwan, van Lier & Hatfield, 2017; Chulalongkorn University's Graduate School of English as an International Language Program, 2018).

However, according to Katsura & Rungrojsuwan (2015), since there are many different aspects among English, and Thai, some of Thai learners are still lacking of the pronunciation skills, and these might be the problems to get the opportunities in the future since the opening of the AEC (ASEAN Economic Community) in 2015 (Luangthongkum, 2003; 2007, Eiamworawuttikul, 2013; Eiamworawuttikul & Luksaneeyanawin, 2014, Eiamworawuttikul & Hatfield, 2017; Yosraveevorakul, Ekkayokkaya, Sangsuwan, van Lier & Hatfield, 2017).

Moreover, many EFL learners are now familiar with edutainments than before (Doll, 2013). So, it can be assumed that using music or songs from YouTube, which is a part of the edutainments' lessons/activities, can be applied to improve the English pronunciation skills of Thai learners during their leisure time for their autonomous lifelong learning (SALC of CULI & MFU SALLC, 2018).

Hence, this research paper shows the overall results that using music along with the other learning materials can enhance the English pronunciation skills of Thai EFL learners since their problems/errors of English pronunciation are decreased.

Therefore, these show that not only English pronunciation skills can be developed from academic materials, but these skills can be also improved from music, or songs, a part of edutainment medias from YouTube channels, for its effectiveness obviously, etc. (The Peer Reviewing Forms of 1001203 English for Academic Writing: Oxford University Press, 2020-2021).

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