

LEARNING STYLE PREFERENCES OF ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT SRINAKHARINWIROT UNIVERSITY, PHITSANULOK

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BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In recent years English language research in Thailand has begun to focus on the learner. Boosakorn Vijchulata (1986) studied motivation and desire to learn English of first year students at Mahidol University. Achara Wangsotorn (1987) focused on a number of learner variables including I.Q., language aptitude, attitudes and motivation, and study habits as well as students' use of visual and auditory learning modes as related to their success in English. Most recently a graduate student at Srinakharinwirot University, Phitsanulok, Pongsak Pojason (1988), completed a study of high school students' use of learning strategies as related to achievement in English.

This focus on the learner is giving us valuable insights into how the learner can better achieve success in learning English in Thailand.

Morley (1987) in her list of current areas of interest in theory and practice includes "...a focus on the individuality of learners and individual learning styles and strategies." Richards and Rodgers (1987 : 46) in their recent review of trends and issues in TESOL in the past twenty years presents the major ideas under four headings : 'Input Considerations', 'Instructional Considerations', 'Learner Considerations', and 'Output Considerations'. Under 'Learner Considerations' the authors (Richards and Rodgers 1987 : 58) discuss 'Learner Styles' which they define as, "...pre-disposition to particular ways of acquiring and processing knowledge and intimately related to perso-

ality types." What determines a previous particular style of learning is the result of many factors. Brown (1980 : 90) notes, "A person's cognitive style is determined by the way he internalizes his total environment, and since that internalization process is not strictly cognitive, we find that physical, affective, and cognitive domains merge in cognitive style." Joseph Hill (1972, cited in Brown 1980 : 89) has identified twenty-nine different factors relating to learning style.

While there are many individual factors involved in one's learning style, it is possible to categorize learning styles under a small number of cognitive or learning modes. Hartnett (1985) in his review of research on cognitive style and second language learning discusses the dichotomy of the analytic and the holistic learner. He notes that research has shown the analytic learner to be more receptive to a deductive teaching style ; the holistic learner more receptive to an inductive teaching style. Kolb (1984, cited in Richards and Rodgers 1987 : 59) focusses on four major modes of learning : "concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation."

In 1987 Reid reported on a study conducted on the learning styles of 1,234 ESL students in thirty-nine intensive English language programs in the U.S. as well as 154 native speaking university students. Reid constructed a questionnaire *with ten statements for* each of six learning styles : auditory, group, kinesthetic, visual, tactile and individual learning. Validation was done using the split-half method. The students learning

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style preferences were analyzed as to the students' age, language background, TOEFL score, length of time in the U.S., length of time studying in the U.S., graduate or undergraduate status, major field of study, and sex.

This research on learner style has pointed out the importance of having both students and teachers become aware of learning styles. Students taught in a teaching mode in line with their learning style preference perform better. Discussing the results of research on cognitive styles, Hartnett (1985 : 28) concludes that "Students learning English as a second language seem to be more successful and to feel more comfortable in a class which complements their cognitive style." This is supported by Willing (1985, cited in Richards and Rodgers : 60) in work with adult learners in Australia. Willing stresses the importance of teachers making themselves aware of learners' different styles and being open to adjusting their own teaching styles in order to achieve maximum learner attainment. At the same time, these learning styles are general tendencies rather than absolute stable characteristics and hence learners who are able to adjust their style and utilize more than one major mode of learning may be at an advantage in learning language.

The advantage of utilizing multiple learning styles was pointed out in Wangsotorn's study. She found in her study of ninety-seven beginning students of English that "...learning modes could explain achievement by 32% and that learning through the aural-visual modes and the visual modes significantly yielded higher achievement scores than learning through the aural mode only." (Wangsotorn, 1987 : 41) Likewise, Holobow, Lambert and Sayegh (1984) in a study on learning dialogs found that using a bimodal approach of listening and reading was more effective than simply reading the dialog. Students who listened to the dialog in L_1 and read in L_2 outperformed those who only read in L_2 . While those who listened in L_2 and also read in L_2 did best. The researchers concluded that, "...presenting a verbal passage through both auditory and visual modes helps to 'solidify' or 'root' the message in the sense that the visual analysis of L_2 material could enrich L_2 auditory processing and vice versa." (Holobow et al. 1984 : 68)

Considering the importance of learning styles on language learning, the author decided to conduct an exploratory study on the learning style preferences of English major students in Thailand.

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A study of the learning style preferences of English major students at Srinakharinwirot University, Phitsanulok, Thailand was undertaken with the following objectives :

- (1) to identify the students' learning style preferences according to year of study and sex,
- (2) to compare the students' learning style preferences according to year of study and sex for any significant differences in learning styles, and
- (3) to analyze any relationships between sex/ year of study and learning style preferences.

All English major students studying in the second semester of the academic year 1987-88 were asked to indicate their learning style preferences. A total of 269 students completed the questionnaires ; fifty first year students, seventy-two second year students, seventy-seven third year students, fifty-six fourth year students, and fourteen graduate students. This accounted for 98.9 percent of the total English major student population studying in the full-time program. There were forty-seven male students and 222 female students.

The questionnaire used was a Thai version of Reid's (1987) **Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire**. Reid's questionnaire, based on a study of existing learning style questionnaires and validated by experts in linguistics and education, consists of thirty statements, five for each of six different learning styles. The learning styles include the four perceptual styles of auditory, visual, tactile and kinesthetic learning as well as individual and group learning. Auditory learning is learning through the listening mode from lectures and/or audiotapes, visual learning is basically through reading, kinesthetic learning involves activities and total physical participation in the learning situation, tactile learning is through building something or carrying out laboratory experiments, while the individual learning style refers to working on assignments or activities alone and group learning means studying and doing assignments within a group.

The thirty statements regarding learning styles were accompanied by a five point Likert scale, for each statement regarding style of learning. The students were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement ranging from strongly agree counted as five to strongly disagree counted as one. Hence, the highest possible

score for any one learning style would be twenty-five, the least would be five.

Data Analysis

Preference means and rankings were calculated for each of the six learning styles for the English major students grouped according to year of study and sex. Analysis of variance and multiple comparison of means tests using the Scheffe and Tukey B methods were calculated for the preference means ($P < .05$). The statistical analysis was carried out using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) computer program at the Chulalongkorn University Center for Language Study, Bangkok.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general, English major students at Srinakharinwirot University, Phitsanulok prefer to learn through an experiential learning mode. That is, they showed highest preference for kinesthetic learning. The students indicated a preference to learn through in-class and out-of-class involvement in activities, in "doing" things to learn English. They least preferred to learn alone, individual learning style, or to be assigned to work in a group, group learning style.

A detailed look at the group means by year of study and sex as seen in tables 1 and 2 indicates that all study groups preferred multiple learning styles.

TABLE 1

Learning Style Preference Means According to Year of Study

Year of Study	Auditory	Group	Learning Style			Individual
			Kinesthetic	Visual	Tactile	
1	19.40	17.18	19.26	18.08	15.40	18.10
2	18.93	16.38	19.39	18.46	15.99	17.93
3	18.55	16.73	19.74	17.47	15.18	17.42
4	17.89	15.71	20.52	18.11	16.04	18.89
Grad.	18.14	16.00	20.36	18.43	18.36	17.86

TABLE 2

Learning Style Preference Means According to Sex

Sex	Auditory	Group	Learning Style			Individual
			Kinesthetic	Visual	Tactile	
Male	18.28	15.96	19.17	18.15	15.62	17.32
Female	18.73	16.58	19.87	18.00	15.82	18.16

As can be seen from tables 1 and 2 the mean range is from a high of 20.52 for kinesthetic learning by fourth year students to a low of 15.18 for tactile

learning by third year students. These high preference scores differ greatly from the results in Reid's study. The forty-seven Thai students in Reid's study had a

high mean score of 14.63 for kinesthetic learning with a low mean score of 11.49 for group learning. Indeed, Reid considered a mean score of 13.50 or higher as indicating a major learning style and 11.49 or less as indicating a negative learning style. His students rated visual learning at 13.40, auditory at 12.83, tactile learning at 14.09 and individual learning at 12.49 (Reid 1987 : 96).

The results of this study at Srinakharinwirot University, Phitsanulok, show that female students preferred all learning styles more than males with the exception of the visual mode for which males had a slightly higher mean preference, males 18.15 to females 18.00.

A comparison of the student groups' rankings of the six learning styles as seen in table 3 again points out the English major students' preference for

the kinesthetic mode followed for most student groups by the auditory mode with the least preferred mode of learning being individual and group learning. Students in the first three years of university least preferred individual learning with fourth year and graduate students least preferring group learning. In Reid's (1987 : 96) study group learning received the lowest mean scores for all language backgrounds with the exception of Malay speakers. As shown in tables 1 and 3, upper class students in this study, in particular graduate students, prefer to work alone on assignments rather than being assigned to do group work. Reid, quoting a study by Vigna and Martin, notes that 84 percent of native speakers of English at secondary school level prefer to work individually (Vigna and Martin 1982, cited in Reid 1987 : 98).

TABLE 3

**Student Group' Rankings of the
Six Learning Styles**

Group	Rankings					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 st Year	Auditory	Kinesthetic	Tactile	Visual	Group	Individual
2 nd Year	Kinesthetic	Auditory	Visual	Tactile	Group	Individual
3 rd Year	Kinesthetic	Auditory	Visual	Tactile	Group	Individual
4 th Year	Kinesthetic	Tactile	Visual	Auditory	Individual	Group
Grad.	Kinesthetic	Visual	Individual	Auditory	Tactile	Group
Male	Kinesthetic	Auditory	Visual	Tactile	Group	Individual
Female	Kinesthetic	Auditory	Tactile	Visual	Group	Individual

The higher ranking for visual as compared to auditory learning for fourth year and graduate students may reflect the increasing importance of reading skills for more advanced language learners and their increased reliance on the visual mode in studying English.

These most preferred and least preferred styles of learning correspond to the learning style preferences given by students studying in the humanities in Reid's study :

Humanities Students

Rank	Style	Mean
1	Kinesthetic	14.23
2	Auditory	13.26
3	Tactile	13.02
4	Visual	12.80
5	Individual	12.68
6	Group	16.96

(Reid, 1987 : 94)