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Relationships between Students' Learning Style and Their Academic Achievement for English Courses

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Abstract

This study aims at indicating learning styles of EFL students who study in Foreign Language Program, majoring English for Service Sectors, as well as to investigate the relationships between the students' learning styles and their academic achievement for English courses. The questionnaire developed by Reid (1987) was distributed to indicate the students' perceptual learning style preferences. The grades which the students received from previous English courses were also used as the dependent variable to reveal the relationships with their learning styles. Hopefully, the results obtained from the study could show how the students' learning styles can be used as a predictor of their academic achievement for English courses. Besides, the explanation of learning style preferences could be used as the guideline for providing an authentic input, such as language tasks, to enhance students' language learning in different courses.

Keywords: EFL students, learning styles, academic achievement, English courses

Introduction

English is taught as a foreign language in Thailand; speaking English is considered to be important, so emphasis is put on learning it in order to develop one's full potential. Although many schools and universities offer English or bilingual programs, the ability of Thai students as EFL students to communicate successfully stays at a low level. Songkhla Rajabhat University, like most schools and universities, organizes a variety of courses and learning activities to remedy this problem. The policy of the university is to produce quality graduates by focusing on student-centered education. This is partly based on the belief that any learning activity will go better if teachers know and understand the personality or nature of their students. Understanding students' learning style is one approach to attain this objective.

"*Learning Style*" has been defined by several scholars. It broadly refers to individual differences among learners. Kolb (1984) (and Honey and Mumford (1992) describe learning style as an individual's preferred or habitual ways of processing and transforming knowledge. Kolb (1984) states that psychological characteristics, resulting from individual differences, determine the specific strategies a person chooses when learning. Keefe (1987) defines learning styles as cognitive, affective, and psychological traits that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment. Dunn and Dunn (1989) added that each individual's concentration on, mental processing of, internalization and retaining of new and difficult information originates in his or her specific

learning style .In 2005, Zhang and Sternberg put this in a wider perspective by indicating that these differences may also manifest themselves in 'life styles' or even in personality types.

Learning styles also have been classified into three broad categories, sensory styles focusing on physical channels such as ears, eyes, and touch, personality styles concerning individual's behaviours, and cognitive styles involving thinking process (Christison, 2003). As for the study, Reid's Perceptual Learning Style Preference model (1987) which is under sensory styles was used as the basis for the study to investigate the students' learning styles because the explanation of the style preferences would cover English courses' characteristics which were used to reveal the relationships with the dependent variable, English courses. The descriptions of the six learning styles preferences describe learners' characteristics as follows:

- Visual: learn well from seeing and can remember well from reading.
- Auditory: learn well from either hearing words or oral Explanation, and can remember well by reading aloud.
- Kinesthetic: learn well by experience and can remember well from participating in activities.
- Tactile: learn well from doing hands-on experiences and can remember well by writing notes.
- Group: learn well when studying with at least one other student and can remember well while working or interacting with others.
- Individual: learn well when working alone and can remember well when learning alone.

Research has shown that learning styles affect learners' learning behaviour .According to Ueno)1998(, learners with different learning style preferences behave differently in the way they perceive, interact with, and respond to their learning environment .So, for teachers to be effective, they should examine the variations in learning styles within their student population . Knowing the various styles and preferences will make them more sensitive to the individual differences students bring to the classroom)Felder & Spurlin, 2005 .(This bigger sensitivity will in its turn lead to adjustments to the students varied and individual needs.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the students' learning styles and the relationship between their learning styles and their academic achievement from English courses.

Definition of Terms

1. EFL students refer to the first year students majoring in English for Service Sectors at Songkhla Rajabhat University
2. Learning styles refer to perceptual learning style preference which was divided into six physical channels which cover visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, group, and individual preferences proposed by Reid (1987).
3. Academic achievement refers to the grades which the students received from two previous English courses.
4. English courses refer to (i) English Usage in Daily Life, and (ii) Listening and Speaking English in Daily Life.

Research Questions

This study was conducted to answer the for the following questions:

- 1) What are learning styles of EFL undergraduate students studying majoring in English for Service Sectors?
- 2) What are the relationships between students' learning styles and their academic achievement from English courses?

Methodology

Participants

The participants of the study were 35 undergraduate students majoring in English for Service Sectors, Foreign Language Program at Songkhla Rajabhat University. They were the first year student and the age was between 18 and 20.

Instruments

Reid's perceptual learning style preference questionnaire)PLSPQ, 1987 (was used for the study .It aimed at indicating the students' learning styles. The questionnaire consists of 30 items measuring the students' preferred learning styles based on their physical channels which cover visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, group, and individual preferences. As for visual, it includes items 6, 10, 12, 24 and 29 .Auditory covers 1,7, 9, 17 and 20 .The next one, kinesthetic, involves items 2, 8, 15, 19 and 26 .Items 11, 14, 16, 22, and 25 are under tactile . The group is from items 3, 4, 5, 21 and 23 .The last one, individual, is related to items 13, 18, 27, 28 and 30. For each item, the respondents have to indicate whether they Strongly Agree)SA(, Agree)A(, Undecided)U(, Disagree)D(, and Strongly Disagree)SD .(They have to choose only one for every item.

The grades which the students received from two previous English courses, (i) English Usage in Daily Life which aims at developing *grammar skill*, and (ii) Listening and Speaking English in Daily Life which mainly aims at developing *listening and speaking skills*, were also used as the dependent variable to reveal the relationships with their learning styles.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaire was analysed by using descriptive statistics in order to indicate the students' learning styles. Pearson product-moment coefficients were also used to reveal the relationships which might occur between the students' learning styles and their academic achievement for English courses.

Findings

Research Question 1: What are learning styles of EFL undergraduate students studying majoring in English for Service Sectors?

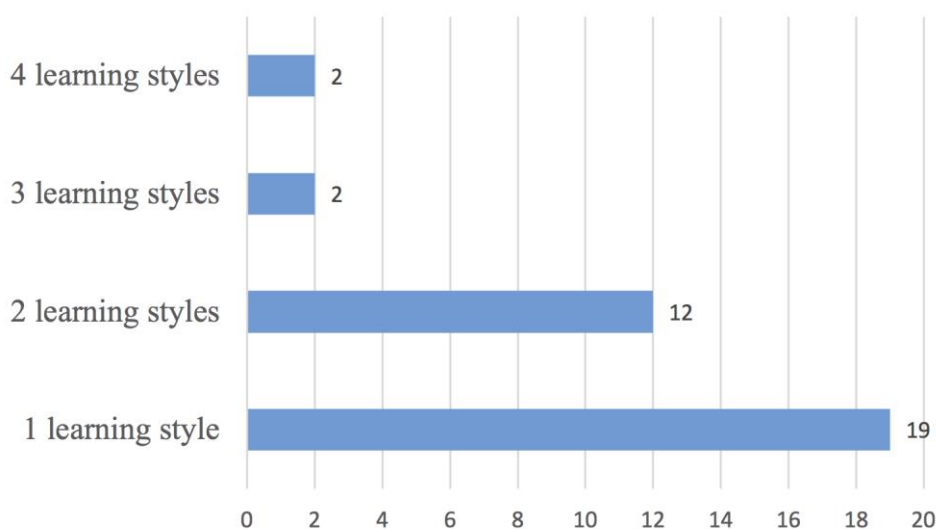


Figure 1. Summary of the students' learning styles

As seen from Figure 1, mostly, the students have one learning styles (N=19). After analysed further, the data also revealed the proportion of students with different learning styles (see Table 1).

Table 1

Summary of the Students Who Have One Learning Style

Learning styles	Number	%
Visual	0	0
Auditory	6	32
Kinesthetic	5	26
Tactile	1	5
Group	5	26
Individual	2	11
Total	19	100

Table 1 shows that the highest number of the students is auditory (N=6, 32%), followed by kinaesthetic (N=5, 26%), group (N=5, 26%), individual (N=2, 11%), and tactile (N=1, 5%).

Research Question 2: What are the relationships between students' learning styles and their academic achievement from English courses?

Table 2

Grades by the Students with Different Learning Styles Received from English Usage in Daily Life Course

Learning styles	Grade							
	A	B+	B	C+	C	D+	D	E
Visual								
Auditory						3	1	2
Kinesthetic					2		3	
Tactile								1
Group					1	1	3	
Individual			1				1	
Total			1		3	4	8	3

As for Table 2, it was found that only one student who is individual learner got the highest grade, B, from *English Usage in Daily Life course*. Also, the other grades which the students from five different learning styles are not different obviously.

Table 3

Grades by the Students with Different Learning Styles Received from Listening and Speaking English in Daily Life Course

Learning styles	Grade							
	A	B+	B	C+	C	D+	D	E
Visual								
Auditory			3	2	1			
Kinesthetic		1	2	2				
Tactile			1					
Group			3	1	1			
Individual			1		1			
Total		1	10	5	3			

As presented, Table 3 shows that among students with five different learning styles, there was only one student who prefers kinesthetic learning style received the highest grade, B+, from *Listening and Speaking English in Daily Life course*, whereas the other grades the students with different style got from this course are similar.

When analyzed the data to explore the relationships between the students' learning styles and their grades obtained from the two English courses, the results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Correlations Between Students' Learning Styles and English Courses

		Correlations	
		English Usage in Daily Life	Listening and Speaking English in Daily Life
Learning styles	Pearson Correlation	.290	-.081
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.115	.372
	N	19	19

As presented, Table 4 shows that among students with five different learning styles, there was no significant correlation. That would be from the limited number of the students. However, after analysing the data further, it was found that there was a relationship between the two English courses, English Usage in Daily Life and Listening and Speaking English in Daily Life (.537) (see Table 5).

Table 5

Correlation between two English Course

		Correlation
		Listening and Speaking English in Daily Life
English Usage in Daily Life	Pearson Correlation	.537**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.009
	N	19

.**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

As seen, the data obtained reveals that there was a relationship between the grades which the students received from English Usage in Daily Life course and those they received from Listening and Speaking English in Daily Life course. That is consistent with previous studies (Zhong-guo & Min-yan, 2007; Alhamdany, 2012) which reported that grammar skills affect the use of communicative skills.

Conclusion

The data obtained from the study showed that among 35 undergraduate students majoring in English for Service Sectors, most of them have one learning styles consisting of auditory (32%), followed by kinesthetic (26%), Group (26%), individual (11%) and tactile (5%). Although it was found that there was no relationship between the students' learning styles and two English courses, the data obtained reveal that student who prefers individual learning style received B which is the highest grade from *English Usage in Daily Life course*, whereas the student from kinesthetic learning style is the only one who got the highest grade (B+) from *Listening and Speaking English in Daily Life course*.

It could be noted that the characteristics of students' learning style preference may enhance the students while learning language skills. As for kinesthetic style, its characteristics, such as learning best based on participating and involving in classroom activities, would help the students in this style to perform better while interacting with others in English. Besides, in order to achieve grammar skill, the students may need to take time and stay alone to concentrate while remembering and understanding the rules or sentence structures. So being individual

learner who learns better when he or she studies alone would be a factor to support using their grammar effectively.

For the study, the implication which is about preparing various classroom activities for the diverse students is proposed based on learning in 21st century skills. They are of communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity (4Cs) which require the students to share ideas, work with others, think systematically, and using imagination or flexibility to develop ideas, respectively. Therefore, providing the students to do the task requiring them to work either in group or individually would be a possible way to serve the students with different learning styles who have different preferences or characteristics while learning. However, having more participants for the further study would help generalizing the data obtained for the students in different contexts.

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