

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Rationale of the Study

Since each person is unique in his/her character, it is assumed and proven by the number of studies Reid (1987), Gardner (1989), (Dunn 2000) that a student perceives and processes information in different ways.

Some learners sometimes experience some degree of discomfort, disinterest or anxiety because the teaching approach of the instructor may not match with the way they prefer to learn. Felder (1995) points out that the student, who feels uncomfortable about his/her learning in classroom, may attribute his/her failure to the false judgment and he/she may also give up learning in a particular class. Therefore, understanding student perceptual learning styles plays a crucial role in selecting the appropriate teaching approaches, styles and materials. It is also essential for students to be conscious of their learning styles in order to learn more effectively and have more confidence.

### 1.2 Aims of the Study

The aim of this research was to explore the perceptual learning styles of Thai learners who study in Junior High School, grades 7 to 9, at Wichai Wittaya Bilingual School in Chiang Mai, Thailand. It also attempted to determine if

perceptual language learning styles vary by gender. More specifically, the research questions are as follows:

- 1) What are the Wichai Wittaya Secondary Level students' learning styles?
- 2) Is there any significant difference between girls and boys?

It was assumed that there would be significant differences in the reported use of learning styles between boy students and girl students.

### **1.3 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research was to investigate student perceptual learning styles and raise teacher and student awareness of learning styles. According to Reid (1987), "Introducing learning-styles information in the classroom and encouraging thoughts on the part of the student to help identify and assess individual learning styles could therefore be a worthwhile goal for the teacher" (p. 101).

The data, which was gathered in this study, could be offered to teachers for the purpose of supporting lesson plan design and development, increasing learner's interest, evaluating students in the English program and developing more effective relationship with students. Davidoff and Berg (1990) are two among many researchers who suggest some guidelines for better learning. They claim that students learn better and more quickly if the teaching methods used match their preferred learning styles. As learning improves, so does self-esteem. This has a further positive effect on learning. Students who have become bored with learning may become interested once again.

The student-teacher relationship can improve because the student can be more successful and more interested in learning. The data also can be offered to students for the purpose of helping them understand how to learn more effectively and to increase their self-confidence.

#### **1.4 Scope of the Study**

The scope of the present study was limited to a sample of 134 students (114 boys and 20 girls) in the Secondary School of Wichai Wittaya. Participants were students from Grades 7 through 9 and their ages ranged from 12-16. Participants' English level ranged from pre-intermediate to intermediate level. Students had studied at list 5 years of compulsory education. At the present of the study participants were studying in co-education.

#### **1.5 Importance of the Study**

This study specifically should contribute to the translation of Learning Style Instrument available for investigating students' language learning style preferences. Teachers can use this instrument to identify learning style preferences, which in turn may improve the quality of teaching and learning for individual teachers and learners. The lack of recognition of student learning style preferences might cause teachers to choose a style which is either grounded in the role-modeling of their own teacher or reflect their own innate preference, without considering the styles of their own students. Peacock (2001) findings indicate that

a mismatch between teaching and learning styles cause learning failure and frustration.

Practically, this study intends to diagnose student perceptual learning styles so that it can enable teachers to deal with the academic challenges more effectively.

### **1.6 Limitations of the Study**

As with most research, the results of this study must be interpreted within the constraints of the study's limitations. Therefore, the reader should be cautious in making generalizations from these findings.

In the case of this study, student learning styles were identified through a self-report questionnaire of the Perceptual Learning Style Preference Survey (PLSPS) Reid (1987). Although the PLSPS has been tested in a variety of languages, it has most frequently been used for international students in intensive English programs in the U.S. (personal email from Reid) and, to the researcher's knowledge, has not been tested with a large group of Thai secondary school students. The PLSPS was the only quantitative method used to gather data. Other data gathering techniques could have been used, qualitative methods, such as interviewing students and observing them in their classes. I chose this technique for its practicality and reliability.

A further limitation may exist as the subjects were told that this survey was developed to determine their learning preferences in their English classes

only. However, they might have responded to the questionnaire according to their general learning preferences in all subjects.

## **1.7 Definition of Terms**

Some key terms that need clarification are defined below.

### **Learning Styles**

Learning styles are cognitive, affective and physiological characteristics that are used by an individual habitually in order to understand, organize, and retain the new information. The characterization can be grouped into specific learning styles, normally under the headings of perceptual modalities, information processing, and personality factors.

### **Perceptual Learning Styles**

Perceptual learning styles are the sensory learning channels used in receiving new information such as visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile. In other words, perceptual learning styles are aspects of learning that are physiological. Learners can have more than one perceptual learning style. However, one rarely uses the sensory learning channels equally. Most of the time learner favors one method of learning over another.

When learning a language, the ears, eyes and hands are all actively involved. Some learners prefer using one sensory channel over the others, while

other students prefer using a mixture of all three channels. Students with greater learning-style flexibility are also greater achievers, as they are able to process information in whatever way it is presented.

Davis, Nur and Ruru (1994) conducted a research on learner preferences and they say “all persons have preferences for ways to learn, adapting these strategies to their environment in all three domains. These preferences are called an individual’s learning style” (p.12)

### **Sensory Learning Style**

Sensory learning style (visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile) received through one of the five senses; seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting. Smell and taste are two senses we do not use for language learning in the classroom. Thus, sensory learning styles employed by the learners of English or other languages are:

Visual - seeing

Verbal – hearing

Kinesthetic – moving

Tactile – touching, hands on

Research on learning styles is based on the assumption that learners receive information through their senses and prefer some senses to others (Ehrman and Oxford, 1993). The sensory learning channels are the senses, which lead language learners to identify their perceptual learning styles.

Maggioli (1996), Reid (1998) and Tullos (2000) describe perceptual learning styles as follows:

### **Visual Learning**

The visual learner recalls information by visualizing the source; following the teacher with his/her eyes while the teacher moves around the classroom; working quickly and finishing early; the visual learner tends to avoid oral production and when asked to speak, will keep his/her production to a minimum, always notices details and is very neat in the presentation of written work. Visual learners can learn alone with a book and if they take notes of lectures, they remember the information. They learn better when they can read or see pictures in connection with the foreign words they are trying to learn. Students who have a visual strength or preference would like the teacher to provide demonstrations, such as charts pictures, flashcards etc. They find it easy to learn through descriptions and tend to be unaware of noise. They often use lists to keep up and to organize thoughts, recognize words by sight, remember faces but forget names, have well-developed imaginations and are easily distracted by movement or action in the classroom.

They like to work with videos, flashcards, card games, pictures, posters or/and diagrams, timelines, charts, grids.

## **Auditory Learner**

The auditory learner knows how to listen to others so he/she is generally a group leader and can be bright at oral work. Auditory learners learn from hearing words. They may remember information by reading aloud or by moving their lips as they read especially when they are reading new material. They cannot stop chattering and whispering. They are good storytellers.

They like to work with audiocassettes, songs, poems, rhymes, helping other students, class discussion and by conversing with their teacher.

## **Kinesthetic Learner**

Kinesthetic learners learn best by experience and by being involved physically in classroom experiences. They use movement and rhythmic routines in order to learn. They remember information well when they actively participate in activities, field trips and role-playing in the classroom. They are good at sports and physical tasks. Students who have a kinesthetic strength or preference often do best when they are involved or active. These students often have high energy levels. They think and learn best while moving. They often lose much of what is said during lecture and have problems concentrating when asked to sit and read. These students prefer to do rather than watch or listen.

The activities that suit their needs are games such as, 'Simon says...', and TPR activities (Total Physical Response), where by students' learn by doing, e.g.,



blackboard work, board games, classroom tasks such as giving out handouts, races, and competitions.

### **Tactile Learner**

Tactile learners need 'hands on' activities in order to understand. They need to see, hear, and do, in order to learn. They are familiar with everybody and have a short concentration span. They find it difficult to understand abstract symbols, e.g., timelines, diagrams. Students who have a tactual strength or preference often do best when they take notes either during a lecture or when reading something new or difficult . They often like to draw or doodle to remember.

They enjoy working with maps, slips of paper, cards, manual arts, card games, and board games.

Many people group kinesthetic and tactile learning styles together, although they are different things. Their similarity is that both types perceive information through body involvement.

### **Group Learner**

Group learners like to study with at least one or more person. They value group interaction and class work with other students and they remember information better when they work with more than one classmate. Mostly they do not get much done by studying alone. They value others' opinions and preferences.

Group interaction increases their learning and later recognition of facts.

Socializing is important to them.

Group learners also like group interaction and prefer social activities, (e.g. games and role-play) which help them to be more with others.

### **Individual Learner**

Individual learners like to work and think alone. They remember information and understand material better also make better progress when they learn by themselves. They care more for their own opinions than for the ideas of others. Thinking, learning and remembering are considered solitary experiences. Mostly they prefer self-directed study, independent reading and computer work.

### **Major Learning Style**

In most cases, the major learning style indicates the learning style in which students feel most comfortable as a learner. They unconsciously incline more to their major learning style. The best thing teacher can do is to make learner to be aware of their learning style. (Reid 1998, p. 166)

### **Minor Learning Style**

A minor learning style indicates an area in addition to the minor learning style where a student can function well as a learner. Generally, a successful learner can learn in several different styles and learner might want to experiment

with some different ways to practice and strengthen his/her minor learning styles.

(Reid 1998, p. 166)

### **Negligible (Negative) Learning Style**

Often, a negligible score indicates that a student might have difficulty learning in that style. One way to find solution to this problem is may be to direct student learning to his/her stronger styles and not force learner to learn through his/her negative learning style. (Reid 1998, p. 166)

### **Learning Style Inventory**

Learning style inventory is the end-product of a procedural analysis of collected data governed by the theoretical construction of serial responding items created to detect learning style preferences of secondary school students in Wichai Wittaya Bilingual School.