Examining SSRU Business English First Year Students' English Language Learning Style Preferences in Speaking and Listening Skills

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Abstract:
There are problems in the varied learning styles of English language learners which can be inconsistent with the teacher's teaching styles in tertiary level as students tend to have their individual learning styles and teachers tend to follow to the specific teaching style that they are good at. This study examines the students' learning styles preferences and their implications on the teaching and learning planning to stimulate the students' performance in English language learning. A paradigm utilising quantitative research method was employed in this study. A group of 125 (26 males and 99 females) first year's Thai university students majoring in Business English were selected to answer the survey through the use of 20-item Willing's (1988) questionnaire. The data collected was analyzed using the means and derivation to achieve the main objective of the study. The results revealed that most students preferred to be concrete learners (active personality) and teacher-oriented learners (passive personality) respectively. The fact that the findings seem to be inconsistent is a phenomenon. Possible reasons of this are discussed. This can be an implication for future design of classroom materials and tasks for first years' students in tertiary level and match students' learning style preferences with effective teaching styles.

Keywords: Learning style preferences, EFL, English language

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, there was a modification on English language learning emphasis that has been put on learner rather than teacher (Yordchim, et al., 2014). In Thailand, English learning problem of Thai students has become a constraint of language efficiency, some of which may result from their learning styles. Learning style is method, characteristic or pattern that the learners prefer to use to recognize and process information until it becomes their learning step and a personalized learning style or individual learning styles which will affect the learning achievement, ability, and aptitude of students (Bidabadia, 2010). Oxford (2003) stated that learning styles are the general methods that learners utilize in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subjects. Theory of English learning styles was found in 4 types; namely communicative style, analytical style, authority-oriented style and concrete style (Willing, 1998). Besides, the teacher's teaching styles can also plays a role affecting student's language learning as they tend to adhere to the specific that they are good at. The problem of student learning style and teacher's teaching techniques can cause inconsistencies. (Khanum, 2014). The more teachers aware the learning style differences, the better they design the lessons meeting the diverse learning styles of their students. Therefore, the focus of English learning style management for students can enhance the learners' ability to use English in external societies more efficiently (Intakaew, 2017)

In Thailand, the subcommittee of the Ministry of Education has studied the problems and obstacles in the teaching and learning of English and found that students are not aware of the importance of learning English as it should be. Most of the students have the ability and skills to use English at a low level when comparing the examination results according to international standards. The Ministry of Education, therefore, has a policy to focus on a new paradigm shift of English teaching and learning to be

Communicative Approach and reduce excessive grammar learning to all students. (Veerawong, 2011). It is found that English speaking skills are the main problem of Thai student in developing English proficiency even though it is very important to students in Thailand (Sarkis, 2012). There are problems in the varied learning styles of English language learners which can be inconsistent with the teacher's teaching styles in tertiary level as students tend to have their individual learning styles and teachers tend to adhere to the specific teaching style that they are good at. Problem in learning English may be found in undergraduate level as it is found that most students have achieved English learning efficiency at a low level from high school. There are weaknesses and unsatisfactory results in the subject of English for communication which can lead to unproductive performance of English learning in tertiary level (Institute for Testing National Education, 2014, Int

First year university students were selected as respondents of this study since they newly entered the tertiary education level. Understanding of their learning styles would be valuable in acquiring learning skills which would increase their learning abilities. The present research aimed to explore the language learning style preferences of Thai Business English major undergraduate students used in the classroom by surveying their preferences and so the study also contributes to the awareness of learner's learning styles and teacher's teaching techniques. By making these two activities will lead to more efficient class activities, materials and higher students' success in learning English as a foreign language.

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Littlewood (1996) describes that the success of learning a second language also depends on the ability and language learning style. There is a study of the relationship between English ability and English learning styles of Hong Kong students and found that Learners with low language ability will use memorization style (Ho, 1999). Those with high language proficiency will use understanding and analytical thinking style in learning. Learning style can be defined as "the way in which individuals begin to concentrate on, process, internalize and retain new

and difficult information" (Dunn, 1990) while Oxford (2003) defined the term learning style as "the general approach preferred by the student when learning a subject, acquiring a language, or dealing with a difficult problem". Learning style is the process that relies on the original experience of the learners, once the students have received the information, they will transform the form of that experience(Transformation of experience) and build into knowledge (Kolb, 1984). Moreover, Learning styles, as defined by Kemp et al,(1998), are"...traits that refer to how individuals approach learning tasks and process information"

Language learning styles have attracted a great deal of attention. Chang (2003) believes that identifying the students' learning styles has a great influence on curriculum design, teaching technique development, material development. Moreover, there is a great deal of evidence that a mismatch between students' learning styles and teacher's instructional style may have a negative impact on classroom learning. Willing (1988) studied four types of learners: concrete, analytical, communicative, and authority-oriented learners and briefly identified each type of learners:

1) Concrete learners are those who employ field dependent cognitive style. They receive and process direct and original information. They prefer studying in classes and predetermined learning styles, like commands or rules, like to socialize and interact with groups of friends in classroom , like to learn interactively with friends and teachers in classroom and work will with others, like learning from direct experience, prefer learning languages for real-life usage and communication than learning about the structure of language ,prefer learning from playing language games, language activities as a group or language activities for communication that require a variety of language skills. They also need external reinforcement and have an active personality;

2) Analytical learners are those whose Field independent cognitive style lead them to analyze and compare carefully and rearrange new information according to their understanding, have few social skills, make decisions based on their own ideas and find their own mistakes. They are learners with analytical skills, able to think of separate components

including the idea of connecting different parts together, like to learn autonomously and avoid group activities or classes, like to specify various learning structure characteristics for themselves. They learn a language as a tool or an object rather than learning a language for use. They respond to internal reinforcement rather than external one. This type is considered a passive personality as they prefer to learn grammar, studying English textbooks and reading newspapers and working on homework assigned by their teachers;

3) Authority-oriented learners are those who have field dependent cognitive style. They prefer their teacher to explain everything to them, tend to have their own textbooks and write everything in a notebook, to study grammatical rules, learn by reading, and learn new words by using visual nerves, look at the language as an analysis. Emphasis is on learning the language for use in activities or assignments rather than using the language in real-life, have good social skills, able to work and live well with others, like to learn interactively with classmates and teachers, are happy to follow others' words or perform language activities as instructed in a textbook, need external reinforcement and need well-organized teachers with good classroom management systems and teaching plans. They are learners with passive personality and

4) Communicative learners are those who have Field independent cognitive style with a desire for a communicative and social learning approach. Their motivation to study a language is in relation to their needs of language learning. They like to learn by watching, listening to native speakers, talking to friends in English and watching television in English, using English outside classroom, learning new words by hearing them, and learning by conversations. They are considered holistic and as an active personality) (Willing, 1988).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research deployed quantitative data. The data is collected from the questionnaire administered to survey different learning style preferences in order to match with appropriate teaching techniques resulting in successful learning outcome especially in the skills of Speaking and Listening.

☐ Participants

A group of 125 (26 males and 99 females) Thai SSRU first year undergraduate students majoring in Business English course at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science in Rajabhat Suan Sunandha University randomly. As freshmen, their age was 18-20 years old. They learn English language for academic purposes. First year university students were selected as respondents of this study since they newly entered the tertiary education. Understanding of their learning styles would be valuable in acquiring learning skills which would increase their learning abilities.

☐ The instrument
The study utilized in this study was the Learning Style Preferences Questionnaire adapted from Willing (1988). In section 1, Willing's (1988:106) questionnaire was selected as the tool because it was a updated one among the very few questionnaires" (Kolb 1984) that examined learner preferences and more practical and useful that others (Ho, 1999). The questionnaire consisted of 20 items using four-point Likert scale ranged from 1: Strongly Disagree to 4: Strongly Agree. The students were asked and evaluated how they learn best in order to assess the learning style preferences and the questions have been grouped into four different learning styles; Question 1-5 represent students who prefer the style of Concrete. Question 6-10 represent students who prefer the style Analytical .Question 11-15 represent students who prefer the style Communicative .Question 16-20 represent students who prefer the style Teacher-oriented. In section 2, 3 open-ended questions were asked about the learner's difficulties in learning English and how, in their opinions, they can improve their speaking and listening skills.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research aimed to study English learning styles in speaking and listening skills of Thai Business English major undergraduate students, the characteristics of English learning of learners that affect the language efficiency to propose ways to promote and develop learners with different learning styles to achieve greater success in learning outcome. The results can be presented in the tables below.

Table 1: Demographic information of participants

	Variable	Frequency	Valid Percent
SEX	man	26	20.80
	women	99	79.20
	Total	125	100.00
AGE	Less than 19 years	95	76.00
	19 - 22 years	30	24.00
	Total	125	100.00
EXP			
	5 - 10 years	33	26.40
	11 years through highest	92	73.60
	Total	125	100.00

From Table 1 , it is found that participants were divided into 26 male (20. 80%) and 99 female(79.20%) students with age less than 19 years old 76% and more than 19 years old 24%. The survey also showed that 92 of them experienced in learning English for more than 11 years or 73.60% and 33 of them (20.80%) have English learning experience from 5-10 years. From this result, it shows that the majority of English language student in this research is female and has English learning experience for more than 10 years.

Table 2: Learning Style Preferences

Questions	Mean	Std. Deviation	meaning	Order
1. In class, I like to listen to and use online and E-learning materials	3.21	0.755	agree	10
2. In class, I like to learn by game	3.05	0.750	agree	14
3. In class, I like to learn by conversations	3.30	0.648	strongly agree	6
4. In class, I like to learn by pictures, films, videos.	3.55	0.641	strongly agree	1
5. I like to study English by talking with another classmate.	3.06	0.676	agree	13
6. I like to have my own textbook.	2.64	0.766	agree	17
7. I like to study grammar.	2.53	0.876	agree	19
8. At home, I like to learn by reading English newspaper.	2.18	0.787	disagree	20
9. I like the teacher to give us exercises to work on	2.80	0.783	agree	15
10. I like to study English by myself alone	2.54	0.838	agree	18
11. I like to practice the sounds and pronunciation.	3.30	0.672	strongly agree	7
12. I like to learn English words by hearing these words or by doing something	3.38	0.645	strongly agree	4
13. I like to learn by talking to friends in English	3.09	0.707	agree	12
14. I like to learn by speaking in English with foreigners when there is a chance.	3.30	0.684	strongly agree	8
15. At home, if I have choice, I would like to learn English by watching TV in English	3.24	0.766	agree	9
16. I like the	3.14	0.704	agree	11

Questions	Mean	Std. Deviation	meaning	Order
teacher to help me talk about my interests.				
17. I want to write everything in my notebook.	2.80	0.871	agree	16
18. I like the teacher to explain everything to us.	3.41	0.731	strongly agree	3
19. I like to learn English words by seeing them.	3.32	0.643	strongly agree	5
20. I like the teacher to tell me all my mistakes.	3.47	0.679	strongly agree	2
SUM	3.06	0.349	agree	

From Table 2, the findings showed that most students prefer to learn English by pictures, films, videos in class with the mean of 3.55, like the teacher to tell all their mistakes with the mean of 3.47, like the teacher to explain everything with the mean of 3.41. The least preference is that they like to learn English by reading newspapers at home with the mean of 2.18) at "disagree" level. From the results shown, it is noticeable that the most three preferred learning styles are categorized as concrete style and authority-oriented style respectively. These findings can be assumed that pictures, films and VDO clips are the preferred materials in learning English by undergraduate students, yet they still need commands, guidelines and suggestions from teachers when learning or correcting mistakes. From the analysis of open-end questions, we found that

1. Difficulties in learning English

Most students responded that the problems in learning English are the environment in which it is not encouraging to practice language, the pronunciation, and they seldom meeting native speakers. This will lower their confidence in using English language. Moreover, memorizing new words that they do not know the meanings is also another obstacle.

2. In your opinion, how can you improve your English speaking skills?

Most students responded that they will improve their English speaking skills by trying to listen from English-speaking movies, increasing international exposure and learning in real situations practicing speaking with foreigners, speak often and noting down what is learned and return to review.

3. In your opinion, how can you improve your English listening skills?

Most students responded that they will improve English listening skills by listening and practice pronunciation more often, trying to listen frequently from various media sources, listening to English songs and watching English YouTube movies.

From the information gained from the open-ended questions concerning difficulties and recommendations in learning English. It is implied that the majority of Business English freshman students in this sample have strong desire to learn by watching and listening to native speakers of English. They tend to watch videos, movies and listen to different media sources. They like to communicate with one another. This is consistent with the questionnaire survey number 4 which represents concrete style learners who tend to learn through games, films, CDs, talking in pairs, and using English for communication.

It is inferred that the majority of Business English freshman students in this sample prefer to learn English from films, VDOs and pictures which represents concrete style. This result of Thai student is quite unique. It is not consistent with the results of Farinaz and Hamidah (2010) 's study on a group of first year students in Iran. The study showed that most students were communicative learners. Also, the study of Ho's agreed that the first year students in Hong Kong considered themselves as communicative learners. The second and third highest scores (question 18 and 20) represent the learning style of authority-oriented. This is in agreement with the findings of Liu's (2008) study on students in Taipei which its responses to authority-oriented type of learning styles were the highest with the mean score.
According to willing (1988), the concrete learning style is the development of inadequacy or an inferiority complex. They dislike learning monotonously and written work. They prefer various verbal and visual experiences. They have strong desire to be entertained by using games, and tend to be involved in learning physically. These findings can be assumed that pictures, films and VDO clips are the preferred materials in learning English by undergraduate students, yet they still need commands,

guidelines and suggestions from teachers when learning or correcting mistakes.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings found from the data analysis provide some valuable insights into the students' language learning style preferences and the design of the course and classroom activities to be developed by their teachers. For successful language teaching and learning, teachers are required to be aware of their students' abilities, potentials, and learning styles to support them in achieving good performance. Data obtained from this study will both be beneficial to university administrators in terms of formulating educational management policies, selecting English teaching staff, allocating of classrooms for suitable English language learners and providing guidance in material design. It is significant that the teachers understand the characteristics of the students and able to arrange teaching that is suitable for the learning characteristics of the learners appropriately. For example, teachers can bring more electronic visual , materials role playing, games and music, multimedia and information technology to the class to attract students' attention and bring the students outside of classroom to attain international exposure.

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