English learning styles of high and low performance students of the faculty of education, Khon Kaen University

Phatchara Phantharakphong*

Abstract

Since English plays an important role, Thailand tries to emphasize on learning English to develop the potential of the country by finding ways to improve English of Thai students. Learning styles is one way proposing that different people learn in different ways and that it is good to know what your own preferred learning style is to be used to improve your learning abilities. The purposes of this research study were to investigate the English learning styles of students and to analyze the English learning styles of high and low performance students of the Faculty of Education, Khon Kaen University. VARK questionnaires by Fleming and Mills were administered to undergraduate students. Besides, the interview was also conducted. The findings showed that the majority of undergraduate students preferred Kinesthetic (K) and Multimodal (MM) styles of learning to Read/Write (R), Auditory (A), and Visual (V) styles of learning. With performance, the high performance students rated themselves in the following order: K, MM, R, A, and V whereas low performance students were MM, K, R, A, and V.

Keywords: Learning styles; learning ability; preference; VARK model; Fleming and Mills

1. Introduction

ESL/EFL countries place the importance on English increasingly in many ways such as politics, economy, telecommunication, and education. Because of this, Thailand, one of the EFL countries, also emphasizes on English learning to develop its potential to be equivalent to other countries. However, with provided bilingual and English programs in schools, Thai students cannot use English to communicate effectively. As a result, many schools arrange a variety of English learning activities to meet the different interests of learners. Khon Kaen University also has this policy. That is, it focuses on producing quality students by using student-centred learning with the belief that learning activity will go well if teachers know and understand the nature of learners. To address this concern, understanding students’ English learning style preferences is one way to achieve this goal. Learning style is described as individualistic differences in approach within a process of information receiving and processing (Kolb, 1984; McCarthy 1987; Felder, 1996). Akkoyunlu (1995) is pointed out that determination of the learner’s learning styles can assist to teachers for the matter that is a method how to develop in teaching process. Determination of the learner’s learning styles is a benefit in terms of the learners, also. Therefore, if the learners have knowledge of their learning styles, in the learning process, they can see their weak and strong sides in regard to their learning and they can tend to suitable learning environment and learn knowledge easily and permanently, also (Dag & Gecer, 2009). It
can be stated that learning style understanding is important to promote the effectiveness of learning, and to help learners to learn potentially.

One of the many characteristics that make up a student's learning style is the sensory modality by which the student prefers to take in new information. Three major sensory modalities have been defined: visual (V), aural (A), and kinesthetic (K), collectively known as VAK. VAK categorizes student learning based on the neural system that is preferred when receiving information. This classification system was recently expanded by Fleming to VARK to further differentiate the visual category into two categories: those who prefer graphical or pictorial representations of their incoming information (V) and those who prefer textual representations: reading/writing (R) (Fleming, 1995). Moreover, learners who do not have a standout mode with one preference score well above other scores are defined as multimodal (MM). Those who are flexible in their communication preferences and who switch from mode to mode depending on what they are working with. They are specific context. They choose a single mode to suit the occasion or situation. If they have to deal with legalities they will apply their Read/write preference. If they are to watch the demonstration of a technique they will be expressing their Kinesthetic preference (Fleming & Mills, 1992). The results of the studies related to learning style pointed that learning style affected to the learning success. In other words, the learning achievement will increase and learners will be able to remember the contents longer if the instructional methods, teaching materials, and the class environments meet students’ learning style preferences (Davis, 1991; Jonassen & Grabowski, 1993; Caldwell & Ginther, 1996; Dunn, et al., 1996).

The purposes of the present study were to investigate the English learning styles of students and to analyze the English learning styles of high and low performance students of the Faculty of Education, Khon Kaen University in order to be used as information for developing curriculum and learning experience management.

2. Method

The population of this study was 2,075 undergraduate students of the Faculty of Education, Khon Kaen University. Three hundred and eleven samples were drawn by simple random sampling method. The VARK questionnaire developed by Fleming and Mills was used to identify students’ English learning styles in this study and distributed to students in the Faculty of Education, Khon Kaen University during the English for Teaching Profession course academic year 2010. It was a 16-item multiple choice questionnaire translated into Thai language by Mrs. Sureeporn Pawuttipattarapong (TESL students, M.Ed, Burapha University) and reviewed by Asst. Prof. Daranee Pummawan, (Expert in Translation), Director, M.Ed. (TESL) Program, Education Faculty, Burapha University, Thailand. Besides, individual interview was administered with 3 of the following themes:

1) Do your result from VARK questionnaire meet your learning style? Why?;
2) How should the teaching style look like to meet your learning style preference?; and
3) Are there any suggestions or questions?

The obtained data from questionnaires was analyzed by frequency and percentage. The interview results were analyzed by content analysis.

3. Findings

3.1 Quantitative Results

Distribution of students’ English learning styles preferences is given in Table 1. It has been found out that the majority of the undergraduate students preferred Kinesthetic (28.62%) and Multimodal (28.30%) styles of learning to Read/Write (22.83%), Auditory (14.47%), and Visual (5.79%) styles of learning.
Table 1. Distribution of Students’ English Learning Style Preferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Styles</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual (V)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aural/Auditory (A)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>14.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read/Write (R)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>22.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinesthetic (K)</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>28.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multimodal (MM)</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>28.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>311</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With performance given in table 2, the high performance students rated themselves in the following order: K (32.50%), MM (26.25%), R (21.88%), A (13.75%), and V (5.63%) whereas low performance students were MM (30.46%), K (24.50%), R (23.84%), A (15.23%), and V (5.96%).

Table 2. Distribution of High and Low Performance Students’ English Learning Style Preferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Styles</th>
<th>High Performance Students</th>
<th>Low Performance Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual (V)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aural/Auditory (A)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read/Write (R)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinesthetic (K)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>32.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multimodal (MM)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>26.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>160</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Qualitative Results

With three interviewed questions, it has been found that most students agreed with the results from the questionnaire showing their English learning style preferences. That is, the most scores from the English learning style questionnaire met their preferences and characteristics. They liked to take an action, practice, do activities that could apply to their daily life. In addition, they suggested that teachers should have more creative activities and teaching materials focusing on collaborative learning. Giving students a chance to communicate with native speakers was what they requested.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The learning styles of students:

The result of students showed that the majority of the undergraduate students preferred Kinesthetic (28.62%) and Multimodal (28.30%) styles of learning which was related to the study of Rattanaubon (1994) showing that undergraduate students of Science of Education preferred learning styles related to relationship and human. Also, undergraduate students of the Faculty of Education, Khon Kaen University preferred Sensing-Feeling (SF) and Sensing-Thinking (ST). That is, students preferred activities helping to learn about themselves and their feeling related to lives to theories. They liked to perform and practice in class. (Sintuwong et.al., 2002) Therefore, teachers should consider instructional methods and learning environment to meet two English learning styles of students. Teachers should focus on activities providing real experiences to students such as real practice, case study, experiment, especially various and creative activities in and outside of class which are able to apply in their real lives.
With the student performance, it has been showed that English learning style preferences of high and low students are different. That is, high performance students preferred Kinesthetic (32.50%) and Multimodal (26.25%) styles of learning while low performance students preferred Multimodal (30.46%) and Kinesthetic (24.50%) styles of learning. It was related to the study of James (1962) finding that learning styles were related to teaching styles. In other words, there was the score difference between learners who learned by their learning style preferences and who did not. Thai students also had different learning styles with related factors such as learning achievement (Jantrarawerakul, 1997). Moreover, Sung (2000) found that secondary students in Taiwan had different learning styles depending on Grade Point Average (GPA), and learning styles could predict learning achievement of secondary students in Korea (Yoon, 2000).

With the data from the interview, it was found that students entirely answered the interviewed questions that they got the scores of four English learning styles closely, but they got the scores of Kinesthetic learning style the most which met their English learning style preferences. They preferred doing activities in class with real experiences because they thought that learning by doing would be the sustainable learning and they could apply it in the future. Besides, they did not like the class in which teachers taught by using the lecture method without practicing. There were so many students in class that teachers could not provide the activities and observe all students effectively.

Considering the performance, high performance students answered that they got high scores in Kinesthetic learning style because they thought that practicing or doing the activities helped them understand the contents more than remembering. Moreover, taking an action in class was similar to practicing four English skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) which maybe caused them get high scores in English learning.

Low performance students preferred various English learning styles or Multimodal such as learning from visual, listening, speaking, reading, or writing. They liked to do various activities. When the relationship between English learning styles and English learning achievement had been studied, it could be caused by the wrong selection of learning styles in each class. Otherwise, it might be the result of teaching methods which did not match English learning styles of students. Atwell (1989) suggested that learning styles helped students succeed in academic fields. Students should be aware of learning styles and be advised about learning methods, and teachers should use creative and different instructional methods.

Suggestions for curriculum and learning experience management were divided into 2 groups: high and low performance students.

High performance students mostly preferred learning by doing. To create environment and the learning experience management in order to develop students’ English potential, teachers should emphasize on taking action activities. At the same time, teachers should teach students in various learning styles. For example, in speaking class, teachers should give students opportunities to perform such as role playing, discussion methods which help students practice not only speaking but also listening as well. In addition, in reading and writing classes, teachers can use visual and kinesthetic learning styles to create the activities. For example, teachers can use Total Physical Response Method in teaching student’s vocabularies or use pictures to practice reading skills and to remember sentence structures. Then let them practice by themselves such as reading articles or writing the sentence structures.

For low performance students, they mostly preferred Multimodal learning style. They liked various activities such as visual, listening, speaking, reading and writing. When focusing on the relationship between learning style preference and their achievement, it may be caused by wrong selecting learning style to match each English learning class or teaching styles not meet their learning style preferences. Therefore, to develop low performance students’ learning potential, teachers should use various teaching methods by slightly adding not too many contents in order to help students be familiar with each learning style. For example, in teaching vocabularies before reading, teachers may use visual learning style with Total Physical Response Method to help students to be able to remember vocabularies better. Then test them by using action activities such as vocabulary games with physical response or pictures or dictation, etc. Moreover, in listening and speaking class, teachers can use role playing or group discussion by providing familiar topics such as freshmen ceremony, English camp, and so on in order to encourage students to listen and to speak, including extreme performance.

In conclusion, there have been relationships among four learning styles and they could be able to apply in learning management to conform to students’ English learning styles integrally and creatively.
References


Fleming, N.D. & Mills, C. (1992), Not Another Inventory, Rather a Catalyst for Reflection, To Improve the Academy, 11, 137.


