LANGUAGE LEARNING STYLE PREFERENCES OF GRADE 11 STUDENTS AT A HIGH SCHOOL, NAM DINH

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SUMMARY

This paper studied the language learning style preferences (LLPs) of grade 11 students and teachers' awareness of them. 35 students and 2 teachers of English from group A at a high school, Nam Dinh were called for cooperation. A 13-item LLP questionnaire adopted from Brindley (1984) was adapted and employed. In addition, more in-depth dada was obtained through interviews with both teachers and students, and diaries by students. Results showed (1) students had their stronger preference for visual and auditory learning, and (2) teachers are well aware of their students' preferred styles in some cases, but unaware in others.
Key words: learning styles, learning style preferences, learning habits, teaching styles, teaching strategies

INTRODUCTION

In this rapidly growing society, English has gained its importance, and has become a tool or a demand of all professionals. English has, therefore, taken the place of a compulsory subject in high school's curriculum in Vietnam. However, English language teaching at Vietnamese high schools seems favor a teacher-centered and grammar-translation method and an emphasis on rote memory. As a result, many students after graduating from high school can not communicate with others in English or feel too shy to do so. What may be the reasons for this fact? The reasons may lie in numerous factors including social factors, educational factors, pupil factors, and teacher factors. Pupils and teachers are undeniably the core components of the teaching and learning process; thus the harmony between the learning styles of students and the teaching strategies of the teacher should be taken into great consideration. The inability to communicate fluently and efficiently in English among high school students partly stems from the fact that teachers are unaware of their students' learning styles. Consequently, they have chosen inappropriate instructional strategies, which cause a

negative impact on the effectiveness of the learning and teaching process.

It is indicated in [2], [8], and [10] that students have different approaches towards taking in and processing information; in other words, they have different learning styles. Teachers, therefore, are supposed to conduct activities and tasks suitable with the way in which their students prefer to learn the language. Unfortunately, as stated in [3], most teachers pay little attention to their student's language learning preferences; instead, they tend to develop the teaching strategies which are congruent with their own learning styles rather than those of their students. This tendency emerges because "teachers subconsciously operate on the assumption that the way they learn is the most effective way for everyone to learn" [3; p.77]. With the hope of raising awareness among teachers about their students' learning style preferences and about the potentially negative effects of teachers' incompatible instructional strategies, the researcher has decided to conduct a study on the language learning style preferences of Grade 11 students at a high school, Nam Dinh, striving to address two main questions: (1) What are the language learning style preferences of Grade 11 students? and (2) To what extent are teachers aware of their students' learning style preferences?

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METHODS

The subjects of the study include totally 35 students majoring in English at the age of 17, including 30 females and 5 males, and 2 female teachers: one is 54 years old with 33 years of teaching English and the other is 26 years old with 4 years of teaching English.

Data collection instruments

Three data collation methods, i.e. questionnaires, interviews and diaries, were triangulated to provide reliable and valid data for this study.

Two versions of questionnaire were revised by the researcher with reference to 13-item language learning preference questionnaires adopted from [1]. In the students' version, the students were supposed to state how they prefer to learn the language. In the teachers' version, the teachers were asked to express their opinions as to how they feel their students prefer to learn the language. The usefulness of questionnaires in investigating learners' language learning styles has been proved by many previous studies including [7], [8], [9] and [11],. Questionnaires were also employed as the primary data collection instrument in this study because "it is quite labor-intensive in construction and analysis. The knowledge needed is controlled by the questions; therefore it affords a good deal of precision and clarity" [5, p.171].

Diary was chosen as the second research tool because this introspective method can provide information about the inner language learning process, which is unlikely to be obtained by other means. Gass and Mackey (2007) [4] claim that:

Diary is another means of obtaining information about learners' internal process. In diary studies, learners are able to record their impressions or perceptions about language learning, unconstrained by pre-determined areas of interests. Diaries can yield insights into the learning process that may be inaccessible from the researchers' perspective alone. Even in studies that provide a structure for the diary writers to follow (e.g., certain topics to address and guidelines for the content), researchers are still able to access the phenomena under investigation from a viewpoint other than their own. (p.48)

McDonough (1997) [5] also points out that diaries can record "what happened, what the writer felt about it, what might or should have happened, what could change, opinions, anticipation and immediate reactions, as well as more reflective tone" (p.124). The diary entries then gave the researcher a more insightful understanding of student's learning styles not just in class but also in their own homes. Moreover, the diary instrument hindered the potential of the researcher's misinterpretation because students' learning styles in class can be controlled by tasks designed by the teachers and commonly to the teacher's own learning styles.

As a follow-up instrument, two versions of semi-structured interview were designed; one for students and one for teachers. As noted in [6, p.60], "interviews can be used to investigate a range of issues including developmental aspects of learner language and learning-style preferences." Additionally, both Nunan (1989) [6] and McDonough (1997) [5] asserted that interviews can be used in an "ancillary" role, perhaps as a checking mechanism to triangulate data gathered from other sources. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow for greater flexibility (e.g. changing the order of questions); for more extensive follow-up of responses (e.g. asking some more in-depth questions); and for richer interactions (e.g. extending the length of the interview) rather than interviews armed with entirely pre-coded questions.

Data collection procedures

First, the questionnaires were given to students and teachers to fulfill at one class meeting with the presence of the researcher, so that students and teachers could ask for further explanation if necessary. Secondly, one guiding session on how to write a learning diary was organized at another class meeting in Group A's classroom. More specifically, the students were asked to write a learning diary within one month. After 10

days, the researcher collected students' diary entries for the first time. Students were asked to continue writing the learning diary, and then after another 20 days all the diary entries were collected. Finally, interviews were conducted in Vietnamese after students and teachers had completed the questionnaires and students had written several learning diary entries.
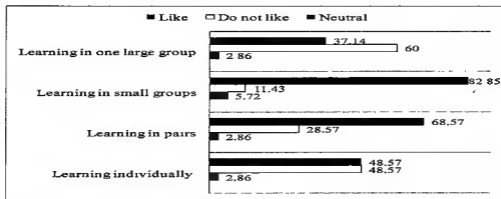
Data analysis procedures

Data collected from the questionnaires was mathematically calculated and synthesized from numbers into percentages. In the interest of the comparison and generalization of the received data, such statistics was summarized into tables and bar charts regarding eight equivalent items in students' questionnaire and teachers' questionnaire. Additionally, two more items on which English skills students prefer to study (from the questionnaire) and what is their most favorite English lesson (from the diary) was also presented. Most typical quotations from the interviews with both students and teachers, and extracts from the students' learning diary entries were frequently cited to illustrate the data analysis.

Finally, all the findings from the data collected in the questionnaires, interviews and diary entries were compared and contrasted with the findings from the research from previous studies related to the research topic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Regarding students' learning mode, it is observed that the largest percentage of students (82.85 %) expressed their preference for working in small groups, which nearly double those who preferred working individually and working in one large group (48.57 % and 37.14 %, respectively). One major reason for this choice is that students can share and exchange ideas in order to come to the best decision. "When working in small groups (3-5 members/ group), many heads think about one matter at the same time; there will be more ideas. If working alone, there'll be only one idea. Working in pairs, if there is a disagreement, it's hard to make a compromise. When working in small groups, the idea of the majority will be chosen and normally it is the best decision", said student 1.

Figure 1. *Students's learning mode*

Legend: ■ Like   □ Do not like   ■ Neutral

- **Learning in one large group**: 37.14 / 60 / 2.86
- **Learning in small groups**: 82.85 / 11.43 / 5.72
- **Learning in pairs**: 68.57 / 28.57 / 2.86
- **Learning individually**: 48.57 / 48.57 / 2.86

Moreover, most students feel that they work more effectively in group work because they can learn from strengths and weaknesses of their own and of others. Students 2 also claimed that he has more motivation to learn in group work because "different people have different strengths and we can learn from each other. I feel that my knowledge is broadened through group work. When studying alone, I have to leave difficult questions behind and ask friends or teachers later." In addition, some students remarked that working in small groups gives them a chance to refresh themselves; when they get bored or tired they can have some chitchat with group members for relaxation. "I prefer learning in small groups because I can ask friends what I can't understand. When I'm tired, I can have some chitchat with them, and during break time, we can release stress. When working individually, if I can not do a task, I have no way but leave it unfinished', said student 3.

In their learning diary entries, students also showed a great interest in group activities conducted in class:

Jan 25th - "... the English lesson today is more interesting with group work activity. I like this kind of activity most because I can remember the lesson longer. I'm so sorry that today my group hasn't got any points. The teacher has suggested about group speaking according to a topic. It sounds interesting. I'm thinking about some special topics..." (Student 4)

Feb 2nd - "...I felt great today. We worked in groups, making a plan for a class picnic. My group chose "Phu Giay" festival. When the whole group was called to speak in front of the class, I felt a bit scared but everything was all right. So happy!" (Student 5)

Turning to working individually, students feel irritated when they have to leave their work unfinished because they can not ask other classmates about what they have not understood. One student remarked that it is not worth working individually, especially when they are given an interesting topic to work on, because they do not have a chance to exchange or share ideas with friends.

As a follow-up interview question for item 1 in the questionnaire, students were asked to clarify what their favorite learning mode at home and in class is. Most students preferred to learn independently at home and work in small groups in class. They said that the quiet atmosphere within the space of their own room facilitates them to concentrate on their study, and they can do or learn whatever they like without anyone's interference. However, some stated that learning by themselves sometimes makes them bored or sleepy. Therefore, if they can arrange appropriate time and space, they would prefer working with one close friend or a group of friends. In terms of group work, 71.42 % students when interviewed favored this work arrangement in class because they can share and exchange opinions together. For those, who are shy and introvert, they feel more confident in teamwork, where they dare to speak their voice without fear. "When listening to the ideas of my group members, I can learn many interesting things from their way of thinking, their way of giving opinions... If I make a mistake, they can correct for me. I also feel more confident when saying my opinions within my group. Normally, I feel so shy that I don't dare to express myself in front of the class", said student 14. Overall, the majority of the students showed their tendency towards learning in pairs and in small groups. They express their interest in teamwork and their reluctance to work on their own. This finding correlates with that in [9] concerning the preference for group activities by Asian ESL students and Iranian EFL learners.

With regard to teachers' opinion on students' learning mode, results from the questionnaire reveals that two teachers shared the opinion that their students like working in small groups, and dislike working individually. When being asked about the hidden reason under these choices, T1 claimed that "only a small number of students (about 25 %), who are good at learning English, prefer working independently. They feel unwilling to work with those, who are inferior to them because they will work more productively and efficiently on their own. However, the majority of the class would prefer learning in pairs or in groups because they can rely on each other..." Moreover, T1 thought that the class setting with two students sitting at one desk facilitates pair work; therefore, pair work would be the most common choice among students. Unlike T1, T2 assumed that students' working in groups of 3 or 5 students is most favorable. Working with more than 3 or 5 students per group or with the whole class will cause the loss of concentration. However, both teachers confirmed that such arrangements (individuals, pairs or groups) depend on the purposes of different activities at different time. Evidently, teachers are both aware that their students would like to have interaction with their classmates, and would feel reluctant to work by themselves. In other words, there is a mutual understanding between students and teachers with respect to this issue. The study of Riazi & Riasati (2007) [9] has also arrived at the same conclusion.

The findings concerning all research items are illustrated in the following table.

	Students	Teachers
1. Learning mode	- For group work - <u>82,85 %</u> - Against individual work - <u>48,57 %</u>	Aware
2. Learning habits	- For being actively engaged in classroom activities. - For reading and taking notes - <u>57,14 %</u> - Against copying from the board - <u>85,71 %</u>	Unaware Unaware Aware
3. Vocabulary learning strategies	For translating into Vietnamese - <u>85,71 %</u>. guessing the unknown - <u>77,14 %</u>. thinking of words' relationships - <u>74,28 %</u>	Aware Aware Unaware
4. Corrective feedback	For immediate corrections - <u>80 %</u>	Aware
5. Learning materials	For the Internet, TV, movies, videos, pictures or posters - <u>97,14 %</u> & <u>88,57 %</u>	Aware
6. Learning activities	- Against memorizing dialogues and writing a learning diary - <u>91,43 %</u> & <u>74,29 %</u> - For having a native guest to class - <u>85,71 %</u>	Aware Unaware
7. Means of assessment	Being able to use English effectively in real-life situations <u>- 85,71 %</u> > being formally assessed by teachers through written tests	Unaware
8. Sense of satisfaction	Performing successfully in the situations they used to find difficult - <u>100 %</u> > getting good marks or being praised	Unaware
9. English skills	*Productive skills* (speaking - <u>48,58 %</u> & writing - <u>40 %</u>) > *Receptive skills* (listening - <u>28,57 %</u> & reading - <u>17,14 %</u>)	Unaware
10. Favourite English lesson	- *T's thorough explanation & friendly attitude* - *The integration of games and speaking activities into the lesson* - *A suitable number of tests and exams*	Aware (to a certain extent)

CONCLUSION

In short, through conscientious analysis and discussion of data collected from questionnaires, interviews and diaries, some major findings are summarized as follows:

1) Regarding the working arrangement, students were keenly interested in group work and reluctant to work independently, and teachers could understand their students' preferred style.

2) Students did not like to be sitting passively in the classroom, but to be actively engaged in the classroom activities. Teachers could realize their students' dislike for copying from the board; however, they were not aware of students' preference for reading books and taking notes by themselves.

3) Student's most favoured vocabulary learning strategies were translating words from English into Vietnamese, guessing the

unknown, and thinking of the relationships between known and unknown. Teachers had a correct assumption about students' preference for verbatim translation; but wrongly thought that their students were unwilling to think of the relationships among words.

4) Being corrected immediately in front of the class did not seem to bother students. Correspondingly, teachers often give students immediate feedbacks rather than delayed ones.

5) The majority of the students seemed to be visual learners with preferences for the Internet, television, movies, videos, pictures or posters, and teachers appeared to endorse their students' choices.

6) In terms of learning activities, students generally favoured all the mentioned activities, except for "memorizing conversations/ dialogues" and "writing a learning diary". They had a special longing to

have a native guest in their class, which proves the students' communicative approach toward language learning. Nonetheless, teachers did not seem to be aware of their students' tendency.

7) Contrary to the teachers' expectation, students preferred realizing their English improvement through their ability to use English effectively in real-life situations to being formally assessed by their teachers through written tests.

8) Against the teachers' opinion, students got a sense of satisfaction not just by getting good marks or being praised, but by seeing if they can perform successfully in the situations they used to find difficult.

9) Students had greater interest in productive skills (speaking and writing) than receptive skills (listening and reading); however, teachers wrongly assumed that their students would feel reluctant to learn speaking or writing skills.

10) Students felt satisfied with the teachers' thorough explanation and friendly way of delivering the knowledge, the integration of games and speaking activities into the lesson, and an appropriate number of tests and exams. Nevertheless, teachers only met their students' expectations to a certain extent.

To sum up, with an effort to classify students into different categories of learning styles, students in Group A can be labelled as a mixture of visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic and group learners with a stronger preference for visual and auditory learning. However, only a small number of students and teachers participated in this study, resulting in limited pedagogical applications. Therefore, larger samples would help to explore more in-depth and reliable information about the preferred language learning styles of grade 11 students. Other researchers can choose to investigate the learning styles of mainstream students instead of gifted students (as in the case of Group A). They may even conduct another study comparing the language learning styles of mainstream students with those of gifted students. In another aspect, researchers may make use of the results of this study to conduct some studies as to the effect of variables such as gender, age, level of English proficiency, cultural influences on the students' choice of learning styles.

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TÓM TẮT
PHONG CÁCH HỌC NGOẠI NGỮ CỦA HỌC SINH LỚP 11, NAM ĐỊNH

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Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu phong cách học ngoại ngữ của học sinh lớp 11 và ý thức của giáo viên về vấn đề này. Đối tượng nghiên cứu là 35 học sinh và 2 giáo viên tiếng Anh tại Nam Định. Công cụ nghiên cứu gồm (1) Bảng khảo sát phong cách học ngôn ngữ của Brindley (1984), (2) Phỏng vấn học sinh và giáo viên, và (3) Nhật ký học tập của học sinh. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy (1) học sinh thiên về cách học theo kênh hình và kênh tiếng, và (2) giáo viên hiểu rõ phong cách học của học sinh ở một vài trường hợp.
Từ khóa: *phong cách học, phong cách học ưu tiên, thói quen học, phong cách dạy học, chiến lược dạy học*

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