

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTUAL LEARNING STYLE PREFERENCES AND THEIR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT NELSON ENGLISH LANGUAGE CENTRE, MYANMAR

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptual learning style preferences of students who are learning English as a foreign language at Nelson English Language School (NELC) in Myanmar during academic year 2018. This study was carried out to investigate the level of students' academic achievement in learning English as a foreign language and to compare the preferred learning styles with their academic achievement. The research was conducted from 26 May to 28 May, 2018 at NELC in Myanmar. As a major source of data collection, the researcher used Reid's Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ). There were 155 students who responded to the questionnaire and respondents' return rate was 100%. The data collected from the PLSPQ was analyzed by frequency and percentage, means and standard deviations and a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). According to this study, the students preferred mixed learning style the most followed by group learning style, kinesthetic learning style, auditory learning style, visual learning style, tactile learning style and individual learning style respectively.

The result of this study showed that there was a very high level of academic achievement of students in NELC and there was no significant difference among students' academic achievement according to their most preferred learning style. It is strongly recommended that NELC uses this study data to conduct teacher professional development plans and apply differentiated instruction in the classroom to meet the requirements of the students and to create a better learning environment where the students can access to many different learning styles.

Keyword: Learning Styles, Achievement, Students' Perceptual Learning Style Preferences, Myanmar.

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Introduction

Successful learning is more likely to happen when the educator values, respects the variance of students and integrates its teaching and learning process (McComb & Miller, 2007). In foreign language acquisition, some students may learn effectively by listening to the teacher explaining, some may study well by seeing visual materials, some may like to study alone, and others may do well working with their peers (Bennett, 2003).

Students have different predisposition and talents, and as they have more educational experiences, they create their own preferences for how they like to learn and the pace at which they learn (McComb & Whisler, 2007). The role of the teacher in recognizing the learners' preference learning method is very crucial for the success of the learners. Differentiated Instruction is one of the most educational issues in order to fit with learners' variances (Dunn, Honigsfeld, & Doolan, 2009).

The researcher is aware that there are many factors that enhance students' achievement such as differentiation in teaching English language, observing the students' motivation and parental encouragement. Among those factors, the researcher assumes that recognizing the perceptual learning style preferences of the students in learning English as a foreign language is one of the most crucial factors that optimize the students' academic achievement. Although some researchers have worked on perceptual learning style preferences in some academic setting, this research is mainly focused on comparing students' academic achievement in learning English as a foreign language according to their perceptual learning style preferences at Nelson English Language Center in Yangon (NELC), Myanmar.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To determine the perceptual learning style preferences of students in learning English as a foreign language at Nelson English Language Centre (NELC).
2. To determine the level of students' achievement in learning English as a foreign language at Nelson English Language Centre (NELC).
3. To determine if there is a significant difference among students' academic achievement according to their most preferred learning style at Nelson English Language Centre (NELC).

Literature Review

Reid's Perceptual Learning Style Preference

This learning style preference was originated from Dunn and Dunn's four learning styles preferences: Visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile. Reid (1984) added two more learning style preferences: group and individual who are classified as sociological factors in Dunn and Dunn's model. According to Reid (1995), three main learning styles named affective/temperament, cognitive and sensory or perceptual learning styles are widely recognized. **Affective learning style** is about individual's personality. It refers to the learners' feeling, values and personality (Renou, 2011). **Cognitive learning styles** are the ways people think, organize and solve the problems. There are two more categories under cognitive learning styles named field-independent and field-dependent. In **sensory learning style**, there are two categories named perceptual learning style and environmental learning style. Under perceptual learning styles, there are six learning styles named auditory, visual, tactile, kinesthetic, individual and group.

According to Reid (1987), Dunn and Dunn found out that the young children are originally tactile and kinesthetic learners. Dunn (1990) discovered that children's auditory and visual skills started to grow when they are about ten years old. Reid (1987) defined the perceptual learning style preferences as how learners interact with the environment and use different senses to deal with new information.

The researcher has used Reid's perceptual learning style as a theoretical framework. Perceptual learning style preference is the characteristics of individual different senses, natural and habitual when individual retrieve and interact new information and new facts (Reid, 1987). There are six different categories of major learning styles in Reid's model and the degree had been divided for major level, minor level and negative level. Major level refers to the learners under this level can learn the related learning style most effectively. In other word, the major level means the highest preferences. The learners under minor level can conduct the related learning style to some extent but it is not necessarily linked to the most effective learning. The learners under negative level will learn negatively which means the related learning style does not work for the learners. There are six learning style preferences and they are as follow:

Visual learning style preference refers to the learners, who easily understand the information by seeing the graphics in books or power point slides. They learn better by visually presented instead of listening to the lectures. To

optimize the learning for visual learners, taking descriptive notetaking during the lecture can visualize them. They like to have first row seating in the classroom and see the teacher's nonverbal cues such as body language to understand the lesson.

Auditory learning style preference refers to the learners who learn more by listening to the lectures in the class and they remember information when it has been explained to them in discussions or interviews. In other word, the auditory learners like to find out information by the means of pitch, speed and emphasis. In the classroom, they enhance their understanding by reading out loud and they have a limited understanding on written information. In order to help the auditory learners to enhance their learning, the teachers can use audio lingual method and drill the words in the classroom.

Kinesthetic learning style preference refers to the learners who learn the best when he or she has a chance to physically involve in classroom activities, field trips or role playing. They prefer physical experiences rather than listening to the lectures and reading the books. The teachers can increase the kinesthetic learners' stimuli by assigning classroom activities and hand on approaches. This type of learners inclines to have a difficulty on staying on the target and have unfocused sometimes.

Tactile learning style preference refers to the learners who optimize their learning by hands on experiences such as laboratory experiments, touching the materials and building the models. The teachers can support the tactile learners by creating a learning environment where the learners have a chance to apply their hands to conceptualize the lessons. This type of learners is good at drawing designs and likes to doodle while listening the lectures. They may find it is hard to sit still for a long time in the classroom.

A group learning style preference refers to the learners who like to share their ideas to other people in the group discussion or in the class. They like to get the ideas from other people as well and they value group interaction. They can achieve learning effectively when the teachers assign them to work class activities in group. The teachers can increase the learners' confidence by creating some activities where they can share their ideas and learn from others as well.

Individual learning style preference refers to the learners who learn best on their own instead of share ideas with other people. Their learning process is better when they work alone and process the new information. Unlike the group learners, the individual learners prefer study on their own and think it

is the best way they can optimize their learning. The individual learners tend to concentrate more than the group learners.

English Language Learning in Myanmar

There are many articles and journals that mention the benefits of learning English and those benefits include having scholarship to do further study abroad and getting promotion at the workplace. There are approximately two billion people use English for communicating with each other and about 450 million speak English as a first language and another one billion use English as a foreign language. Generally, one-third of the world population is speaking English and there will be more people using English in the future. After the first general election in 2010, one of the South East Asian countries, Myanmar, has emerged from decades of international isolation, civil conflict and classification as one of the poorest nations in the world. In 2009, Myanmar is included as one of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and it officially recognized English as the operational language of the organization (Kirkpatrick, 2014).

English language education helps Myanmar citizen to enhance the ability to participate in world economic system and it has become one of the important factors in continued development in Myanmar. Myanmar government decision makers as well as Myanmar academics highlight the urgency of English language pedagogy reform to improve national education system in Myanmar. According to Brutt-Griffler (2002), there are four criteria in defining development of English as an international language in Myanmar. Firstly, English is a widely used communicative tool to contact with the business, cultural, scientific and intellectual community. Secondly, English is used alongside with Myanmar language within multilingual communities. Thirdly, English is used by all sectors and levels in the society. Lastly, English as an international language spreads through speech communities acquiring English.

The challenges of English language learning in Myanmar are similar patterns and dilemmas with other world regions. Lambon (2009), for example, describes the challenges of English language instruction in the Chad republic such as limited ability of educators to teach English language skills in the areas of speaking, listening and reading. De Segovia (2008) noted the challenge of English language teaching in Thailand as disconnection between curriculum policy and classroom practice. Nimmannit (2009) describes the barriers of English language teaching in China are large class size, high level of pressure to get good results within the examination system, insufficient

teaching materials, limited number of dedicated and motivated language instructors.

In order to improve quality of English language teaching in Myanmar, it is needed to find out the challenges the educators encountered in English language teaching field, the reasons behind those challenges and the recommendations for English language educators. It is always debatable to promote contemporary English pedagogical practices in Myanmar context due to the gap between English proficiency between educators and the students (Soe, 2015). In her study of contemporary trends and challenges of English language teaching in Myanmar, it was found out that some students have obtained high level of fluency and accuracy by watching Hollywood films and attending private English language schools. As a result, they can speak confidently in English and have more fluency and accuracy than the educators. This gap created the imbalance between the teacher and the students' relationship and it was compounded by disparity between curriculum policies and classroom practices and the new generations of students who were born in modern technology.

Many academics give recommendations regarding the quality of English language teaching in Myanmar. Those recommendations derived from the analysis of the challenges of English language teaching in Myanmar. Firstly, English language educators need to reflect on their teaching pedagogy and classroom practices through coaching, observation and feedback to achieve effective teaching. Many educators in Myanmar are overload with daily schedule and they have no dedicated time to reflect on their own teaching. Secondly, reflective practice is important in order to achieve quality English language learning. It is needed to monitor and reflect on the effectiveness of classroom practice as it would be useful to address many barriers faced by English language educators in Myanmar. Thirdly, doing classroom action research among the educators would be beneficial and it can motivate them and improve their instructional strategy in the classroom. By doing classroom action research, the educators can their professional learning needs as well as those of their learners. Lastly, including English language educators in decision making process for curriculum, educational policy and program reform can have a huge impact on enhancing the effectiveness of English language teaching in Myanmar. Only the educators who are teaching English in Myanmar know very well about the challenges of English language teaching so that they can discover the problems more than any other people.

Conceptual Framework

This study aimed to identify the perceptual learning style preferences of students at NELC during the academic year 2018. The researcher studied if there is a significant difference among students' academic achievement according to their most preferred learning style at Nelson English Language Centre (NELC). There are two variables in this study: independent variables such as perceptual learning style preferences and a dependent variable such as the students' academic achievement. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework for this study as follow:

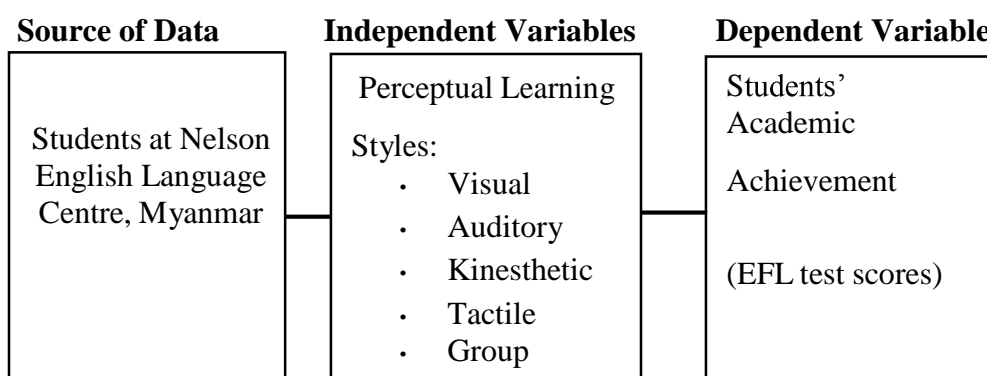


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for present study.

Sample

The population of this study was 155 students who are learning English as a foreign language at NELC during the academic year 2018. The researcher used all students from seven foundation level English classes at NELC during the academic year 2018.

Research Instrument

There are two research instruments in this study. Firstly, the researcher used Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ) developed by (Reid, 1984). The questionnaire was used to find out the students' perceptual learning style preferences in learning English as a foreign language at NELC. Then, the researcher used the students' EFL test scores as academic achievement to determine their level of achievement in learning English as a foreign language. In this study, the researcher examined if there is a significant difference among students' academic achievement according to their most preferred learning style at Nelson English Language Centre (NELC).

Findings

The findings are clarified and presented according to the research objectives.

Research Finding for Objective One

The researcher collected data from PLSPQ for objective one. Research objective 1 was to determine the perceptual learning style preferences of students in learning English as a foreign language at Nelson English Language Centre (NELC). The PLSPQ was designed to determine the perceptual learning style preferences of students and there are six categories such as visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, group and tactile learning styles. There are six items for each learning style and thirty items in total. There is a 5 point Likert scale that is used to find out individual's perceptual learning style preferences toward each item in the PLSPQ such as strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree. For objective one, the researcher computed the mean scores for each learning style based on the replied data, and identified the highest means scores to describe the students' most preferred learning style in learning English as a foreign language.

Table 1 *Frequency and Percentage of the Students' Preferred Learning Styles at NELC*

Learning Styles	Frequency	Percentage
Visual	13	8.4
Auditory	15	9.7
Kinesthetic	32	20.6
Tactile	12	7.7
Group	34	21.9
Individual	1	0.7
Mixed	48	31.0
Total	155	100

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of students' preferred learning styles at NELC. According to the result, the most preferred learning style is mixed (31.0%), followed by group (21.9%), kinesthetic (20.6%), auditory (9.7%), visual (8.4%), tactile (7.7%) and individual (0.7%).

Research Finding of Research Objective Two

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for research objective two. Research objective 2 was to determine the level of students' achievement in learning English as a foreign language at Nelson English Language Centre (NELC).

The researcher used EFL test scores as academic achievement from the students who are learning English as a foreign language at NELC during the academic year 2018. The data analysis result is presented in table 15.

Table 2 *Means and Standard Deviations of Academic Achievement of Students in NELC*

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Interpretation
Achievement Level	155	88.10	6.226	Very High

The mean score of 88.10 in academic achievement describes that the students at NELC demonstrated a very high level of achievement based on the table 15 criteria of academic achievement.

Research Finding of Research Objective Three

The data was collected from the PLSPQ to answer the research objective three. Research objective 3 was to determine if there is a significant difference among students' academic achievement according to their most preferred learning style at Nelson English Language Centre (NELC).

Table 3 shows the comparison of students' achievement according to their most preferred learning styles for research objective three. One-way ANOVA was used to compare the students' academic achievement according to their most preferred learning style at NELC.

Table 3 *Comparison of Students' Academic Achievement According to Their Most Preferred Learning Styles*

Learning Styles	Sum of Squares	<i>Df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	Sig.
Between Groups	125.234	6	20.872	.529	.786
Within Groups	5844.314	148	39.489		
Total	5969.548	154			

Table 3 indicates that the probability of .786 is bigger than .05 at .05 level of significance. Therefore, there are no significance differences among students academic achievement according to their most preferred learning style at Nelson English Language Centre (NELC).

Discussion

In this section, the researcher discusses the perceptual learning style preference, academic achievement in learning English as a foreign language and comparison of the academic achievement with the most preferred learning style.

Perceptual Learning Style Preference

The results of this study describe that students from NELC prefer mixed learning styles as the most preferred learning style followed by group learning style, kinesthetic learning style, auditory learning style, visual learning style, tactile learning style and individual learning style as the least preferred one

According to Reid (1987), she had conducted perceptual learning style preferences of 1388 EFL students in the United States. In her study, kinesthetic and tactile were major learning styles. The major learning styles of this study are kinesthetic, tactile and group so it is similar to Reid's study in 1987. In this study, the students in NELC prefer partially to both tactile and kinesthetic learning style so mixed learning style becomes the most preferred one. The researcher assumes that the students in NELC encountered different teaching methods from various teachers and this is another reason that mixed learning style is the most preferred one in this study.

There are two reasons why the students in NELC prefer group learning style as their second most preferred one. Firstly, the students have to do many group project presentations and classroom discussions with their classmates in NELC. The researcher assumes that this familiarity of group learning style supports the students in learning English as a foreign language and it becomes their second most preferred learning style in this study. Secondly, most teachers in NELC use project based learning which require the students to be in group to do some classroom activities. The finding of this study differs from Reid's finding in 1987 which resulted that there was negligible group learning style preference.

There are many possibilities why individual learning style is the least preferred one in this study. Firstly, the classroom activities often require the students to be in pair work or group work and the students have very limited chance to work alone. Secondly, it is a nature of Asian students to be interdependent with each other in the learning. In NELC, students are diverse in terms of regions, culture, educational background and religions. This variety imposes the students to learn more from each other instead of learning individually. Therefore, it is no surprising to see the result that the students in NELC preferred individual learning style the least.

In Reid's research about ESL students in the United States demonstrated that individual's learning style preference is different due to many factors such as culture, the majors and the age. Vietnamese students preferred visual learning styles while Spanish ones preferred kinesthetic learning styles and tactile learning styles (Reid, 1987). In this study, students prefer kinesthetic learning

style (20.6%) more than visual learning style (8.4%). The researcher assumes that a different learning environment is one of the factors that influence individual preferred learning style.

According to Juris, Ramos, and Castaneda (2009), the most preferred learning style was kinesthetic followed by tactile and auditory learning styles. That study was conducted with 254 students and 9 teachers in private and public schools of four cities in Colombia. The respondents of this study reveal that they prefer kinesthetic learning style followed by auditory, visual and tactile learning style. There were mixed learning style, group learning style and individual learning style in this study but there were no individual and group learning style in Juris, Ramos, and Castaneda's study. The researcher assumes that this difference might be resulted from different learning environment and different sample size from this study (254 and 155) and various instruction methods.

Academic Achievement in Learning English as a Foreign Language

Finely (2000) developed a study on learning styles and academic learning achievement of high school students. According to the study, 81% of kinesthetic students are more active in the classroom participation compared to other students. As a result, the kinesthetic learners have higher learning achievement than the passive students. In this study, the researcher used EFL test scores to measure academic achievement of students who are learning English as a foreign language at NELC. The result shows that students in NELC have a very high level of academic achievement in learning English as a foreign language and prefer mixed learning style.

There are many factors that support a very high level of academic achievement of students in NELC during the academic year 2018. Firstly, the students experienced various teaching styles in NELC. Most of them are coming from rural area of Myanmar so they are familiar with only teacher-centered approach in the classroom. Teachers in NELC vary the teaching methods according to the needs of the students and the researcher assumes that this is one of the factors the students gain a very high level of academic achievement. Secondly, students from rural area are more hardworking and disciplined in learning English than the students in urban area. Most students in NELC are from rural area and their parents send them to urban area to learn English after they have completed their high school exam.

Moreover, students in Myanmar are aware that they have more opportunities in education and work when they can speak English.

Comparison of Academic Achievement and the Most Preferred Learning Styles

The analysis of this study shows that there is no significant difference among students' academic achievement according to their most preferred learning styles. It means that the students in NELC do have their own learning styles respectively but their academic achievement is not affected by any of these learning styles. Rouke and Lysnchuk (2000) used two different materials: printed materials and web-based materials to teach. The students are divided into two groups where one group is taught with printed material and the other is with web-based material. According to their finding, the students with different learning styles have different learning achievement levels which differ from this researcher's study. Different results of these two studies might be caused by the different learning atmosphere and the teaching methods applied by the teachers.

Moo (2016) created a study of elementary to upper intermediate students determining that their preferred learning style was kinesthetic. In this study, the most preferred learning style is mixed learning style. The different result of these two studies might be different exam type and different instruction applied by the teachers. The study also showed that there was no significant difference of elementary to upper-intermediate students' academic achievement according to their most preferred learning style. This researcher's study had a similar result of no significant difference in students' academic achievement according to their most preferred learning style.

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