CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Background

A major concern of teachers and programme developers of English as a Second Language (ESL) has been the understanding of the ESL learning process. Several factors have made this topic a focal point of interest among practising teachers and second language researchers. To begin with, ESL teachers cannot but be concerned with the learning needs of their students. In addition, a knowledge of how students learn is important for the development of curricula, teaching methods and teaching materials in order to meet the needs of ESL students.

In their efforts to understand the learning process, ESL researchers have attempted to isolate learner characteristics which enhance or hinder progress in learning a second language. Studies dealing with individual differences in the learning process have focussed on questions such as what makes a good language learner and why some students develop proficiency more quickly and easily than others (Chapelle and Roberts, 1986). In the course of their studies, ESL researchers have identified several factors which account for some of the differences in how students learn. Two such factors are learning styles and learning strategies. At the heart of the study of learning styles is the desire among these researchers to help students find out their uniqueness as learners. In addition, the central goal in focussing on learning strategies is to discover

ways to help their students realise their full language learning potential. According to Ely and Pease-Alvarez (1996), both ". . . these goals are not only complementary but essential to each other. If students have not become aware of who they are as learners, they will have no foundation for working with how they learn." (Ely and Pease-Alvarez, 1996, p. 5). Ely and Pease-Alvarez (1996) also suggest that if learners do not take full advantage of their learning styles through appropriate learning strategies, this self-knowledge is then wasted.

Learning styles have been defined differently by different researchers. Keefe (1987) defines learning styles "as characteristic cognitive, affective and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment." (Keefe, 1987, p. 4). According to Kolb (1984), learning styles are an individual's preferred method of receiving and processing information which is shaped by heredity, age, past and present environmental factors as well as cultural background. Kinsella (1996) describes learning styles as being multi-dimensional, whose elements can be classified into five stimulus categories: environmental elements (sound, light, temperature, design), emotional elements (motivation, persistence, responsibility) physical elements (perception, intake, time, mobility), sociological elements (self, partner, team, mentor) and psychological elements (global/analytical, impulsive/reflective). Clearly learning styles include the cognitive, affective and physiological domain (Oxford, Hollaway and Horton-Murillo, 1992).

Reid (1987) divides learning styles into three major categories, namely cognitive learning styles, sensory learning styles and personality learning styles. Among these three major learning styles, Barbe, Swassing and Milone (1979) consider the sensory modes as "the key to learning" (Barbe *et. al.* 1979, p.1) and point to the vital role perceptions play in thought processes. According to them, there exists in language learning a critical link between the learner's senses, particularly the auditory and visual channels and the verbal and non-verbal aspects of the language which the learner is attempting to process and incorporate. Reid (1987) divides the sensory learning styles into perceptual learning styles, environmental styles and sociological styles. Among these the perceptual modalities have been regarded as the most important in ESL learning.

According to French, Gilley and Cherry (1981) in (http://www.learningstyles.org /SevenstylesOverview.htm), perceptual learning styles are the means by which learners extract information from their surroundings through the use of their five senses. Individuals have different "pathways" that are specific to them. When information enters that "pathway" the information is retained in short term memory. Repeated exposure and use promote retention in long term memory. The seven principles of perceptual modes (pathways) included in this theory are print, interactive, visual, haptic, kinesthetic, and olfactory. The print mode refers to seeing printed words or written words; aural refers to listening; interactive refers to verbalisation; visual to seeing visual depictions such as pictures and graphs; haptic to the sense of

touch or grasp; kinesthetic refers to whole body movement, while olfactory refers to the sense of smell and taste.

Research with US children by Dunn (1984, 1983) and Reinert (1976) has demonstrated that learners have four basic perceptual learning channels (or modalities). They are visual learning, auditory learning, kinesthetic learning and tactile learning.

Reid (1995) defines perceptual learning styles as internally based characteristics of individuals for the intake or understanding of new information. According to Reid (1995), all learners have individual attributes relating to their learning processes. Some people rely heavily on visual presentation; others may prefer spoken language; still others may respond to hands-on activities. Reid has identified six learning style preferences, namely visual learning, auditory learning, kinesthetic learning, tactile learning, group learning and individual learning.

While most research on the cognitive domain of learning styles has focussed on the thinking and remembering aspects of this domain (Ramirez, 1986; Hansen and Stanfield, 1981; Benesse and Hamayan, 1980), there has been limited research on perceptual learning styles in the context of second language learning. This has been considered a serious omission in view of the important place held by perceptual modalities in the learning style theory and the

implications of perceptual modality learning on ESL instruction (Barbe *et. al.* 1979).

Research in perceptual learning has focussed mainly on native English speakers, primarily children (Carbo, 1984; Barbe and Milone, 1981, 1980; Dunn and Dunn, 1978), and to a lesser extent on adults (Dorsey and Pierson, 1984; Galbraith and James, 1984; Kolb, 1984; Cherry, 1981). Prior to the 1980s, relatively little research was carried out on the perceptual learning styles of ESL speakers. Early research on American minorities (Hale, 1982; Ramierez and Castanada, 1974; Cohen, 1969) suggested that ethnicity played a role in learning differences among the groups studied.

Later research also posited that cultural values influence learning with significant difference in attitude, perceptions and interpersonal relationships between non-Western and Western cultures (Hvitfeld, 1986; Decker, 1983). Research on other aspects of cognition such as field dependence and independence which focussed on diverse ethnic groups has demonstrated that cultural, social and educational factors have a significant effect on learning style development (Gonzales and Roll, 1985; Ramirez and Castaneda, 1974; Lesser, Fifer and Clark, 1965). Similar factors seem to influence perceptual learning style development as evidenced by the significant differences in perceptual modality preferences exhibited by foreign students in a study carried out by Reid (1987). Reid (1987) who carried out a comprehensive study on the perceptual learning

styles of foreign students attending American colleges also found that other variables such as gender, length of time spent in the United States, major field of study and level of education can cause significant differences in the perceptual learning style preferences. Reid's study also hints at the changes in the learning styles of the immigrant learners through continued exposure to the host culture.

Similar studies carried out by Stebbins (1992), Melton (1990) and Rossi-Le (1989), using the same instrument further confirmed the effect of culture on perceptual learning style preferences of the ESL learners. Rossi-Le and Stebbins carried out their respective studies in America while Melton's study was carried out in the Republic of China. According to Oxford and Anderson (1995) for ". . . optimal language progress, language instructors need to understand their students' learning styles and the cultural and cross-cultural influences that shape those styles" (Oxford and Anderson, 1995, p. 201).

The research on learning styles has examined the effects of tailoring teaching to students' learning styles (Hansen-Strain, 1989). It has shown that matching learning styles has a positive impact on students' achievement, interest and motivation (Smith and Renzulli, 1984). The results of several investigations of the potential interaction between learning styles and learning approaches indicate that students' performances can be enhanced by adapting instructional methods to individual differences in learning styles (Sein and Robey, 1991; Wesche, 1981; Dunn and Dunn, 1979). Many researchers such as Kinsella

(1996) and Gagne (1993) have argued that identifying learning styles and providing appropriate instruction contribute to more effective learning. According to Brown (1994), when students' learning styles are matched with appropriate approaches in teaching their motivation, performance and achievement will increase.

The Malaysian education system requires students to learn the English language as a second language. The reason for this is that the Malaysian Government recognises that the English language is a global language and if Malaysians are to be effective global players, obviously they need to be proficient in this language. Therefore the focus of ESL in primary and secondary schools is primarily for communication. For students in the institutions of higher learning the need to be proficient in English goes beyond the ability to communicate effectively. For these students (irrespective of the field they may be in), the amount of knowledge that they need to process increases daily with most of the sources of this knowledge being in the English language. These students therefore are often required to take specific classes to improve their ESL skills. In many cases, the pre-determined reading and teaching styles used in these classes do not lead to significant improvement in the ability of individual students to tackle particular academic areas such as accounting, engineering, humanities and a host of other content area interests. According to Benesch (1996), the problems include not only different learning and teaching styles but also widely different learning needs and objectives among individual students.

The students who are successful in mastering the English language underline the importance of knowledge of the language-learning process shared by the teacher and their own perceptual learning styles. According to James and Galbraith (1989, p.68):

> The learning style concept is essential to the individual learner. Since learning styles impact on the amount of information processed and retained, knowledge and utilisation of one's most effective learning style will enhance knowledge of learning style information, allow individuals to pursue their personal learning projects in a more effective and efficient manner.

According to Smith and Associates (1990), knowledge of one's own learning style is essential in learning to learn. Teachers should help students discover their own learning style preferences and provide constructive feedback about the advantages and disadvantages of the various styles. Also, teachers should respect the learners' present preferences and encourage their development, while at the same time creating opportunities for students to experiment with different ways of learning.

Students learn more effectively through their own initiative. The goal is the development of self-directed learners. Self-direction is essential in the active development of adults' abilities in learning (Smith and Associates, 1990). It is especially important for ESL learners to be self-directed since it is impossible to give them guidance or instruction when they use the language outside the classroom. Clearly, ESL learners need to be empowered with a wide range of

learning strategies to achieve competence and autonomy in learning the target language. This requires teachers to expand their knowledge of language teaching and learning strategies and to gradually develop students' flexibilities in learning.

Thus, the identification of the preferred perceptual learning styles of the students and the ability to select and use appropriate learning strategies are important for both ESL students and teachers.

Statement of the Problem

The perceptual learning styles of students have been found to be a significant factor in ESL learning (Rossi-Le, 1989; Reid, 1987). The need to match learning strategies with learning styles for effective learning to take place has been emphasised (Oxford and Levine, 1991). Before the students can select the appropriate learning strategies, they would need to know their perceptual learning style preferences. The focus of this study is Malay ESL students from an institution of higher learning in Malaysia. The impetus for this study is the apparent absence of comprehensive baseline data on the perceptual learning style preferences and learning strategies of this group of students. A study on the perceptual learning styles of Malay students, among other students, studying in America was carried out by Reid (1987). Reid found that the host culture of a country tended to influence the ESL students' perceptual learning styles. In fact, Reid (1987) found that the longer the ESL students stayed in the host country,

the more they tended to change their learning styles in accordance with that found in the host country.

On the surface, the concept of learning style and culture appears to be contradictory. The notion of learning style implies individual differences. As Reid (Reid, 1987, p. 89) points out, learning style is a "pervasive quality in the learning strategies or the learning behaviour of an individual." Culture on the other hand refers not to what is individual but to what is shared by a group of individuals. Culture refers to what is common to members of a group. Reid (1987) says cultural learning style exists and it is learned. According to her, individuals learn how to learn through the socialisation process that occurs in families and friendship groups. As Singleton (1991, p.120) explains:

> There are in every society, unstated assumptions about people and how they learn, which act as a set of self-fulfilling prophesies that invisibly guide whatever educational processes may occur there. They act as a kind of unintentional hidden curriculum, or what an anthropologist might call a cultural theory of learning.

The studies carried out by both Reid (1987) and Singleton (1991) stressed on the importance of attending to students' cultural learning styles when selecting teaching and learning strategies for ESL learning. As an initial step there is a need to identify the learning styles of the students in their native country.

Researchers such as Oxford and Lavine (1991) and Rossi-Le (1989) have found that learning styles influence learners' selection of their learning strategies.

Since no known study has been carried out on Malay undergraduates in the Malaysian setting, this study will look at the interplay between the perceptual learning style preferences of Malay students and the learning strategies they use in ESL learning.

Studies by Rossi-Le (1989) and Reid (1987) have also found that personal differences in the respondents such as gender, proficiency in the English Language, the number of years they have studied the language as well as their field of study can have an effect on the learning styles of the students. Brown (1987) found the affective side of the learner to be one of the biggest influences on language learning success or failure. Those with positive emotions and attitudes can make learning more effective and enjoyable. Needless to say, there has been insufficient research carried out on the effect of these personal factors on the perceptual learning style preferences of Malay students in institutions of higher learning in Malaysia.

Locally, several researchers have carried out studies on learning styles. Among these are studies carried out by Jaya (2003), Chua (2003), Wan Zakri (2000), Ch'ng (2000), Abdul Razak (1999), Zalizan, Yassin, Salamuddin, Rahman, Majid, and Amir, (1998), Saad (1997) and Lourdusamy (1994). However, these studies used different models of learning styles and subjects. Jaya (2003) used Keefe's (1989) human information processing model to study the learning style preferences of year two teacher trainees at the Sarawak

Teachers' Training College, Zalizan *et. al.* (1998) compared cognitive learning styles of high and low achievers, Wan Zakri (2000) studied the relationship between learning styles and achievement in physics, Ch'ng (2000) looked at relationship between learning style and achievement in science, Lourdusamy (1994) looked at the relationship between cognitive learning styles of teacher trainees and achievement the in education component of the teacher education curriculum, Abdul Razak (1999) studied the relationship between learning styles and achievement in history, Saad (1997) investigated the relationship between the learning environment, learning approach and achievement in economics while the focus of Chua's (2003) study was the learning styles of teacher trainees and the relationship of learning styles to academic achievement.

There is no known research on the perceptual learning style preferences, the learning strategies and the relationship between these two variables on Malay ESL students at university level in Malaysia. Previous studies carried out used either one or the other of these two variables and with respondents from multi-ethnic groups. Abdullah (1999), Hariharan and Abdullah (1999) as well as Syed Sahil and Wan Din (1995) used the Perceptual Learning Style Preference (PLSP) questionnaire to study the perceptual learning style preferences of multi-ethnic ESL university students. Singh (2000), and Hashim and Syed Shahil (1994) used the Strategy Inventory for Language Learners (SILL) to study the learning strategies of ESL students. It is to be pointed out that an additional feature in the present research is the use of case studies to seek explanations for

some of the variations in the strategies used by students with different perceptual learning style preferences.

In relation to the gaps identified in past studies on perceptual learning style preferences and learning strategies of Malay ESL students in university, this study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptual learning style preferences of Malay ESL students in a local university?
2. Is there a relationship between personal variables of these students and their perceptual learning style preferences?
3. What are the ESL learning strategies used by these students?
4. Is there a relationship between personal variables of these students and their ESL learning strategies?
5. Is there a relationship between the perceptual learning styles of these students and their ESL learning strategies?
6. How do three ESL students with different perceptual learning style preferences select their learning strategies for a reading comprehension task?

Objectives of the Study

The overall objective of this study is to determine the perceptual learning style preferences, the learning strategies in ESL learning and the relationship

between perceptual learning style preferences and learning strategies of selected Malay students in a selected institution of higher learning in Malaysia. The study also explores the processes three students go through when selecting learning strategies for reading comprehension tasks. More specifically, this study attempts to determine the following:

1. The perceptual learning style preferences of these students in terms of their major learning styles, minor learning styles and negligible learning styles;

2. The relationship between selected personal variables of (a) age (b) number of years of studying the English Language (c) proficiency in the English Language (d) gender and (e) field of study and the perceptual learning style preferences of these students;

3. The learning strategies used by these students in ESL, that is whether they are high, medium or low level users of the strategies concerned;

4. The relationship between selected personal variables of (a) age (b) number of years of studying the English Language (c) proficiency in the English Language (d) gender and (e) field of study and the learning strategies used in ESL learning;

5. The relationship between the perceptual learning styles of these students and their ESL learning strategies; and

6. An in-depth study of how three ESL students with different perceptual learning style preferences select learning strategies for a reading comprehension task.

Significance of this Study

The study will contribute to a better understanding of the learning process of Malay ESL learners at university level, more specifically in the area of their perceptual learning style preferences and their learning strategies.

For students, understanding their learning style preferences may accomplish several goals:

1. Identifing learning "tools" that initially build upon their own inclination and backgrounds and offering them some familiarity may make them less resistant to risk-taking and change factors considered necessary for successful second language acquisition;

2. Knowledge of their learning styles and the place of learning styles in a specific culture may help students understand that beliefs and behaviours are not universal but are learned instead and may vary among cultures. In this way, students might view changes asked of them in the ESL classrooms not as a repudiation of their ethnicity but rather as behaviours that they can learn to maximise in their own ESL learning and academic success;

3. For students from classes where the teaching is heavily teacher-directed, knowledge of their individual learning style preferences could help them to assume responsibility for their learning by helping them select learning strategies that build on their innate preferences; and

4. Knowledge of their learning styles will give students a sense that they are in control of aspects of their learning process with direct influence on the

outcome. This can build self-confidence, again reinforcing the willingness to be risk-takers.

In the case of teachers, the knowledge and understanding of the learning style preferences of the students and the relationship between learning style preferences and learning strategies will enable them to be more sensitive to the learning needs of their students and thereby enable them to plan learning experiences that will produce optimal learning.

The research findings derived through this study will expand the baseline data produced by researchers such as Rossi-Le (1989), Reid (1987) and others who have carried out similar studies in their own countries. The study may also help to extend the understanding of the extent to which culture and background variables of the students influence the perceptual learning style preferences of ESL students.

Most of the ESL curricula, learning materials and methodologies used in Malaysia have been based on studies carried out on ESL learning in the West. Knowledge of the perceptual learning style preferences and their relationships to the learning strategies of ESL learners in their home setting will help in the development of more appropriate curriculum, learning materials and learning strategies that will better meet the needs of the Malaysian ESL students.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

Certain limitations of the study should be noted and these limitations would suggest possible future research directions. One limitation is that this study is carried out with Malay students from three selected fields of study in a university in Malaysia. The generalisability of the findings would therefore be limited to similar respondents from similar universities.

While it is recognised there are several categories of learning styles, this study focussed only on the perceptual learning style preferences of the ESL students and their relationships to learning strategies. Therefore, the findings of the study are only applicable to this particular aspect of learning styles.

While different researchers have defined perceptual learning styles differently and used corresponding instruments to measure the learning styles of their respondents, this study uses Reid's (1987) definition of perceptual learning style preferences. Accordingly, the questionnaire used to determine the learning style preferences of the respondents is the one used by Reid in her study, that is, the Perceptual Learning Style Preference questionnaire.

This study uses Oxford's (1986b) definition of learning strategies and accordingly uses the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (1990) developed by her to determine the learning strategies of the respondents in this study.

Definition of Terms

In this section several terms are defined as they are used in this study.

Learning Styles

In this study, unless it is otherwise stated, learning styles refer to perceptual learning style preferences / preferred perceptual learning styles.

Perceptual Learning Style Preferences (PLSP)

This refers to the channels through which students prefer to learn as defined by Reid (1987). They are classified as follows:

1. auditory – listening to tapes and lectures;

2. visual – reading and studying charts;

3. kinesthetic – experiential learning, that is, total physical involvement with a learning situation like role playing, dramas and story-telling;

4. tactile – hands-on learning such as building models or doing laboratory experiments;

5. group learning – learning more successfully and learning more easily when working with others or tends to remember information better when working with two or more classmates; and

6. individual learning - learning best when learning alone; able to think better when studying alone and tends to remember information better when learning alone.

These channels are measured using the Perceptual Learning Style Preference questionnaire (see Appendix B for the questionnaire). The questionnaire determines the learning style preferences into the following three categories:

Major learning style preferences

This is the perceptual learning style preference of the respondent who obtains a score of 38 – 50 for a particular style in the Perceptual Learning Style Preference questionnaire.

Minor learning style preferences

This is the perceptual learning style preference of the respondent who obtains a score of 25–37 for a particular style in the Perceptual Learning Style Preference questionnaire.

Negligible learning style preferences

This refers to the perceptual learning style preference of the respondent who obtains a score of 24 and less for a particular learning style in the PLSP Questionnaire.

Learning Strategies

These refer to the techniques that students employ in order to facilitate their learning of materials such as repeating words orally and taking notes. In this study, the learning strategies are grouped according to those proposed by Oxford (1986b). These groups are as follows:

1. memory – remembering more effectively;

2. cognitive – using all the mental processes;

3. compensatory – compensating for missing knowledge;

4. metacognitive – organising and evaluating knowledge;

5. affective – managing emotions; and

6. social – learning with others.

These are measured using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (see Appendix C for the questionnaire). Depending on the score obtained by the respondents, they are categorised into three groups, that is, high level user of the strategy, medium level user of the strategy and low level user of the strategy. The definition of the three levels of usage with their corresponding scores are as follows:

Level of Use	Frequency of use	Average Score
High	Always or almost always used usually used	4.5 to 5.0 3.5 to 4.4
Medium	Sometimes used	2.5 to 3.4
Low	Generally not used never or almost never used	1.5 to 2.4 1.0 to 1.4

Proficiency in the English Language

In this study, this refers to the grade obtained by a student in the English Language at the end of their Foundation English Language Programme. Students are assessed on language proficiency based on the grades obtained in the final examination. The grading system is as follows:

Grade	Range of Marks(%)
A+	90-100
A	80-89
A-	75-79
B+	70-74
B	65-69
B-	60-64
C+	55-59
C	50-54
C-	45-49
D+	40-44
D	35-39
E	30-34
F	0-29

Foundation English Language Programme

This programme is compulsory for all students who are pursuing professional courses at Universiti Teknologi Mara. It is specially designed for students with elementary language proficiency. The aim of the programme is to raise the students' level of proficiency in the four language skills and equip them with adequate communication abilities at tertiary level. This will enable students to develop enough proficiency in the English Language in order to be able to read and understand reference materials in the English Language related to their respective fields of study.

Field of Study

This refers to the professional courses pursued by the students. In this study, the students are from the Faculties of Business and Management (Business

Management), Office Management and Technology (Secretarial Science) and Information Technology and Quantitative Science (Computer Science).

Learner autonomy

In this study, learner autonomy uses Benson and Voller's (1997) definition. In this definition, learner autonomy refers to (a) situations in which learners study entirely on their own, (b) a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning, (c) the exercise of learners responsibility for their own learning and (d) the right of learners to determine the direction of their learning.

Culture

This refers to the total shared way of life of a given group of people, comprising of their modes of thinking, acting and feeling.