

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Learning is an interactive process and the product of student and teacher activities within a specific learning environment. These activities, which are the central elements of the learning process, show a wide variation in pattern, style and quality. Learning problems may not be frequently related to the difficulty of the subject matter but rather to the type and level of cognitive processes required to learn the content (Keefe, 1988).

In the Malaysian education system English language is a compulsory subject. In line with its status as “the second most important language” in the country, English language is taught in all primary and secondary schools to enable them to use the language to further their studies in the tertiary level and for work purposes. The reason for this is that the Malaysian Government recognizes that the English language is a global language and if Malaysians are to be effective as global players, obviously they need to be proficient in this language (The Sun, 2009). Therefore, the focus of ESL in primary and secondary school is not only for communication but also as a preparation to use the language in tertiary education and later in the job market. Due to this, students are expected to have mastered all the English language skills by the time they finish their Form 5 in secondary school.

Today, students do not only have to learn English and pass the examination like the other subjects in schools, but to be able to use the language in order to cope with the information explosion. They too, have to be able to read, write, speak and listen to, for different purposes in different contexts. With more information and knowledge they will be able to move ahead as more employees would prefer graduates who are able to speak well in English. In short, the students need to be prepared by the education system by all means to master the language.

A primary area of concern for nearly every teacher is the difference in learning strategies they observe between male and female students. Past studies have shown that there is immense overlap between the genders, that each child is an inherently sacrosanct individual not to be limited by a gender stereotype, but to many, they know that boys and girls learn differently (Gurian, 2001).

Past studies have also shown that both genders tend to create quite different educational experiences for themselves. Therefore, since every student in this country is expected to learn all skills in the language, the identification of the preferred learning styles of students of both genders and the ability to select and use appropriate learning strategies are equally important for both students and teachers.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In the Malaysian school system, English language is a compulsory subject to all students. In acquiring the language, students employ learning strategies and may also have their perceptual learning styles in order to achieve the best results to enable them to understand and communicate in the language fluently.

Based on the researcher's experience as an English language teacher, as well as personal interviews with other teachers, teachers reported informally that during English lessons, different genders react and perform differently to the tasks given by the teacher. For instance, in speaking activities carried out during the language lesson, male students tend to be more outspoken, direct and speak in higher tone in discussions, debates and other speaking activities, while female students speak in a softer tone and speak more slowly and clearly. While in writing activity, male and female students use different ways to express their views and react differently on certain topics given.

The choice of learning style preference and strategies is influenced by a number of factors. A student's preference of learning style may be influenced by various internal and external factors. According to Nunan (1995), a person's learning style is a result of personality variables, such as psychological and cognitive make-up, socio-cultural background and educational experience. It can also be affected by factors like subject matter, context, age, prior knowledge, gender, motivation and ethnicity (Reid, 1987).

Gender has been identified to influence learning styles and strategies. According to several studies, the gender of the students also makes a significant difference in learning a second or foreign language, (Politzer, 1983; Oxford et al.,1988; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Oxford et al.,1993; Oxford and Ehrman,1995; and Lee,1994). These studies examined gender as a variable in the use of language learning strategies and reported that significant gender differences almost always occurred with greater use of language learning strategies by females.

Paramjeet's (2003) study was the one found to use both Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning to identify students' learning styles and strategies of students at the tertiary level. Other local studies were found to have used either only Reid's (1987) Perceptual Learning Style Preference (PLSP) questionnaire or Oxford's (1986) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning to identify students' learning style preferences or latter, students' learning strategies.

Therefore, this study is carried out to identify learning styles and choice of learning strategies of local secondary students, in particular in learning the English language in a classroom setting. It also aims to ascertain whether there are any differences in the learning style preferences and learning strategies of different genders.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The focus of the study is on secondary students learning the English language in the classroom, and the objectives are:

1. To investigate the learning style preference of secondary students based on gender differences.
2. To identify the choice of learning strategies used by secondary students based on gender differences.
3. To compare similarities and differences of students' learning style preferences and choice of learning strategies based on gender differences.

1.4 Research Questions

Based on the above objectives, the research questions for this study are as the following:

1. What are the perceptual learning style preferences (PLSP) of secondary students in a classroom situation?
2. What are the learning strategies used by secondary students?
3. How similar or different are the male and female students in terms of their perceptual learning style preferences and strategies based on gender differences?

For Research Question 1, these will refer to the perceptual learning style preferences test by Reid (1987) between the male and female students in terms of their major learning styles, minor learning styles and negligible learning styles;

For Research Question 2, these will refer to the learning strategies based on the test by Oxford (1990) used by these students in learning English language that is whether they are high, medium or low level users of the strategies concerned.

For Research Question 3, the findings from research question 1 and research question 2 will be compared to find whether there are any similarities or differences between the male and female students on their perceptual learning style preferences and strategies based on gender differences.

1.5 Limitations of the Study

This study inevitably has the following limitations.

1. This study is limited to three particular groups of 90 Form 2 male and female students in a local government school in Puchong, Selangor. Students from other locations in Malaysia have not been considered.
2. Age is not a variable in this study. All students in the selected classes are subjects of this study.

Thus, due to the above limitations, this study shall not be generalized as typical or representative of all Malaysian secondary male and female students for their learning style preferences and strategies.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Previous studies carried out focused on either Reid's (1987) Perceptual Learning Style Preferences to identify the learning styles or Oxford's (1986) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning to identify the students' language learning strategies. Locally, several researchers have carried out studies on learning style preferences and learning strategies. To name few, there are Ebenezer (1999), Yeoh (2004), Noor Saazai (2004) and Badli Esham (2005). Of these four, only Noor Saazai's (2004) samples were secondary students, while the other researchers' samples were students from the higher institutions. Singh (2000), and Hashim and Syed Sahil (1994) used the Strategy Inventory for Language Learners (SILL) to study the learning strategies of ESL Learners. Paramjeet's (2003) study was found to use both Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning to identify students' learning styles and strategies. However, her samples were students of the tertiary level.

Why do we study the learning style preferences and the learning strategies of the male and female students in a Malaysian secondary school? What do we gain from this exploration?

While many teachers are generally aware of the differences between male and female students, not many know the pedagogical implications as the importance of this matter is often overlooked. Thus, it is hoped that the findings of this study provides an opportunity for English teachers in particular educators in ESL settings to benefit from this study. For teachers and curriculum designers of English as a Second Language (ESL), if it is possible to identify the characteristics of learners, this could enhance students' progress in learning the English language.

As for the students, knowing and understanding their own learning style preferences can help improve their learning of the English language. The findings of this study which reflect their learning styles and strategies will empower them as they can be guided to control aspects of their language learning process which ultimately will lead to a direct influence on their learning outcome. This can include building their self-confidence, again reinforcing the willingness to be risk-takers in order to be competent in the language. When they realize their learning styles at the very young age, they would be able to use suitable and the best strategies in any situation they would encounter in the acquisition of the language.

This study is relevant since it allows educators, including the researcher who is also an English language teacher, to gain more insight into ways of making teaching more effective. By acknowledging the similarities and differences between male and female students' language learning style and strategies, teachers would be able to plan their lessons and activities which would suit their students' needs and interests so that students of different genders would get to learn the English language at its best.

In short, the result that comes out of this study on the gender differences would generally give an impact towards English language learning.

1.7 Conclusion

This study aims to identify the learning style preferences and strategies of a group of 90 Form 2 secondary school students. It focuses on the perceptual learning style preferences and the language learning strategies.

This chapter began with the background of this study followed by the statement of the problem. The objective and research questions posed are aimed to investigate the problem of this study. Limitations of the study were presented with the chapter ending with the discussion on the significance of the study. Literature related to this study will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.