Chapter 1

Introduction

This chapter discusses the rationale, the statement of the problem, the objectives, the scope, and the significance of this study. This chapter also defines most of the terms, which are important in understanding the study.

Rationale and Statement of the Problem

In China, English, as a foreign language, has been taught as a compulsory course in colleges/universities for nearly 20 years. In order to obtain educational diplomas, college/university students must pass the English proficiency examinations, which are administrated by the Ministry of Higher Education in China. However, only a few students pass the examination to obtain the diploma for finding meaningful employment. This fact definitely increases the pressure for students to learn English but it also decreases their confidence in learning English.

Accordingly, the curriculum of current English textbooks in China are mainly designed for passing the proficiency examinations, which lead teachers to use a set textbook and control the teaching and learning process. Breaking away from this traditional pattern has been difficult because of the lack of learning materials appropriate to the students' learning styles.

Furthermore, most Chinese teachers prefer their familiar instructional skills and strategies in teaching, thus, failing to adapt to students' learning styles in planning classroom activities. This fact results in a proliferation of students' passive learning habits and the lack of enthusiasm in English learning. It is important to realize that students learn in different ways and that have preferences for how they like to learn and how they learn best. The more the teacher knows about the learning styles of students, the more they are able to plan a varity of instructional approaches and materials to promote successful learning.

Chinese teachers need to realize the defects of their traditional instruction and increase awareness of students' learning style preferences to develop suitable learning materials. The material would provide learners with more control over their language learning and lead them toward becoming independent language learners, according to their learning styles. The problems mentioned above are also true for the students and teachers at Southwest Nationality Institute.

Background of SWNI (Southwest Nationality Institute)

The SWNI in Chengdu, Sichuan province, is an institution of various ethnic groups with a students enrollment of around 16,000, who come from all over China. These ethnic group students get special permission (the entrance examination score can be lower than in other universities) from the Chinese government to study at this Institute. The whole Institute has a total of sixteen departments. In the English Department, there are thirty-two Chinese teachers and two native English teachers.

In December 1998, this researcher informally interviewed all the Chinese teachers in the English Department and one hundred and twenty Non-English majors on the awareness of learning styles. The researcher found that:

Most of the teachers and students had not heard of the term "learning style" and had no idea as to what it meant. The few teachers and students who had heard the term "learning style" confused it with learning skills and learning strategies.

Additionally, most students at this Institute had low motivation in learning English due to their low English proficiency levels, which resulted from their former English training background. This fact also caused the teachers to simply complain that the students were low-level learners who decreased the teachers' own motivation in teaching. Consequently, the students lost their self-confidence in coping with their study.

The researcher also analyzed the present English textbooks for Non-English majors in order to look into their adequacy in terms of the communicative skills considered important in current language teaching approaches. This researcher found the following weaknesses: First, the textbooks start with an introduction to reading articles, vocabulary lists, grammar features, and translations respectively; there is less attention paid to communicative speaking, listening, and writing. Second, the textbooks are rather difficult for the students to understand because there are too many unfamiliar words and complex sentence structures. And third, the textbooks do not cover real world materials and do not provide the students sufficient opportunity to practice using English in social situations.

After noticing the condition stated above, this researcher decided to conduct a survey to discover the students' learning style preferences in learning English in order to develop an instructional material to supplement the core material or current textbooks that would take into consideration the learners' learning styles. The researcher hopes that the this study will make the English teachers aware of the variations in students' learning styles and will lead reconsider their teaching approaches and materials in order to suit them to the identified learning styles of the learners.

Objectives of this Study

There are two objectives in this study:

1. To investigate the language learning style preferences of ethnic group Non-English majors at the Southwest Nationality Institute, Sichuan, China.

2. To develop supplementary materials based on the students' learning style preferences.

Scope of this Study

The scope of this study is as follows:

1. The subjects of this study were 192 ethnic group students, aged from 18 to 20 years old, who were randomly drawn from sixteen departments with different English proficiency levels.

2. This study did not focus on the variation of learning styles according to ethnic group, gender, and proficiency levels. Instead, it focused on discovering the subjects' learning style preferences.

3. The learning style survey questionnaire focused on twelve learning modalities, which were constructed according to students' learning habits or behaviors.

4. This Supplementary material project (SMP) focused on one theme which most students were interested in. And this SMP was based on using authentic materials.

5. The design of this SMP was based on a task framework, which was developed from Nunan's task components in 1989.

6. The tasks in this study were not constructed according to different language skills. It was one "package" of different classroom activities and language skills, which were designed to match the subjects' learning styles.

7. The classroom observations focused on the teacher's action zone, teacher's talk, classroom interactions, group arrangements, seating, and classroom atmosphere.

8. The questionnaire of the project survey focused on the students' opinions of the classes that used this SMP.

Significance of the Study

Along with the emphasis on learning styles, the teachers will have the option of improving the traditional content of the current English textbooks, creating appropriate teaching approaches, and promoting learners' motivation in English learning. Moreover, the results of this study should encourage teachers to use authentic materials to reinforce students' language learning skills. Additionally, it is a very good start for teachers to experience learner-centered

study by guiding students to learn independently through students' strengths in different situations.

Furthermore, the other teachers at SWNI may use this SMP as a model to use in classrooms. The administrators and supervisors at this Institute may use the findings of the study to reconsider and reconstruct a new learning environment to match the students' learning styles and needs.

Definitions of Terms

Ethnic group students: The population in China consists of 55 ethnic groups plus one major group--- the Han. In this study, ethnic group students refer to the 192 Non-English majors, who were randomly drawn from Southwest Nationality Institute.

Learning style: Learning style indicates the habits and behaviors of each individual involved when he/she learns or acquires new information or knowledge.

Supplementary material: The supplementary material is the material constructed to supplement appropriate authentic materials based on the students' learning style preferences and Task-based teaching.

Task framework: Task framework is the essence of this material construction, which is developed according to Nunan's task component. It covers learning styles, activities, input, skills, objectives, evaluations, seating, equipment, and the role of teachers and learners.