

CHAPTER 3

3.1 English Teaching in Thailand: The Present Situation

The importance and the necessity of learning English as a communication tool in business, education, and culture is recognized by both the public and administration. Recently, the Thai Ministry of Education in Thailand placed emphasis on English as one of the most important subjects. For instance, Thai elementary schools now introduce their students to English in Grade 1. In fact, English language education starts while students are studying in kindergarten. According to the Ministry of Education requirements for learner-centered instruction, teachers need to change their methods from traditional styles, such as grammar-based or translation-based instruction, to the communicative language teaching approach to enhance their students' English proficiency level. To start teaching according to the communicative approach, one of the important points teachers should be aware of is how to know their students' learning styles. Accordingly, many teachers are looking at how to transform their lessons to the meet new educational objectives.

English is the foreign language for Thais and is taught in schools often from the first years of schooling. Furthermore, some ability in English is a requirement for higher education. All students must pass an English component in order to be awarded an undergraduate degree by a state university. For the

learners the teacher is the only authority in the classroom that learners can give respect to.

According to Rao (2002), "Bridging the gap between teaching and learning styles can only be achieved when teachers are first of all, aware of their learners' needs, capacities, potentials, and learning style preferences in meeting these needs" (p.7). Liu and Littlewood (1997) focuses on the importance of knowing the learning styles and they believe being aware of learning style employed by this or that particular student becomes more evident as teachers strive to provide each and every student with equal opportunities and enable them to utilize their strengths in mastering the subject. Traditionally, the teaching of EFL not only in Thailand but as Liu and Littlewood (1997) mentioned in most Asian countries is dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar-translation method and an emphasis on rote memory.

3.2 A Characterization of Thai Students' English Learning

The student-centered classroom has lately gained much attention in Thailand. Learning style training is used in teacher training programs. The Thai Ministry of Education asked schools to set their curriculum according to the student-centered philosophy. In student-centered classes, students take responsibility for their own learning; they make their own decisions in the choice of tasks, material and learning according to student-centered instruction standards. Recognizing learning style of students and teaching accordingly has been widely used with young learners for more than a decade (Reid 1998, p. ix). The Thai

Ministry of Education wants teachers to be aware of learners' needs and especially their learning styles. They believe this helps students achieve more in class.

Research in regard to how learning style affects achievement is presented in Chapter II.

Although some teachers have been trained to apply the student-centered approach, the majority of teachers still prefer the old teacher-centered approach. This approach is characterized by students not being allowed to talk unless teacher allows them to do so; the instructor is the one who lectures and asks questions to elicit answers from students. Students are required to listen to the teacher, keep quiet and copy the work from the board or write down everything they hear. The amount of group work and individual work (which helps learners to increase self-confidence) is very limited. Teacher talk in the teacher-centered classroom takes place more often than student talk. Very few supporting materials are used by the teacher, who mostly sticks to the course book.

Most of the time, Thai students neither participate in the classroom discussion nor engage in interaction with the teacher. This is partly because of a cultural fact e.g., students fear "losing face" if they make a mistake. Showing respect to parents, teachers and the elderly is again part of the Thai culture. In East Asia, most students see knowledge as something to be transmitted by the teacher rather than discovered by the learners. They, therefore, find it normal to engage in modes of learning which are teacher-centered and in which they receive knowledge rather than interpret it.

In this study, the researcher sought to identify major, minor and negligible learning styles applied by the Thai secondary school-level EFL learners and also to find out if there was any difference between perceptual learning styles used by female and male students. The researcher hoped to raise the awareness of perceptual learning styles exhibited by students and teachers.

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