

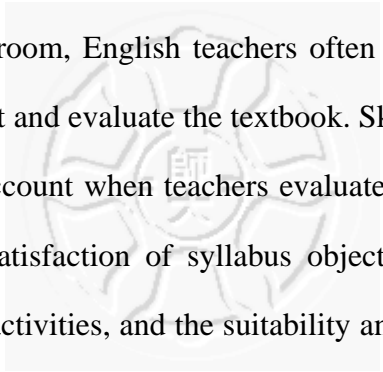
Chapter One Introduction

This chapter introduces the general background and rationale of the present research, purposes, research questions, the significance, and the organization of the study.

Background and Problem

In Taiwan, junior high school English teachers use published textbooks much more often than designing their own teaching materials. Most English teachers are not given enough time to develop their own textbook materials but overburdened with daily trivial. Besides, they have to cover at least three lessons before each monthly exam. Therefore, most of them just teach by the textbook; they seldom design their own teaching materials but follow the activities in the textbook (Chan, 2003; Liao, 2003). In the past, all of the junior high school English teachers used the same textbook issued by the National Institute for Compilation and Translation. However, in 2002, commercial textbooks started to replace this unified version. There are a great number of English teaching materials on the markets, published by local editors or imported from overseas. Without standard textbooks, junior high school administrators and English teachers have to choose a set of textbooks, which can best suit the students in each school. This change becomes a great challenge for them. Although the teachers are provided with a variety of qualified commercial textbooks, it is still a complex process for the evaluation and selection of a set of suitable textbooks because of different situations and students in different schools.

When it comes to textbook evaluation, English teachers and school administrators often take into consideration the design and content of the textbook. Since teachers and students spend most of their time on textbook activities and



exercises in everyday classroom, English teachers often pay special attention to the activity design as they select and evaluate the textbook. Skierso (1991) explored items that should be taken into account when teachers evaluate the exercises and activities of the textbook, such as satisfaction of syllabus objectives, fulfillment of student needs, effectiveness of the activities, and the suitability and interest level. Most of the items are concerned about students' feelings and opinions. However, while English teachers were making a decision to choose or change the version of textbook according to communicative teaching principles, evaluation checklists, and the effect of implementation of the textbook in the classroom, or students' performance and response; the opinion of our students is seldom considered. In junior high schools in Taiwan, the committee of English-teaching, which is composed of English teachers, decides on the version of textbook. In the researcher's school, English teachers would fill in some evaluation checklists, discuss the effect of implementation of the currently used version, compare the difference of each version, and then choose one version for their students. So do the teachers in other schools in Taiwan (Chen, 2000; Chan, 2003; Liao, 2003). The result is that the selection of textbook may be based on teachers' preferences instead of their students'. In the real classroom, students may perform differently from what their teachers expect.

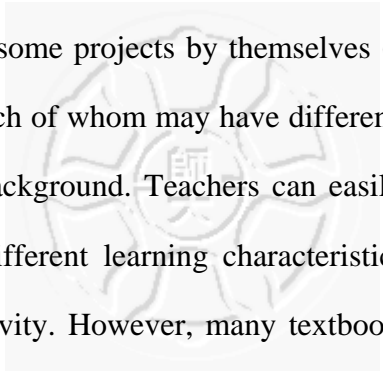
Motivation

For the second year of the new curriculum, we find that many English teachers and school administrators have decided to change the version they used the year before because the materials and activities did not achieve the effect they expected when they decided to adopt the textbook. Take the researcher's school for example. Textbooks are decided through the English-teaching committee just like other junior high schools in Taiwan. During the past three years of using the commercial textbook, English teachers in the researcher's school has adopted three different versions of

textbook because each year they think the previous versions did not achieve the effect they expected. For example, the activities in Textbook A could not attract students' attention. Textbook B contains many communicative activities, but some students did not seem to like them. Finally, English teachers in the researcher's school chose Textbook C because its activities look interesting and contain a wider variety. However, the researcher does not know if they will change the version again next year.

Similar situation can be found in some research concerning the implementation and selection of textbook in other schools in Taiwan (Wang, 2003; Lin, 2003; Chan, 2003). In Chen's (2002) study, about one third of the senior high school English teachers in the greater Taipei were also found to have adopted more than one sets of textbooks. Nearly half of the teachers changed the textbooks mainly because the textbooks were too difficult for their students. This indicates that when they chose the first set of textbook, their considerations are quite different from those of their students after a year of implementation. Most English teachers face difficulties after they began using the new commercial textbooks. They find that the topics are not attractive enough and the contents do not base on students' needs and proficiency levels (Lin, 2003), and "the highly diverse classes" is the main problem they encounter while using current textbooks (Chan, 2003). Teachers do not feel so satisfied with the design of teaching and learning activities in textbooks, especially because these teaching and learning activities fail to consider students' individual differences (Wang, 2003) and could not motivate students to learn.

In Taiwan, almost all students at the same junior high school work on the same textbook, go through the same activities and exercises, pursue the same goals, and are evaluated in the same ways. However, students may achieve their goals by different routes (Altman, 1972). The student who prefers to learn a language aurally may like to listen to a record player or converse with a classmate; the student who learns best



by doing may prefer to do some projects by themselves (Reid, 1987). Every class is composed of individuals each of whom may have different learning style preferences, learning motivation, and background. Teachers can easily observe in the classroom that students do possess different learning characteristics and that they may react differently to the same activity. However, many textbook authors do not pay much attention to these learner differences while some teachers may not be aware of their students' individual differences or do not know how to make use of them in the real classroom. For example, among the five versions of English textbooks for junior high school students, none of them are designed for students of different learning characteristics; the writers of these textbooks designed their textbooks only for students of the same grade. Thus, the researcher was inspired to explore the theory and practice of learning styles in daily English classroom, the relationship between students' attitudes toward textbook activities and their learning styles, and what role motivation plays in students' participating classroom learning practice and activities.

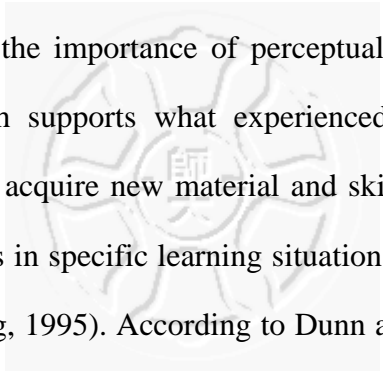
Theoretical Background

During the past three decades, language learners' individual differences have been investigated by many researchers (Skehan, 1989; Reid, 1987; Gregorc, 1979; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992) and a greater emphasis has been laid on learners' perceptions of classroom events and activities (Jonassen, 1993). The view of the learner's role was changed from merely a 'container', into which language knowledge could be poured, to an active participant in the learning process (Schmitt, 2002) and the focus of instruction has shifted from a teacher-centered approach to a learner-centered one. McDonough and Shaw (1993) listed the key learner characteristics that cannot be controlled by the teacher and that may influence teachers' planning of activities and students' ways of learning; among them, learning style has been

identified by many researchers as one of the most crucial factors in affecting student language learning (Reid, 1987; Kinsella, 1995; Oxford & Anderson, 1995). Numerous dimensions of learning styles have been proposed as being relevant to language learning, marking out different preferred responses to language learning problems or different ways of thinking (McDonough, 2002).

The study of learning styles originated from the research of cognitive psychology. Most of the early research emphasized the personal cognitive characteristics, such as perceptions, memory and information processing. In the 1970s, researchers began to explore the more external, applied modes of students' individual learning styles. Learning style is broadly described as "cognitive, affective, and psychological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment" (Keefe, 1979, p. 4). To be specific, style refers to a pervasive quality in the learning strategies or the learning behavior of an individual; that is "a quality that persists though the content may change" (Fischer & Fischer, 1979). It is the stable personal reactions toward the learning context and environment, which varies from person to person and is the reflection of one's culture and background. Dunn and Dunn (1979) defined learning styles as the way in which an individual concentrates on, processes, internalizes, and remembers new and difficult academic content. The concept of learning styles also describes learner preferences for different types of learning and instructional activities (Jonassen & Grabowski, 1993). They make the identical instruction effective for some students and ineffective for others. These styles are generally measured by interview techniques or by self-report techniques that ask individuals how they think that they prefer to learn.

Language learners' perceptual learning style preference is one of the most obvious aspects of learning style (Kroonenberg, 1995). They are the perceptual modes or learning channels through which students take in information (Oxford, 1995).



Kinsella (1995) confirmed the importance of perceptual learning style by claiming that learning style research supports what experienced classroom teachers know intuitively; that is, students acquire new material and skills through their senses and prefer some senses to others in specific learning situations (O'Brien, 1989; Oxford & Ehrman, 1989; Kroonenberg, 1995). According to Dunn and Dunn (1979), perceptual learning style is defined as the variations among learners in using one or more modalities to understand, organize, and retain experience.

The perceptual learning style preferences affect not only the learning results, but also the general attitudes toward what they are engaged in learning (Reid, 1987). If teachers fail to recognize students' learning styles, students may get bored with the activities that they are not interested in or cannot cope with. For example, a visual learner may not be able to learn well by merely listening to the lecture given by the teacher; in this way, he may get discouraged easily and lose motivation to learn.

Motivation can be said to be involved in all of the processes of learning, since cognitive qualities, preferences, culture and personality all predetermine something of what we feel comfortable about doing, want to commit time and effort to, and how we evaluate what success we have (McDonough, S., 2002). It refers to the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity (Gardner, 1985). Motivation has been investigated many times in relation to language learning (Gardner, 1985; Jacques, 2001; Julkunen, 2001). It may also be seen as goal-directed strength, which gets us to decide (or comply with someone else' decision) to learn a language, to engage in learning activities, to tolerate the inevitable frustrations, and to persevere in the face of impatience or boredom. Gardner's (1985) research has shown that motivation strongly influences the degree to which learners take advantage of opportunities to use the language. Regardless of whether we believe motivation to be the single primary

factor, one of several equally important factors, or an intermediary factor, it is impossible to dismiss the importance of motivation in language learning.

In the classroom context, motivation can be seen as a continuous interaction process between the learner and the environment (Julkunen, 2001). It does not only affect the selection and conceptualization of a specific goal in the beginning of an activity. It also functions in controlling and directing an activity. In directing and coordinating various operations towards an object or goal, motivation transforms a number of separate reactions into significant action. Learners build object-directed means-end structures, such as tasks, plans, projects, intentions, and interests (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). Even if students have no personal long-term motivation, as is often the case in junior high school, teachers can select topics and activities that serve to motivate them in the short term. If an activity can stimulate interest and involvement for the next five minutes of one lesson, students may learn something even during such a short time (Willis, 1996).

According to Scarcella and Oxford (1992), motivation is directly affected by whether language instruction is relevant to the learning style preferences of students. For instance, analytic students, whose tendency is to break down material and look for details, are often more motivated by grammar-based activities and less motivated by communicative, free-flowing activities. The opposite can be said of global students, who prefer to look for main ideas and are not focused so much on details (Kinsella, 1995). Therefore, in the present study students' language learning motivation will also be investigated to explore its relationship with students' attitudes toward learning activities and their language learning styles.

Purpose of the study

Reid (1987) suggested that, “identifying the learning style preferences of nonnative speakers may have wide ranging implications in the areas of curriculum design, material development, student orientation, and teacher training” (p.88). Moreover, junior high schools are the places where Taiwanese students learn their first foreign language formally, and English is usually highly valued by parents and in schools. Therefore, it is necessary to have a better understanding of the perceptual learning preferences of junior high school students.

Although considerable research in the general area of learning styles has been done with students whose native language is English (Oxford et al., 1992; Kinsella, 1995), and with English speakers learning a second language in the United States and Canada (Stansfield and Hansen, 1983), only a few studies explore the learning styles of ESL or EFL learners (Park, 2000; Reid, 1987). In Taiwan, the issue related to perceptual learning style preferences of junior high school students was seldom investigated in spite of the need of this population; the results obtained from studies of college students (Chang, 1998; Cheng, 1997) or senior high school students (Tso, 2002), may not be the same as those that will be gained from students at junior high schools. In addition, most of the research of learning styles focuses on the relationship of learning styles and language achievement (Rossi-Le, 1995; Park, 1997; Chang, 1998; Chen, 1999) or the cultural differences of learning styles (Reid, 1987; Oxford et al., 1992; Stebbins, 1995; Torkleson, 1995). There has been no study on the relationship between ESL students’ perceptual learning style preferences and their attitudes towards textbook activities in real ESL classrooms in junior high schools in Taiwan.

In addition, according to Reid (1987), students’ perceptual learning styles may affect not only their language achievement but also their attitudes toward what they

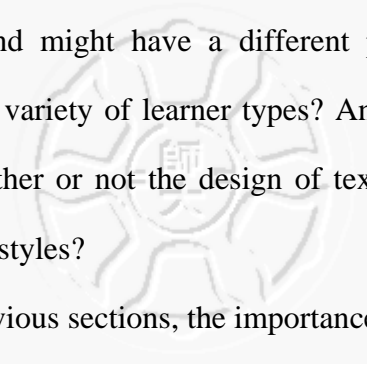
are engaged in learning, and the variables that affect second language learning are complex. Thus, a multiplicity of interacting factors will also be taken into account in the present study, such as the compensating role of motivation, students' language learning background, and their language achievement.

Owing to the above reasons, the present study aims to investigate Taiwanese junior high school EFL students' perceptual learning style preferences, language learning motivational intensity, their preferences for textbook activities, the relationship among them, and the relationship between teachers' and students' preferences for textbook activities. The following research questions are addressed:

1. What is the distribution of perceptual learning style preferences and the motivational intensity level reported by Taiwanese junior high school students?
2. What are students' and teachers' general attitudes toward current textbook activities and to what extent they are similar?
3. How are students' preferences for textbook activities related to their perceptual learning styles and motivational intensity level?
4. To what extent – if any – are students' preferences for textbook activities related to their English achievement and gender?

Significance of the study

In Taiwan, textbooks have been playing a greater role in shaping the curriculum than teachers. They set teaching objectives, daily lessons and activities, and influence the content and form of tests and exams. Since the textbook is often the determinant of a course of study, the selection of a textbook is a critical task. Choosing the right textbook becomes a major area of concern for both students who begin to learn a foreign language, and for the language instructors. However, each individual student has a different approach to language learning. Each one may



possess a different style and might have a different preference. What could the teachers do with such a big variety of learner types? And have teachers or textbook authors ever examined whether or not the design of textbook activities can comply with the concept of learning styles?

As discussed in the previous sections, the importance of learning styles cannot be overemphasized. Awareness of individual differences will make teachers and textbook authors more sensitive to their role in learning, and this awareness may provide educators with a better understanding of difficulties that arise for certain learners in relation to specific tasks (Kinsella, 1995). It is very important for teachers to recognize them because they can rough-tune classroom activities to accommodate different students' needs. If these learner characteristics can be more appropriately assessed in the classroom environment, teachers can actively make use of them to increase the effectiveness of instruction (Cohen & Dornyei, 2002).

Following the trend of learner-centered teaching, future English teachers are supposed to have the ability to choose suitable textbook for their students. Even if the textbook they choose cannot meet their own needs or that of their students', they should be able to revise the textbook activities or design their own teaching/learning activities based on their students' learning styles and individual differences in order to motivate students and to make their teaching more effective and successful.

For some teachers, it may look difficult to use or adapt teaching activities according to the learner variables if they have a large class, i.e. a class of at least 35 individuals. The present study presents both the theoretical and practical sides of the learning style theory and invites the foreign language teachers to think twice before assigning any task to their students who naturally have different learning styles. With a better understanding of learners' perceptual learning preferences, their language learning motivation, and their attitudes towards textbook activities, suggestions can be

offered to instructors to diversify their learning styles, and to be able to shape their activities accordingly. In addition, the study may bring insight for junior high school English teachers to have another way to evaluate textbook activities and to know how to adapt them, evaluate the adapted activities and revise the adapted activities according to their students' individual differences. Also, material designers may have a better idea of how to incorporate the concept of learning style into the design of tasks and activities.

Finally, the present study may supply other researchers with a better understanding of differences and characteristics of ESL learners in Taiwan and hopefully can inspire further studies in this area.

Organization of the study

This thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter one states the background, motivation, rationale, purpose, and significance of the study. Chapter two reviews the main issues concerning learning styles and related studies. Chapter three describes the method of the study. The selection of subjects, the instruments and procedures are given in this section. Chapters four and five present the results and discuss the major findings of the research. Finally, the major points of this study, pedagogical implications, limitations of the study, and suggestions for further research are offered in chapter six.