



**A SURVEY ON LEARNING STYLE PREFERENCES AMONG FORM 4
ARTS STUDENTS IN TWO URBAN SCHOOLS – A COMPARISON**

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**Final Year Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

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This study aimed to identify the perceptual learning style preferences of Form 4 Arts students in learning literature in English. It also attempted to find out whether teachers are aware of the differences in students' perceptual learning style and to what extent do the instructional strategies or activities that they used vary to cater to students' different perceptual learning style preferences in learning literature in English. 61 male students from two classes of Form 4 Arts and an English teacher from SMK St Thomas as well as 85 female students from two classes of Form 4 Arts and an English teacher of SMK St Mary were chosen as the respondents for this study. The data was obtained through self-reporting questionnaire and interview. The findings revealed that there were similar patterns in the learning style preferences of the male and female students in learning literature in English in the six perceptual learning styles given emphasis to in this study. However, higher significant preference for certain learning styles, were prominently displayed among the female students. The findings also showed that the teachers were generally aware of the differences in the perceptual learning style preferences of their students in learning literature in English. The interview carried out with teachers involved, nevertheless, revealed that the teachers did not vary much in their instructional strategies or activities to cater to the differences in the perceptual learning style preferences of their students.

ABSTRAK

KAJIAN MENGENAI PREFERENSI GAYA PEMBELAJARAN DI KALANGAN PELAJAR-PELAJAR TINGKATAN 4 SASTERA DI DUA BUAH SEKOLAH MENENGAH BANDAR – SATU PERBANDINGAN

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Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti preferensi gaya pembelajaran persepsi pelajar-pelajar tingkatan 4 dalam pembelajaran sastera dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Kajian ini juga meninjau kesedaran guru tentang kepelbagaian preferensi gaya pembelajaran persepsi pelajar serta sejauh mana strategi atau aktiviti yang digunakan oleh guru dipelbagaikan untuk memenuhi perbezaan dalam preferensi gaya pembelajaran persepsi pelajar dalam pembelajaran Sastera dalam Bahasa Inggeris. 61 pelajar lelaki daripada dua buah kelas tingkatan 4 aliran sastera dan seorang guru Bahasa Inggeris dari SMK St Thomas serta 85 pelajar perempuan daripada dua buah kelas tingkatan 4 aliran sastera dan seorang guru Bahasa Inggeris dari SMK St Mary telah dipilih sebagai responden-responden dalam kajian ini. Data-data telah diperolehi melalui soal selidik pelaporan sendiri dan temuduga. Hasil dapatan menunjukkan bahawa terdapat persamaan di dalam corak preferensi pembelajaran di kalangan pelajar-pelajar perempuan serta pelajar-pelajar lelaki dalam pembelajaran Sastera dalam Bahasa Inggeris melalui enam gaya pembelajaran persepsi yang ditekankan dalam kajian ini. Walau bagaimanapun, preferensi yang tinggi terhadap gaya pembelajaran yang tertentu telah jelas ditonjolkan di kalangan pelajar-pelajar perempuan berbanding pelajar-pelajar lelaki. Kajian juga mendapati bahawa secara keseluruhannya guru mempunyai kesedaran tentang kepelbagaian preferensi gaya pembelajaran persepsi di kalangan pelajar dalam pembelajaran Sastera dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Walau bagaimanapun, temuduga yang dijalankan dengan guru-guru menunjukkan bahawa strategi atau aktiviti pengajaran yang dilaksanakan oleh guru tidak banyak berbeza dalam memenuhi perbezaan preferensi gaya pembelajaran persepsi pelajar-pelajar.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CRP	=	Class Reader Programme
EFL	=	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	=	English as a Second Language
LEP	=	Literature Component in English
PLSP	=	Perceptual Learning Style
PMR	=	Penilaian Menengah Rendah
SMK	=	Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan
SPM	=	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
Tr	=	Teacher

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the overall purpose of the study. It discusses the objectives of the study, research questions, significance of the study, definition of key terms used.

1.1 Background to the Study

In a typical classroom situation, teachers encounter a multitude of learners who differ from one another in almost every aspect. All learners have individual characteristics that influence their learning process. According to Reid (1987) learners obviously learn in different ways due to their individual differences which is also valid in language learning environments. They have their own personal approaches or preferred ways of learning. Some learners are more inclined to certain ways than others in their learning as in some preferring visual presentation, others like to hear spoken language, and some others enjoy hands-on activities. Teachers, in other words, are obviously teaching individuals with different learning styles.

In the teaching and learning context, teachers naturally want to offer the best type of teaching and learning experience for their students. Knowledge of the different learning styles of the students in the classroom could be a teacher's first step to help enhance his/her students' learning of a language or a subject. One of the first things that teachers can do to aid and enhance their students' learning process as proposed by Blackmore (1996), is just to be aware of the diverse styles of learning among the students in the classrooms. Willing (1988 and cited in Nunan, 1989) also suggests that a teacher who is sensitive to and accommodates the students' preferences for learning styles can bring about improved learner satisfaction and attainment.

Teachers are expected to have a good understanding of their students' different learning styles. In Malaysian setting, however, when thinking of the teaching of English in the classroom, people tend to think about teachers and what they do when more importantly in fact, they should be focusing on the pupils who are learning the language. Chitravelu, Sithamparan & Teh (1995:3) highlight that "the starting point for all efforts in teaching English in Malaysian schools must necessarily be an understanding of differences amongst pupils, as well as knowledge and understanding of how people learn a second language and what processes are involved". This puts forth the importance of understanding individual differences particularly the different learning styles that students employ in their learning process.

Price (1977, cited in Hood, 1995) states that systematic ways to identify individual preferences for learning and suggestions for teaching students with

varying learning styles can be based on an individual's diagnosis of his learning. Comprehension of individual differences and learning styles can provide teachers with the theory and knowledge upon which to base decisions. Once a teacher has determined why a student responds in a certain way, then they can make more intelligent decisions about instructions methods (Reef, 1992, cited in Hood, 1995).

Kumaravadivelu (1991) also highlights that it is necessary for teachers to plan and match their teaching-learning activities with students' learning styles for effective teaching and learning to take place. This is to prevent mismatches between the students' learning style and the teachers' teaching styles, which can result in students feeling bored and inattentive, doing poorly in tests, getting discouraged about their studies and may even conclude that they are not good at the subjects or eventually give up altogether in their studies (Zhenhui, 2001). It is also important that students should know their own learning styles as it can help them to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of their own preferred ways of learning. This knowledge can help them to be more proactive and positive in their learning by giving emphasis on the learning style that they most preferred as well as complementing it with their less preferred ways of learning at the same time.

The differences in the preferred ways in which students learn can be categorized into three dimensions namely cognitive, affective and perceptual (sensory) (James and Gardner, 1995; cited in Brown 1998). The perceptual learning style which refers to the preferred sensory channels or "modality

strength” through which individual receive and process information efficiently in their environment is to be the main focus of this study. The four basic aspects of perceptual learning style, identified as visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic, must be taken into consideration by teachers in every teaching and learning process. Teachers can also take a proactive role in improving their teaching strategies by using the Learning Style Inventory to identify and understand the students’ learning style preferences.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The existence of about 30 – 50 students in a classroom is a typical scenario in the Malaysian classroom setting. Complementing such scenario is the diversity in the students’ characteristics as well as their preferences in the teaching and learning process. It also implies that the students are bound to have differing perceptual learning styles preferences in learning language as well as other subjects. Facing such a situation, teachers cannot assume that all their students would be able to learn well from what is presented in class. Researches conducted which focused on perceptual learning styles has shown that learners of language and other subjects do show cultural, group as well as gender differences in their learning process (Reid, 1987; Park, 1997; 2000).

Knowledge of the perceptual learning style preferences among the students in learning the language is extremely important and should be of concern to every teacher as it will help determine the success of the learning process taking place.

More often than not, teachers will have the tendency to neglect and not pay attention to how their students learn best (Dunn & Dunn, 1992). Dunn and Dunn (1978 cited in Hood, 1995) point out that teachers can help their students learn more efficiently by helping to diagnose their individual's learning style. Helping the students to identify their learning style can eventually help teachers improve their teaching and instructional strategies apart from providing them with information on their students' progress.

Much research also supports the view that when students' learning preferences match their instructor's teaching styles, student motivation and achievement usually improve (Miller, 2001; Stitt-Gohdes, 2003; cited in Brown, 2003). This knowledge not only further enhances the need for teachers to have a better understanding of their students' perceptual learning styles but also to ensure that their teaching styles match the preferred ways in which their students learn language as well as other disciplines.

The recent economic boom in the new millennium, together with factors related to globalisation and the age of the Internet has asserted the significance and renewed interest to the teaching and learning of English. It also sees the inclusion of literature as a tested component in the Malaysian secondary school ESL syllabus. This recent scenario has brought the anticipation and awareness that the knowledge on students' perceptual learning style preferences will help teachers to understand and be aware of their students' individual differences so as to ensure effective teaching and learning to occur in the classroom. It is also hoped that teachers would employ a variety of instructional strategies and

activities in order to cater to these differences in the preferred ways in which their students learn.

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of the study is first to investigate the four basic perceptual learning style preferences (auditory, visual, kinesthetic and tactile) and preferences for group and individual learning of Form 4 Arts students in 2 single-sex schools (namely SMK St Thomas and SMK St Mary) in learning literature in English or commonly known as the literature component of the Malaysian English syllabus. The study also attempts to find out whether the teachers are aware of their students' different learning style preferences in learning Literature in English and to what extent do they vary their instructional strategies or activities to cater to the different learning styles preferred by their students in learning literature in English.

1.4 Research Questions

With regards to the objectives of the study, four research questions were formulated to direct the research. They are as follows:

1. What are the perceptual learning styles that are most preferred by the male and female students in learning literature in English?

2. To what extent do the perceptual learning style preferences of the male students differ from those of the female students in learning literature in English?
3. Are teachers aware of the students' different learning style preferences in learning literature in English?
4. To what extent do teachers vary their instructional strategies or activities to cater to students' different learning style preferences in learning literature in English?

1.5 Significance of the study

The study highlights the need to identify the perceptual learning style preferences of students in two urban schools as well as teachers' awareness of their students' different learning style preferences and the extent to which they vary their instructional strategies or activities in catering for these differences.

It is hoped that the findings will provide a greater insight on students' perceptual learning styles in learning Literature in English. This knowledge is useful to the students themselves, as it will encourage them to focus on their strengths, i.e. their most preferred ways of learning, with the purpose of enhancing their learning. It is also hoped that the findings can offer teachers a better understanding on the different perceptual learning styles most preferred among male and female students in learning literature in English. This knowledge is particularly useful for teachers who are teaching in single-sex schools as the

scenario in such schools might be different from those encountered by teachers in coeducational schools.

The findings also will directly reveal whether teachers are aware of their students' different perceptual learning style preferences in learning Literature in English. It can also help to enlighten teachers with the need to vary their instructional strategies or activities to cater for the different learning styles preferred by their students. Teachers can also make use of the findings of the study to guide them in designing experiences appropriate for students through thoughtful and systematic matching or mismatching of learning experiences.

As the area of research on the teaching and learning of Literature in English in Malaysia is relatively new, with very few researches being carried out in this field, it is also hoped that the findings of this study will be able to shed some light and provide information on the study of Literature, particularly on the aspects of learning styles preferences of students in learning the literature component or Literature in English of the Malaysian English Syllabus.

1.6 Definition of key terms used

(a) learning style

Researchers have been using the term “learning styles” in various and sometimes confusing ways in the literature based on the parts of the learning process and the dimensions being emphasized. The following definitions by different researchers are to show the differing as well prominent aspects taken

into consideration by these researchers when defining what it meant by learning styles. According to Chittravelu, Sithamparan & Teh (1995), learning styles refer to the ways a student prefers to go about learning.

Dunn and Dunn (1992), on the other hand, define learning styles as the ways in which each learner begins to concentrate on, process and retain new information. This interaction occurs differently for everyone.

Reid (1998) terms learning styles as internally based characteristics, often not perceived or consciously used by learners, for the intake and comprehension of new information.

Similarly, Oxford (2003) defines learning style as the general approaches – for example, auditory or visual – that students use in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subject.

James and Gardner (1995, cited in Brown, 1998) define learning styles as the complex manner in which, and condition under which, learners most efficiently and most effectively perceive, process, store and recall what they are attempting to learn.

Beishuizen & Stoutjesdijk (cited in McLoughlin 1999:222), on the other hand, refer to learning style as a conscious or habitual mode of acquiring or imparting knowledge through study, experience or teaching.

Learning styles are generally described as “cognitive, affective and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment” (Keefe, 1979 cited in Park, 2000:249).

However, for the purpose of this study, the term learning style is used to refer to the general ways or approaches in which individual learners prefer to go about processing or learning new information in acquiring a new language or any other subject.

(b) perceptual learning styles

Dunn (1984; cited in Reid, 1987) define perceptual learning styles as a term that describes the variations among learners in using one or more senses to understand, organize and retain experiences. There are four basic aspects of perceptual learning styles namely visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic. However, for the purpose of this study, perceptual learning styles are classified into six categories or preferences as the study employed and adapted slightly Reid's questionnaire in which the classification of the perceptual learning styles preferences is divided into six types namely visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, group and individual learning.

(c) literature in English

For the purpose of this study, the term literature in English is used to refer to literature component in the Malaysian English language syllabus. It is referring to the teaching of literature to all students in secondary schools as literature has been incorporated or become part of the secondary school English syllabus. The main aims of the literature component is to enhance students' proficiency in the English language through the study of a set of prescribed texts, contribute to personal

development and character building and broaden students' outlook through reading about cultures and world views (Curriculum Development Centre, 1999).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the background of the Literature Component of Malaysian English Syllabus and the literatures related to learning styles. It also introduces the different dimension of learning styles, perceptual learning styles and the characteristics of learners related to the styles. Some studies related to perceptual learning styles are also included apart from discussing the impact of bridging the gap between instruction and students' learning style preferences on learning.

2.1. Literature in Malaysian Secondary Schools

The teaching and learning of literature in English in the Malaysian English Language (ESL) context “has evolved from being a core part of the school curriculum to a point of near extinction only to re-emerge in the 21st century in a stronger form” (Subramaniam, 2003:27). A call for the revival of literature in English in the curriculum was made in 1988. The rationale was that literature