THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEARNING STYLES AND LEARNERS' PREFERENCE FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING SOFTWARE ACTIVITIES

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents and my love for their endless support and encouragement.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to find the relationship between students' learning style and their preferences of "Tell Me More" language learning software activities. The participants were 57 intermediate international IEC students at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). This study used Kolb Learning Style Inventory (KLSI) as an instrument to investigate participants' learning styles which indicated that IEC students had different learning styles in which 12 are divergers, 12 are accommodators, 19 are assimilators and 14 are convergers. A "Tell Me More" activities preference questionnaire was distributed to find out 40 of the 57 participants' preference of these activities (10 participants for each learning style). The results of this questionnaire were analysed according to their learning style to find out the relationship between the participants' learning styles and preference for "Tell Me More" activities. The results were then triangulated using interview questions. Hence, this study reveals majority of the participants who are accommodators, convergers and divergers prefer the dialogue type of "Tell Me More" activities. In addition, the same number of participants who were divergers also liked activities which are "fill in the blanks". On the other hand, majority of the participants who were assimilators, have a preference for the "the right word" type of "Tell Me More" activities. This study suggests considering the educational needs of learners in second or foreign English language courses based on the individual learning style.

ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mencari hubungan antara gaya pembelajaran pelajar dan pilihan mereka dalam aktiviti-aktiviti perisian pembelajaran bahasa "Tell Me More". Mereka yang terlibat ialah 57 pelajar antarabangsa IEC bertahap sederhana di Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). Kajian ini menggunakan "Kolb Learning Style Inventory" (KLSI) sebagai alat untuk mengkaji gaya pembelajaran peserta. Dapatan menunjukkan pelajar IEC mempunyai gaya pembelajaran yang berbeza di mana 12 merupakan pengalih, 12 penampung, 19 pengasimilasi dan 14 penukar. Borang soal selidik pilihan aktiviti-aktiviti dalam "Tell Me More" telah diedarkan untuk mengetahui pilihan aktiviti 40 daripada 57 peserta tersebut (10 peserta bagi setiap gaya pembelajaran). Hasil soal selidik ini telah dianalisis mengikut gaya pembelajaran mereka untuk mengetahui hubungan antara gaya pembelajaran para peserta dan pilihan untuk aktiviti "Tell Me More". Keputusan kemudiannya diperoleh melalui soalan-soalan temu bual dengan menggunakan kaedah triangulasi. Oleh itu, kajian ini menunjukkan majoriti peserta yang pengasimilasi, penukar dan pengalih memilih jenis aktiviti berbentuk dialog dalam "Tell Me More". Di samping itu, peserta pengalih lebih cenderung kepada aktiviti-aktiviti "mengisi tempat kosong". Sebaliknya, majoriti daripada peserta pengasimilasi memilih aktiviti berbentuk "perkataan yang betul" dalam aktiviti "Tell Me More". Kajian ini mencadangkan agar keperluan pendidikan pelajar dalam kursus-kursus bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua atau asing perlu dititikberatkan berdasarkan gaya pembelajaran individu.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AC - Abstract Conceptualization

AE - Active Experimentation

CALL - Computer Assisted Language Learning

CE - Concrete Experience

EFL - English as a Foreign Language

ESL - English as a Second Language

IEC - Intensive English Course

KLSI - Kolb Learning Style Inventory

LSI - Learning Style Inventory

RO - Reflective Observation

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Introduction

Information can be obtained and processed by learners in different ways. Furthermore, the instructors can distinguish different types of learner based on the way they are learning. One way of understanding the learners' needs is to know their learning styles. Learning style theory has been expanded and used in a variety of curriculum for every levels of education. Through finding and recognising individual learner's learning style, the most appropriate techniques can be used to enhance learning quality. In addition, research on learning styles helps teachers with different methods of instruction to consider various learners' learning style in their classroom.

Learning English plays a crucial role in today's world as the number of English language learners are increasing significantly. In this age of learner-centered learning, English teachers are concerned about learning materials, tasks, and activities which are suitable for individual learning styles and preferences. Moreover, learning English as a foreign language is a very complicated stage for the learner. At this level, a learner needs to find the most suitable learning approach, learning style and strategy that satisfy his or her individual needs.

In addition, there are many external factors that affect individuals' learning. Factors such as learning environment, the teachers' attitude and personality, and learning materials and facilities available help the learning process. Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has changed greatly over the past decades mainly by the increasing use of technology in daily life. Language learning software is new technological tool impels foreign or second language learning.

The use of programs as language learning media in Digital Language Lab were introduced at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) for the self-access English language learning in 1995 and it is still being used until now with some upgrades and modifications under the name of self-access language learning. One of the most popular software which is designed for learning different languages is "Tell Me More" that is used in UTM digital language labs.

While instructional technology has allowed researchers to re-evaluate teaching methods, one question being considered is the effective design of English language learning software. Taking advantage of fast growing advanced technologies and exploring English language learners' need will enable the instructors to efficiently implement technology to meet the needs of students. One crucial way of finding students' need is by considering their learning style.

There are a lot of researches on learning English by books and handouts, but a few researches on learning English by software. Therefore, this research investigates the relationship between UTM International students' learning styles and their preferences in "Tell Me More" activities.

1.2   Background of the Study

All international students applying to UTM must have an acceptable level of English Language proficiency. This criterion can be satisfied by presenting one of the most famous English Language testing results including: Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS). The minimum score for TOEFL-paper-based test (PBT) is 550 and 79 for internet-base test (IBT), and for IELTS the minimum overall score is 6.0 for the academic module. Students who satisfy the English Language requirements will be welcomed to enroll in a faculty program and commence their academic course immediately and exempted to participate in the Intensive English Course (IEC). IEC is an English course conducted by the School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPACE) of UTM for international students whom have not satisfied the English Language requirements.

However, a student with lower score depending on his or her English Language proficiency level have to register and pass IEC at least for one semester or may extend to two semesters. All students are required to participate and pass IEC-intermediate level before they are allowed to register for their foundation, undergraduate, or postgraduate program. As the number of international students in UTM is increasing, the importance of IEC program is more noticeable.

IEC is designed for the international students that are non-native English speakers who want to pursue their academic studies in Malaysia. The main aim of IEC is to develop their English language as a preparation to start their undergraduate or postgraduate studies in UTM. Specifically, the purpose of IEC is to equip learners with skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking English for academic as well as social and professional purposes.

IEC comprises of the following modules: Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking and self access language learning with a total of twenty two hours a week. The course adopts the skills-based approach where all the four languages skills are emphasised in the classroom. The self access program allows students to use the facilities in the digital language lab for learning English. Self access language learning is done in UTM digital language lab. In the lab, the students are offered multiple kinds of learning materials such as software, audio, videos and internet service. However, the language program especially "Tell Me More" language learning software which is used in the digital language lab for self access will be discussed in this study.

The first aim of self access language learning is to meet the students' needs because it is difficult to fulfill each student's individual needs in the classroom due to the class size and different ability. In addition, IEC is implemented to get students more exposure to the English language. The last aim is to promote autonomous learning among the learners, so they can learn independently and take more responsibility for their learning.

Students' attendance for the self access program is compulsory and being recorded at the digital language lab. The activities in self access program are grammar activities, pronunciation practice, communication practice, vocabulary and enrichment activities. Although attendance is compulsory, there is no exact student progress tracking like carry marks, quizzes, or examination as students only need to attend the session. The digital language lab is offered as a facility for enhancing students' learning experience.

One of the software which IEC students are using in UTM digital language lab is "Tell Me More". It is part of IEC students self access program that they have to do once a week. In this software, there are nineteen types of activities with different pedagogical objectives. The activities develop all the students' English proficiency

skills. For instance, some of the activities develop listening and speaking skills whereas some of them develop reading and writing skills.

Since Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) is one of the higher institutions of learning in Malaysia which has focused on technology, it is important to promote technology in all courses especially in English language learning. IEC is aimed to enhance students' proficiency level of English for different skills include: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Moreover, the technology hopefully can encourage students' performance not only in their courses, but in their future careers.

This study aims to examine the issue of learning styles to investigate and estimate students' preference for activities in the digital language laboratory. The research is focused on intermediate students because this course has introduced English language learning software programs "Tell Me More" in which the students are able to carry out different activities provided in the learning laboratory at their own preference.

1.3   Problem Statement

Nowadays, English language is one of the most important languages in our life other than our mother language. In ESL and EFL classrooms there is a high-level of attention to teaching and learning strategies to have effective learning. ESL/EFL teachers should have knowledge about students' differences in learning, the appropriate teaching methods, and learners' preferences and at the same time choosing the appropriate teaching materials based on learners' needs in the educational setting. There is also a high-level consideration about teaching and learning styles in academic environments. The emergence of the technology is also the alternative that is hoped to be used to attract students' attention.

Some English language learners faced difficulties in acquiring concepts and materials of the course lectured in English after they start their study as a master or PhD student. This seems to be one of the problems that international students face in UTM. In addition, students need to be able to write high quality research and do acceptable presentation in English.

Furthermore, many learners do not fully engage themselves in the self access program and the students' attendance at digital language lab is low. Some IEC students who attend the English language lab work do not take the activities seriously, so they do not complete "Tell Me More" activities before the end of semester. The learners skip some sessions or have many unfinished activities. The activities may be difficult for some students or easy for some of them.

There is a need to know the suitability of the activities in "Tell Me More" software in developing UTM students' English language skills while the high achievers in the digital lab are the students who are doing the activities. The important point is a need to have a clear feedback on the software and activities used in the digital language lab to increase learners' participation. Furthermore, feedback can enhance the students' learning experience.

Thus, this research plans to reveal students' learning styles when they do the activities in the "Tell Me More" software including their amount of interest in the activities. It is hoped that the findings of the study could help to improve the use of "Tell Me More" as software in developing UTM students' English language proficiency.

1.4   Aim of the Study

This study aims to investigate the relationship between EFL learners' learning style and students' preference for English language learning software (Tell Me More) exercises. The purpose of the study is to find out the IEC students' preference for the activities in the "Tell Me More" software and the relation with their learning styles. A potential outcome of the study is the contribution of information that will prove useful in the process of developing teaching methodologies, curricula and software's materials reflective of the learning style of UTM international students.

1.5   Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to explore the relation of learning style preferences on UTM international students while using ESL software especially "Tell Me More". This study is based on the belief that appropriate activities that match students' learning styles preferences can improve students' achievement. This study attempt to:

- Investigate the different learning styles among intermediate EFL international students in UTM.
- Investigate intermediate EFL international students' preferences for the different types of English language learning activities in "Tell Me More" English language software.
- To determine the extent of the relationship between the intermediate EFL international students' learning style and their preferences for English language learning activities in "Tell Me More".

1.6   Research Questions of the Study

This study aims to answer these questions:

1. What are the intermediate EFL international students' learning styles in UTM?
2. What are the intermediate EFL international students' preferences for English language learning activities in the "Tell Me More"?
3. What is the extent of relationship between the intermediate EFL international students' learning style and their preference for English language learning activities in "Tell Me More"?

1.7   Scope of the Study

This study focuses on fifty seven international students who are taking the intermediate intensive English course in UTM. All of them are required to use the English version of "Tell Me More" learning language software, in the digital language laboratory in UTM as part of their self access learning.

The research focused on learning styles used by students when using "Tell Me More" in the digital language laboratory. As Kolb learning style inventory version 3.1 is one of the reliable learning style instruments (Kolb, 2005, Kayes, 2005), it will be adapted for this research.

1.8 Significance of the Study

An awareness of individual differences in learning has made ESL/EFL instructors and program designers more responsible for their roles in teaching and learning and has let them match teaching tools and students' learning styles to develop students' potentials in second or foreign language learning. As new technological tools continue to emerge and impact second language (SL) learning, language teachers should be familiar with them such as using ESL software.

Although research on learning styles and course design is not robust enough to provide course developers with standard guidelines, Currie (1995) advocates that instructors should utilise a variety of techniques and training aids and encourage an awareness of learning style. Providing learning materials that challenge and support students to develop deep levels of thinking and application, and integrating assessment practices in everyday teaching and learning, helps to create and maintain a learning environment both supportive and productive.

Computers carry out a set of activities and handle planned functions at remarkable speed. Modern situation is different; software can check activities that students have completed and move students step by step from easier to more difficult activities based on students' levels and potentials. When students cannot reply questions accurately or complete activities, the software can simulate, drill, or clarify the phenomenon in a way that makes it easier for the learner to recognise (Hoffman, 1996).

1.9 Terminology

1.9.1 Learning Style

Learning styles are different approaches or ways of learning. They engage in educating methods, particular to a person, that are supposed to allow that individual to learn best. Everyone has his own way of absorbing and processing information. As Hashim (2005) stated learning styles have been defined as characteristic tendencies for the understanding and processing of information and experiences, which are, unique for individuals and developed during various phases of life. They consist of complex interactions of physiological, psychological, environment and situational variables.

1.9.2 Kolb Learning Style

David A. Kolb's (1984) learning style model is based on the experiential learning theory (ELT), as he described in his book "Experiential Learning: experience as the Source of Learning and Development". The ELT model sketches two related approaches toward gaining experience: Concrete Experience and Abstract Conceptualization, and two related approaches toward transforming experience: Reflective Observation and Active Experimentation. As individuals try to apply all four approaches, they tend to develop strengths in one experience-grasping approach and one experience transforming approach. The resulting learning styles are a mixtures of the individual's preferred approaches. Kolb (2005:5) learning styles are:

Converger: These persons do best when there is a certain correct answer/solution for a under discussion question/problem. They can just concentrate

on a certain issue or situation. Convergers are usually not acting emotionally and prefer to deal with real things rather than people around themselves. They like to be specialist at following areas includes: computer science, engineering, and finally physical sciences because of their natures.

Diverger: People with this kind of learning style have great talent to look at a real situation issue from different points of views and produce some ideas by doing brainstorming. They are usually imaginative and sensitive person. They like to do artistic and civilian works and tend to be human resource manager, organization development specialist or even consultant.

Assimilator: This kind of people is likely to reasoning by induction and generates different ideas followed by observation as an integrated solution. They are not interested in social interaction and have more consideration on abstract concepts rather than practical application of theories. They usually try to realise theories logically if they could not match theories with facts they will try to re-evaluate the facts. They can be expert in mathematics, basic science rather than applied science. They tend to choose job that needs researching and planning.

Accommodator: They like to take risk and have adventurous characteristic. They have brilliant ability in handling tasks which need immediate decisions and adjustment. When they found themselves in a situation that there is no correspondent fact with under discussion facts, they will try to neglect it and try other theories. They usually solve problems through trial and error method and like to use other people information. Accommodators prefer to study in practical fields such as business and education and tend to be a nurse, teacher, seller or even marketer.

1.9.3 Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is a method of language teaching and learning in that computer technology is applied as an aid to the reinforcement, presentation, and assessment of material to be learned, usually consisting of significant interactive factor. Typical CALL programs present a stimulus to which the learner must respond. The stimulus may exist in any combination of text, still pictures, sound, and motion video. The learner answers by typing on the keyboard, pointing and clicking with the mouse, or speaking into a microphone. The computer offers feedback, representing whether the learner's answer is right or wrong. Levy (1997:1) defines CALL more succinctly and more broadly as "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning".

1.9.4 "Tell Me More"

"Tell Me More" education software by Auralog Company offers various types of activities that match with particular pedagogical objectives. It is available in 11 types of language such as American English, British English, French, Spanish, Japan and others. It consists of different language skills such as reading, writing, vocabulary and speaking. Auralog is the producer of the award winning "TELL ME MORE" language learning program. Auralog has more than seven million students in the world. It is a global publisher of software for language learning based in Paris, and established in 1987. (tellmemore.com,2011)

1.10   Summary

To summarise, this chapter attemptes to describe the problem and the significant of this study. In addition, it introduces research questions and objectives of this research. The second chapter of this study presents a review of the literature that exists on CALL as well as on the learning style employed by the students. The third chapter describes the methodology to be used in conducting the study. Forth chapter aims to present the results of data collection procedures and discusses the findings. The last chapter summarises findings of this study, gives some suggestion as a future work and elaborates limitation of this research. It hopes that the findings will be of practical use to teachers, curriculum developers and software designers in the field of ESL/EFL and will contribute to an understanding of the roles that learning styles play in second language learning.

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