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Learning Styles of Japanese Students Who Studied Thai as a Foreign Language at The University of Osaka, Japan

ศึกษาการเรียนรู้ของนักศึกษาญี่ปุ่นที่ศึกษาภาษาไทยในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ มหาวิทยาลัยโอซากา ประเทศญี่ปุ่น

Passapong Pewporchai

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this survey research was to examine the learning styles of Japanese Students Studying Thai at the University of Osaka, Japan. A total of 60 participants took part in the survey. The research instruments consisted of a questionnaire and interviews regarding learning styles in Thai language courses. The results revealed that the Japanese students who study at the university of Osaka employed *collaborative*, *participant*, *independent*, *dependent*, *competitive*, and *avoidant* learning styles, respectively.

Keyword: Learning Style, Teaching Thai, Japanese Students, The University of Osaka

INTRODUCTION

Presently, the education of Thai as a foreign language has started to grow in role and significance. A great number of foreigners are interested in learning Thai both in Thailand and foreign countries. This is due to globalist changes in the economic, political, societal and cultural dimensions and the need of using language to communicate with foreigners in order to develop efficient understanding and accommodate the learners' life in different aspects, namely conducting business, building international relationships and living in Thailand happily. Thus, foreigners have become interested in learning Thai more earnestly and more formally.

Hiranpradit (2002: 94) stated that foreigners' motivation for learning Thai was to accomplish various purposes. The primary purpose was to communicate with Thai people, followed by working with Thai people and gaining a deeper knowledge of Thai language and culture. This corresponds with the views of many Thai language teachers aboard. For example, Sandilands (2001) pointed out that Australians' interest in learning Thai was mainly driven by personal reasons. These included a fascination with Thai culture or personal background connected to Thailand, such as, having been exchange students in Thailand, staying in Thailand for a period of time, having close Thai friends or spouses, being born and raised in Australia with parents who emigrated from Thailand, or wanting to conduct business in Thailand.

This agrees with Awang (2001) who emphasized that Malaysians' interest in learning Thai arose from their appreciation of Thai culture and their personal background. She observed that the strong interest shown by students from the northern states of Malaysia was due to the fact that this region had once been part of Thailand. Furthermore, Ponmanee (2002: 36-39), examined the opinions and needs of foreigners regarding learning Thai and found that they

wished to study both the language and the culture, as they already had affinity for Thai society and Thai culture. Some foreigners also expressed a desire to work with Thai people. This made it necessary for them to learn Thai language in its social context, as it is actually used in everyday life, in addition to learning grammar.

Nevertheless, the success of teaching Thai as a foreign language also unavoidably depends on the learners. Therefore, the management of education should be learners-centered. In other words, the characteristics of the learners must be considered as the basis for selecting appropriate teaching methods and learning media that match their potential. Specifically, the learners' characteristics should be considered at the very first stage so that their learning styles of learning can be identified. Then they will inform the design of suitable instructional approaches in subsequent steps.

To clarify the scope of 'learning style, Khammanee (2008: 2-3) explained that it refers to the mode or method of learning, thinking or problem-solving that an individual prefers or is most competent in and is regularly employed in learning situations in everyday life. A learning style is essentially the method that enables a person to achieve the best learning outcome. Therefore, teachers need to study the various learning styles of their learners and adjust their teaching to accommodate these differences to enable them to achieve the best results or reach their full potential.

Sriwattana and Boonprasert (2013) stated that in teaching Thai as a foreign language, teachers design instruction according to the learners' learning styles, the learners will be able to learn more efficiently. This is because encouraging learners to use their preferred learning styles or methods fosters responsibility to motivate them to make greater efforts in learning and using the target language. Moreover, allowing learners to engage in language learning on their own helps them become more effective and independent learners. Clearly, learners' learning styles play a crucial role in the determination of the teachers' instructional methods. Therefore, studying learning styles is highly beneficial for instructional planning and the organization of classroom activities. Learners' learning styles can be categorized into various types as proposed by Grasha and Richeman (1975) as follows:

1) Collaborative style. Learners with this style prefer learning together with others. They enjoy the process of learning through interaction and cooperation, and they tend to achieve better results when participating in group activities.

2) Participant style. Learners with this style take responsibility for their learning and strive to study subjects that they are interested in or that are assigned to them. They actively participate in learning activities related to their goals or objectives, but show little interest in activities that are unrelated to their learning purposes.

3) Independent style. Learners with this style are the opposite of the dependent ones. They prefer to learn, think and work on their own. They enjoy having freedom to explore and complete tasks without interference from others. However, they are open to listening and considering others' opinions.

4) Dependent style. Learners with this style tend to lack knowledge, skills or self-confidence,

and therefore rely on others for guidance in learning. They often imitate others or following advice closely to complete tasks.

5) Competitive style. Learners with this style enjoy challenging learning tasks and strive to outperform others. Their motivations come from achieving higher scores or rewards, performing better than peers, and surpassing others in learning outcomes.

6) Avoidant style. Learners with this style lack motivation and clear learning objectives. As a result, they show little interest in learning and tend to avoid participating in learning activities.

In teaching Thai for international students, teachers encounter learners with diverse differences as each learner has a unique learning style. Utilizing learners' preferred learning styles can provide them with opportunities for more efficient learning. Studying these learning styles enables teachers to design instructional methods that align with the learners' styles to enhance the effectiveness of the teaching process.

Thailand has actively participated in the free trade economy. In terms of education services with foreign countries, the nation has emphasized on universality of education by implementing bilingual programs, organizing cooperative projects for teacher and student exchanges, and offering international programs. Various programs have attracted increasing numbers of students from the Greater Mekong Subregion. Thailand has also established international academic centers within higher-education institutions and promoted itself as an educational hub for neighboring countries. Consequently, the number of foreign students studying and working at Thai universities has continued to grow each year. Among these, the largest group comprises Chinese students pursuing their bachelor's degree programs (Pholchumni, 2013).

The aforementioned economic and educational circumstances in the contemporary Thailand highlight the importance of learning Thai as a foreign language. At the same time, understanding foreign learners' learning styles is crucial for achieving Thai language instructional goals. At Thai universities, many international students come to study Thai. Similarly, there are university students in other countries who have expressed interest in learning Thai, such as those in Japan.

In Japan, Thai is recognized as a Southeast Asian language that has gained notable popularity among Japanese learners. Phaengsorn (2000) suggested that multiple factors contribute to this interest. For instance, many Japanese individuals express an affinity for Thailand, including its people, language, history, and culture. In addition, some learners are motivated by the desire to read Thai newspapers and magazines in their original form. Furthermore, there is a perception that proficiency in Thai provides a competitive advantage for Japanese individuals, particularly in relation to economic and trade opportunities.

Currently, in Japan, Thai language programs have been established at three universities, and Osaka University of Foreign Studies (now part of The University of Osaka) is one of them. The Osaka University of Foreign Studies was integrated into The University of Osaka, which is one of the seven former Imperial universities. Following the integration, it became the Faculty of Foreign Languages, and the Thai Language Department was restructured into the Thai Language Program. It can be said that the Thai Language Program at The University of Osaka is a major academic program with a significant and longstanding history in teaching Thai as

a foreign language. At present, approximately 70 students are enrolled in Thai as their major, and each year between eighteen and twenty new students are admitted into the program. An annual exchange program is also organized, through which Japanese students are sent to partner universities in Thailand to further their Thai language studies. In addition, the Hakuzokai (White Elephant Association) was established as an alumni association that brings together former students from the era of the Thai Language Department at the Osaka University of Foreign Studies. The members have continued to gather annually for meetings and exchanges up to the present day. The researcher is therefore interested in investigating the learning styles of these international students and aims to understand their preferred ways of learning. This understand can serve as a guide for instruction by helping to organize appropriate activities, designing suitable course materials, and effectively assess students' performance in Thai classes. Ultimately, the study seeks to enable learners to reach their maximum potential in acquiring Thai language skills, which are valuable for both their educational and personal goals.

METHODOLOGY

The learning styles of Japanese students studying Thai as a foreign language at the university of Osaka was conducted based on to the following procedures;

Firstly, the researcher developed two major research tools, including a questionnaire on Thai language learning styles. In designing the questionnaire, the researcher referred to the concepts of Sriwattana (2013) and Grasha and Reichman (1975). The questionnaire employed a five-point scale 1: lowest, 2: low, 3: medium, 4: high and 5: highest. It consisted of 60 questions in total. To prevent the respondents from easily identifying patterns, the questions were randomized rather than grouping items of the same learning styles together. Additionally, the questionnaire was accompanied by a Japanese translation prepared by a Japanese language expert, to ensure that students with basic Thai proficiency could fully understand all statements.

Secondly, the researcher developed an interview form on Thai language learning styles, a structured format with open-ended questions. The design of the interview questions was based on the concepts proposed by Sriwattana (2013). The questions were as follows:

- (1) Which skill do you enjoy learning the most among the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, or writing?
- (2) What methods do you use to review Thai language lessons outside the classroom?
- (3) What methods do you use to practice your Thai language skills?
- (4) Which educational activities in class do you enjoy? Please provide examples.
- (5) Are there aspects of the class activities that should be modified or improved? Please provide recommendations.
- (6) When receiving tasks assigned by teachers, do you prefer working individually or with your classmates?
- (7) Do you enjoy the extracurricular activities offered by the university? What types of extracurricular activities would you like to participate in or see implemented? Please provide suggestions.

The researcher ensured the quality of the research tools by verifying their content validity through evaluation by experts in teaching Thai as a foreign language. The verification was conducted using the index of item-objective congruence (IOC). Based on the evaluation by three experts, it was found that the IOC for every question in the questionnaire exceeded 0.5.

In terms of data collection, the researcher followed the steps outlined below. First, a student representative from each academic year was contacted by the researcher to obtain permission to distribute questionnaires on learning styles in the Thai language courses at the University of Osaka. After receiving consent, the questionnaire was distributed to all 68 Japanese students enrolled in the program during the first semester of the 2025 academic year. Of these, 60 completed questionnaires were returned and subsequently used for data analysis.

Secondly, the data was collected using the interview form 10 Japanese students were randomly selected from the list of all the Japanese participants. The selected students were informed about their participation; the date, time, and venue for the interviews were scheduled. The interviews were then conducted using the predetermined questions in the interview form to collect the student's responses.

After data collection, the data from both research tools were analyzed. The researcher computed the arithmetic means and standard deviations from all completed questionnaire responses and integrated the findings with the data obtained from the interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research results reveal that among Japanese students studying Thai as a foreign language at The University of Osaka, the collaborative learning style was the most commonly used. The other learning styles, in descending order of usage, were participant, independent, dependent, competitive, and avoidant. The results can be further discussed as follows:

In general, among Japanese students studying Thai as a foreign language at The University of Osaka, the collaborative learning style was the most commonly used, followed by the participant learning style. Analysis of the questionnaire responses and student interviews indicates that these learners preferred the collaborative style because it allows them to contribute their opinions and apply their ability effectively. They collaborated closely with teachers and classmates, enjoying tasks that involved groups work and viewing the classroom as a space for social interaction and learning (Grasha and Reichman, 1975).

This finding is supported by the interview responses. Students expressed that they enjoyed in-class activities that allowed them to voice their opinions and work with classmates, as this enabled them to help each other review and check their work before submission. They also appreciated having Thai friends and expressed pleasure in studying courses alongside Thai classmates. This interaction exposed them to Thai social practices and provides them opportunities to develop their everyday Thai language skills. Through socializing with Thai students who study in Japan, they could acquire new vocabulary including terms not covered in textbooks.

These findings align with the conclusions of Suphanyot (2011), who noted that Chinese students who studying Thai as a foreign language achieved better academic outcomes when

learning the Thai language and culture together with other students. Integrating Thai culture and traditions in real-life situations allowed them to connect knowledge within the same subjects and across different subjects.

The underlying motivation for this learning style was also revealed through the interviews. Most Japanese students set a clear study goal to be able to pursue their professional careers in Thailand. This goal driven promoted them to seek additional possibilities to improve their Thai language skills and to expand their knowledge by learning from any available resources.

It was found that the behavior of some students reflected the characteristics of participant learning style learners. They are those who strive to learn as much as possible from class lesson, take responsibility for assignments given in class and actively engage in classroom activities. This tendency is likely to stems from the fact that most students chose to study Thai out of their personal interest in Thailand and recognized the benefits of learning the language. Additionally, Thai was relatively new to them and considered challenging, so active participation helped them better understand the lessons and succeed academically.

Aligned with their professional goal, the majority of students were determined to find employment in Thailand after the graduation. Some of them express interest to have a career related to Thailand. Consequently, they exerted significant effort to participate in class activities, review lessons, practice Thai and assume responsibility for their learning. These findings are consistent with those of Pholchumni (2013) and Pinngern (2004). They noted that students' age which is late adolescence affect who they seek social acceptance from peers. This in turn influences their preferred learning behaviors. Overall, most students exhibited a preference for the participant learning style.

Nonetheless, the learning behavior of some students reflected the independent learning style. The learners with this style preferred to study, reflect and work individually. They were confident in their abilities and willing to consider the opinions of others when relevant to the subject matter. The synthesis of the interviews further supported that the Thai learning behavior of certain students demonstrated characteristics of independent learners. For example, they practiced Thai communication skills outside the classroom by speaking with classmates around the university to review Thai lessons on their own. In their free time, some enjoyed watching Thai soap operas and some admired Thai singers. These students used opportunities to practice Thai independently in order to understand the lyrics of their favorite songs. This finding corresponds with the Sriwattana (2013), which concluded that society and culture plays a crucial role in language learning. Therefore, knowledge of society and culture should be integrated into language teaching.

The least frequently used learning style among the Japanese students was the avoidant style. This is likely due to their strong motivation and positive attitude towards Thai language subjects, driven by clear occupational goals. Students avoided the avoidant learning style. Such style might allow them to remain in their comfort zone but would not support the long-term achievement of their highest learning objectives. Consequently, the avoidant style was the least observed among the students.

CONCLUSION

In short, this research aimed to investigate the learning styles of Japanese students studying Thai as a foreign language at the University of Osaka. A total of 60 students participated in the study the research tools included a questionnaire on the learning styles in Thai language courses, using a five-point rating scale which was developed based on the work of Sriwattana (2013) and Grasha and Reichman (1975) and an interview form that integrated questions on learning styles according to Sriwattana (2013). Data were analyzed using percentages, means and standard deviations.

The salient findings reveal that the primary style of learning Thai among the Japanese students who studied Thai at the university of Osaka was the collaborative learning style. The subsequent ones were the participant, independent, dependent, competitive and avoidant learning styles.

However, this research focused on basic learning styles of Japanese students who learned Thai in Japan. For future studies, it would be very useful to extend the investigation to address additional research questions such as whether other variables such as gender, age and prior knowledge affect Japanese learners Thai learning styles. Future students also need to look into whether the learning styles of Japanese learners in Thailand are similar, and what the learning styles of students from other nationalities are both in Thailand and abroad. These questions are considered crucial for further examination. Identification of the learning styles and comparison of the major factors influencing them across different contexts and time periods remain open for future research. Such studies would contribute to the continued development of effective Thai as a foreign language education. This finding would not only benefit individual learners but also contribute to the broader development of Thailand as a whole, particularly in the area of Thai language education.

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