

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Motivation

As an English teacher for years, the researcher has had more than two thousand students. Whenever she teaches a new class, she is always surprised at the great differences among her students. As a matter of fact, it is a common phenomenon in elementary schools that some students succeed in learning English whereas others fail to learn English. Are those good at English more intelligent? How intelligent are they? Why do they learn English with ease? In contrast, why is learning English so difficult for their counterparts? Are they weak in other aspects of life? How can we help those who fail in learning English catch up with their classmates? Out of curiosity, the researcher thinks that profound understanding of our students is needed. Hence, she examined learning theories of intelligence. The assumption of multiple intelligences (MI) aroused her intense interest and curiosity.

The MI theory proposed in 1983 by Howard Gardner, an American psychologist at Harvard University, has received much attention in education over the past two decades (Campbell, 1997). Challenging the traditionally-held notion of intelligence which used to refer to a single quotient or “IQ” score measured by psychometric tests, Gardner claimed the existence of at least eight basic intelligences including linguistic intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, spatial intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, music intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence and naturalist intelligence (Armstrong, 2000). The major points of MI theory are: every human being has a unique combination of the eight multiple intelligences for

solving problems or fashioning products in life; every individual can develop intelligence to an adequate level of performance after enough practice and instruction; and intelligences interact with each other in a complicated manner.

The MI theory has great impact on English educators as well. Teachers are suggested to recognize the individual differences of learners and encouraged to incorporate diverse teaching activities to meet the needs of students at all levels (Hall Haley, 2004). Accordingly, the MI theory has been considered a quite innovative idea and useful tool for English curriculum development. Furthermore, Brown (2000) stated that extension of constructs of intelligence helps educators and learners to perceive the relationship between intelligence and second language learning more easily. For instance, musical intelligence may have connection to the intonation pattern of a language; bodily-kinesthetic intelligence has been considered related to learning phonology of a language; interpersonal intelligence may influence communicative process. Nevertheless, criticisms have also been offered by some language teachers, who considered that MI-based instruction is impractical and inefficient in responding to the diversity of students' learning in the real teaching contexts, and incompatible with the expectations of students, parents and administrators (Richard & Rodgers, 2001). Now that the effectiveness of this innovative teaching in language education has been questioned and it needs further examinations.

With an increased interest in the MI theory, a great number of studies have discussed the implementation of MI theory in language education in the recent years (Anderson, 1998; Christison, 1996; Cluck & Hess, 2003; Feng, 2000; Hall Haley, 2004; Lin, 2000; Safi, 1996). According to these studies, students' motivation and language achievements could apparently be enhanced by MI-based instruction.

Nevertheless, extremely scarce research has been conducted on the correlation between learners' multiple intelligences and language proficiency. Meanwhile, the researcher found that MI theory has already been adopted to explore the correlation with students' learning abilities or academic performance in other fields of education, such as learning style, thinking style, academic achievement, creativity, critical thinking ability, etc (Chan & Yeh, 2004; Hsieh & Yeh, 2000; Tseng, 2001; Wang, 2003; Wu, 2002). In light of the insufficiency of the studies on the correlation between multiple intelligences and language proficiency, the researcher made an attempt to do relevant investigation in the field of foreign language learning.

Among the basic four abilities underlying English proficiency, reading has been highly valued in EFL learning. First and foremost, with the portability of English books and the increasing availability of reading materials on the Internet, reading is considered as the main source of input for second language acquisition (Kim & Krashen, 1997). In Taiwan, where English is a foreign language, learners do not have opportunities to practice speaking, listening, or writing English, yet get rich access to English reading materials in their daily life. In addition, by means of English reading, not only do learners obtain wider knowledge or latest information but also enhance language competence at the same time (Dupuy & Cook, 1996; Wee, 1999). Grabe (1991) also pointed out that reading is the most important skill in academic contexts for second or foreign language learners. In recent years, many English-as-native-language countries, such as the United States and Canada, have advocated the educational policies of promoting children's literacy skills considered as the basic component of public education (Ediger, 2001). In other words, effective reading ability has been believed to assist learners in absorbing knowledge of each subject with efficiency. Recognizing the crucial role of reading in English proficiency, the

researcher would like to investigate the correlation between students' English reading proficiency and multiple intelligences.

Finally, the researcher would like to mention professor Langdon in the novel—*the Da Vinci Code*, who uncovered the mystery of the murder step by step by means of the knowledge in human symbology. By the same token, the rationale for this research is to disclose and decode the secret of English reading proficiency through the application of the innovative human intelligence theory. It might be an intriguing study to unveil the unknown part of English reading proficiency, bringing some novel ideas to open another window in English education.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the correlation between elementary school students' multiple intelligences and English reading proficiency. It is expected to ascertain the dominant intelligence related to English reading proficiency for English educators and learners. Furthermore, the researcher compared the differences between students' multiple intelligences and English reading proficiency in terms of proficiency level and gender to promote the understanding of the correlation in depth and width.

1.3 Significance of the Study

It was hoped the findings of this research beneficial to foreign language learning. First of all, being aware of the correlation between English reading proficiency and multiple intelligences may help educators and curriculum designers develop curriculum and teaching strategies with efficiency and effectiveness.

Secondly, the researcher expected to interpret English reading proficiency by the

alternative theory of human intelligence, i.e. multiple intelligences. The results of this research might lead to a comprehensive understanding of English reading proficiency. As mentioned earlier, little research has been done on the topic of the correlation between multiple intelligences and English proficiency. Hence, the research might invite further research on the application of MI theory in language education.

Ultimately, the research may be of value in knowing the individual differences of learners. Investigating the distribution of learners' multiple intelligences might provide English teachers with profound perception of their students so as to construct more appropriate learning activities to arouse their interests and meet their needs in learning English.