

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GRADE 9 STUDENTS'  
PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT AND  
PREFERENCES FOR ENGLISH LEARNING STRATEGIES IN  
YINSHENG MIDDLE SCHOOL IN KUNMING, YUNNAN  
PROVINCE, CHINA**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine the levels of perceptions of the English classroom environment and preferences for English learning strategies and investigate if there were significant relationships between perceptions of the English classroom environment in terms of relationship, personal development, and system maintenance and change dimensions and preferences for English learning strategies of Grade 9 students at Yinsheng Middle school in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China. The participants were Grade 9 92 students in the target school. The What is Happening in This Class? (WIHIC) a questionnaire was used to measure the levels of perceptions of the English classroom environment, including three dimensions (relationship, personal development, and system maintenance and change dimensions). In contrast, The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire was used to measure students' preferences for English learning strategies. Results indicated that Grade 9 students' overall perception of the English classroom in terms of three dimensions was positive. In contrast, Grade 9 students' level of preferences for English learning strategies was strong. Pearson's product-moment correlation suggested positive and significant relationships between Grade 9 students' perception of the English classroom environment regarding relationship and personal development dimensions and preference for English learning strategies. However, there was no significant relationship between Grade 9 students' perceptions of the English classroom environment regarding system

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maintenance and change dimension with preferences for English learning strategies.

**Keywords:** Students' Perceptions of English Classroom Environment; Preferences for English Language Learning Strategies; Relationship Dimension; Personal Development Dimension; System Maintenance and Change Dimension of Classroom Environment

### **Introduction**

Under the strong influence of English globalization, English as a compulsory subject has been taught in basic education in many countries. It has become the most influential language teaching globally (Dearden, 2014). Chinese Ministry of Education acknowledges the importance of English teaching in China's basic education system. Since 2001, the Chinese Ministry of Education has been vigorously advancing curriculum reform in basic education; according to English Curriculum Standards (MOE, 2011), the significance of optimizing the classroom environment to students' English learning has been emphasized. Most primary and secondary school students in China lack an authentic and relaxed English learning environment since they are given limited chances to apply English to daily life. English classrooms have become a leading place for those students learning English (Liu, 2015). Meanwhile, the researcher believes that the middle school stage is a crucial transitional period that links reinforcing the fundamentals of the English language and receiving further improvement.

As mentioned above, the significance of the English classroom environment to middle school students in learning English in China is worth exploring. Further internal interactions are involved in the English classroom environment and student learning behavior instead of confining within the elements that constitute the English classroom environment. Learning strategies are considered critical factors for autonomous learning. The frequency of learning strategy use is closely related to language learning success (Macaro, 2006). Learners differ in language learning strategy use; preferences for learning strategy can be regarded as good sources of information about learners' learning process. Therefore, the researcher deems exploring the interactive relations between students' perceptions of the English classroom environment and their preferences for English learning strategies is meaningful.

### **Research Objectives**

The following objectives were addressed in this study.

1. To determine the level of Grade 9 students' perceptions of the English classroom environment in Yinsheng Middle School in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China.
  - 1.1. To determine the level of Grade 9 students' perceptions of the relationship dimension of an English classroom environment in Yinsheng Middle School in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China.
  - 1.2. To determine the level of Grade 9 students' perceptions of the personal development dimension of the English classroom environment in Yinsheng Middle School in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China.
  - 1.3. To determine the level of Grade 9 students' perceptions of system maintenance and change dimension of the English classroom environment in Yinsheng Middle School in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China.
2. To determine the level of preferences of Grade 9 students' English learning strategies in Yinsheng Middle School in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China.
3. To establish a significant relationship between Grade 9 students' perceptions of an English classroom environment and preference for English learning strategies in Yinsheng Middle School in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China.
4. To establish a significant relationship between Grade 9 students' perceptions of the English classroom environment (relationship dimension, personal development dimension, and system maintenance and change dimension) and preference for English learning strategies in Yinsheng Middle School in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China.

### **Literature Review**

Three theories as mainly theoretical support to current research and studies on perceptions of the classroom environment and learning strategies in China context are briefly presented below.

### **Lewin's Field Theory**

Lewin (1936) believes that human is in a particular "life space," which is a kind of own "psychological field." "Field" here refers to a holistic concept; it can be a class, a school, a community, or the whole society. Psychological activities of humans happen in the field of living space. A person's behavior depends on the interaction between the individual and the environment he lives in. Lewin emphasized that the individual's behavior should be discussed and explored in physical and social environments. Lewin put forward a formula:  $B = F(PE) = f(LS)$ , B refers to individual behavior, F represents function relationship, P refers to the internal motivation of a person. E refers to the

stimulation and reaction from a person's environment. It implies that individual behavior results from the interaction between a person's internal motivation and environment.

Regarding the later developed formula  $B = f(LS)$ . LS refers to "living space," which means the person ( $P$ ) and his environment ( $E$ ), while behavior ( $B$ ) occurs in the  $LS$ . Around the same time, Murry (1938) extended Lewin's idea to propose the needs-press model, which explained that individual behavior is determined by the interaction between the person's internal needs and the external environment press. Based on Lewin's field theory, Stern (1970) started to give attention to the fit between an individual and their environment, which was an essential addition to studies on the learning environment. Moreover, Moos's later analysis of the human environment (1974) was also inspired by Lewin's field theory.

### **Moos's Human Environment Theory**

Moos's (1974) human-environment theory laid the foundation for the later studies in a classroom environment. In Moos's theory, the social environment was divided into three dimensions: relationship dimensions, personal development dimensions, system maintenance, and change dimensions. The relationship dimension refers to the degree of individual involvement in the environment in a classroom setting, which describes the relationship between students and teachers. The personal development dimension refers to individual growth and self-improvement in the environment. The system maintenance and change dimension refer to the ordering of environment evaluation, the clarity of members' requirements, and the reaction degree of the changes.

### **Learning Strategy Theory**

Oxford (1990) defined learning strategy as a series of specific actions learners take to learn more efficiently, effectively, joyfully, independently, and flexibly. Learning strategy can be regarded as techniques that learners apply consciously to improve understanding, digestion, application ability to the target language. Oxford categorized learning strategies as follows: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies.

### **China Context Regarding Classroom Environment and Learning Strategies**

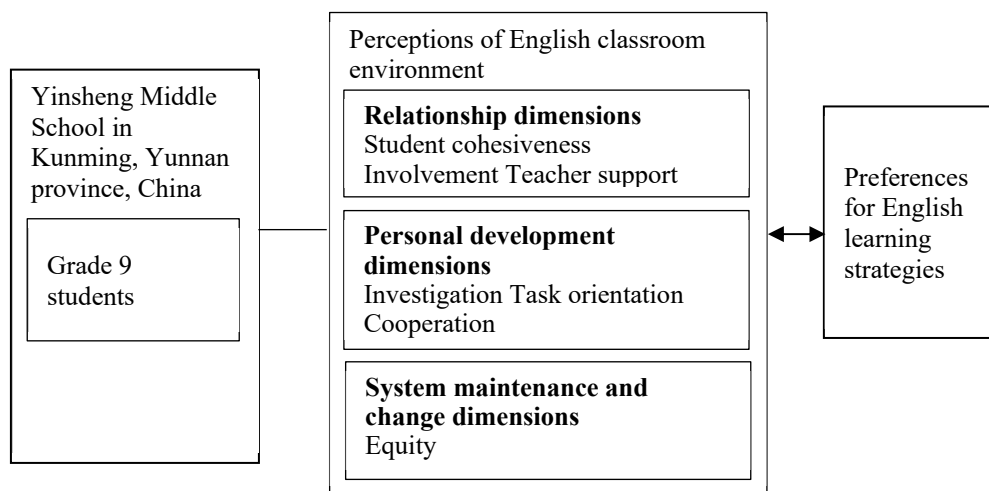
Regarding research methods, two previous quantitative studies conducted on students' perception of the classroom environment by adapting the classroom environment measurement scale are summarized.

Qu (2012) developed research on 327 high school students in Yangzhou, China, to investigate students' perceptions of an actual English classroom environment and expectations. The research finding showed a gap between the existing classroom environment and the expected classroom environment for students. It is suggested that teachers encourage students to engage in classroom activities and help develop students' learning strategies and autonomous learning abilities.

Similarly, Guo and Li (2015) developed research by the questionnaire method to investigate English majors' perceptions of a classroom environment and the level of their autonomous learning ability in the School of Foreign Language at Shanxi University. The research data was carried on multiple regression for analysis, and the results showed that both teachers' teaching and students' learning in the classroom environment positively impact students' autonomous learning. What's more, learning strategies acted by students had a more significant influence than the influence of the teachers' teaching mode in terms of the development of students' autonomous learning ability.

### Conceptual Framework

The following objectives were addressed in this study.



**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study.**

### Methodology/Procedure

#### *Population and Sample.*

This research used purposive sampling; all students in Grade 9 from Yinsheng Middle School, Kunming, Yunnan Province, China, were sampled during the academic year of 2018-2019. There were three classes- 92

students in Grade 9, 30 students in class 1, 30 students in class 2, and 32 students in class 3.

### *Research Instruments*

Two questionnaires were used to investigate students' perceptions of the English classroom environment and students' preferences for English learning strategies. Questionnaire one is What Is Happening In this Class (WHIC), developed by Fraser, McRobbie, and Fisher (1996) according to Moos's (1974) scheme for classifying human environments, which consists of 7 scales and 56 items. After consulting the researcher's supervisor to adapt to the current project, the researcher cut out one sub-scale, Investigation, which involved eight items. Therefore, the modified questionnaire consists of 6 scales and 48 items that measured students' perceptions of the English classroom. Another Questionnaire Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) made by Oxford (1989) consists of 4 parts, 50 items, which was measured students' preference for English learning strategies in this research.

### **Findings**

The findings regarding each research objective are summarized as follows.

#### *Research Objective 1*

It was found that the level of Grade 9 students' perception of the English classroom environment at Yinsheng Middle School was positive. Findings regarding each dimension of the English classroom environment: relationship dimension, personal development dimension, system maintenance, and change dimension were presented below.

##### *Research Objective 1.1.*

It was found that the level of Grade 9 students' perceptions of the English classroom environment in terms of relationship dimension at Yinsheng Middle School was positive.

##### *Research Objective 1.2.*

It was found that the level of Grade 9 students' perceptions of the English classroom environment in terms of the personal development dimension at Yinsheng Middle School was positive.

##### *Research Objective 1.3.*

It was found that the level of Grade 9 students' perceptions of the English classroom environment in terms of system maintenance and change dimension at Yinsheng Middle School was positive.

#### *Research Objective 2*

It was found that the level of Grade 9 students' preferences for English learning strategies at Yinsheng Middle School was strong.

#### *Research Objective 3*

It was found that there was a strong, positive, and significant relationship between Grade 9 students' perceptions of the English classroom environment and preferences for English learning strategies at Yinsheng Middle School.

#### *Research Objective 4*

- Grade 9 students' perceptions of the English classroom environment in terms of relationship dimension correlated significantly, positively, strongly with their preferences for English learning strategies in Yinsheng Middle School.
- Grade 9 students' perceptions of the English classroom environment concerning the personal development dimension correlated significantly, positively, weakly with their preferences for English learning strategies in Yinsheng Middle School.
- Grade 9 students' perceptions of the English classroom environment regarding system and change dimensions did not correlate with their preferences for English learning strategies in Yinsheng Middle School.
- There is a significant, strong correlation between the relationship dimension and personal development dimension of perceptions of the English classroom environment at Yinsheng Middle School.

### **Discussion**

This section discusses the findings of this research by relating them to the findings of previous research studies. It also presents the analysis for this study from the perspective and observation of the researcher.

#### *Perceptions of English Classroom*

This research indicates that Grade 9 students of the target school generally believed that they studied English in a supportive classroom environment. Researchers concluded that environmental support could positively impact students perceiving learning (Shernoff, Ruzek, & Sinha, 2017). However, from each dimension of the overall perception of the classroom environment, there were still aspects needing improvement.

#### *Relationship Dimension of English Classroom.*

Results of the study indicate that Grade 9 students of this school perceived a positive classroom environment perception in the relationship dimension. Moos (1991) reported that student involvement and supportive relationships with teachers and peers in a classroom setting could positively affect student

morale in learning. The finding was consistent with the study result of Fisher and Rickards (1998) that teachers seem to be perceived by students more positively for some reasons in the Asian education context than students in other cultural backgrounds.

*Personal Development Dimension of English Classroom Environment.*

The finding indicates that Grade 9 students were generally aware of the importance of completing several English works and clarifying learning tasks. In the context of China's education system, Grade 9 was the last but critical year for the students in middle school; they were facing more pressure in the high school entrance examination than students in lower Grades. When it came to English learning goals, most answers among students were to complete assignments as the teacher required and get a good grade on every English test. However, speaking of specific learning objectives for each lesson, many students seem not to be clear learning objectives all the time. As Taylor and Fraser (2013) reported in their study, student learning anxiety can be partially attributed to being unclear about specific learning objectives. Accordingly, the researcher assumes that less emphasis is given to knowing specific learning objectives resulting in students' test anxiety.

*System Maintenance and Change Dimension of English Classroom.*

This finding indicates that Grade 9 students generally believed that they were given equal opportunities for expressing, sharing, and discussing in English class. English teachers intended to make students aware that everyone was part of the class and had an equal chance to express opinions and receive the teacher's help.

*Preferences for English Learning Strategies*

The finding from this research implies that Grade 9 students perceived that they had an overall high frequency and a good level of using English language learning strategies, which was in line with a previous study employed on secondary school students in Malaysia. Overall, it showed high frequencies in applying six classifications (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies) of English learning strategies (see Razak, Ismail, Aziz & Babikkoi, 2012). Furthermore, this study reported that the Malaysian education system has primarily encouraged and influenced the high preference for learning strategies in English language learning. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, under the requirement of the English Curriculum Standard in China, secondary school students were encouraged to increase their frequency of use of learning strategies (MOE; 2001, 2011). Likewise, it can be a reason that can explain why Grade 9 students in Yinsheng Middle School have strong preferences for English learning strategies. As



Oxford revealed (1990), the motivational drive is one factor that influences the preference for language learning. Having good grades in English subjects as a motivational drive, students are more likely to be aware of the significance of learning strategies used to achieve effective learning. Accordingly, the researcher deems that Grade 9 students showed a positive attitude toward English learning strategies due to the motivational drive for a good grade.

The findings also showed that metacognitive strategies were the most frequently used among six categories of learning strategies by the Grade 9 students. Meanwhile, it showed the least use of social strategy compared with other learning strategies, which is consistent with the finding of Ghavamnia, Kassaian, and Dabaghi (2011). who reported that students might not be aware of the potential of social strategies, resulting in a weak preference for social strategy. A previous study reported that in an educational system that encourages individual competitiveness and organizes its curriculum around competitive tasks, language learners tend to prefer learning strategies that allow them to work individually rather than social strategies that suggest cooperation with others (Chamot, 2004). Accordingly, the researcher assumes that the Grade 9 students use fewer social strategies.

*Relationship between Perception of English Classroom Environment and Preferences for English Learning Strategies*

This research indicates that the more positive perception of the English classroom environment Grade 9 students have, the stronger their preferences for English learning strategies; furthermore, the better and the more often they can develop and use English learning strategies. This finding was aligned with a previous study (see Lv, 2017), which reported that the better the students' perception of English class, the higher level of learning strategies they can reach. That is to say, student perceptions of the classroom environment and their preferences for learning strategies are closely associated.

*Relationship between Perception of Relationship Dimension of English Classroom Environment and Preferences for English Learning Strategies*

The finding of this study reported that the students' perceptions of English classrooms in terms of student cohesiveness, teacher support, and student involvement were positively related to their English learning strategies use. Daemi, Tahriri, and Zafarghandi's (2017) study found student cohesiveness positively correlated with EFL learners' self-efficacy. The finding suggested that language self-efficacy and achievement could be increased by developing student cohesiveness. Accordingly, it also indicates that student cohesiveness plays a positive role in using English learning strategies. Likewise, the student's perceptions of the classroom environment in student involvement

positively relate to students learning strategies. The finding was similar to a previous study reporting that students' cognitive strategies increased when a teacher encouraged involvement (see Blumenfeld & Meece, 1988). Referring to teacher support, there was a similar study conducted in a math classroom that found a positive relationship between perceived teacher support and learning strategies (Karabenick & Sharma, 1994).

*Relationship between Perception of English Classroom Environment in Personal Dimension and Preferences for English Learning Strategies*

This study found that the students' perceptions of English classrooms in terms of task orientation and cooperation were positively correlated to their English learning strategies use. This finding is similar to a previous study by Ames and Archer (1988), who reported that students' perception of classroom goal orientation related to using learning strategies effectively. Moreover, students who perceived awareness of task orientation in the classroom reported using more learning strategies.

*Relationship between Perception of English Classroom Environment in System Maintenance and Change Dimension and Preference for English Learning Strategies*

The finding of this current study indicated that students' perceptions of equity given by teachers had no statistically significant relationship with their preferences for English learning strategies. A similar survey by Blumenfeld, Pintrich, Meece and Wessels (1982) reported that teachers respond equally to boys and girls during learning activities such as individual work, seat work, and group work, regardless of student behavior varied by sex. This study showed that student behaviors changed in different settings rather than teacher treatment of students. In the researcher's opinion, student behaviors here could be regarded as a sort of action they take when learning, that is, their learning strategies. Accordingly, the current study result was in line with the previous study's findings.

**Recommendations for Students**

This study revealed that Grade 9 students of Yinsheng Middle School had positive perceptions of their English classroom. Among the three dimensions of perceptions, the personal development dimension scored lower than the other two. Students should be sure of specific learning objectives and increase awareness of learning goal setting. Moreover, students should find the reasons behind exam anxiety and then try to relieve exam stress, such as taking regular breaks, making positive self-suggestions, setting appropriate self-expectations, etc.

This study also revealed that Grade 9 students of Yinsheng Middle School perceived that they had an overall high frequency and a good level of using English language learning strategies. It also showed that the students used social strategies less than other learning strategies; some expressed fear and bashfulness of speaking English to others or in a public setting. Accordingly, students should be aware of the potential of social strategies and develop communication skills via collaborating with others to achieve successful English language learning.

### **Recommendations for Teachers**

Teachers played a crucial role in providing and maintaining a supportive learning environment for their students. To create a supportive classroom environment characterized by autonomy and efficiency, the teacher should be aware that students are the central learning position. The role of the teacher should shift from an authority of knowledge to an organizer of students' learning process. Avoid aggressiveness and hostile criticism of students. Take measures to reduce classroom anxiety by exchanging exciting experiences related to lesson content. Organize fun activities or games that engage in learning, have relaxing talks with students, and give students enough time and appropriate guidance and advice. Group work creates favorable conditions for students' autonomous learning.

On the other hand, teachers should pay more attention to the interaction culture in the classroom and organize group cooperative learning in favor of developing student English learning strategies. First, it is necessary to help students establish learning cooperation groups. Each group should comprise members with different learning abilities and learning levels. Meanwhile, the learning abilities of different groups should be balanced as much as possible, which benefits students to help each other and encourage social learning strategies to use. Besides, it can also contribute to fair competition among groups to achieve a harmonious and competitive classroom environment. Secondly, the teacher should help each group member with clear learning objectives and accountability for learning tasks. Different tasks should be assigned according to the different levels of students' learning abilities, which can probably increase students' learning enthusiasm and enhance their sense of collective belonging. Thirdly, the teacher should attach great importance to the design of learning activities, enrich ways to organize learning activities to increase the enjoyment of learning, and provide students with more opportunities for learning strategies.

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