

VAK learning styles in language teaching and learning

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to research on one of the factors affecting the success among L2 students. The main aim was to find out if the cognitive style of the teacher has a significant impact on cognitive style of students, therefore the level of performance of the student would be affected. The survey conducted was based on *The Style Analysis Survey (SAS) Assessing Your Own Learning and Working Styles* by Rebecca L. Oxford. The teacher also answered the survey. In addition, the average grade of the group of students was compared with the result from the section of the survey “How I Use My Physical Senses to Study or Work” to identify the impact in the final grade of the language course and finally find out if the cognitive style of the teacher impacts the students learning process.

*Key words:* VAK learning styles, language teaching

### **Developments in language teaching and the origin of the VAK model**

“It has been estimated that some sixty percent of today’s world population is multilingual” (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 1). With figures so high, it comes as no surprise that language learning has such an outstanding relevance in modern day society, which has been valid as far as recorded history extends. The first structured language teaching of which we have record—the Grammar-Translation method—, originated in Europe at the moment when Latin ceased to be a living language, and the focus of learning was that of classic literature (p. 1). The methodology was far from sensitive to learning needs or understanding of learning and psychology, so the study of Latin became an issue of “mental gymnastic[s]” (p.2), that lent little results and surprisingly enough it is still the basis for teaching some languages (like Japanese, see the series *Minna no Nihongo*, or many L2 French texts). The first innovations towards a more efficient language methodology started during the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the railway started to acquire popularity and cultural contact became more frequent (Gouin, 1892, p. v). With this proliferation of cultural contact the necessity to learn a language for communicating purposes arose, and as a response theoreticians started focusing more on the L1 learning process as a guide. As research and observations increased so did the appearance of *Author methods*, which had particular focus, on how each one understood the learner.

The first great developments appeared from the early 1900s to the 1950s, with the work of Bloomfield, Sampir, Hockett, Fries and other advocates of the school of structural linguistics (Brown, 2000, p.8) who analyzed language within a highly organized and systematic method which served as a basis for grammar-based syllabus that in some way continue to impact language teaching to this day. The school of structural linguistics shared views about language and learning with behaviorism (p. 8), which conceives the human

mind as a *tabula rasa* on which knowledge can accumulate by means of *stimulus* that reinforce specific behaviors by means of *repetition* or *suppression* (Skinner, 1957, in Richards & Rodgers, p. 50).

It was probably during this period where the learning styles trio emerged —VAK—, because of its structural-behavioral view of learning; although some sources claim that it might be more than 100 years old (Sharp, Byrne & Bowker, 2008, p. 89), but a clear answer is yet to be discovered since some sources set the 1920's as a source, with authors like Fernald, Keller, Orton, Gillingham, Stillman and Montessori (Dettlaff, 2003, p. 3), and others would claim more conservative dates. In common practice most texts do not mention proponent or date of origin at all (as is the case of the VAR/VARK website by Fleming, 2001).

But as scientifically accurate as this paradigm was, the analysis of learning as only an overtly evident phenomenon seized to satisfy theoreticians. During the 1960s, with the advent of Chomsky's generative grammar, and the distinction between performance and competence —with a precursor in Saussure's *parole et langue*—, and the early developments of computer science the rationalist-cognitive school of language emerged (Brown, pp. 9-10). During this period researchers started to understand that no single method could account for success in L2 acquisition; some learners seemed to succeed with any method a phenomenon that lead Rubin and Stern to describe good learners in terms of characteristics, styles and strategies (Brown, 2000, p. 123). It was during this period where the idea of learning styles and strategies started to formalize.

### **The VAK model in learning styles**

There is no clear definition for a learning style. Most authors conceive them as “the way individual learners try to learn” (Duckett & Tatarkowski, n. d., p. 1) and others define them as “general approaches that students use in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subject” (Oxford, 2003, p. 2), definitions that make classifying and saying what is a style and what not with precision ambiguous; hence great number of classifications according to author. Some classifications include the following: Sensory preferences, personality types, desired degree of generality, and biological differences (p. 3), some of which might subdivide further into a more complex taxonomy. Another example comes from Brown’s *Principles of language learning and teaching*, where he takes the following classification: Field independence, left- and right-brain functioning, and ambiguity tolerance, visual and auditory style (2000, pp.113-122). None of which include the VAK model, which has been “the subject of harsh criticism; however, using perceptual modalities (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, and gustatory) has a high face-validity because of its practical clarity”(Given, 1996, in Cockerline & Yearwood, 2009, p. 004245).

The election of this model rest upon its practical clarity, for this is a key in successful language teaching (using the most time efficient method of analysis to know the students), based on the principle that the least elements used the easier the handling becomes. In this sense, using only three categories lends itself more effective, although a recurrent criticism relies on the fact that a problem with this classification for its elements seem not to belong into a same category, because the first two correspond to senses, but there is no such thing as a kinetic sense (Felder & Henriques, 1995, p. 23).

Before continuing any further, we must point out that no classification comes without criticism, e.g. the differentiating people as of using more the right or the left

hemisphere, a distinction favored by many educators which has obtained quite a degree of trendiness, because brain science fascinates educators and the general public. Although it might sound interesting to imply that certain mental factors affect our performance in school, the literature in brain sciences does not lend a conclusive answer (Sharp, Byrne & Bowker, 2008, p. 93) because most experiments designed to test hemisphere differences are carried out in such a controlled fashion that the results can lend little aid to education (p. 94). Even though neurology offers little to education in terms of brain differences, teachers still believe in classifications made based on neurological differences. As it happens with this classification, all of the other fall into a continuum spectrum of which differences dilute for most learners have all of the characteristics to certain degree, which means that implying differences of success in learning in these small differences equals to see something that might not be there at all.

Even though there is little evidence in the field of neuroscience to support typologies like these ones. This does not mean that they are not completely valid, for one scientific field does not need validation from the others to be suited as true. If a concept lends results in the education field this should be taken as evidence within a pragmatic paradigm to support it, although being cautions when abstracting theory from it. In this sense the VAK model should be seen as a tool that helps understand the learners and not as an explanation of factual learning differences that might put learning at stake (thinking that favoring one style will doom the others in oblivion).

### **VAK: being visual, auditory or kinesthetic**

In broad terms students' "general approaches [...] in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subject" (Oxford, 2003, p. 2) can be broken down into three rough categories that reflect which type of information is more easily assimilated by them (although this does not by any means mean that there is an only learners' channel for absorbing input). Many models and classifications have arisen since the 1970s (Brown, 2000, p. 123) focusing on different approaches towards learning, but the one of interest to the present research focuses on perceptual modalities, i.e. viewing, hearing and feeling or interacting with.

According to some sources, the visual style is the most common in learning (Aultman College, 2008, p. 4). Visual learners tend to be those who seat in the front rows in classrooms, and tend to describe things in terms of their appearance (p. 3). This type of learners benefit from using graphs, imagery and other visual aids, and perform poor when receiving oral instructions without written support or visually driven explanations (pp. 6-7). Other characteristics include a supposedly higher competence in spelling, because they remember word in terms of appearance (written image) instead of sound (acoustic image). They also read the instructor's body language as a main source of information and often ask for instructions to be repeated.

Visual learners are said to remember words in terms of their written form, as some models suggest lexical items can be accessed directly without relying on acoustic image, a process called *direct accessing* (Marin, 1978, in Felder & Henriques, 1995, p. 23). Research points out that most people access lexical items directly (Dale, 1969, in Felder & Henriques, 1995, p. 24), although it is common practice to teach lexical items based on an oral fashion, which might pose some disadvantage to visual learners.

For this reason teachers should learn to be sensitive to this aspect of learning styles, because “the more that teachers know about their students' style preferences, the more effectively they can orient their L2 instruction, as well as the strategy teaching that can be interwoven into language instruction, matched to those style preferences”(Oxford, 2003, p.16).“Although visual images are part of human cognition, they tend to be marginalized and undervalued in education” (Stokes, 2002, in Foster, 2008, p.23).

Knowing this is particularly relevant about visual learners because they might start to daydream while listening to long lectures (Duckett & Tatarkowski, n. d., p. 3), an aspect that can cause scolding from teachers without sensitivity towards learning differences.

The second most numerous style of learning corresponds to the auditory style (environ 30%, Aultman College, 2008, p. 4). These learners are characterized by being more talkative than other learners (Duckett & Tatarkowski, n. d., p. 3), an aspect that might overlap with the introvert-extrovert classification, and that also might get them into trouble with teachers who have low noise tolerance. These learners benefit from debates, oral presentations and other activities that include auditory stimuli (Aultman College, 2008, p. 9), which puts them in favor in traditional classroom settings because they can follow oral instructions easily and are usually quite articulated speakers who know how to profit from study groups. “Fleming [13] and Sankley [14] were of the opinion that two perceptual modalities are disadvantaged by this traditional teaching paradigm: the visual and kinesthetic modalities” (Given, 1996, in Cockerline & Yearwood, 2009, p. 004245).

The percentage in these two types is so high (95% of the population), that some theoreticians completely discard the third type (see, Oxford, 2003, Brown, 2000, Felder & Henriques, 1995), even though the conventional model supported by authors like Barbe & Swassing (1979); Dunn, Dunn, & Price (1978, in Felder & Henriques, 1995, p. 23) still



prevails strongly. Even though the auditory and visual styles constitute the majority of population, the kinesthetic style should not be forgotten. The main characteristic of this style is that learners seem to be more movement or hands-on oriented. These learners enjoy action and demonstration, and become frustrated when asked to remain seated for long periods. Kinesthetic learners are usually good at arts and sports for they are keener to have good coordination (Aultman College, 2008, pp. 12-13), and thus benefit from activities that demand a more dynamic interaction.

Even though the kinesthetic learner is usually neglected in the traditional classroom setting, a model was designed that addressed their needs: total physical response; a method developed by James Asher, a professor of psychology at San Jose State University. Its basic methodology consists on teaching language built on the coordination of speech and action (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 87). TPR is commonly used with children, but in adult learners it seldom is used.

We should not forget that there are no absolute style learners (i.e. learners who have only one style and who will be doomed if their style is not addressed), but “Some learners might need instruction presented more visually, while others might require more auditory, kinesthetic, or tactile types of instruction. Without adequate knowledge about their individual students’ style preferences, teachers cannot systematically provide the needed instructional variety” (Oxford, 2003, p.16). The teachers should strive to give mixed style classes in order to foster learning at its best.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants:**

The text from Oxford (1993) was translated into Spanish and applied to 36 adult students from both genders, and also to the teacher. The results were added and compared to the general group performance (since not all the teachers were willing to reveal the specific grades of each student, also the students completed the survey in an anonymous way for them to answer completely unbiased).

### **Materials and procedures**

Instrument: Style Analysis Survey (SAS)

Assessing Your Own Learning and Working Styles

Rebecca L. Oxford

According to Oxford (1993) "The Style Analysis survey (SAS) is designed to assess [...] general approach to learning and working. It does not predict [...] behavior in every instance, but it is a clear indication of [...] overall style preferences" (p.179). Furthermore, this analysis indicates the tendencies or inclinations of individuals respect to their learning and working styles.

The SAS survey is divided in 5 major activities named: Activity 1 How I use My Physical Senses to Study or Work, Activity 2 How I Deal with Other People, Activity 3 How I Handle Possibilities, Activity 4 How I Approach Tasks and, Activity 5 How I Deal with Ideas. In addition to that, their 110 items displayed.

The section "How I use My Physical Senses to Study or Work" had 30 items, whilst, the other four activities only had 20 items. Also, for the five sections are a series of multiple choice answers which are situated in each item, those response options are represented by multiple number where 0 represents never, 1 represents sometimes, 2

represents very often and 3 represents always. The persons who answer the survey must *circle* the responses.

## **Results**

The findings obtained through the responses given by the students and the teacher of Group A and B are the following:

For group A the teacher is kinesthetic (9%); while the students are as follows: 2 students are visual (16%), 6 students are auditive (50%), and 3 students are kinesthetic (25%).

Their grade average as a group is 8.5. Due the result of Group A, we found out that only three students have the same cognitive style as the teacher. The majority of students have auditive style and there are a small number of students that are visual.

The results obtained from *group b* are slightly different. This is a large group with 26 students. According to the professor the ages of the students range between 18 and 25. There are more male students than female ones. The different types of students that were to be detected are the following: kinesthetic, visual and auditive students. And the teacher is a visual learner.

For group B the teacher is visual (5%); and her students are as follows: 15 students obtained a result suggesting they learn visually (55%), 6 students are auditive learners (22%), 5 students are kinesthetic learners (18%).

Their grade average as a group is 9.23 and according to the teacher, the learning styles have never been an impediment for learning since the class is very well rounded with different activities for all kinds of learning styles. The learning style of the teacher matches the learning style of a majority.

### **Conclusions**

The difference between the average grades of the two groups is 8.5 vs. 9.23, which does show a significant statistical difference. Group B has better grades and the majority of the students seem to share the same cognitive style likewise the teacher, the percentage of difference between group A and group B is of only of 7% percent (a staggering difference in terms of performance), although it is a very small number to conclude that VAK are a major factor that affects entirely the learning process of the student. With such a disparity in learning styles, and if these due influence in how a teacher gives class, and how students learn, then it would be expected a very low performance level, since the great majority do not share style with the instructor in the case of Group A. From the results of the test, and comparing them to the general course performance it can be concluded that VAK style does have its weight in language learning, although this model provides a guide as a principle for making more dynamic and varied courses. Further research is necessary to reach conclusive evidence.

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