

Matching Styles to Students

Melissa Perna, Rita Dunn, and Andrea Honigsfeld examine which methods work best for language learners

It is not just English Language Learners (ELLs) who need

to learn a second language. In this increasingly challenging global economy, every student should speak and read one or more foreign languages. The majority of the world's population is either multilingual or multidialectal. The days of seeking employment in the same town, city, or even country in which children were reared are gone. Rather, today's and tomorrow's young adults may work in other nations and on other continents. To earn a good living and to enhance their lives culturally and financially, today's youth will have to speak and understand different languages so that they know what corporate and industrial leaders in other cultures say, need, or require.

Different Methods for Teaching Foreign Languages

What often creates dissension among foreign-language teachers are the differences in their instructional belief systems.

1. Some insist that speaking the target language in class, regardless of each individual's ability to keep pace and understand what is being said, is how to create sufficient fluency to enable youngsters to converse coherently. This method is referred to as Total Immersion.

2. Others adopt varied innovative approaches and employ them without the benefit of extensive research or an evaluation schema. One such current system is teaching Languages Other Than English (LOTE) in a middle- or high-school setting.

3. Others teach vocabulary lists and grammar by following a basic textbook. They provide discussions, lectures, and readings. We call that method Traditional Teaching (TT).

Responses from teachers and students to these approaches vary. While exploring research-based, best practices in foreign language teaching, as well as in the broader educational context, we came

across several publications that strongly argued for introducing new and difficult content through students' strongest perceptual strengths and then reinforcing that same material through their secondary or tertiary strengths (Dunn & Dunn, 2005; Dunn, Pratt-Johnson, & Honigsfeld, 2008). Perceptual strengths were described as learning by listening (auditory), reading (visual/print-particularly when accompanied by photos or images (visual/picture/), manipulating resources (tactual), or moving actively (kinesthetically) while learning.

Methods Tried

We construed of Traditional Teaching (TT) as heavy reliance on books, workbooks, dittos, lectures, discussions, drills and practice (Drew, Dunn, Quinn, Sinatra, & Spiridakis, 1994). Kinesthetic Resources (KR) were Floor and Wall Games in which students actively learned through movements such as bending, hopping, skipping, or walking, whereas Tactual Resources (TR) were hands-on materials called Electroboards, Flip-Chutes, Pic-A-Holes, and Task Cards.. When kinesthetic and tactual resources were used, we responded to students' primary and secondary perceptual preferences. Finally, we also implemented Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS) that exposed learners to planned-, sequential-, and repetitive-language structures by having them listen to and read interesting and engaging stories rather than by consciously learning or memorizing language (Gaab, 2005).

Our Students

Of the 118 students participating in this study, 50 were ninth graders, 67 were tenth graders, and 1 was in the eleventh grade-all trying to learn Italian Level 2. Fifty two were female and 66 were male. Only seven of the 118 used a language other than English as a primary

means of communication at home with their families. Of those seven students, only two reported using an Italian dialect for communication.

Materials

We used a total of six teacher-constructed pre- and posttests that previously had been submitted to a jury of experts to be certain that each of the methods taught equally difficult lessons in the exact same amount of time (Perna, 2007). Students were required to give the Italian equivalent of each word or phrase. The Comparative Value Scale (CVS) (O'Connell, 1989) was administered to compare students' attitudes toward each of the approaches used to teach them new Italian vocabulary.

Procedures and Design

Students' learning styles were identified by Learning in Vogue: Elements of Style (Missere & Dunn, 2005). Melissa taught all the lessons to control for different teaching styles. To avoid a novelty effect, students were exposed to tactual and kinesthetic resources, TPRS stories, and traditional instruction prior to the beginning of this study. Each lesson was presented in a consistent manner and format throughout the research. A counterbalanced design was employed to control for a possible novelty effect.

Findings

Achievement

- In all vocabulary lessons, students achieved statistically higher ($p < .001$) scores on Italian vocabulary tests when taught through their primary- and reinforced through their secondary-perceptual strengths than when they either were taught through traditional or TPRS instruction.
- Although the mean test scores for the TPRS group were higher than for the traditional groups, no significant differences were found in achievement scores for students in the traditional and the TPRS groups.
- In one of three lessons, students achieved statistically more positive vocabulary-achievement scores when taught through TPRS than when taught through traditional instruction.
- Additionally, we determined correlations between specific perceptual strengths and students' scores following each method of instruction. There was a slight negative relationship between auditory-preferred students and their gain scores for the tactual and kinesthetic lessons, indicating that auditory students did not need the tactual and kinesthetic resources. Instead, they performed slightly better with TPRS, which is an auditory strategy.
- A positive relationship was identified between visually-preferred students and their gain scores for the TPRS lessons.

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Attitudes

■ We found statistically more positive attitude-test scores when students were taught Italian-vocabulary words through their perceptual strengths than when taught traditionally or through TPRS. Results showed that students believed instruction through their perceptual strengths was more helpful than the other two methods in all four areas-learning vocabulary, remembering vocabulary, understanding vocabulary, and enjoying vocabulary.

■ In addition, students indicated that traditional instruction was more helpful in learning, remembering, and understanding vocabulary than TPRS. However, students did not indicate a significant preference for enjoying traditional over TPRS instruction or vice versa.

Perceptual Preference and Attitudes

Additional analyses identified three relationships between students of specific perceptual strengths and attitudes toward learning Italian vocabulary words.

■ Auditory students found traditional instruction more enjoyable than TPRS.

■ Visual students reported higher levels of remembering and understanding vocabulary when instructed traditionally.

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Conclusions and Recommendations

These results corroborated prior research stating the benefits of perceptually sequenced instruction over traditional instruction (Mitchell et al., 2003; Solomon-Hollander, 2005). Results of all three vocabulary lessons showed the benefits of instruction through students' perceptual strengths as compared with both traditional and TPRS methods of instruction. We strongly recommend that the perceptual strengths of all students studying a language be identified with a reliable and valid learning-style instrument (www.learningstyles.net). On the basis of these findings, teachers need to use kinesthetic and tactual approaches to teaching language with the majority of students who are neither strongly auditory nor visual. **X**

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Rita Dunn passed away this summer (see In Memoriam, p.8) She was the director for St. John's University's Center for the Study of Learning and Teaching Styles in New York.

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