

Teaching VAK-abulary

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Abstract: Research on the understanding of the brain and how people learn have introduced the VAK learning styles model to the ELT world in the last two decades. The VAK learning Style - [Neuro-linguistic programming](#) model (NLP) - addresses a learner's three main sensory receivers - Vision, Auditory, and Kinesthetic. Teacher feedback and the findings of prevailing research into the field indicate that teachers' ability in simultaneous practice of all three styles in their EFL classes boosts language learners' success almost in all language skills, including vocabulary teaching. Studies on brain and cognition also show that strength of memory depends mostly on how deeply information is processed. The purpose of this presentation is to demonstrate that we will not only maintain a lively foreign language class atmosphere but also provide our students with strong memory when we teach new vocabulary by tapping learners' VAK sensory receivers which are brain friendly learning styles.

Key words: Vocabulary, Learning styles, Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic learners,

*“When it comes to words, every person is destined to be a lifelong learner.”
Dale Johnson (2001, 9)*

Introduction

Over the last the decade, necessity of vocabulary knowledge has come into its own again in foreign language teaching. Luckily, thanks to notable research in psycholinguistic, computer-assisted language learning, teaching and learning strategies and styles we have come to better understand how the language learner's mind processes and stores vocabulary. Since vocabulary growth is of great importance to academic success, traditional methods currently used in ELT classes regarding teaching vocabulary need to be urgently readdressed. In other words, the common vocabulary pedagogy which mainly consists of providing learners with dictionary meaning, synonyms, and antonyms is considered quite traditional and insufficient.

David Wilkins' (1972:111) famous quotation “Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. If you spend most of your time studying grammar, your English will not improve much. You will see most improvement if you learn more words and expressions. You can say very little with grammar, but you can say almost anything with words!” is almost known by everyone interested in teaching foreign languages. Foreign language learners and teachers inspired by these convincing and guiding words have focused on innovative methods both for presenting, practicing, organizing new words and making them accessible and memorable (Harmer & Rossner, 1992; Wellman 1992; McCarthy and O'Dell 1994).

For a long time, language courses and textbooks were organized according to a set of grammatical points along side with very limited number of words to support the topic of each language unit. This traditional type of language teaching pedagogy has been mostly based on the common credo of several language teaching methods as Direct Method, Audio-Lingual Method, and Communicative Language Teaching which give great priority to the teaching of grammatical structures. Their rationale behind introducing limited number of words has been that too many words could distract learners from studying the grammatical structures. Conscious or subconscious minds of these methods believe firmly that one grammatical rule can generate numberless sentences; therefore,

teaching grammar is deemed more essential and productive. In their eyes vocabulary is merely a mass of items, while grammar is a system of rules worth teaching.

However, more recently the hegemony of grammar has been substantially challenged since Michael Lewis (1998) introduced Lexical Approach whose principles stress the importance of word frequency and lexical chunks in the language teaching and learning process. Similarly proponents of Natural Approach, Total Physical Approach, Suggestopedia, Content Based Teaching and so forth have also supported the necessity of vocabulary growth which resulted in more interest and research in teaching foreign language words. For instance, Harmer (2007) stated that in certain contexts vocabulary plays greater role than grammatical structures and the correct use of structures is almost impossible if one does not possess the necessary vocabulary knowledge. Fortunately, vocabulary is no more treated like Cinderella even if many ELT publishers insist on grammatical syllabus in their textbooks. The inclusion of different vocabulary activities in recent textbooks shows how seriously vocabulary is treated nowadays. For example, a back cover survey of some popular ELT textbooks shows the degree of importance given to vocabulary teaching:

“Strong emphasis on vocabulary, with a particular focus on high frequency, useful words and phrases”. (from Cutting Edge Intermediate)

Learning Styles

Research in pedagogy has shown that we learn in different ways, at different rates, and under different conditions. Thus, it is significant for teachers to look to come with better ways to teach their students and plan their language classes to address the learning styles of their learners (Carbo, 1981). Newman (1981) defines learning styles as the ways through which people learn, Holland (1982) agrees that learning style is a student's preferred way of learning, and DeCecco (1968: 89) describes learning style as the "personal ways in which individuals process information in the course of learning new concepts and principals." Correspondingly, the results of Specific Diagnostic Study indicate that 29% of elementary and high school students learn best through visuals, 34% through auditory mode, and 37% through kinesthetic mode (Willis and Hodson 1999). Surprisingly, though the concept of learning styles has been known for more than two decades, it is still relatively new for many languages teachers and learners therefore needs constant reminding. Glad to see that it as an indispensable component of most teacher training programs because it stresses the idea of individualized instruction. According to its principles, maximum learning outcome is possible when learners are given to opportunity to learn in terms of their preference.

Carbo (1981) argues that learners have different learning styles – mainly visual, auditory, and kinesthetic; thus, there is no single learning method best for all learners. For example, a visual learner may remember words after seeing them several times. A kinesthetic learner may desire to feel, touch, or trace over words to learn them. An auditory learner may learn words better when they are pronounced a few times. Each of these methods may help if they address the right group of learners; otherwise, they may be useless and even hinder learning. With the help of learning style inventory, the teacher can choose the most effective vocabulary teaching activities and materials for their learners. No doubt that when a teacher is able to address all types of learners with the same teaching material, it will help them save time that is otherwise spent on trial-and-error procedures which may result in failure. With respect to vocabulary teaching, if teachers use teaching material which includes visual, auditory and kinesthetic components simultaneously, students may not only learn the target words quickly but also enjoy the class and have long term retention.

Visual Learning of Vocabulary

The saying that a picture is often truly worth a thousand words is especially true in foreign language teaching. There is a significant amount of research which supports the idea that pictures can enhance considerably both reading and listening comprehension of L1 students (Clark and Paivio, 1991). Cognitive psychology and visual-verbal behavior research supports the influence of pictures on learning (Cronin and Myers, 1997). Canning (2000) also claims that use of visuals in EFL and ESL classrooms can remarkably facilitate language learning, for they are able to form a strong link between the material learned and learners' mental activity. Pictures are peculiarly effective because they evoke numberless cognitive pegs to make associative and referential connections between mental images and information in the long-term memory.

Canning (2000) points out that visuals are available in different forms - illustrations, pictures, perceptions, mental images, figures, impressions, likeness, replicas, reproductions – and provide the learners with immediate comprehension aid. Visuals may help learners predict and infer information, and with their help teachers can present objects, animals, people, occupations, planets, organisms and countless other materials to the students and open useful discussions. However, the same researcher argues as well that visuals can be ineffective when they are not well-chosen and used in improper ways. For example, the use of violent scenes, too many distracters, too crowded or causing an overwhelming effect of information, too small or clearly defined, stereotyped images, poor reproduction, not related to the text, irrelevant captioning, and offering too much information, unclear picture which does not compliment the text do not facilitate learning of the material.

Undoubtedly, pictures play an affective and motivational function for students and their benefit is greatest when they are related to the reader's age. Young learners may benefit more from demonstrations, whereas for older learners "try-to-imagine" instructions may be sufficient. Kehret (1996) has found out that drawing or sketches made by the teachers is a useful tool to enhance comprehension. Accordingly, visual learners have the tendency to see what they are learning; thus, pictures and images help them understand ideas and information better than solely words. They like it when the teacher is capable of creating a mental image, for it provides them with greater understanding and stronger recalling of learning. When they are well-chosen, pictures can make any language learning task, in this case vocabulary teaching, more enjoyable, result in positive attitudes and high retention, and can influence the time learners are willing to spend on the learning material.

Kinesthetic Learning of Vocabulary

According to pedagogical research, we remember 10% of what we read, 20% of what we hear, 75% of what we see and 90% of what we do. Doubtless to say, the best way to learn something is doing it ourselves. Brown (1996:3) argues that "learning styles research shows that most people prefer learning by experiencing and doing (kinesthetic elements), especially reinforced through touching and movements (tactile elements)". Similarly, Total Physical Response (TPR) proposes that second language acquisition occurs at a much faster rate when the kinesthetic sensory system of the learner is tapped (Asher, 2003). In TPR - which is based on the coordination of speech and action - language is taught primarily through physical activity. While it addresses both parts – right and left - of the brain, this approach to teaching language seems to enable children and adults to enjoy rapid, stress-free assimilation of any language followed by long-term retention. That is to say, kinesthetic learners enjoy learning when they are given the opportunity to sense the position and movement of a language skill or

learning task. Seemingly, they are likely to avoid lecture and discussion type of classes, yet they do well in learning a language skill when there are materials available for manipulation and hands-on practice.

While most children transcend by kinesthetic means during their schooling: especially in their early years they develop in kindergarten by moving, touching, feeling everything as they learn. As they grow older though some may shift to other learning styles – visual or auditory- a great number of them maintain their kinesthetic strengths throughout their lives. Kinesthetic learners strikingly learn faster when the medium of instruction is transmitted through labs, presentations, demonstrations, field trips and other tactile activities. Because of the great number of kinesthetic population it is quite reasonable to change our vocabulary teaching methods which address their gross motor (large-muscle) activity so that they we can enhance their learning.

Auditory Learning of Vocabulary

According to Dr. Shirley Wyver (reported in FPC Magazine for Australian parents) “Parents may notice they have one child who likes to talk and asks questions,” she says, “whereas the other likes to observe. Both children are engaging, but one is benefiting more from auditory input and the other from visual input”. Auditory learners enjoy listening to someone who talks about a topic rather than reading about it in the first place (Sarasin 1998). They avoid taking lecture notes in order that they can fully understand the lecturer. Further, auditory learners are left brain oriented and therefore respond well to messages, dialogues, speech, and music. They mostly enjoy both internal and external dialogues and demonstrate self-talk habits by often staring into the space and they may ask for somebody to repeat himself. Unlike other learner, they are able to work with music in the background and are not easily distracted by external noise from different sources.

Learners with this type of learning style do remember learning instructions better and like it when somebody reads the directions for a given task. Therefore, as far as vocabulary teaching is concerned, they are required to exercise their vocal cords a lot, for their students success mostly relies on how well they can verbalize the learning tasks.

VAK – abulary Teaching Sample 1.

As an example to VAK-abulary teaching, I would like to present the Frayer Model (adapted from Yopp, Yopp, and Bishop, 2009) which includes a simple definition of the target word (audio-visual) backed by necessary characteristics (audio-visual), examples (audio-visual), and non-example (audio-visual). I’m certain that the inclusion of pronunciation with phonetic transcription possibility (auditory), a picture (visual) and some tactile activity (kinesthetic) can create a lively classroom, develop deeper comprehension and result in long term retention of the target words. Even though the Frayer Modle is used mostly with nouns, they can be employed to

teach other parts of speech (verb, adjective, adverbs) as well.

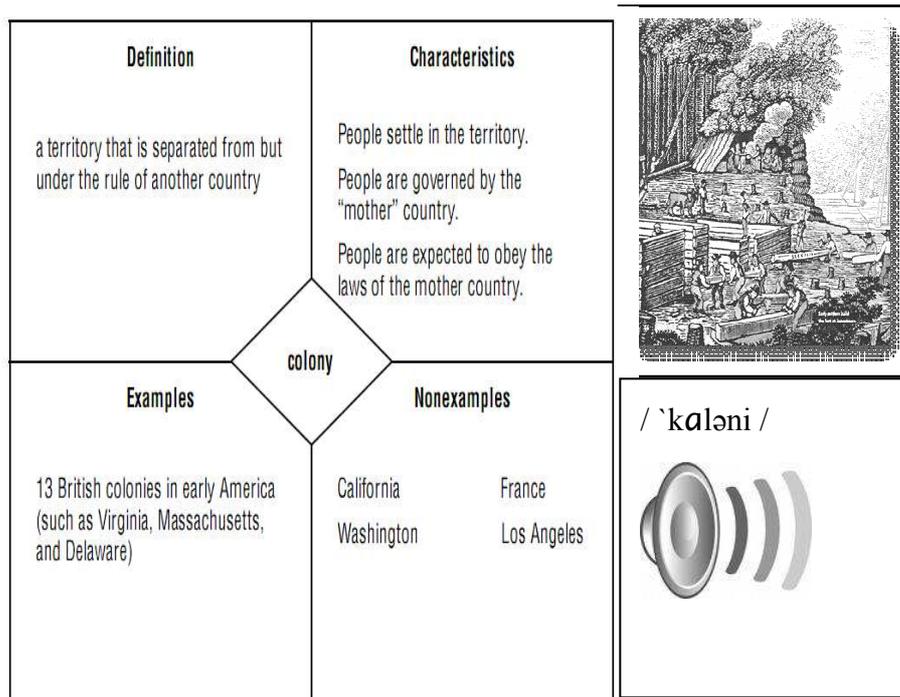


Figure 1 shows a modified version of Frayer Model to present words through VAK-abulary teaching.

Figure 1. A Flayer Model for Vak-abulary teaching.

VAK – abulary Teaching Sample 2.

The Verbal and Visual Word Association strategy (also adapted from Yopp, Yopp, and Bishop, 2009) is another exemplar for VAK-abulary teaching, for it asks the learners to approach the target words form several angles as displayed below in Figure 2. Learners are asked to write the target word into the upper-left section (visual and kinesthetic). Further, they are expected to write a simple definition (visual and kinesthetic) obtained either from the teacher or dictionary into the lower-left section of the figure. In order to increase the comprehension of the target word, the teacher should provide the figure with an appropriate picture (visual) and pronunciation possibility of the phonetic transcription (auditory).

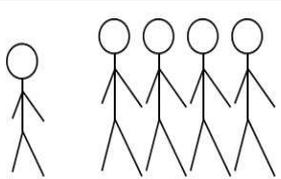
<i>isolate</i>		/ ˈaɪsəˌleɪt 
<i>to put by oneself</i>	<i>When I was sick, my mom isolated me from my family members so they wouldn't get sick, too.</i>	

Figure 2. A Verbal Word Word Association strategy for Vak-abulary teaching.

VAK–abulary teaching sample 3.

A. Look, listen and repeat.			
abandon	cultivation	irrigation	obtain
adversely	fertilize	precipitation	aggreagate
intensify	photosynthesis		
B. Listen, point and tell.			
1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8
9	10		

This final type of VAK-abulary teaching techniques has been developed by me, myself and is unique in that it provides the teacher not only with an energetic class atmosphere, but also amazingly results in high retention of vocabulary, for it tackles concurrently all three learning styles – visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. First, the target words are presented with pictures one by one with exact pronunciation (visual-audio). If teachers do not have access to photos, they may draw sketches. When you choose pictures as a teacher, make sure that the pictures are clear and congruent with the words. In the next phase, the teacher presents the same pictures, only that the words are deleted and replaced with numbers this time. Here the

teacher starts to tell the words randomly and asks the students to point to the proper pictures (kinesthetic) which include a lot of TPR. Following this, the teacher tells the words and asks the students to provide him with the correct numbers that match the pictures and later roles are exchanged (auditory).

Finally, this time the teacher deletes the pictures as well and leaves out only the numbers under the pictures.

C. Imagine and tell.			
1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8
9	10		

When you ask the students to come up with the right vocabulary for the numbers, surprisingly they provide you with the correct answers from their mental picture: an activity which involves NLP elements in that it plays both hemispheres of the brain. I firmly believe that rather than simply repeating the words for a longer period of time, strong memory relies much more on how deeply the students are able to process the learning of new words.

Conclusion

Vocabulary teaching is an essential goal in ELT pedagogy, perhaps more significant than is generally accepted by researchers and foreign language teachers. Both parents and teachers can assist learners unforgettably in the vocabulary learning process by providing diverse activities which are most interesting and appropriate to their learning style. Correspondingly, learners' vocabulary growth, comprehension and retention will increase remarkably provided that teachers practice whole sensory learning by addressing all learning receptors simultaneously: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. As long as teacher's teaching style employed in the class does not relate to the learner's sensory style, most probably students will shut down their preferred learning style which will most probably decrease their success, attention and motivation in the topic. As a result, schools, curriculums and lesson plans need to include large quantities of language activities that address multiple learning styles concurrently in the same lesson. Rather than saying "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," we should actually pronounce "Present information to others as they will best learn."

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