

## LEARNING STYLES IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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### **Abstract:**

The article describes action research carried out in order to identify my students' learning styles, to investigate the relationship between learning styles and language acquisition and to facilitate language progress through adequate class techniques. Teaching focused on the diversity of learning styles and multiple intelligences was consistently implemented after the interpretation of the data collected by various methods.

**Key words:** *learning styles, visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, multiple intelligences.*

### **Introduction**

For some time now, educational research exploring the issues of academic achievement and success has focused on the learner and promoted active and interactive learning. Language teaching has become more learner-focused and interactive and placed emphasis on helping students take more responsibility in increasing their language acquisition. A number of language-learning concepts have been put into circulation as a result of the ample research in the field, with the purpose to better understand and enhance this complex process.

One concept in particular which has provided some valuable insights into learning in both academic and other settings is learning styles. It is generally accepted that the manner in which learners choose to or are inclined to approach a learning situation has an important impact on the learners' performance. In spite of the different theoretical positions, models and instruments used in a vast number of research and practitioner-based studies, the relevance of the diversity of learning styles and the necessity to consistently address all of them cannot be ignored. Awareness of learning styles preferences allows learners to understand and organise their learning. It allows teachers to become more sensitive and responsive to their students' learner profiles and needs.

Teachers cannot know all aspects related to the differences in learning, therefore they cannot take effective action to support their students, even when they are sympathetic and empathetic by nature, if they do not read about issues. There is the danger that teachers will get an impressionistic, limited, even wrong perspective on their students' behaviour. As teachers are not alike, students are

not alike either, that is why we should not pigeon-hole them. We need to expose them to a variety of activities to maximise their potential for learning English and to expand their minds. This can only be done through constant research and extensive reading on all topics that might help us to know the individuals in front of us better. These beliefs made me start the piece of action research whose results are presented in this article.

### **Description**

My research was carried out between January 2012 and June 2013. The goal of the research was to better know my students and to find ways to help them enhance their language acquisition. My main aims were to identify students' learning styles and preferences, to investigate whether there is a relationship between learning styles and language acquisition and consequently to provide adequate opportunities able to maximise their potential and develop better language competences. My target group consisted of lower-secondary and upper-secondary students at 'Costache Negruzzi' College in Iași.

In order to collect data I used questionnaires, checklists, observations and discussions. There were 211 respondents with an age range between 11 and 17 years old. I opted for different types of questionnaires according to the students' age and level of English, simpler with the younger learners and more elaborate with the older ones. I should mention the fact that, for language development reasons, I preferred the English version, assuming the assistant role whenever students asked for explanation and clarification. All responses were interpreted and discussed with the students in order to raise their awareness of their learning preferences.

The data analysis of the questionnaires and checklists revealed that the students' major preferences were visual, kinaesthetic and global with both levels of students. These results were compared to the results of observation and they confirmed my expectations. Through class discussions I collected information on the teaching patterns they had been exposed to during English classes in the previous years and the current teaching format they witness in their other classes, focused mainly on long lectures and rote memorisation. At that moment I realised why most of them refrained from speaking or expressing their own opinions.

By further research I understood why learners who read horribly if kept in a sitting position turn into perfect loud readers if asked to walk about and read; why visual learners do not retain spoken information and cannot follow spoken instructions; why auditory learners do not pay attention to their spelling mistakes and have trouble with written work; why most of my students cannot learn well for other subjects if they are not in a cordial relationship with that specific teacher (because they are kinaesthetic-emotional and suffer when they

are not emotionally connected to the person in front of them); why most of my younger students constantly chew on their pens and rulers, making a lot of noise which sometimes irritates me (because they are kinaesthetic-motoric and they have to struggle with sitting for fifty minutes in a row); why some of my students look out of the window while I am explaining something 'important' and I would need them to visually follow me when I am talking (but they are perfect 'listeners' who do not need visual input at all and surprisingly remember everything I have said weeks later).

The next stage was to implement learning style teaching in the English class. I experimented with the effect of using diversity of tasks and strategies able to improve their communication skills, I used any opportunity to foster an atmosphere of trust and support, I encouraged their participation and involvement throughout the lesson, and I raised their interest in their development and increased their motivation for learning English.

I selected, adapted and designed activities to address different learning styles and multiple intelligences. The positive results of my action were soon evident in the increased interaction in class and the improved performance of most students. The informal feedback collected from them either through open discussions and written questions confirmed their satisfaction with my teaching style and the classroom atmosphere I created. They also voiced their awareness of improvement and better self-esteem.

From the perspective of a teacher, the action research and its results were a period of exploration and experiment, of further readings and reflection, of learning and development.

### **Stages**

In my attempt to know my students' learning preferences, I looked for some types of questionnaires and checklists simple enough to be easily used with students aged 11-17.

I conducted the study over a period of one year. The questionnaires and checklists were applied in three stages: May 2012, December 2012 and May-June 2013. Two hundred and eleven students took part in this action research. The participants were lower-secondary students (aged 11-12 and 13-14) and upper-secondary students (aged 15 -17).

### **Results according to stages**

#### **Stage 1- May 2012**

At the end of the previous school year (2011-2012) I asked my upper-secondary students (9<sup>th</sup> grade) to fill in a checklist of *Right vs. Left Brain Dominance* consisting of 32 questions (<http://www.angelfire.com/wi/2brains/test.html>).

Sixty-two students aged 15-16 answered the questions in English and used the key to score their preferences. The checklist was discussed in class the next day. The answers showed 43.55% right-brain dominance and 56.45 % left-brain dominance.

Lower-secondary students (5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade, aged 11-12 and 13-14) were invited to answer a 20-questions survey on their learning style preferences. (<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/education/educational-technology-and-practice/educational-practice/whats-your-learning-style>) The survey focused on five learning systems: listening/reading (auditory learners), seeing/visualizing (visual learners), experiencing/hands-on learning (kinaesthetic learners), feeling/belonging (social/emotional learners) and reflecting/evaluating (metacognitive learners). The surveys were carried out during regular class periods and help was provided by the teacher to ease comprehension of more difficult questions. The students used the key to score their results. From the total number of one hundred and forty-nine participants, fifty-nine students were in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade and ninety students in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. The next time we met we had a class discussion about advantages and disadvantages of strengths and weaknesses in certain learning situations.

From 149 respondents, 82.86 % students were visual and 17.14 % were auditory, while 34.29 % were kinaesthetic and 65.71% were social-emotional.

At the beginning of the study the upper-secondary students displayed a more balanced position between the right vs. left dominant style and the encompassed visual & global vs. auditory & analytic styles, respectively.

Lower-secondary students showed a more evident visual learning style preference. Another evident factor was that as students mature, they become more kinaesthetic emotional and less motoric.

### **Stage 2 – December 2012**

In order to re-assess their approach to learning, I asked my 6<sup>th</sup> graders (former 5<sup>th</sup> graders in May 2012) and 10<sup>th</sup> graders (former 9<sup>th</sup> graders in May 2012) to answer two structured questionnaires. Both surveys were carried out during regular English classes.

I used the *Learning Style Survey for Young Learners: Assessing Your Own Learning Styles* (Cohen & Oxford, 2001, source Cohen & Weaver, 2005: 29-31) with the 6<sup>th</sup> graders. There are fifty-six questions in this survey and the styles measured are visual, auditory, tactile/kinaesthetic, extroverted vs. introverted, closure-oriented vs. open-oriented and global vs. particular. There were fifty-nine participants in this lower-secondary group.

The 59 respondents displayed the following characteristics: visual 41.38%, auditory 58.62%, kinaesthetic 89.66%, and extroverted 57.62% vs. introverted 41.38%; global 62.07% vs. analytic 37.93%.

With the 10<sup>th</sup> graders I used the *Learning Style Survey: Assessing Your Learning Styles* (Cohen, Oxford, Chi, 2002, source Cohen & Weaver, 2005: 16-22). The survey measures the following styles: visual, auditory, tactile/kinaesthetic, extraverted vs. introverted, random-intuitive vs. concrete-sequential, closure-oriented vs. open-ended, global-synthesizing vs. particular-analytic, sharpener vs. leveller, deductive vs. inductive, field-independent vs. field-dependent, impulsive vs. reflective and metaphoric vs. literal in sixty-eight questions. There were sixty-two participants in this upper-secondary group.

The older students displayed a more evident preference towards visual and global learning than the younger ones. They also tend to become more introverted as they mature. The 6<sup>th</sup> graders showed an evident preference towards kinaesthetic activities. When discussing the results with them they complained about the fact that since it was winter time and very cold outside, they were not allowed to go into the schoolyard during breaks. Having limited opportunities to release their energy, they tended to become hyperactive during class periods.

The conclusions of this second stage in my research show that the average student has a balanced visual-auditory style, is highly kinaesthetic motoric due to the lack of opportunities for moving too much outside school caused by the cold winter season, is somehow extroverted but tends to introversion as he or she grows older, and is highly global.

### Stage 3 – May/June 2013

Towards the end of this school year (2012-2013) I asked all my students to answer the *VAK & Global/Analytic Checklist* (Rosenberg, 2013: 30,32). The checklist consists of thirty-two questions which measure the visual, auditory, kinaesthetic-motoric and kinaesthetic-emotional styles and thirty questions that measure the global and analytic styles. There were two hundred and eleven participants, fifty-nine 6<sup>th</sup> graders, ninety 8<sup>th</sup> graders and sixty-two 10<sup>th</sup> graders. All checklists were filled in during regular class periods. Learner strategies were provided after discussions of scores with each class.

No of Ss	Grade	Age	Visual	Auditory	Kinaesthetic motoric	Kinaesthetic emotional	Global	Analytic
59	6 <sup>th</sup>	12-13	62.07 %	37.93 %	31.03 %	68.97 %	72.41 %	27.59 %
90	8 <sup>th</sup>	14-15	69.05 %	30.95 %	30.95 %	69.05 %	47.62 %	52.38 %
62	10 <sup>th</sup>	16-17	71.43 %	28.57 %	21.43 %	78.57 %	64.29 %	35.71 %
211	6 <sup>th</sup> & 8 <sup>th</sup> & 10 <sup>th</sup>	12-17	67.52 %	32.48 %	27.80 %	72.20 %	61.44 %	38.56 %

At the end of this study the overall learning preferences are visual and global. As they mature, students become more sensitive to social and emotional contexts and their tendency to express themselves through movement decreases.

### Age groups

#### Results according to age group & learning style

**Lower-secondary, 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> graders (aged 11-13), number of participants: 59.**

Stage	Visual	Auditory
May 2012	74.58 %	25.42 %
December 2012	41.38 %	58.62 %
May 2013	62.07 %	37.93 %

There is a correlation between the amount of light available when learning and the students' visual vs. auditory preference. In May students appear more visual than in December. During the follow-up discussions of stage 2, they complained about the fact that they could not see properly in the classroom because the sky was overcast and the electric light too dim in their classrooms. I also noticed that they made mistakes when writing things down in their copybooks or when reading from their course books.

The analysis of kinaesthetic motoric vs. emotional learning style preferences in the three stages of the research shows a decrease of the kinaesthetic motoric in favour of kinaesthetic emotional from 40.68% KM in May 2012 to 31.03% in May 2013 in comparison with the increase from 59.32% KE in May 2012 to 68.97% in May 2013. In one year these students' emotional perceptions have increased. They move less during class periods and show more willingness to work as a team. Conflicts are fewer and rare.

With reference to the global vs. analytic learning style preference, there was an increase of global from 62.07% in December 2012 to 72.41% in May 2013. These learners are now better able to process information as a whole and to see the big picture. They can easily identify main features in a text or in a speaking activity and are not overwhelmed by unnecessary details.

**Lower-secondary, 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders (aged 13-15), number of participants: 90**

Stage	Visual	Auditory
May 2012	88.89 %	11.11 %
June 2013	69.05 %	30.95 %

Over a period of one year these students were trained to comply with the requirements of the bilingual exam (May 30<sup>th</sup> 2013), which has a speaking

component. Hence they developed solid speaking and listening skills and improved their conversational strategies.

Stage	KM	Social/KE
May 2012	29.63 %	70.05 %
June 2013	30.95 %	69.05 %

Their scores are consistent; there is only a slight decrease of emotional involvement due to the fact that they are competing against one another in the Bilingual English Exam and the National Evaluation Exam at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Also they feel an increased need to move around during classes because they spend more than ten hours a day studying and preparing for the exam.

Stage	Global	Analytic
June 2013	47.62 %	52.38 %

For the National Evaluation Exam these students are required to remember specific details, formulae, names of writers and book characters and features of literary trends. This is the reason why at this stage students become less global in their learning preference.

#### Upper-secondary, 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> graders (aged 15-17), number of participants: 62.

Stage	Right-brain dominance (visual, global characteristics)		Left-brain dominance (auditory, analytic characteristics)	
May 2012	43.55 %		56.45 %	
	Visual	Global	Auditory	Analytic
December 2012	60 %	80 %	40 %	20 %
May 2013	71.43 %	64.29 %	28.57 %	35.71 %

There is an obvious increase in these students' visual and global perceptions. When I discussed the results with them they revealed the fact that in their lower-secondary school years they had been trained to remember facts by rote learning for subjects such as Sciences, Maths, History, Geography and even Languages. The general approach to teaching they experienced before starting the 9<sup>th</sup> grade had been a seated teacher lecturing for thirty minutes and listening to their "memorised" chunks of lessons for another twenty. Their previous experience with learning English included filling in gaps in their course book exercises, doing reading and listening multiple-choice exercises without discussing why plausible distractors do not fit the stem, without any forms of conversations or discussions, writing in their notebooks, pair work or group work.

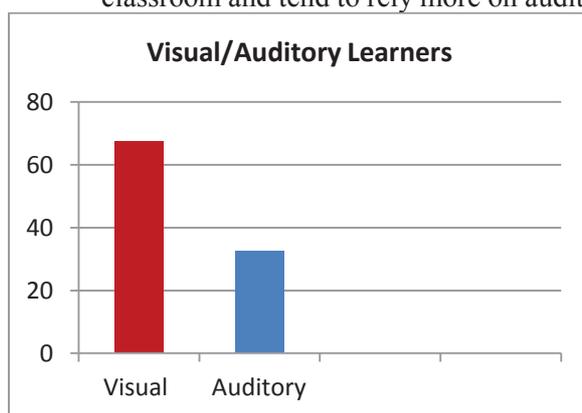
Stage	Kinaesthetic motoric	Emotional	
December 2012	47.5 %	<b>Extroverted</b> 42.5 %	<b>Introverted</b> 57.5 %
May 2013	21.43 %	<b>Kinaesthetic emotional</b> 78.57 %	

These students have become closer as a group. They interact better when asked to co-operate. They feel safe in my presence and they have learned to enjoy expressing their opinions. The more introverted ones have managed to establish groups of learners with the same characteristics and now they feel comfortable and confident working together.

### Conclusions of the study

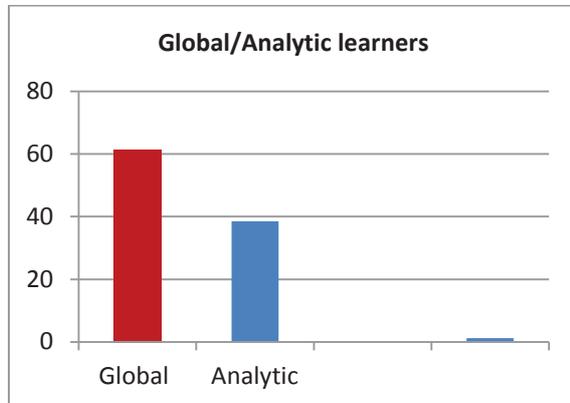
I can draw the following conclusions after this one-year study.

1. Most of my students are visual learners. During the winter weeks though, they are affected by the poor quality of electric light in the classroom and tend to rely more on auditory input.



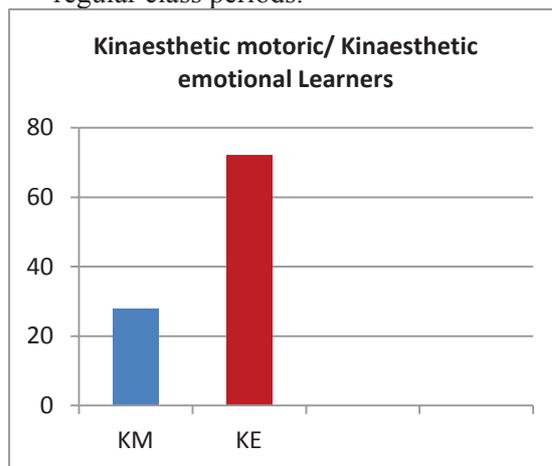
**Fig. 1** Visual vs. Auditory learning preferences at the end of the study

2. The majority of the participants in the study are global learners. Nevertheless, in the case of forthcoming Maths and Romanian exams, these students are forced to remember a great number of details, formulae and types of problems, thus they become more analytic.



**Fig. 2** Global vs. Analytic learning preferences at the end of the study

3. Younger students tend to be more kinaesthetic motoric during winter months when they are not allowed going into the schoolyard to play. As a result, they instinctively compensate that by moving constantly during regular class periods.



**Fig. 3** Kinaesthetic motoric vs. emotional learning preferences at the end of the study

They respond positively whenever I involve them into an activity which requires them to leave their seats or build something together.

4. A final point I can make based on this study is that as students grow older and mature, their need to interact kinaesthetically decreases and they become more socially and emotionally involved with their peers and even teachers.

### **Teacher's action and strategies in a concrete context**

Aware of the diversity of learning preferences among my students and of the fact that all styles, if well exploited, can be effective, I have tried to adjust my teaching to better serve my students' strengths and to work on developing new learning strategies. I have followed Reid's principles referring to the use of different mnemonic devices, pictures, hand-outs and breaking the content into small and manageable sequences, especially with the younger learners. I do believe that stimulating and varied activities are more likely to engage students, thus I have experimented with a large range of activities and I have operated systematic selections of the activities in the course books. My criteria in this selection were the degree of sensory stimulation, adequate challenge for my students and interactivity. I have also adapted those activities in the course books which proved irrelevant, repetitive and boring and consequently non-productive for my students. This way I have been able to provide a multi-sensory way of teaching in class.

I let myself be inspired by activities suggested by authors like Jane Arnold, Herbert Puchta and Mario Rinvoluceri in their book *Imagine That* (2007), Herbert Puchta and Mario Rinvoluceri in *Multiple Intelligences in EFL* (2005), or Marjorie Rosenberg in her *Spotlight on Learning Styles* (2013). I have also incorporated Brain Gym exercises (apud Reid, 2005: 147) in my lessons in order to help my students relax and simultaneously achieve some form of body balance so that information can flow freely and be processed readily.

As a guide in my attempt to implement learning styles in my teaching I have used the teacher strategies suggested by Gavin Reid (2005) and Marjorie Rosenberg (2013) in order to help each type of learner on the one hand, and to foster a multi-sensory way with English, on the other.

### **Multisensory learning**

Multisensory learning responds to a very concrete reality. Multisensory techniques actively involve learners in using their stronger channels of learning to bring on the weaker ones. The motto is 'heat it, see it, say it, write it, act it out', and make learning possible.

Different sensory memories are stored in different places in our brain and by receiving information in a variety of ways, we ensure that it is stored in a number of different places. The more ways we receive information, the better we are able to effectively remember that information. When students are asked to verbalise what they can see or what they are doing, they are placing the information in different places in their brain. If they are asked to visualise what they are reading or listening to, this multi-placing of the information helps them to better 'save' the information and later on to activate it.

### **Multisensory strategies in class**

All types of learners benefit from multisensory learning experiences. Providing multisensory learning experiences is not as difficult as it may seem. If we say a word and invite our students to hear it, to see it, to ‘write’ it with their index in the air, to feel it, to associate a smell or a taste with it, we teach that word in a multisensory way. If we say a word and ask our students to associate it with some pleasant experience in their life, and then ask them to visualise the situation and remember as many details as possible, colours, smells, people, and then ask them to write a paragraph and add or not a drawing, and read out the paragraph or post the drawing on the wall and receive feedback from the peers, we are teaching in a multisensory way. When we use a simple and commonplace object like a pencil or a paper clip and ask our students standing in a circle to imagine other uses for that object, to act them out and verbalise what they can do with the object, we are teaching in a multisensory way. When we ask our students to read a text and summarise it and then to share the summary with the rest of the group or class who are supposed to write key words in their note books, we are addressing more senses and learning preferences. If we set a session of oral presentations with our students and give them complete freedom of topic but ask them to stick to some kind of framework both for the content and for the manner of delivery, and give them time to research and collect information, then to select and prepare their presentation accompanied by appropriate visuals, and finally invite them to do their presentation in front of the class while the other take notes and later on give them feedback, we are promoting multisensory learning and by doing that we enhance learning and skills development.

A series of classical multisensory activities can be developed around or on different topics and areas of language. I have found the *running dictation* (as described by Rosenberg, 2013) very successful with my students. I have used it with one and the same text for all groups or with extracts from a story copied and pinned on the walls of the classroom. When working with the same text I prefer pair work. One student is the runner and the other one is the scribe. With different parts of a text I ask students to work in groups and decide on their roles, the runners, as many as the fragments, the scribes, the same number and the editor(s) who will reconstruct the story and check spelling and accuracy. At the end of the activity they compare their story with the original and read it out. The style spectrum of this activity is quite large. Remembering written text is visual; dictating is auditory; running is kinaesthetic motoric; remembering a text as a whole is global; remembering individual words is analytic; helping and cooperating is kinaesthetic emotional.

Chain stories focusing on some selected structures can be organized so as to address multisensory learners. Starting from ‘If I were a giant’ I asked my

sixth graders to continue the story by contributing each a line. When they showed reluctance to writing in their notebooks (it was the last class in the timetable after a series of test-papers at other different subjects), as a way out, I asked them to use their mobile phones. At this stage everybody happily wanted to contribute and they also enjoyed the idea to cooperate and send me their versions by e-mail. Here is one of their products:

*If I were a giant, I would capture a unicorn and keep it in my giant doll house. If I kept my unicorn in my giant doll house, I would buy him food from the humans' world. If I bought food for him from the humans' world, I would make the unicorn happy!:)If the unicorn were happy, he would colour my house with his horn. If he coloured the house with his horn, I would prepare a cake for him. If I prepared a cake for him, his horn would fall. If his horn fell, it would be a normal horse. If he were a normal horse, the other horses wouldn't laugh at him anymore. If the other horses didn't laugh at him anymore, I would give him a potion for the horn to grow again! If his horn grew again, I would take a photo with him. If I took a photo with him, we would live happily ever after! THE END!:)))) Sent from Samsung Mobile*

For the 12<sup>th</sup> graders I adapted a lesson in the course book 'English Horizons' to make it more relevant and appropriate for the learning profile and the exam needs of my students. The lesson is based on extracts from the novel *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. I started the lesson by inviting students to look at the two cartoons from the film *Animal Farm* and predict what the story is about. Then I contextualised the plot and asked the students to read the 'Seven Commandments' as adopted by the revolted animals and in pairs decide on the values as promoted by the commandments among the animals on the farm. I checked with them and encouraged class discussion on the values. Then they were invited to watch the trailer of the film based on the novel and reformulate the commandments as they change in time. At this point of the lesson I referred them to the excerpts in the book and asked them to do the task in the book, to decide which part of the story they belong to. As my students need to show reading comprehension in their final exam, I built a T/F/DK exercise as the next step in the lesson. For the next sequence of the lesson I gave hand-outs with a list of values and asked the students to tick the ones which were illustrated in the literary excerpts and to comment on the slogan in the end of the novel. In order to personalise and involve them emotionally I asked them to rank the values in the list in terms of relevance to themselves and to write a list of rules they would like to follow in their life. As home assignment, I invited them to prepare a three-minute oral presentation on the topic 'My life, my values'.

When developing multisensory tasks with a diversity of strategies we cater for multisensory, global and analytic, right hemisphere and left hemisphere. Such activities are stimulating for my students, they address the repertoire of learning preferences characteristic for their comfort zone but they are also able to stretch them out of it and help them develop second and third register strategies and abilities.

### **Conclusions**

My research aimed at identifying learning preferences among my students across the age and level range in order to better organise my lessons and adjust my teaching to their learner profile. Bearing in mind their needs in terms of communication skills either for real life or for exams, and noticing their initial reluctance to initiating or carrying out speaking tasks, I developed an interest in their learning styles. I considered that the data collected only by observation were not valid or relevant enough. So I used questionnaires and checklists to collect data able to construct the learner profile of my students.

The results confirmed partly the data collected through observation but provided a more accurate image of my students' strengths and also of those areas where they are not so effective and successful, not because they lack cognitive abilities, but because the activities in class do not address their learning preferences.

The interpretation of the results, the discussions and the strategies implemented following the interpretation of data have brought a change in the attitude of my students and contributed to their progress. The research I carried out is of course at a small scale in the context of everyday teaching practice. Nonetheless, it proved its validity and relevance in what my students managed to gain, on the one hand, and in my development as a teacher but also a learner side by side with my students, on the other. The results helped me to understand better my students and to think of my teaching from a different perspective. I concentrated my efforts on teaching in a multi-style fashion that both reaches the greatest extent of students in class and challenges all students to grow as learners.

I incorporated learning styles and multiple intelligences in my classroom by identifying the learning styles of each student, matching my teaching style to their learning preferences for difficult tasks, strengthening weaker sides through easier tasks and drills, and teaching my students to select effective strategies or develop new ones. Accommodating my teaching to their learning styles improved their overall results, increased their motivation and efficiency and enabled a positive attitude towards learning. By having them acknowledge their individual styles and potential I encouraged them to build upon their skills beyond school and classroom activities. In the end, this is what teaching means – equipping our students with the tools that are vital for their life-long learning.

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