

LEARNING STYLES IN PRACTICE: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY BASED ON CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS IN GERMAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (DAF) CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: Learning styles have long been a subject of discussion in educational research, particularly in the context of foreign language teaching. While numerous theoretical models describe different learning styles and learner preferences, the practical implementation of these concepts in classroom teaching remains controversial. The present study investigates how different learning modalities are reflected in the practice of teaching German as a Foreign Language (DaF). The research is based on classroom observations conducted in a DaF class consisting of 20 students. Structured observation sheets were used to document teaching methods, interaction patterns, and the use of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning modalities. The results are presented through descriptive analysis of the observed teaching activities. The findings indicate that visual and auditory teaching methods are the most frequently used instructional approaches, while kinesthetic activities occur less often. The study contributes to the ongoing discussion about the relevance of learning styles in foreign language teaching and highlights the importance of varied teaching methods in addressing different learner needs in the DaF classroom.

Keywords: learning styles, DaF instruction, classroom observation, foreign language teaching, VAK model, learning modalities.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the concept of learning styles has gained considerable attention in educational research and pedagogical practice. Learning styles refer to the idea that individuals differ in the ways they prefer to receive, process, and retain information. These differences have been widely discussed in relation to classroom teaching and learning processes, particularly in the field of foreign language education.

Several theoretical models have attempted to categorize learners according to specific learning preferences. These models often distinguish between visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning modalities, suggesting that students may learn more effectively when instruction corresponds to their preferred learning style. As a result, many educators have been encouraged to adapt their teaching strategies in order to accommodate diverse learning preferences within the classroom.

Despite the popularity of learning style theories, their scientific validity has been widely debated. Some researchers argue that there is limited empirical evidence supporting the claim that matching teaching methods to students' learning styles leads to improved learning outcomes. Nevertheless, the concept of learning styles continues to influence teaching practices in many educational contexts, including the teaching of German as a Foreign Language (DaF).

In DaF classrooms, teachers frequently employ a variety of instructional methods, such as visual materials, oral explanations, discussions, and interactive activities. These teaching strategies may correspond to different learning modalities and may influence the way students engage with the learning process. However, relatively few studies have examined how these learning modalities are actually reflected in everyday classroom practice.

The present study aims to explore how different learning styles and learning modalities appear in DaF classroom instruction. By analyzing classroom observations, this research seeks to provide insights into the teaching methods used in DaF lessons and to examine the extent to which different learning modalities are represented in classroom practice.

Based on the objectives of this study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Which teaching activities are used most often in the observed DaF classroom?
2. How are visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning modalities incorporated into classroom instruction?
3. To what extent do the observed teaching practices align with the principles associated with learning style theories?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Learning Styles in Educational Research

The concept of learning styles has been widely discussed in educational psychology and pedagogical research for several decades. Learning styles refer to the idea that individuals differ in the ways they prefer to perceive, process,

and retain information. These differences have often been used to explain variations in learning outcomes among students and to guide teaching practices in educational settings.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of learning styles gained significant popularity in educational theory. Many researchers argued that identifying students' preferred learning styles could help teachers design more effective instructional strategies. As a result, various theoretical models were developed in order to categorize learners according to specific learning preferences (Pritchard, 2014).

However, despite the widespread acceptance of learning style theories in educational practice, their empirical validity has been questioned by several researchers. Some studies suggest that there is limited scientific evidence supporting the idea that adapting teaching methods to individual learning styles significantly improves learning outcomes (Willingham, D. T., Hughes, E. M., & Dobolyi, D. G., 2015). Nevertheless, the concept continues to influence classroom teaching, particularly in foreign language education, where diverse teaching methods are often used to address different learner needs.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Model

One of the most influential models of learning styles was developed by David A. Kolb, who introduced the concept of experiential learning. According to (Kolb, 1984), learning is a cyclical process that involves four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. These stages form a continuous learning cycle in which learners transform their experiences into knowledge.

Based on this model, Kolb identified four learning styles:

- Accommodators, who prefer hands-on experiences and active experimentation
- Convergers, who focus on practical application of ideas
- Divergers, who rely on imagination and reflection
- Assimilators, who prefer theoretical models and conceptual understanding

Kolb's model has been widely used in educational research and has influenced many later theories of learning styles.

The VAK/VARK Model

Another widely discussed framework is the VAK/VARK model, which focuses on sensory learning modalities. This model distinguishes between visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning preferences (Fleming, 2001).

Visual learners prefer information presented through images, diagrams, charts, and written text. Auditory learners tend to learn more effectively through listening activities such as lectures, discussions, or oral explanations. Kinesthetic learners benefit from hands-on activities, movement, and practical experiences.

In foreign language classrooms, these modalities are often reflected in different teaching activities, such as listening exercises, visual presentations, classroom discussions, and interactive tasks.

Criticism of Learning Style Theories

Despite their popularity, learning style theories have been widely criticized in recent years. Several researchers argue that there is insufficient empirical evidence to support the claim that teaching according to students' preferred learning styles leads to improved learning outcomes.

Willingham, Hughes and Dobolyi (Willingham, D. T., Hughes, E. M., & Dobolyi, D. G., 2015) emphasize that although learners may express preferences for certain types of instruction, these preferences do not necessarily correspond to more effective learning. Similarly, (Curry, 1990) highlights the lack of consistent theoretical frameworks and methodological rigor in many learning style studies.

Nevertheless, many educators continue to use a variety of teaching methods in order to create more inclusive learning environments. In this context, the concept of learning styles may still serve as a useful pedagogical perspective that encourages teachers to diversify their instructional strategies.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

The study was conducted in a German as a Foreign Language (DaF) classroom consisting of 20 students at the secondary school level. The students were learning German as a foreign language at an intermediate level (approximately B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study were collected through six classroom observations conducted in a German as a Foreign Language (DaF) classroom. Each observation focused on documenting teaching activities, classroom interaction, and the use of different learning modalities such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements. The observations were carried out over several lessons in order to obtain a representative overview of the instructional practices used in the classroom.

The analysis was based on 18 valid observation sheets, which were considered sufficient for descriptive analysis of classroom teaching practices. The frequencies of different teaching methods and learning modalities were examined

in order to identify patterns in classroom instruction. The analysis focused on the presence of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements in the observed DaF lessons. The results are presented using frequency tables in order to provide a clear overview of the observed teaching activities.

4. RESULTS

Table 1. Frequency of Observed Teaching Activities (n = 18)

Teaching Activity	Frequency	Learning Modality
Audiovisual activities (listening tasks, projector use)	14	Visual / Auditory
Group Work	11	Kinesthetic / Social
Class Discussions	9	Auditory
Individual Work	7	Visual / Reflective
Grammar Teaching Through Games	6	Kinesthetic / Active

Source: Author's own observation data.

The analysis of the classroom observation sheets revealed several recurring teaching activities in the observed DaF lessons. The most frequently used instructional approach involved audiovisual teaching methods, particularly listening exercises and the use of a projector for presenting learning materials. These activities appeared regularly across the observed lessons and were perceived as highly engaging for the students.

Another commonly observed instructional strategy was group work, which allowed students to collaborate and interact with each other while completing various learning tasks. Group activities often encouraged communication and participation among the learners.

Class discussions were also present in several lessons. These discussions typically followed listening activities or reading tasks and allowed students to express their opinions and reflect on the lesson content.

Individual work occurred during certain phases of the lessons, particularly when students were asked to complete exercises from the textbook or worksheets. These tasks were mainly used for practicing vocabulary or consolidating previously learned material.

An interesting instructional strategy observed during the lessons was grammar instruction through games. In these activities, grammatical structures were introduced and practiced in a playful and interactive way. Although these activities occurred less frequently than audiovisual or group-based tasks, they appeared to motivate students and increase their engagement in the learning process.

Overall, the observations suggest that the DaF lessons included a variety of teaching methods that addressed different learning modalities. Audiovisual instruction and interactive activities were particularly prominent in the observed classroom practice.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the classroom observations provide insight into how different learning modalities are represented in the observed DaF classroom. The findings indicate that audiovisual teaching methods were the most frequently used instructional strategies. Activities such as listening exercises and the use of a projector correspond to the visual and auditory learning modalities described in the VAK/VARK learning style models (Fleming, 2001). These modalities rely on visual input and spoken language, which are commonly used in foreign language instruction.

Another frequently observed teaching strategy was group work. Collaborative learning activities encourage interaction among students and promote communicative competence. From the perspective of learning styles, group work may support social and interactive learning preferences, allowing students to exchange ideas and actively participate in the learning process.

Class discussions were also observed in several lessons. These discussions allowed students to reflect on lesson content and express their opinions. Such activities support auditory learning modalities, as students process information primarily through listening and speaking.

Individual work appeared during practice exercises and consolidation phases of the lesson. These activities allow students to work independently and process information at their own pace. Individual tasks may support learners who prefer more reflective or analytical learning approaches.

An interesting finding was the use of grammar teaching through games. Although these activities appeared less frequently, they seemed to increase student engagement and motivation. Games may address kinesthetic learning preferences, as they often involve movement, interaction, and active participation. Such activities can make grammar learning more dynamic and accessible for learners.

Overall, the findings suggest that the observed DaF lessons included a variety of teaching methods, addressing multiple learning modalities. Even though learning style theories remain debated in educational research (Willingham, D. T., Hughes, E. M., & Dobolyi, D. G., 2015), the use of diverse instructional strategies may help teachers create more inclusive and engaging learning environments.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study is limited by the relatively small sample size of 20 students in a single DaF classroom, which restricts the findings to other educational levels. However, the study provides an initial overview of how different teaching activities appear within this specific classroom environment. In addition, the study relies solely on descriptive observational data and does not measure actual learning outcomes or performance gains. Therefore, while it offers valuable insights into the frequency and types of teaching activities, it cannot determine the effectiveness of these activities for students with different learning styles. The focus on a single classroom also means that factors such as teacher experience, curriculum differences, and cultural influences were not accounted for, limiting the scope of the findings. Meanwhile, these contextual factors may play an important role in shaping instructional practices and learning experiences.

Future research could expand on these limitations by including multiple classrooms across diverse educational settings and combining observational data with quantitative measures of student learning outcomes, such as language proficiency, engagement, or retention. Studies could further examine how instructional strategies affect learners over time. Whether certain modalities are more effective for particular learner profiles. Additionally, investigating teacher perceptions and decision-making processes regarding learning styles would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these concepts are applied in practice and support evidence-based recommendations for foreign language instruction.

7. CONCLUSION

The present study examined how different learning modalities are reflected in the practice of teaching German as a Foreign Language (DaF). Based on classroom observations conducted in a DaF class consisting of twenty students, the study explored the teaching methods used during six observed lessons.

The results indicate that audiovisual teaching methods, particularly listening activities and the use of visual materials, were the most frequently used instructional strategies. Interactive teaching approaches, such as group work and classroom discussions, were also present and contributed to student engagement in the learning process. In addition, grammar teaching through games provided an alternative and motivating approach to language instruction. Although the study is based on a relatively small sample and limited number of observations, it provides useful insights into classroom practices in DaF teaching. The findings suggest that teachers often combine different teaching methods in order to address diverse learner needs and preferences.

Future research could expand this study by including a larger number of classrooms, teachers, and observation sessions. Such studies could provide further insights into how different instructional approaches influence learning outcomes in foreign language education.

In conclusion, the results highlight the importance of varied teaching strategies in DaF classrooms. By integrating visual, auditory, and interactive learning activities, teachers may create more inclusive learning environments that support diverse learning preferences among students.

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