

Complete and integrated V.A.K. in the classroom

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One of the first areas of NLP to be recognised as relevant to education was the use of the visual, auditory and kinesthetic channels for presenting new information. V.A.K., as the channels are known in their abbreviated form, became referred to as personal learning styles or learning preference channels. Many teachers have now heard of them and through seminars and reading have become aware of the importance of catering to the different learning styles in the classroom. In English language teaching, for example, there are now several coursebooks and teacher resource books containing activities which combine the three channels.

But is the use of different activities enough to really make a difference? An activity that is designed to reach students through one channel, may keep certain students actively engaged for a while, but if all that surrounds it, such as the instructions, the talk, the feedback and the rapport does not respect the different channels, the positive effect on learning from doing that activity may be minimal.

While it is also true that many English teachers and some teachers of other subjects have taken V.A.K. on board, the awareness and adoption of V.A.K.-friendly techniques by many other educators seems to be a long way off. This is especially true at the higher levels of education where the auditory, lecture-based model predominates with little visual input and even less recognition of the kinesthetic channel. The multi-channel activities that kindergarten and first year primary teachers use suddenly become unacceptable or unprofessional by the time students reach secondary school, thereby prejudicing the learning of those students who have not been taught to develop their channels.

So, on the one hand, there is the issue of spreading the word and getting teachers to realise that they could add some valuable teaching techniques to their repertoire. Then, we have the question of those teachers who have had a taste of NLP and who for many reasons remain unconvinced of its value. If NLP is as good as many of us believe, how come staff rooms are not full of teachers clamouring to learn from those practitioners that cross their path? There are countless reasons for this and many are personal. Integrating NLP-based techniques is a personal process in which each person takes the time they need. Many people are unable or unready to invest the time or money in training. Can we make NLP more accessible and fruitful for these teachers?

If we are to expect NLP to become increasingly used in schools, an important step would be to counter this scepticism of teachers who want positive results and who fail to see noticeable differences after trying out a few V.A.K. 'recipes'. We, as users of NLP, know that NLP is a tremendous tool for improving communication *and* we also know that NLP learning has to 'get into the muscle', as Robert Dilts says. Therefore, in addition to using practical activities that take into account the learning channel preferences of students, we need to be offer exercises that will help teachers develop such factors as by rapport, sensory acuity, planning and flexibility. It is the combination of these and the types of activities used in class which will ensure top results.

Some excellent teachers are V.A.K. congruent by intuition and experience. Others have to work at it on a conscious level to attain the desired unconscious competence. The purpose of this article is to outline some steps that a teacher with little or no knowledge of V.A.K. can take to widen their expertise with the learning preference channels.

An excellent practitioner

Now, let us consider what an excellent practitioner in the use of the V.A.K. channels in the classroom is probably like.

An excellent practitioner teaches effortlessly through the three channels. She moves congruently from one channel to another in the language she uses. She paces her students in the channels they are using. She gives instructions and explanations in ways which engage all her learners. She helps her students become aware of their own preferences and trains them to develop the channels they are less comfortable using. She knows what attracts learners of each different channel and she knows what turns them off. And yes, she will also use a variety of activities to suit the different learners, or offer a variety of tasks. The most important factor of all is that all this comes from within - that it is natural and congruent in all that she does in the classroom (and in life). Surely having these skills is a desirable goal for all of us?

Task One: How well do you consider that you integrate the three sensory channels (visual, auditory and kinesthetic) in your teaching? Take a moment to reflect on your teaching, listen to yourself in class and discover how balanced and flexible you really are.

Now, read the steps below and choose any activity that you believe will give you increased awareness into using V.A.K.- friendly techniques in class.

These steps assume that the reader has some idea of the behaviour of people acting in visual, auditory or kinesthetic mode. If not, you are recommended to consult one of the titles in the reading list below. Some behaviours mentioned below are annotated with an initial to indicate which channel is probably in use. It can only be emphasised that this is a general guide and that to have a complete picture of learning preferences, other factors should be taken into account.

Steps to effortless V.A.K.

Part One: Awareness and Noticing

Task 2 Be aware of yourself.

Do you tend to communicate using one channel more than the others? How can you gauge this?

Here are a few questions to work through.

- a) What activities do you like doing most in class? Keep a list for a few days of each part of your lessons and annotate them with a V, an A, or a K. according to the channel that they most favour. Does one channel appear more than the others?
- b) What type of homework do you give students? Is there a variety for the different learning styles?
- c) How do you speak in class? Fast (V), medium paced (A) or slowly (K)? Using a high (V), medium (A) or low (K) voice tone? Record a lesson or part of a lesson on video or cassette and then assess whether you are predominantly in one mode or other.
- d) How do you move in class? How much do you move about? By videotaping yourself, you can notice your movements and gestures, both to ascertain your teaching style and how you might appeal to the different styles of learner. A teacher who is expressive and uses a lot of gestures will appeal to a visual learner as will one who shows pictures, objects, etc. A teacher who moves among the students, giving assistance with tasks, may appeal more to the kinesthetic learner who appreciates the proximity and the hands-on help.
- e) What do you look at in class? The students faces? (V) The windows and the walls? (A) The floor or your papers? (K) Do you often look down? (K) How much of the lesson do you look at each student?
- f) When you give students new information, in what form do you prefer to give it? Do you tell them? (A) Do you have them read the material? (V) Do you give them a task to do to discover the information? (K)

Task 3 Be aware of your students.

Start to pay attention to the learning styles of your students. There is an abundance of information in front of your eyes. Make a chart or keep a notebook and record what you discover. You may prefer to focus on a few key students only, those who are the obvious leaders or those who challenge you most, but remember to notice the quieter ones too, they deserve your attention as much as the others.

- a) How does each student usually sit? Which students move about a lot?(K) Which remain very upright or very still and focused on you?(V)
- b) If the students have a choice, where do they sit? Who takes the front row or somewhere with an uninterrupted view of the teacher and main teaching space?(V) Which ones want a line through to your ear and sit to your sides?(A) Who chooses to have more space or to be out of your immediate line of vision?(K)
- c) Which students have very tidy, neat handwriting and presentation of work?(V)
- d) Which students talk a lot and make comments on what is going on in class?(A)
- e) Which students fiddle, fidget, wriggle or tap?(K)
- f) If a student talks for a sufficiently long period, notice what language they use. Is there a preference for visual, auditory or kinesthetic words?
- g) Who looks up a lot?(V) Who looks down?(K) Which ones look out the window or anywhere but the teacher or the board?(A)
- h) How does each student respond to obviously one-channel activities? An auditory student may want to talk during a reading activity. A kinesthetic student may need to move more.

It is important to bear in mind that we seldom use just the one channel for learning. We may use a combination of two at one time or while using all three channels, one may seem to dominate. Our physical and emotional state can also effect the channel we use. Friday afternoons can be very kinesthetic in many schools as students start thinking about what they want to do at the weekend and wind down from the week. Each of us has days when one channel will be preferred and it may not always be the same. The information on each student that you gather is good to give you a general idea of their preferences but does not mean that they are always like that.

Task 4 Know your materials

Books: Study your coursebook. What type of activities do the students do in it? How does it give the information? Are the learning channels well represented or are they neglected? Is it interactive, eg. the students have gaps to fill, tasks to do, parts to match?

Supplementary materials: Do you use them? If so, how do they fit in with or balance the book? Ask your students how much they like the books or materials you are using from the perspective of being memorable and easy to get into. Can you find other material, videos, tapes, computer programmes, games which will give a variety from the book?

Part Two : Ways to balance the channels

Task 5 Lesson Plan

Take your lesson plan and annotate each stage according to which channel the students will be using. If you need to, insert activities that help balance up the learning channels.

Task 6 A one-channel activity?

Add other channels. This can be done by using a different channel to introduce the activity. For example:

- ❖ A reading passage can be preceded by a discussion on the topic. True/False statements could be put on the walls before the class. Students have to walk around and predict what is true or false

according to the text. Then they read the text and check. If you do not want the students to move, give them cards or slips of paper with the statements on to discuss in pairs at their tables.

- ❖ A listening activity can be introduced by setting the scene with pictures and asking students to predict orally or in writing what they will hear.

- ❖ Factual or statistical information can be given by means of a dictation, or as a scavenger hunt in which the students have to find the information from different places. These could be books, computers or copies of the text cut up on cards or posted on the walls of the classroom.

- ❖ When information is given in lecture form, students can be trained to make a visual representation of the information, to note take using drawings and diagrams as well as words, or draw mind maps to make the words more memorable.

Task 7 Giving instructions.

Do it in all three channels. We can learn lots here from the way teachers of young ones give instructions. Ask students to look at you and show them the material or page they will be working with. Have them point to the exact exercise if appropriate! Put a written version of your instructions on the board. If your activity is largely in one channel, try to use words of the other channels. For a reading you could say something like - "In this text which you are going to *work on* in a moment, you will read a *discussion* about keeping pets in a city. As you *move through* the passage, *ask yourself* if you agree with the *findings* of the experts."

Task 8 Peripherals

Material that has been presented largely via auditory or kinesthetic channels can also be taught by sticking summaries of key points or ideas on posters around the walls. This way reaches students subliminally. I often anticipate the study of new language by putting quotes, song lyrics and key phrases on the walls well in advance of the lesson in which they are actually going to work with the language. When I actually teach it the students already seem familiar with the language and often cite examples from the walls.

Task 9 Delivery

Try varying your speech in class. Experiment speaking faster or slower, using more or less emphasis, changing the voice tones, etc. Obviously, this could be rather comic should you change drastically from one day to another. The most important thing to do is to ensure that you keep rapport with your students. Where a change in delivery can be effective, is to pace a class of largely kinesthetic or auditory students when dealing with visual matter. Kinesthetic students like to have time to process information and a fast spoken commentary of OHP transparencies or flash cards is likely to have them lost from the start. Slow down your speech and use auditory or kinesthetic predicates (vocabulary) where possible.

Task 10 Sequencing

Auditory students like to follow sequences and can get very frustrated if the speaker never actually gets to the third point in a promised list. Try to ensure that you complete your lists. Visual students can be happy seeing the material out of sequence so giving them a chance to look at the whole chapter as an overview beforehand will suit them.

Task 11 Add Feeling and Personalisation

Kinesthetic doesn't just mean doing but can also mean feeling and there are students who fail to really learn things until they have some sort of emotional response to material. Encourage your students to express their feelings about what they are doing and to find a personal angle. In language work they can invent their own sentences and dialogues. In other subjects they can discuss how the subject relates to them.

Task 12 Help students to develop the three channels

To build up the visual channel, visualisations, the use of clear and relevant note taking, making mind maps and diagrams or pictures can all help learning. As teachers we can build up picture files with pictures from magazines, postcards, calendars and flash cards. We can have a library of posters, including good home made ones and we can collect maps, brochures and catalogues. Any visual representation beyond our coursebooks and photocopies will help some students.

Kinesthetic learning can be enhanced by using cards in class, doing poster and project work, acting out scenes and developing the personal and emotional side.

Using realia (real objects) is popular with students. Newspapers and magazines are good sources of material. In language teaching, you can use foam or magnetic letters or numbers, cuisenaire rods, clocks, toy money, menus, props like clothing, dolls houses and furniture, thermometers, etc. In fact, the contents of bags and pockets can make for excellent prompts for a language lesson.

Cards, flashcards, postcards, pictures to put in sequence, photos and the like are useful to hand around and can be for ordering activities, for group discussions, as an individual prompt or simply to hold. Many students feel that the attention is off them and on the object if they are holding something up in class.

Board games can be made up to revise almost any subject and throwing the dice and moving of the counters around the board gives students something active to do.

Doing exercise at intervals while learning also helps.

There is no reason why many of these teaching aids cannot be used for teaching subjects other than languages.

For auditory learning, chants, rhymes, phrases to repeat and plain drilling and similar techniques can be very effective. Songs are usually remembered with considerable accuracy. Debates and discussions help personalise written material.

Conclusion

Increasing your flexibility with the learning preference channels is a big first step towards solving learning difficulties in your classroom. It will make your presentations richer and automatically make students feel more involved in the lesson. It will make your experience of the classroom richer too. We can enter all our students' worlds with the right behaviour and communicate effortlessly with all of them.

Further reading

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