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Learning styles and English reading comprehension in higher education

Estilos de aprendizaje y comprensión lectora en inglés en educación superior

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is essential for meaningful learning and access to scientific information in English. The objective was to analyze the relationship between learning styles and reading comprehension in English. A quantitative study with a correlational scope. The VAK questionnaire (visual, auditory and kinesthetic) and the reading comprehension test (literal, inferential and critical) were applied to a sample of 60 students. The visual and kinesthetic styles are the predominant ones with 90% and 91.7% respectively. Liberal comprehension reached a high level in 81.7%, and greater difficulty was presented at the inferential and critical levels. A high correlation was found ($r=0.89$). It is concluded that students mostly present a visual and kinesthetic learning style. Literal comprehension of English is high, but the inferential and critical levels require further development. There is a significant correlation between learning styles and reading comprehension

Keywords: Learning styles, reading comprehension, visual learning, visual learning, higher education, second language.

Resumen

Para un aprendizaje significativo y el acceso a la información científica en inglés es fundamental la comprensión lectora. El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar la relación entre los estilos de aprendizaje y la comprensión lectora en inglés. El estudio es de enfoque cuantitativo y alcance correlacional, sobre una muestra de 60 estudiantes. Se aplicó el cuestionario VAK (visual, auditivo y kinestésico) y el test de comprensión lectora (literal, inferencial y crítico). Los estilos visual y kinestésico son los predominantes con el 90% y 91.7% respectivamente. La comprensión liberal alcanzó un nivel alto en el 81,7%, se presentó mayor dificultad en los niveles inferencial y crítico. Se halló una alta correlación ($r=0.89$). Se concluye que los estudiantes presentan mayoritariamente un estilo de aprendizaje visual y kinestésico. La comprensión literal del inglés es alta, pero los niveles inferencial y crítico requieren mayor desarrollo. Se evidenció una correlación significativa entre los estilos de aprendizaje y la comprensión lectora.

Palabras clave: Estilos de aprendizaje, comprensión lectora, aprendizaje visual, educación superior, segunda lengua.

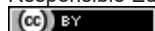
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Introduction

Reading comprehension is fundamental to achieving meaningful learning in higher education, as it enables students to acquire, process, and analyze information more effectively. Learning English as a second language has become a cornerstone for accessing scientific and academic information in higher education. Therefore, reading comprehension in English is essential not only for interpreting texts written in this language but also for developing the critical and analytical thinking required to enhance learning outcomes (Alejandro et al., 2024). However, numerous studies indicate that higher education students often experience difficulties with reading comprehension, limiting their ability to interpret implicit information and critically reflect on texts (Flores, 2019; Sumarriva et al., 2024).

According to the literature, reading comprehension develops through different levels of depth: literal, inferential, and critical, each requiring progressively more complex cognitive processes (Cieza, 2023; Sánchez & Yagual, 2025). Although students generally achieve better results at the literal level, they continue to experience difficulties with inferential interpretation and critical analysis, particularly when reading academic texts in English (Delgado Moreira et al., 2025; Zapata & Carrión, 2021).

Reading comprehension may be defined as a dynamic and complex process that begins with literal comprehension, which involves identifying and recognizing explicit information in a text. It then progresses to inferential comprehension, a deeper level in which readers deduce implicit information by establishing connections between the ideas presented in the text and their prior knowledge. Finally, critical comprehension, regarded as the most advanced level, involves analyzing and evaluating the content of a text through reflective thinking. These three levels are essential for the development of comprehensive reading competence (Gondim & Abreu, 2022; Sánchez, 2013).

The concept of learning style refers to an individual's characteristic way of learning, which varies according to personal context and knowledge and may evolve and improve through experience (Arellano Bustos,

2019). It has been suggested that individuals process information differently according to their sensory preferences, which may influence student learning. The classification of learning styles based on preferences for images and graphics (Visual), oral explanations and discussions (Auditory), or hands-on, experience-based learning (Kinesthetic) is known as the VAK model (Arellano Bustos, 2019; Newton, 2015). The VAK model is widely applied in educational settings to describe perceptual tendencies associated with learning (Arellano et al., 2024). Identifying the predominant learning style among higher education students makes it possible to design more effective teaching strategies tailored to their needs (Rodríguez et al., 2022).

In recent years, several studies have explored the possible relationship between learning styles and reading comprehension at different educational levels. Their findings, however, remain heterogeneous (Delgado Saldaña et al., 2025; Tafur, 2022). Against this background, a theoretical and empirical gap remains regarding the understanding of how predominant learning styles may influence English reading comprehension among university students (Rodríguez et al., 2022). Understanding this relationship is important for designing relevant and context-specific pedagogical strategies that contribute to the development of higher-order reading skills and strengthen English language learning in higher education.

This study seeks to provide relevant evidence for improving the teaching and learning of English in higher education. By understanding how learning styles influence reading comprehension, it is possible to propose pedagogical strategies that foster deeper and more meaningful reading skills among students. Accordingly, the objective of this study was to analyze the relationship between learning styles and English reading comprehension among final-year Communication students at the Instituto de Educación Superior de Abancay, Perú.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative approach with a descriptive-correlational research design. The sample consisted of 60 final-year students enrolled in the

Communication program at the Instituto de Educación Superior de Abancay, Perú. Participants were selected through non-probability convenience sampling. All participants signed an informed consent form explaining the study's objectives and procedures. They were assured of the privacy and confidentiality of the information they provided and were informed about the potential risks and benefits associated with their participation in the research.

Learning styles were assessed using the standardized VAK (Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic) questionnaire, which evaluates students across three sensory modalities, thereby identifying their preferred ways of learning in everyday and academic settings. Students with a visual learning style prefer learning through images, diagrams, and graphic materials; those with an auditory learning style prefer listening, oral explanations, and discussion; whereas kinesthetic learners prefer hands-on practice, object manipulation, and learning through direct experience (Coronel & Cevallos, 2024; Marambio et al., 2019).

The VAK questionnaire administered in this study consists of 20 items, each offering three response options, with each option corresponding to one of the three learning styles. At the end of the questionnaire, responses are totaled to determine each participant's predominant learning style. The VAK questionnaire has demonstrated satisfactory validity and reliability in previous studies (Addine et al., 2023; Marambio et al., 2019), supporting its use in the present research.

English reading comprehension was measured using a test based on the literal, inferential, and critical levels of comprehension. At the literal level, the most basic stage, readers identify and recall explicit information from the text, recognize definitions, identify specific details, and answer direct questions. At the inferential level, readers deduce information that is not explicitly stated by drawing on prior knowledge to identify relationships within the text, infer the meaning of words or phrases, determine the author's intention and tone, and integrate information from different parts of the text to reach logical conclusions. At the critical level, readers engage in advanced comprehension by evaluating and reflecting on the content of the text, assessing the validity of the

information, identifying potential biases, comparing the information with their own knowledge, and formulating well-supported opinions either in favor of or against the ideas presented (Zapata & Carrión, 2021).

The reading comprehension test consisted of 20 items designed to assess English reading comprehension across these three levels—from literal identification of information, through interpretation and inference, to critical evaluation of the text—thus providing a comprehensive assessment of each student's English reading comprehension.

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 22.0 (Spanish edition). Descriptive statistics were used to present frequencies and percentages in tabular form. The relationship between the study variables was examined using Pearson's correlation coefficient (Pearson's r).

Results

The learning styles observed among the participants were Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic. Ninety percent of the students exhibited a high visual learning style, indicating a preference for learning through images, graphics, and diagrams. Fifty percent demonstrated a high auditory learning style, while 48.3% showed a moderate level, suggesting that most students learn effectively by listening to explanations or participating in discussions. In addition, 91.7% of the students exhibited a high kinesthetic learning style, indicating a strong preference for learning through hands-on practice and the manipulation of materials (Table 1).

Overall, the predominant learning styles were visual and kinesthetic, suggesting that instructional strategies based on images, diagrams, videos, and experiential learning may be more effective in supporting students' teaching and learning processes.

English reading comprehension was assessed across three dimensions. A high level of literal comprehension was achieved by 81.7% of the students, indicating that the majority were able to identify and understand explicit information in the texts. Thirty-eight-point three percent (38.3%) demonstrated a high level of inferential comprehension, suggesting that students

experienced greater difficulty interpreting implicit information. Meanwhile, 40.0% achieved a high level of critical comprehension, indicating that their ability to evaluate and critically reflect on a text still requires further development (Table 2).

Overall, the findings suggest that students have a solid ability to comprehend explicit information in English texts—that is, they demonstrate strong literal comprehension. However, they experience greater difficulty with inferential and critical comprehension. These results highlight the need for pedagogical strategies that promote deeper interpretation and critical analysis of English-language texts.

At the intersection of the variables using Pearson's correlation coefficient (r), an r value of 0.89 was obtained, indicating a strong correlation between

learning styles and English reading comprehension. When the learning styles variable was correlated with the dimensions of English reading comprehension, a strong correlation was observed for the literal and inferential comprehension dimensions, and a moderate correlation for the critical comprehension dimension (Table 3). These findings indicate a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between learning styles and English reading comprehension levels. The strongest correlation was found with literal comprehension, suggesting that students with visual and kinesthetic learning styles have an advantage in identifying explicit information in texts. However, the correlation decreases slightly at the inferential and critical levels, indicating that other factors may influence students' ability to interpret and analyze texts in greater depth.

Table 1. Learning Styles among Higher Education Students.

Dimension	Low (n)	Low (%)	Moderate (n)	Moderate (%)	High (n)	High (%)	Total (n)	Total (%)
Visual	0	0.0%	6	10.0%	54	90.0%	60	100%
Auditory	1	1.7%	29	48.3%	30	50.0%	60	100%
Kinesthetic	0	0.0%	5	8.3%	55	91.7%	60	100%

Table 2. English Reading Comprehension among Higher Education Students.

Dimension	Low (n)	Low (%)	Moderate (n)	Moderate (%)	High (n)	High (%)	Total (n)	Total (%)
Literal	0	0.0%	11	18.3%	49	81.7%	60	100%
Inferential	5	8.3%	32	53.3%	23	38.3%	60	100%
Critical	10	16.7%	26	43.3%	24	40.0%	60	100%

Table 3. Correlation between learning styles and English reading comprehension among higher education students.

Statistic	Learning Styles (Overall)	Reading Comprehension: Literal	Reading Comprehension: Inferential	Reading Comprehension: Critical
Pearson's r	0.890	0.754	0.739	0.687
Sig. (p-value)	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001

The findings indicate that the majority of higher education students have visual and kinesthetic learning styles, which positively influence their literal comprehension of English texts. However, they face challenges at the inferential and critical levels,

suggesting the need for instructional strategies that strengthen students' ability to interpret and analyze English texts. Furthermore, the significant correlation between learning styles and reading comprehension confirms that adapting teaching methods to students'

predominant learning styles could improve English reading outcomes.

Discussion

The results of this study show that the predominant learning styles among higher education students enrolled in the Communication program at the Higher Education Institute of Abancay are visual and kinesthetic, accounting for 90% and 91.7%, respectively. These findings are consistent with those reported by Arellano Bustos (2019), who found that students in non-university higher education predominantly preferred visual and kinesthetic learning styles, while the auditory style was the least represented.

Similarly, Marambio et al. (2019) and Addine et al. (2023), in studies involving residents in Human Medicine specialty programs, reported a predominance of the visual learning style, followed by the kinesthetic style, with the auditory style occurring least frequently. Likewise, Wan and Mohd (2023) and Tafur (2022), in studies conducted with basic education students, found that the visual style was the most dominant, followed by the auditory and kinesthetic styles.

These findings may be related to the current educational context, in which the use of technological resources and visual materials in the classroom has increased. The incorporation of videos, multimedia presentations, and hands-on activities fosters a learning environment that promotes the acquisition of information through visual input and practical experience. From this perspective, the results support the view that learning preferences are based on individuals' sensory modalities—visual, auditory, or kinesthetic—which influence how they process information during teaching and learning.

Our findings differ from those reported by Rodríguez et al. (2022) and Valencia et al. (2020), who found that university students predominantly exhibited an auditory learning style, followed by kinesthetic and, lastly, visual. They also differ from the findings of Biswas et al. (2023), who, in a study involving healthcare professionals, reported that the auditory learning style was the most prevalent, followed by the

kinesthetic style, with the visual style being the least common.

Conversely, Abella et al. (2022), in a study of design and engineering students, found that the three learning styles coexisted among participants without statistically significant differences in their proportions. This discrepancy with our findings may be explained by differences in participants' profiles, instructional methodologies, and educational contexts.

It can also be argued that educational environments emphasizing dialogue, discussion, and active listening are more likely to promote the auditory learning style, whereas settings that rely more heavily on visual resources and practical activities—such as those examined in the present study—may foster visual and kinesthetic learning preferences. Almasri (2022) further reported that groups in which the kinesthetic learning style predominates demonstrate higher levels of learning engagement and satisfaction.

With regard to English reading comprehension, our study found that 81.7% of students achieved a high level of literal comprehension, indicating that they are able to identify explicit information in texts. However, only 38.3% demonstrated a high level of inferential comprehension, while 40% achieved a high level of critical comprehension. These findings are consistent with those reported by Valero et al. (2024), who found that university students performed best in literal comprehension, followed by inferential and critical comprehension. Their findings suggest the need to implement remedial courses aimed at strengthening reading competence, which is essential for acquiring new knowledge in higher education.

Similarly, Zapata and Carrión (2021) argue that students from basic education onward experience difficulties interpreting implicit information and critically reflecting on texts. They therefore emphasize the importance of improving instruction in deep reading strategies and textual analysis in English, as these skills are fundamental to the development of analytical critical thinking. Likewise, Barrios (2020) reported that higher education students often fail to fully understand what they read, exhibiting an average level of reading comprehension, with particular

difficulties in inferential comprehension and the greatest deficiencies in critical comprehension.

In contrast, Del Pino-Yépez et al. (2019) found that university students demonstrated low levels of reading comprehension across all three dimensions. According to these authors, reading comprehension is a complex constructive process involving the interaction between readers' characteristics and the text itself. They argue that strengthening this competence requires carefully planned and reflective instructional strategies, given that reading comprehension is a fundamental skill for university students' academic development. Furthermore, studies by Campos (2021) and Sánchez (2013) identified that the limited development of critical thinking among university and secondary school students is associated with poor reading comprehension, limited text production and verbal argumentation, and a reduced ability to formulate well-supported opinions and arguments.

In many educational contexts, the teaching of English as a foreign language focuses primarily on the literal comprehension of texts, emphasizing memorization and the identification of explicit information rather than analysis and interpretation. This instructional approach contributes to difficulties at the inferential and critical levels, which require higher-order reasoning and greater abstraction. Inferential and critical comprehension also demand sufficient language proficiency to enable readers to infer meanings and identify the author's intentions. When students have a limited vocabulary, their ability to interpret complex texts is consequently restricted. Cieza (2023) argues that reading comprehension is a dynamic and multifaceted process influenced by readers' prior knowledge and by the pedagogical strategies employed by educators, highlighting the essential role of teachers in fostering this competence.

On the other hand, traditional teaching approaches based on translation and the mechanical repetition of grammatical structures limit the development of critical thinking in reading. These findings may be explained by the fact that learning occurs at different levels of cognitive processing. Literal comprehension represents the most basic level, as it involves

recognizing and storing information, whereas inferential and critical comprehension are more advanced levels that require deeper and more meaningful processing of information.

In the present study, correlating learning styles with reading comprehension revealed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.89$), suggesting that students' learning styles influence their level of reading comprehension. The predominant visual learning style showed a strong correlation with literal reading comprehension ($r = 0.75$), indicating that students whose preferred learning style is visual have an advantage in identifying explicit information in texts. However, the correlations were lower for inferential comprehension ($r = 0.73$) and critical comprehension ($r = 0.68$), suggesting that additional factors—such as English vocabulary knowledge, practice in text analysis, and familiarity with complex grammatical structures—may influence these higher levels of comprehension. These findings are similar to those reported by Tafur (2022), who found a significant correlation of $r = 0.94$.

In contrast, the correlation coefficients obtained in this study differ from those reported by Sánchez-Domínguez et al. (2023), who found a lower but still statistically significant correlation ($r = 0.339$) among university psychology students. Likewise, Rodríguez et al. (2016), in a qualitative study, suggested that the relationship between learning styles and reading comprehension is moderate. These differences may be attributable to variations in the methodological approach, the characteristics of the sample, or the instruments used to measure the two variables.

According to Sánchez (2013), the reading process is influenced by linguistic factors, which helps explain why some students, despite having strong reading and writing skills in their native language, experience difficulties with reading comprehension in a second language. This may be because reading in a second language requires mastery of grammatical structures and vocabulary that do not always correspond to those of the learners' first language, making text interpretation more challenging. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that reading comprehension in a second language largely depends on the

techniques and strategies learners adopt to manage these linguistic and cognitive processes.

Conclusions

Among higher education students, visual and kinesthetic learning styles were found to predominate, suggesting that the learning process is enhanced through the use of images, videos, and hands-on activities. This highlights the importance of designing English language teaching strategies that incorporate visual resources and practical activities to promote meaningful learning.

Regarding English reading comprehension, higher education students demonstrated a high level of performance in literal comprehension. However, their levels of inferential and critical comprehension were significantly lower. In other words, students are able to identify and recall explicit information in texts, but they experience difficulties interpreting implicit information and evaluating texts analytically.

The statistical analysis revealed a significant correlation between learning styles and reading comprehension. Students with visual and kinesthetic learning styles showed advantages in identifying explicit information and interpreting certain aspects of the text. Therefore, learning styles should be taken into account when teaching English as a second language, making it necessary to adapt pedagogical strategies to students' learning preferences in order to improve second-language reading comprehension.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that higher education instructors incorporate instructional strategies that integrate visual resources and practical activities aligned with the predominant learning styles identified in this study. Likewise, efforts should be strengthened to foster inferential and critical comprehension through activities involving text analysis, communicative problem-solving, and guided reading with a reflective approach.

Regarding future research, the study could be extended to larger samples and a wider range of academic programs. In addition, longitudinal research designs should be considered to examine the development of reading comprehension over time. It would also be worthwhile to investigate other related

variables, such as language proficiency, academic motivation, and metacognitive reading strategies.

One of the main limitations of this study is the relatively small sample size, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, the results provide valuable insight into the context under study and contribute useful empirical evidence to the field of education.

Author contributions

Ronald Paúl Postigo Delgado: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Project Administration, Resources, Visualization.

Liceth Lazo Otazú: Formal Analysis, Methodology, Software, Supervision, Validation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

Herbert Cosio Dueñas: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request via email (Herbert Cosio Dueñas: herbert.cosio@unsaac.edu.pe).

Peer review comments

This article underwent an anonymous peer-review process in accordance with the journal's editorial transparency policy. The reviewers, who participated anonymously in the evaluation process, consented to the publication of the comments issued during the review.

Peer review comment 1: This manuscript presents a quantitative study addressing a relevant topic in the fields of education and second-language teaching. However, it contains several areas requiring substantial improvement before publication. A detailed list of the aspects requiring revision is provided in the attached review. Editorial decision: Accept with revisions.

Peer review comment 2: The study represents a valuable contribution to the field and meets the journal's standards regarding content and structure. Nevertheless, it requires stylistic revision, as well as adjustments to the formatting of citations and references in accordance with the APA 7th edition guidelines. Final recommendation: Accept with minor revisions.

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