



# The Effects of an Online Task on Legal English Students' Perceptual Learning Styles and Academic Achievement

Los efectos de una tarea online en los estilos de aprendizaje perceptivos y en el rendimiento académico de estudiantes de inglés jurídico

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**RESUMEN:** Los avances en la tecnología educativa ofrecen muchas oportunidades en el aula de inglés para fines específicos (ESP): el desarrollo de la motivación y la autonomía de los estudiantes; la integración y la evolución de la Enseñanza de Lenguas Basada en Tareas (TBLT) con la aparición de diferentes tipos de tareas de aprendizaje en línea; o la preocupación por los Estilos de Aprendizaje Perceptivo de los estudiantes en entornos multimodales. Este estudio investiga las preferencias de aprendizaje perceptivo de las nuevas generaciones y cómo las tendencias digitales pueden influir en el rendimiento académico de los estudiantes tras la implementación de una tarea en línea (es decir, "Lección"). En este estudio participaron un grupo experimental (n=150) y otro de control (n=21), del primer curso de la licenciatura en Derecho de una universidad española. Se siguieron cuatro etapas: (1) cumplimentación del "Cuestionario de Estilos de Aprendizaje Perceptivos", (2) realización de la "Lección", (3) realización del examen online, y (4) análisis de datos. Tras la intervención, los resultados indican la presencia del estilo de aprendizaje 'Multimodal' y altos niveles de rendimiento académico de los estudiantes multimodales.

*Palabras clave:* ESP, autonomía, TBLT, tarea de aprendizaje en línea, Lección, estilos de aprendizaje perceptuales.

**ABSTRACT:** Advances in educational technology offer many opportunities in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classroom: the development of students' motivation and autonomy; the integration and evolution of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) with the emergence of different types of online learning tasks; or the concern of students' Perceptual Learning Styles in multimodal environments. This study investigates new generations' perceptual learning preferences and how digital tendencies may influence students' academic achievement after the implementation of an online task (i.e., 'Lesson'). An experimental (n=150) and a control group (n=21), from the first year of the bachelor's degree in Law at a Spanish university participated in this study. Four stages were followed: (1) 'Perceptual Learning Styles' Questionnaire' completion, (2) 'Lesson' performance, (3) online exam implementation, and (4) data analysis. After the intervention, results indicate the presence of the 'Multimodal' learning style and high levels of academic achievement of multimodal students.

*Key words:* ESP, autonomy, TBLT, online learning task, Lesson, perceptual learning styles.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the current globalised world, teaching and learning perspectives conceive oral and written modes from print to multimodal formats, as well as the appearance of digital tools such as smartphones (Álvarez, 2016; González-Lloret, 2016). For decades now, digitalisation has created a new social context with new generations of students who commonly use digital devices and share new learning needs.

The ESP educational environment in the 21st century must be understood together with the use of technological resources (i.e., the Internet), which aims to contribute to the development of students' motivation and learning autonomy (Stockwell & Reinders, 2019). Particularly, the design of online tasks in the ESP classroom allows students to build new information from their already existing background knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). In this line, it could be argued that students have walked from being mere Web spectators to constructors of new information by means of Web knowledge (Villanueva, 2020). Therefore, online tasks can be beneficial for students because they can become confident and competent with new technologies.

In a multimodal world, ESP teachers should consider their students' learning traits (i.e., *Learning Styles*) to design learning tasks that are more adequate and that may adjust to their learning preferences. The term *Learning Styles* refers to "an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred way(s) of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills" (Reid, 1995: 34), and although there is previous literature dealing with different learning styles' models (Honey & Mumford, 1982; Kolb, 1984; Dunn & Dunn, 1992; Villanueva, 2002<sup>1</sup>), this work is based on Dunn and Dunn's (1992) model of

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learning styles. Their model examines four variables: environmental, emotional, sociological, and perceptual. In relation to this last variable (perceptual), three preferences can be differentiated: auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic. In other words, the term *Perceptual Learning Styles* refers to the perceptual learning traits that students use during their learning process (Montemayor et al., 2009; Pourhossein, 2012; Arbuthnott & Gregory, 2015; Gargallo-Camarillas & Girón-García, 2016; Rhouma, 2016). The identification of perceptual learning styles enables students to be responsible for their own learning process (Gargallo-Camarillas, 2018) so they can effectively choose the most appropriate learning strategies according to their needs. Finally, students who show a preference for a single learning style in comparison to other perceptual preferences may be considered 'unimodal'. In contrast, 'multimodal' students combine two or more perceptual modes at similar levels (Lawless, 2019; Girón-García & Gargallo-Camarillas, 2021).

Our objective is therefore to explore the new generations' perceptual learning preferences in the new ESP learning scenario, as well as to the extent the implementation of an online task influences students' academic achievement. Particular attention was paid to the two distinct groups (i.e., experimental and control) that participated in this study.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. PERCEPTUAL LEARNING STYLES

It is undeniable that digital devices such as smartphones or tablets, which provide users with immediate access to information, surround new generations of students. To be precise, members of these new generations are considered multitaskers (Swanzen, 2018), which means that they perform different tasks (i.e., observe, listen, do) and look for quick solutions to real problems in multimodal resources. Therefore, considering the great number of resources and due to the complexity of task performance, the association of digital contexts with students' perceptual learning styles is necessary to approach online activities (Girón-García & Gargallo-Camarillas, 2016).

Learning Styles can be categorised according to four dimensions: (1) personality types, (2) desired degree of generality, (3) biological differences, and (4) sensory preferences (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990). The last dimension, developed by Dunn and Dunn (1992), is based on the biological imposed characteristics that measure students' preferences according to the senses or modes they use when performing learning tasks. Moreover, 'Multimodality' (Fandiño, 2013) implies the multiple use of all the senses. For this reason, regarding the ESP learning process, it may be affirmed that multimodal learning reinforces strong students' perceptual learning preferences and promotes weak ones. According to this multimodal context, a great variety of perceptual learning styles may be present in the ESP classroom and therefore "we should not award a particular learning style label to each student" (Girón-García, 2013: 86). Thus, a single student may strongly develop one, two or three perceptual preferences (e.g., auditory, kinaesthetic, and visual). Auditory learners enjoy taking part in discussions (Moharrer, 2012), kinaesthetic students learn best when considering real examples (Zhang, 2002) and visual learners tend to read books or imagine what they are reading (Dunn and Missere, 2007).

In view of the noticeable presence of multimodal resources among new generations (Olson et al., 2010), it would not be surprising that students may strongly prefer the different perceptual modes instead of selecting just one of them. In comparison to traditional learning and teaching contexts, multiple modes of information and

communication are present in the ESP classroom, which reinforce the students' strongest tendencies and promote their weakest preferences. For that reason, the presence of new ways of communication may increase the number of students with a 'Multimodal' learning style (Gargallo-Camarillas, 2018).

## 2.2. TASK-BASED TEACHING TO FACILITATE LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE NEW DIGITAL ERA

New generations are considered digital natives who know how to use the Internet resources and manage different technological devices and online applications. However, this knowledge is not enough in the learning environment (Prensky, 2001; 2017). Students must be trained in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs, henceforth) to respond to their digital demands and facilitate their lifelong learning. Moreover, this training provides learners with an adequate pedagogical perspective in the completion of tasks, within the framework of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT, henceforth) (Leaver & Willis, 2004; Long, 2016; Willis & Willis, 2007).

A *Task-Based Language Teaching* (TBLT) approach first appeared around the 90's as an evolution of the Communicative Approach framework (Breen, 1987; Candlin, 1990; Nunan, 1989; Zanón, 1990; Hernández & Zanón, 1990) and aimed at engaging students in a more effective classroom communication. In this line, many researchers in this field have conceived the concept of 'task' as a new methodological approach that requires using language to communicate naturally in the classroom. For example, Crookes (1986: 1) defined the concept of task as "*a piece of work or an activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course, or at work*". Other authors, such as Nunan (1989: 10) consider that a task should emphasise meaning rather than focusing on content or form and define it as "*a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form*". In that sense, task-based activities integrate the use of the target language (i.e., English) and content on a particular topic of interest. Therefore, we could then argue that this type of content-based instruction is beneficial to students and offers pedagogical reasons why educators should encourage its use in the classroom. Some of these advantages (Erlam & Tolosa, 2022) include: (a) *motivation* (Erlam, 2015), (b) development of *metacognitive* skills, (c) language learning *autonomy*, and (d) students' interaction with *authentic* materials relevant to their goals, which enhances their motivation in their learning process, as well as opportunities to practise the language in *meaningful* contexts, among other benefits.

The use of multimodal materials in online platforms based on the TBLT approach could provide a motivating picture in the university context because it creates a bridge between the learning environment and the real world, and therefore real students' needs. This view might contrast with traditional teaching methods, which do not consider (a) students' active participation in the multimodal world, (b) their contemporary learning preferences, and (c) their academic and personal needs. In this regard, TBLT is a term that has reemerged as 'Technology-mediated TBLT' (González-Lloret, 2016), which refers to the completion of online tasks that have a previous plan and design by the teacher.

In the digital age, we are living in, a wide range of tools and resources in the ESP learning context have proliferated. Some examples of digital learning tasks based on the TBLT approach are '*WebQuest*', '*TalenQuest*', '*Cybertask*', and '*Lesson*'. Firstly, the

'WebQuest' model (Dodge, 1997; 2001) promotes students' critical thinking with the management of information and the appropriate use of the Internet. Secondly, a second-generation WebQuest called '*TalenQuest*' (Koenraad, 2002) was designed to promote the use of ICTs to learn foreign languages. Thirdly, a third generation WebQuest, '*Cybertask*' (Girón-García, 2013), consisted of an online task that involved students in using the Internet to collect, use and transform the information obtained from the Internet to learn ESP (Girón-García & Silvestre-López, 2019). Finally, an online task adapted from the Cybertask model (i.e., 'Lesson') and integrated into a Moodle platform (Dougiamas & Taylor, 2002) makes a distinction with respect to the online tasks. Therefore, in this case, students are considered as 'Moodle users' who have their own personal account which provides them with access anywhere at any time.

The present study considers the 'Lesson' integrated into the Moodle platform (i.e., 'Virtual Classroom') as an alternative tool for face-to-face interaction in Higher Education (HE) that may raise students' awareness regarding: (1) Creativity and Constructivism, (2) Planning and Reflection, (3) Meaningfulness, (4) Autonomy, (5) Development of Digital Literacies, and (6) Engagement in Online Literacy Activities.

*Creativity and Constructivism.* With the help of this 'Lesson', students develop creative and critical thinking (Orsini-Jones, 2010), and learn how to create new knowledge from already existing information. In this respect, constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) plays a fundamental role in students' learning process since this 'Lesson' demands creating new ideas from the information analysed in the different types of online resources offered to answer the questions integrated into the 'Lesson'. Constructivism, therefore, is necessary if we want students to think about their own learning.

*Planning and Reflection.* Students plan their learning process and reflect on their learning results. The implementation of the 'Lesson' proposed in this study provides students with time to plan their learning process and, therefore, reflect on their learning outcomes (Girón-García, 2013).

*Meaningfulness.* Since TBLT places emphasis on what students can do by using language (Norris, 2009), learners have the advantage of using the English language in authentic contexts and in a meaningful way. To this end, the 'Lesson' allows them to use the language of their specialty (i.e., Legal English) in a real context (Ellis, 2009). Furthermore, students may perceive this online task motivating and meaningful because it takes into consideration not only their academic needs, but also their future professional requirements (Girón-García & Boghiu-Balaur, 2021).

*Autonomy.* Learners approach learning from a more individualistic perspective. Since students are not born as autonomous individuals, they need to receive some training with the help of well-organised materials and online resources in their course curriculum to develop their learning autonomy (Holec, 1981). Accordingly, the online task - 'Lesson'- proposed may help them use the capabilities of the Internet for autonomous language learning since ICTs by themselves do not automatically generate autonomy (Luzón, Ruiz-Madrid & Villanueva, 2010).

*Development of Digital Literacies.* Students' development of their digital literacies (Luzón, Ruiz-Madrid & Villanueva, 2010) is not only related to specific abilities to deal with a concrete task; but these literacies also approach Internet users' attitudes and awareness towards a context that is constantly changing. As a result, digital literacies allow students to use the World Wide Web (WWW), as well as other ICTs to identify, synthesise, and critically evaluate the usefulness of the information they read to answer the questions proposed (Leu et al., 2004). Considering the present digital scenario, digital literacies are essential to engage students in *online literacy activities* (e.g., 'Lesson') because of the rapid adjustment to changes in that virtual environment, but these digital

literacies also demand educators to be trained in a set of digital competences (Redecker, 2017)<sup>2</sup> in order to develop them efficiently in the classroom.

*Engagement in Online Literacy Activities.* Students get involved in online literacy activities (Kress, 2003) that demand students' selection, synthesis, a critical perspective, and development of the activities suggested with the help of the online resources (i.e., text and video) and online dictionaries to write their responses.

Taking this background into consideration, learning styles have been analysed in relation to different reading and navigation modes that university students employ when dealing with tasks requiring effective management of web-based information. Also, these learning styles have been explored regarding digital texts and different ways of implementing "browsing", "reading", and "navigating" modes (Girón-García, 2013). However, from what we know, no previous studies have explored the influence of perceptual learning styles and the online task 'Lesson' with reference to students' academic achievement in HE. Thus, this paper aims to analyse Legal English students' perceptual learning preferences, as well as the effects of an online task 'Lesson' on their academic achievement. More specifically, it addresses the following research question: *Does the online task foster perceptual learning styles and affect academic achievement in the ESP classroom?*

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

The present study was conducted with two groups of students, an experimental (n=150) and a control group (n=21), from the first year of the bachelor's degree in Law at a Spanish university. On the one hand, the experimental group completed the 'Learning Styles' Questionnaire', participated in the 'Lesson' and took an online written exam at the end of the term. On the other hand, the control group only took part in the final written exam. Regarding their English proficiency level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)<sup>3</sup> and to a questionnaire<sup>4</sup> integrated into the Moodle platform, most of them (n=138) showed Elementary (A2) and Intermediate (B1) levels, and few of them (n=33) demonstrated an Upper-Intermediate level (B2). The results obtained showed that the average language proficiency level (B1) was in line with that described in the teaching guide for the course of Legal English. Therefore, the results implied no change in the design of the online task.

#### 3.2. PROCEDURE

The design of the present study follows a mixed-method approach (i.e., a combination of both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods). The study took place in the Moodle platform (i.e., Virtual Classroom) of the Legal English course and, therefore, all the students had access to it by means of their own personal accounts and their results were automatically sent to the same platform after its completion. Four stages may be differentiated:

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<sup>2</sup> [https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/digcomp/digital-competence-framework-20\\_en](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/digcomp/digital-competence-framework-20_en) (DIGCOMPEDU)

<sup>3</sup> Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR): <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages>

<sup>4</sup> Cambridge Assessment English: <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/test-your-english/general-english/>

Stage 1: Design, implementation, and data collection of the 'Learning Styles' Questionnaire'.

Stage 2: Design, implementation, and data collection of the 'Lesson'.

Stage 3: Design, implementation, and data collection of the online written exam.

Stage 4: Analysis of the results obtained.

All these data were extracted from the Virtual Classroom and further analysed qualitatively and quantitatively by means of analysis of variance ANOVA and T-test. The focus of this analysis was on the possible correlation between the experimental and control groups in terms of academic achievement.

### 3.3. ANALYTICAL INSTRUMENTS FOR DATA COLLECTION

#### 3.3.1. 'Learning Styles' Questionnaire'

The 'Learning Styles' Questionnaire' (Appendix 1) was used to measure students' perceptual preferences and identify them as 'unimodal' or 'multimodal' students. This questionnaire has been adapted from VARK's model (<https://vark-learn.com/the-vark-questionnaire/>). The instructions of the questionnaire were as follows: "*Choose the answer which best explains your preference and click the box next to it. Please, click more than one box if a single answer does not match with your perception. Leave blank any question that does not apply. There are no correct or wrong answers.* Every question was related to the use of perceptual modes in the ESP learning context and accordingly prompted three answers related to the 'auditory', 'kinaesthetic', and 'visual' modes, respectively. Therefore, students had to read each question and then choose one, two or three answers.

The questionnaire was divided into five questions, namely:

- (1) *I prefer teachers that promote...*
- (2) *If I use the Internet as an online resource to learn, I like finding materials, and/or information that includes...*
- (3) *If I wanted to learn to do something new on a computer (e.g., a Cybertask) I would...*
- (4) *Imagine that you are going to take part in a project at your university. Before starting the project, how would you learn about it?*
- (5) *Imagine that the laptop you normally use in class is broken so you need to buy a new one. What do you do to choose your new laptop?*

Question 1: *I prefer teachers that promote...* look into students' teaching preferences. To answer this question, students need to reflect upon different activities that characterise their perceptual preferences. For example, the auditory learning style is considered by the first answer (i.e., *question and answer activities, talks and group discussions, and/or bringing guest speakers to the classroom*). The kinaesthetic learning style is related to the second answer (i.e., *demonstrations, models, or practical sessions*). The third answer (i.e., *diagrams, pictures, photographs, charts, maps and/or graphs*) refers to the visual learning style.

Question 2: *If I use the Internet as an online resource to learn, I like finding materials, and/or information that includes...* explores students' use of online resources. Auditory, kinaesthetic, and visual learning styles are respectively considered in the three answers: (1) *audio channels, which allow me to listen to podcasts or interviews. I find this type of resources more engaging and motivating;* (2) *videos showing pedagogical explanations to learn about specific contents of the subject. I find this type of information more useful because it is directly linked to the contents I must learn;* (3) *interesting design*

and visual features, because I am better at retaining the information if this is represented with pictures and/or drawings.

Question 3: *If I wanted to learn to do something new on a computer (e.g., a Cybertask) I would...* is related to the use of online tasks. The first answer (i.e., *talk to people who know about the program, platform, and/or online task*) analyses the auditory preferences, the second answer (i.e., *start using it and learn by trial and error*) covers kinaesthetic characteristics and the third answer (i.e., *read the written instructions that came with the program*) regards visual perceptual features.

Question 4: *Imagine that you are going to take part in a project at your university. Before starting the project, how would you learn about it?* entails the implementation of autonomous learning strategies according to the students' perceptual preferences. For instance, the first strategy (i.e., *I would discuss the project with the other members*) is related to the auditory learning style, the second strategy (i.e., *I would look for previous examples and results of similar projects to get a clearer idea*) and the third strategy (i.e., *I would read a general description, including diagrams and charts*) deals with visual characteristics.

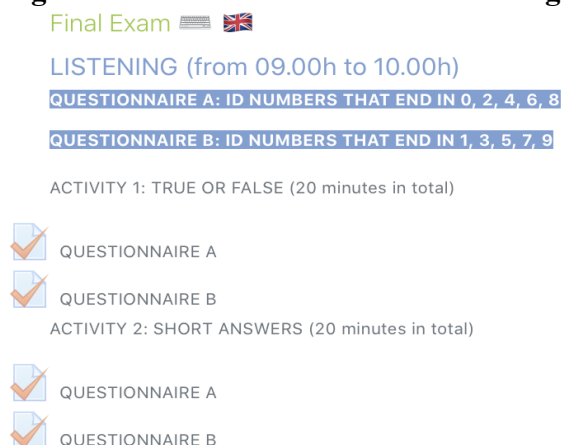
Question 5: *Imagine that the laptop you normally use in class is broken so you need to buy a new one. What do you do to choose your new laptop?* asks students about digital preferences in the learning context. To answer this question, students need to reflect upon their perceptual preferences and choose the corresponding answer(s), respectively related to auditory, kinaesthetic, and visual preferences: (1) *I talk to the shop assistant to know its properties*, (2) *I watch an online tutorial to get more information about its characteristics* and (3) *I read a description of its features before going to the shop*.

The 'Learning Styles Questionnaire' gave us qualitative information regarding the students' 'unimodality' and 'multimodality'.

### 3.3.2. Online written exam

Students from both groups had to take a compulsory final written exam. Due to the COVID-19 situation, the written exam was online and not in-person. As with the 'Lesson', the online written exam was designed and implemented in the Moodle platform (i.e., 'Virtual Classroom'). It was divided into two sections (i.e., Listening and Reading), which included multiple-choice questions, short questions and answers, and true/false activities (Figure 1). All these questions were related to Legal English, so they covered content and key concepts of the Legal English course.

#### Figure 1. Online written exam: Listening





### 3.4. 'LESSON'

The 'Lesson' (Figure 2) was designed to present students with different types of legal, jurisprudential, and doctrinal resources in Legal English, which are necessary in the modern society in which they live. It had a value of 25 points out of 60 points, regarding all the continuous assessment activities, and students' participation was not compulsory. Moreover, participants had previously carried out other types of online tasks (i.e., Cybertasks) but this study will only take into consideration the 'Lesson' as the main research tool.

To accomplish the 'Lesson', students had to deal with several activities directly related to the contents included in their course curricula arranged into eight sections: (1) *The Practice of Law*, (2) *Legal English for Research*, (3) *European Union Law and its Institutions*, (4) *International Law*, (5) *Contract Law*, (6) *Criminal Law*, (7) *Company Law*, and (8) *Commercial Law*. Additionally, a wide range of Web resources (mainly text and video) were integrated in each of the eight sections and students had to surf the ones that they considered necessary to carry out the 'Lesson' (Figure 1). It is worth noting that students were not required to follow a linear navigation system, instead they were allowed to select those online resources that they deemed necessary to carry out the activities suggested (i.e., non-linear navigation). In this line, students were free to choose their own navigation path when selecting some web resources or others.

With the completion of the proposed 'Lesson', students were able to deal with multimodal resources of legal nature (e.g., videos, written texts with images, online dictionaries) and practise the four language skills (i.e., listening, reading, speaking, and writing). From the aforementioned resources, students could develop comprehension strategies as well as select and contrast relevant information related to Anglo-Saxon and Spanish legal systems.

#### Figure 2. 'Lesson': The Practice of Law

##### THE PRACTICE OF LAW: Legal English

**Question 1.1.** Before starting this course, what did you know about Legal English? Compare your answer with your knowledge of Legal English now. You may use these Web Resources to help you write your explanation with your own words in 4-6 lines.

• Web Resources:

1. <http://www.british-legal-centre.com/en/what-is-legal-English.html>



The 'Lesson' proposed must meet some meaningful learning objectives: (1) search on the Internet for relevant information in relation to the aforementioned sections in the Law field; (2) acquire new content knowledge by using the online resources offered; (3) focus on students' meaningful answers to the activities proposed in the 'Lesson' (i.e.

focus on meaning rather than on form or content itself) according to the students' goals; and (4) think critically about students' own learning process.

In addition to the previous learning objectives, the main students' aim in this 'Lesson' was to write a final report that elicited a series of questions related to their progress throughout the Legal English course, as well as their 'Lesson' implementation experience. Accordingly, students had to organise and develop their report taking into consideration the following elements:

1. Goals and objectives of the 'Lesson' in relation to the Legal English course program.
2. Added value of the 'Lesson' for students' academic development related to: (a) outcomes achieved, (b) contents learned, and (c) benefits to face the final exam.
3. Importance of online tasks accomplishment by university students.
4. Recommendations and further implementation of online tasks (e.g., 'Lesson') in the ESP classroom.

Finally, the completion of this 'Final Report' gave us detailed and meaningful information considered as valuable data for an in-depth qualitative analysis.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The qualitative results will be analysed with the experimental group only, taking into consideration the students' answers in the 'Final Report', which was the last activity suggested in the 'Lesson'. In contrast, the quantitative results will be examined with both groups to find significant statistical differences between them regarding their academic performance by means of a two-sample T-test. Both the 'Learning Styles' Questionnaire' and the online written exam will be considered to analyse quantitative data.

Firstly, the experimental group, which completed the 'Learning Styles' Questionnaire' and the 'Lesson', can be considered as 'Multimodal' and their academic results were better in comparison to those obtained by the control group, which did not take part in the 'Learning Styles' Questionnaire' or in the 'Lesson'. It is worth noting that academic achievement was measured considering the grades obtained by both groups in the online written exam.

### 4.2. QUALITATIVE STUDY RESULTS

The qualitative results obtained from the 'Lesson': *Final Report* will be discussed regarding the items students were required to develop in it. Therefore, from the bulk of students' responses, the most remarkable examples will be organised and analysed according to 4 different aspects, namely:

- (1) Goals and objectives of the 'Lesson' in relation to the Legal English course program.
  - (2) Added value of the 'Lesson' for students' academic development
  - (3) Importance of online tasks accomplishment by university students.
  - (4) Recommendations and further implementation of online tasks (e.g., 'Lesson') in the ESP classroom.
1. Goals and objectives of the 'Lesson' in relation to the Legal English course program.

The promotion of *critical thinking* together with the increase of students' *digital literacy* are among the objectives of the 'Lesson'. Students were provided with different online resources so that they could search, contrast information with their previous knowledge, and after a careful selection, decide which was the most appropriate

information to perform the task. Furthermore, this online task also seems to be useful to promote digital skills in the classroom. These two objectives are respectively exemplified in the following students' comments<sup>5</sup>:

The fact that we have had to inform and document ourselves on various pages and sources of information, has served to identify the pages on which we personally move better so that in the future we can resort to them, and, in addition, contrasting information on a given topic on several pages, helps us to capture more complete information on the specific topic. (Student 7)

We think that this way of working is more comfortable because of the Covid-19, it has also made us develop our technological skills searching for information. (Student 2)

In addition, the furtherance of students' *learning autonomy* and the compliance of the principles featured by *constructivism* are other two objectives that seem to be achieved considering students' statements. Namely, after the teachers' indications, students could autonomously work on the task and incorporate new information into their pre-existing knowledge:

The objective of this work is to make us more autonomous students and to know how to search for adequate information on the internet, expanding our knowledge and vocabulary. From our point of view, this task allows us to know some basic concepts of legal English. (Student 47)

We are learning legal terms and legal concepts typical of Anglo-Saxon countries, as well as, in the same way, the way of acting of the different institutions belonging to these legal systems; and the differences with the Spanish legal system; by searching through specialized web pages and comparing the results obtained with our initial conceptions. (Student 29)

## 2. Added value of the 'Lesson' for students' academic development

All the students (n=150) found the completion of the 'Lesson' useful to *face the final exam* because it allowed the review of concepts related to most of the topics covered throughout the semester. Besides, only one student found it difficult. Nevertheless, s/he reinforced the *interactivity* of the Lesson by means of the different types of resources available in it, as well as his/her understanding of the classroom content:

This has also allowed us to refresh the content and vocabulary that we viewed in class, which can help us to prepare for the exam. (Student 24)

...this task has been rather difficult because of the number of hours we have used to elaborate it and the number of questions to be developed... [...] In terms of academic development, this activity has been a better understanding of English texts and videos. We note that all these results have been addressed in classes, and questions for the final exam are possible. Therefore, without realizing it we have reviewed and studied the subject in a more interactive way. (Student 87)

Apart from being a fruitful task for students' academic development, this 'Lesson' also appears to present other benefits. Students emphasised the importance of *accessibility* and *collaborative learning* inside and outside the classroom. More specifically, students affirmed that the possibility of working online regardless of the

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<sup>5</sup> Students' answers have not been translated into English but have been inserted in the text by using their exact words.

physical environment allowed them to get to know their classmates better (especially due to the *COVID-19* situation since this circumstance did not permit work collaboratively face-to-face). Moreover, students did not only consider the 'Lesson' as an ordinary class activity, but considered it a tool that creates *personal satisfaction* and nurtures the significance of *being acquainted with digital competence*:

...in all careers it is promoted that students have more accessibility to be able to work online. On the other hand, in the law degree thanks to the online lesson of this subject we have met new people, which are our co-workers. (Student 93)

It is indispensable in any university career and allows us to have good communication with people from different countries, creating progress in our lives, giving us personal satisfaction and seeing the world from different perspectives. (Student 67)

In the legal field, the use of the internet becomes crucial. Lawyers are confronted with a great deal of information (codes, rulings, constitutions, jurisprudence) which is always changing and evolving. The online tasks proposed in the academic context help us familiarize with the tools available, making our learning process a bit easier. (Student 121)

### 3. Importance of online tasks accomplishment by university students.

The impact of *globalisation* on new generations has established new learning needs among university students, who are part of a society interconnected with digital technologies. Particularly, learners seem to convey their desire of being part of society as *citizens* and *future professionals*. For example, they pointed out their concerns about the sanitary conditions caused by *COVID-19* and their career prospects.

Recently, the completion of these activities at the university has been promoted. This is because in addition to training future professionals, teachers also want to train future members of a competitive society. (Student 36)

We think that these lessons will be very beneficial for our future and for our career prospects. [...] It will also serve us for different moments in our daily lives. This new knowledge will help us to face a possible future abroad. (Student 86)

This type of online task is being widely used by university students due to the current Covid-19 situation, which forces us to reduce the contact. (Student 39)

### 4. Recommendations and further implementation of online tasks (e.g., 'Lesson') in the ESP classroom.

The application of online tasks in the ESP learning environment is recommended by all the students. Considering students' answers, further implementation of online tasks seems to increase students' degree of *motivation*, favour the use of *new resources of information* and introduce students to the practice of specific terms in *real contexts*.

Undoubtedly this way of learning through the use of a 'Lesson' ... is a different, enjoyable and practical way to learn a foreign language. (Student 28)

Activities which encourage students to research on the Internet and give them the opportunity to screen all the information provided, should be promoted much more among all the university degrees. (Student 70)

We really recommend the implementation of online tasks by using online resources because that really helps us to understand the meaning of each word in the context of specific terms of law that will have to be used in the future (Student 11)

Furthermore, learners describe online resources in the educational process as *easy*, *quick*, *inexpensive*, *dynamic*, and *helpful*. Therefore, students regard online tasks as resources that favour their learning process.

Online tasks should be promoted and encouraged in universities around the world. The internet provides a great wealth of information in an easy, quick, and inexpensive way. (Student 145)

We believe the online activities are dynamic, easy and helpful in the learning process” as “they facilitate the access to knowledge in any situation as long as you have a computer/telephone and an internet connection. (Student 72)

#### 4.3. QUANTITATIVE STUDY RESULTS

This section shows quantitative results obtained from the ‘Learning Styles’ Questionnaire’ and the online written exam to examine whether students’ preferences regarding the perceptual learning styles, namely ‘auditory’, ‘kinaesthetic’, and ‘visual’ have affected their outcomes in the final assessment.

##### 4.3.1. ‘Learning Styles’ Questionnaire’

As it has been previously mentioned, this questionnaire includes five questions with three answers in each one. The first answer refers to the auditory learning style, the second to the kinaesthetic learning style and the third to the visual learning style. Table 1 shows data obtained from each of these five questions.

**Table 1. Learning Styles Questionnaire (questions %)**

Question Number	<i>Auditory</i> %	<i>Kinaesthetic</i> %	<i>Visual</i> %
1	63,8 (n=96)	50 (n=75)	25,5 (n=38)
2	24,5 (n=37)	60,6 (n=91)	46,8 (n=70)
3	48,4 (n=73)	21,3 (n=32)	56,9 (n=40)
4	47,3 (n=71)	61,7 (n=93)	35,1 (n=53)
5	48,9 (n=73)	38,3 (n=57)	50,5 (n=76)

According to the students’ answers in the five questions of the ‘Learning Styles Questionnaire’, the three lowest percentages have been obtained in each of the three perceptual learning styles: 21,3% kinaesthetic (question 3); 24,5% auditory (question 2) and 25,5% visual (question 1). On the contrary, the three highest percentages were 63,8% in the auditory learning style (question 1) and 61,7% and 60,6% in the kinaesthetic learning style (questions 4 and 2, respectively).

**Table 2. Students' Learning Styles in terms of Perceptual Preferences**

TOTAL			
Perceptual Learning Style	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error
Auditory	46.58	14.0825	6.2979
Kinaesthetic	46.38	16.9138	7.5641
Visual	42.96	12.5753	5.6238

**Table 3. Students' Learning Styles in terms of Perceptual Preferences: Summary**

Summary					
Source	Degrees of Freedom DF	Sum of Squares SS	Mean Square MS	F-Stat	P-Value
Between Groups	2	41.4013	20.7007	0.0967	0.9086
Within Groups	12	2570.1264	214.1772		
Total	14	2611.5278			

Considering the previous results, a simple analysis of variance (ANOVA) of Perceptual Learning Styles was performed (i.e., 'auditory', 'kinaesthetic', and 'visual') to better understand the possible differences encountered. Test results (Table 2 and Table 3) indicated none of these differences were statistically significant since  $p\text{-value} > 0.9086$  ranked quite over  $p\text{-value} = 0.0005$ . On that account, regarding the total number of students' answers in the 'Learning Styles Questionnaire', similar results were obtained, which indicated that students' shared preferences in the three Perceptual Learning Styles.

**Table 4. Online written exam results: Experimental and control groups**

Group	Experimental Group	Control Group
Mean	28.69	18.67
Standard Deviation	8.57	5.79
Std. Error Mean	0.70	1.26
N	150	21
t	5.1911	
Degree of freedom (df.)	169	
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.0001	

Based on the online written exam result, Table 4 shows that the mean difference of the experimental group minus the mean difference of the control group equals 10.03. On the grounds of this, there is considerable variation between the two groups in terms of academic achievement. A T-test was conducted to check for the significant difference

between both groups. The two-tailed p-value is less than 0.0001 ( $p < 0.0001$ ) with a 95% confidence interval of difference (from 6.21 to 13.84). Therefore, the results confirm that this difference is considered extremely statistically significant between the experimental and control groups.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND FINAL REMARKS

It should be recalled that the 'Learning Styles' Questionnaire' enables researchers to define a students' learning profile or style as a collection of combinations of traits and gradual criteria, depending on their preferences. Accordingly, regarding the results obtained from this questionnaire it is worth noting that the 'Multimodal' learning style is present in the ESP classroom. Therefore, it seems that the multimodal input provided in the form of *YouTube* videos and other web pages integrated in the online task proposed 'Lesson', exerts a great influence on students' senses. Particularly, this effect may indicate that the multimodal conditions that surround students' social contexts have an impact on students' perceptual learning preferences. On that account, students' communicative routines involve more than one sense (i.e., hearing, touch, and vision) and the ESP learning environment could take all the perceptual preferences into account to promote effective communication skills.

It should be emphasised that an individual student may manifest some learning traits belonging, theoretically, to different learning styles. A particular learning style label should not be attributed to each student, given that learning styles are characterised by the recurrent use of a set of pragmatic and cognitive strategies related to different learning features. As a result, the blending of some learning tendencies (i.e., 'style-blending') elucidates the personal attitude towards learning considering the task requirements. Girón-García (2013: 436), in her study about learning styles, demonstrated that:

The combination of some strategies with other traits may constitute complex learning profiles (...) this combination of strategies is what we call *blended learning profile*, which has an influence on how students solve a given task. Style-blending can be defined as a combination, mixture or synthesis of strategies that characterise a particular learning profile

The assignment of one learning style or another to students depends on different dimensions that may be encompassed in both social and pedagogical contexts: personality types, desired degree of generality, biological differences, and sensory preferences (Ehrman and Oxford 1990). Consequently, it may be suggested that new generations seem to develop new learning preferences (i.e., multimodal) according to social characteristics and changes, which are mainly caused by technological advances. Therefore, to attain great academic achievement among students, it would be proposed to include pedagogical materials that consider new students' perceptual preferences.

Regarding the 'Lesson' intervention, students seem to feel motivated with the use of online tasks in the learning environment due to the positive answers provided in the final report. In accordance with students' comments, the 'Lesson' appears to be a dynamic tool that builds bridges between the artificial context (i.e., classroom) and the real world. Therefore, by considering real contexts, the ESP classroom may turn out to be a setting that supports the daily communicative routines to benefit students' interactive aptitudes. Moreover, the promotion of online tasks may support collaborative and autonomous learning inside and outside the classroom, which is related to students' learning process.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The present study aimed at investigating 21<sup>st</sup> century students' perceptual learning preferences and their final academic results with the help of a 'Lesson' specifically designed for a Legal English course.

The 'Lesson' designed for the aforementioned Legal English course consisted of promoting specialised language in English through the integration of a series of questions that (a) stimulates students' cognitive capacities, as well as (b) raises awareness of their creative and critical thinking, (c) allows students to create new knowledge from already existing information (i.e. Constructivism), (d) plans and reflects on students' learning process and learning results, (e) motivates students to work not only on their academic needs, but also on their professional requirements, (f) approaches the learning process from an autonomous perspective, (g) develops students' digital literacy skills by engaging them in online literacy activities.

Regarding the Perceptual Preferences analysed, the results of our intervention with the 'Lesson' point to the importance of learning styles and strategies that students develop as English language learners for the resolution of the online task - 'Lesson' - suggested. Some students will carry out a task in one way or another depending on their learning style (Villanueva & Navarro, 1997; Girón-García, 2013; Gargallo-Camarillas & Girón-García, 2016; Girón-García & Gargallo-Camarillas, 2021) and the preferences they manifest towards some strategies or others. Since students might display different learning styles and strategies in terms of language learning procedures, teachers must be aware that depending on the task a particular student is exposed to, s/he will develop different strategies. In this vein, different ways to approach a particular task from the teacher's perspective show that learning is not qualitatively of the same nature for each student.

The overall results have ascertained students' motivation, perceived by their active participation and engagement in all the online tasks that revolve around the course, but especially around the 'Lesson', as well as to encourage their language learning. Additionally, this study has acknowledged a global improvement in the students' performance and success rates of the Legal English course in the case of the students who participated in the study with the 'Lesson' (experimental group), in comparison to the low academic achievement of the control group. Therefore, the potential of the 'Lesson' has made a difference in their final course results and in the fostering of the multimodal learning style.

On the other hand, the Web resources (specialised online dictionaries, text information sites, and videos) offered in the 'Lesson' to answer the questions posed have helped new generations of students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to learn specialised vocabulary and content. Likewise, the online resources integrated into the 'Lesson' have contributed to the enhancement of the curricular adaptation in the Legal English course (and in other courses), and (2) encourage students' autonomous skills in their language learning process by means of ICTs.

As a conclusion, some final remarks can be drawn considering the RQ of the present study: *Does the online task foster perceptual learning styles and affect academic achievement in the ESP classroom?* First, the participation of the experimental group in the completion of the 'Learning Styles' Questionnaire' and in the fulfilment of the 'Lesson' apparently reveals that students' reflective learning and active participation favours academic achievement. Particularly, students think of their perceptual learning preferences first, and then, they complete the 'Lesson' by using the learning strategies that best fit their learning styles. Second, students of the control group did not respond to



the questionnaire and did not complete the 'Lesson'. Therefore, they could not identify their perceptual learning styles and they did not experience the fulfilment of the 'Lesson'. Finally, the comparison of the grades obtained by the students of both groups in the final online exam confirms that the use of online tasks appears to reinforce and promote the students' strongest and weakest sensory preferences, which in turn may contribute to high rates of academic performance in the final online written exam.

This research has tested the potential that the 'Lesson' had on the Legal English classroom. In this vein, the 'Lesson' intervention has proved to be beneficial to get better results in the final written exam. Due to practical constraints, this study has undertaken a series of limitations that must be considered as future lines of research:

1. The number of participants in the control group (n=21) has been a limitation. Further studies should be conducted with a larger size of participants in order to refine the outcome and, therefore, provide more validity to the study.
2. The design of the questionnaire was based on the VARK Questionnaire. The fact of considering other Learning Styles' questionnaires would have provided more recognition to the study. Future studies could include more questions based on other Learning Styles' questionnaires, which might show differences in the results.
3. The 'Lesson' required students to perform both online reading and writing tasks (by using the online resources integrated into the 'Lesson'). However, the students have only focused on the writing process in the online written exam. Future research could be based on assessing students' answers in the 'Lesson' to have more conclusive results.
4. For research reasons, we have only focused on analysing the result obtained in the online written exam; therefore, we have not carried out an analysis of the students' responses to the questions posed in the 'Lesson'. Thus, we consider that this type of analysis is a research gap that could be studied for future analysis as further research.

Finally, in this framework, the integration of online learning into HE contexts is a matter of interest for the academic field. Yet, we believe that future 'Lesson' designs might help students improve their academic performance in a particular course in any discipline (e.g., Law, Engineering, Medicine, Tourism, etc.).

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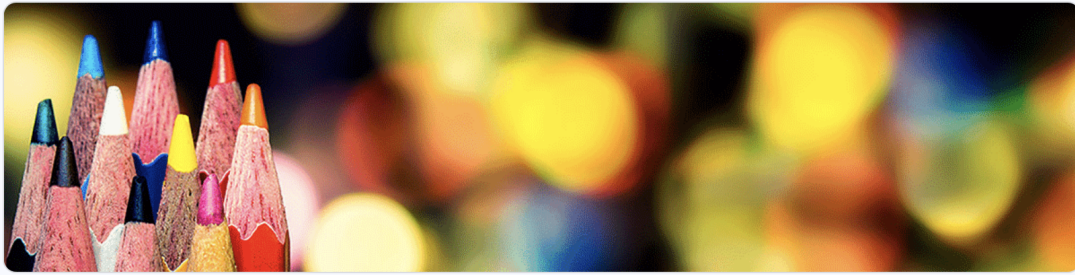
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## APPENDIX 1. Learning Styles' Questionnaire: What is your Learning Preference?



### Learning Styles' Questionnaire: What is Your Learning Preference?

Choose the answer which best explains your preference and click the box next to it.  
Please, click more than one box if a single answer does not match with your perception.  
Leave blank any question that does not apply.  
There are no correct or wrong answers.

This questionnaire has been adapted from <https://vark-learn.com/the-vark-questionnaire/>

1. I prefer teachers that promote: \*



- question and answer activities, talks and group discussions, and/or bring guest speakers to the classroom
- demonstrations, models or practical sessions
- diagrams, pictures, photographs, charts, maps and/or graphs

2. If I use the Internet as an online resource to learn, I like finding materials, and/or information that includes: \*



- audio channels, which allow me to listen to podcasts or interviews. I find this type of resources more engaging and motivating
- videos showing pedagogical explanations to learn about specific contents of the subject. I find this type of information more useful if it is directly linked to the contents I have to learn
- interesting design and visual features, because I am better at retaining the information if this is represented with pictures and/or drawings

3. If I wanted to learn to do something new on a computer (e.g. a Cybertask). I would: \*

 **Cybertask: European Union Law & Institutions = 15%**

 [LINK: EU Law and Institutions 'Cybertask'](#)

- talk to people who know about the program, platform, and/or online task
- start using it and learn by trial and error
- read the written instructions that came with the program

4. Imagine that you are going to take part in a project at your university. Before starting the project, how would you learn about it? \*



- I would discuss the project with the other members
- I would look for previous examples and results of similar projects in order to get a clearer idea
- I would read a general description, including diagrams and charts

5. Imagine that the laptop you normally use in class is broken so you need to buy a new one. What do you do in order to choose your new laptop? \*



- I talk to the shop assistant in order to know its properties
- I watch an online tutorial in order to get more information about its characteristics
- I read a description of its features before going to the shop

6. Which of the following options has been your favourite class/group task? Why? Choose only one: Writing an Abstract, Cybertask, Lesson, Kahoot(s). \*



Tu respuesta \_\_\_\_\_