

# Learning Styles 1

What is a learning style? Simply stated, it is each learner's preferred way of learning. In recent years in the area of teaching languages there has been a shift in focus from how the teacher should teach to how the student best learns. Researchers in how people learn languages are trying to discover what goes on in the mind of the student, i.e. how learners absorb (internalize) - process - and output what they are learning.

We all know that language students differ in several respects:

- a. rate of progress: some learn faster than others.
- b. degree of independence: some students are more independent – they have their own ideas – and are not so heavily reliant on the teacher, while others are very passive and constantly look to the teacher for direction and assistance.
- c. consistency of performance: some make few errors, while some are constantly making errors.
- d. the final level reached: some do well, while others do poorly (even though they had the same opportunity to learn).

What are some of the reasons for these differences? Factors include age, intelligence, aptitude, motivation, attitude, personality, learning style and learning strategies. All these interact together in the student. Also the quality of teaching (interesting and stimulating?), the textbooks (meeting the student's communicative needs?), and the learning environment (plenty of opportunities to interact with local people?) – all these have an influence on the learner's progress in mastering Chinese.

When learning a language, we use our MIND - BODY - PERSONALITY. In this article and Learning Styles 2, we will focus on how the mind processes language material. Then in Learning Styles 3 & 4, we will concentrate on the body and one's personality.

## **MIND**

This is to do with how language is ordered and sequenced; how a

learner goes about solving problems, and whether information is handled more efficiently in concrete form or abstract form.

### **Analytical (Linear) vs. Intuitive (Global)**

Unless the 200 million nerve fibers that connect the left-brain to the right-brain have been severed, learners use a combination of both sides of the brain when learning a language. Most people, however, show a preference for one side or the other.

Answer the following questions:

1. I prefer to learn from a) details and specific facts, or b) a general overview of things by looking at the whole picture.
2. I prefer to use a) logic, or b) my gut feelings.
3. In High School, I preferred a) math, or b) art.
4. I like classes or work to be a) planned so that I know exactly what to do, or b) open, with opportunities for change as the class progresses.
5. When reading or studying by myself, I prefer a) total quiet, or b) background music.
6. I'm good at a) putting ideas in logical order, step-by-step, or b) showing relationships among ideas.
7. When learning languages, I prefer a) the grammar over stories, or b) stories over the grammar.
8. I like to a) organize my daily routine, or b) be spontaneous.
9. I remember a) names more easily than faces, or b) faces more easily than names.
10. When reading, I prefer to look for a) specific details and facts, or b) the main ideas.

The more 'a' answers you checked off, the more left-brain and analytical you are. The more 'b' answers you checked off, the more right-brain and intuitive you are.

### **What do these two types look like?**

**ANALYTICAL:** They are organized, logical, step-by-step, disciplined, make lists, like to look at the details and facts, are task-oriented and goal-oriented, and prefer factual decision-making. They like

analyzing and gradually building up the big picture from the parts. Their problem, however, is that they can't see the wood for the trees.

INTUITIVE: These types, on the other hand, can't see the trees for the wood! They prefer the new and novel to the familiar, tend to deal with problems intuitively, prefer loose guidelines, dreams, play with ideas and enjoy having fun with no particular goal in mind.

**How do these two types of learners differ in the way they approach, organize and deal with the language? What different 'mindset' (mindstyles) do they have?**

ANALYTICAL learners love the grammar – you can tell one a mile off by the amount of high-lighting they have done in their grammar book! They prefer being given the grammar rule and may well create their own summary of the grammar system in a separate notebook. They probably enjoy being in the classroom or studying by themselves more than socializing with people outside, hence will progress slower in the language than intuitive learners during the early stages when the major focus is on understanding the structure of the language.

INTUITIVE learners prefer to begin with the whole picture – seeing the relation between things by intuition, whereas analytical learners begin with the separate parts and piece them together to make a whole. Intuitive learners also enjoy being with their teachers and friends. They learn through using their intuition, as well as through concrete experiences as they interact with people. They use their creative right-brain to make language learning fun!

**What learning strategies will aid these two types?**

When learning a language, some language skills involve more analytical, sequential, left-brain processing (e.g. grammar rules), while others involve right-brain skills such as guessing a meaning, grasping the overall idea of the story, or doing an activity. Whatever preference you have (analytical or intuitive), you can achieve a high level of ability in Chinese. However, intuitive people are likely to progress quicker, reaching a higher degree of fluency in the early stages (women more than men?). Analytical learners, on the other

hand, tend to be more accurate because they concentrate on the structure of the language (men more than women?).

ANALYTICAL learners should try not to let an ambiguous learning situation (e.g. a difficult-to-grasp point of grammar) overly frustrate them, but be willing to give it time. (Time is a great clarifier of grammar and difficult vocabulary!) Don't set your goals unrealistically high, but find out from other students the average time each textbook takes to complete. Ensure that you allot sufficient time for conversation practice – don't just sit at your desk poring over your books all day.

INTUITIVE learners should find creative ways to communicate. Think up language learning activities and games to make learning more fun! Use pictures to help you remember words. Use your intuition to guess meanings from the context without necessarily feeling you need to work out all the details. But remember that you can't achieve real proficiency in a language without being accurate as well as fluent.