

Learning Styles 3

How Learners Use their Sensory Channels to Process Language

In Learning Styles 1&2, we looked at how the mind perceives and processes language. In this article, we will cover the sensory channels (ears, eyes, hands) through which the language materials are received (and transmitted), as well as various physical factors such as time and place, heating and lighting, etc. which may affect the learner's desire to study.

The Sensory Channels

Language is received and transmitted primarily through the sensory channels (ears, eyes, hands). Learners often show a preference for one of these sensory modes.

Which of the following statements are true of you?

1. When asked to do an assignment in class, I prefer written instructions rather than oral ones.
2. I remember more about a subject by listening than through reading about it.
3. I enjoy making things with my hands.
4. I enjoy looking at and deciphering graphs, charts and diagrams.
5. I prefer to have an oral explanation of diagrams and maps rather than simply reading them and working out for myself.
6. I like to learn something new by actually trying it out with my hands rather than by reading about it.
7. I try to remember something by picturing it in my mind.
8. I did better in High School when listening to the teacher instead of reading textbooks.
9. I can't sit too long at a study desk – I have to get up and walk around.
10. I like to obtain information on interesting subjects by reading relevant material.
11. When someone gives me directions to a place, I prefer them to do it orally rather than draw a sketch map.

12. When I see a new household appliance, I like to pick it up straightaway and play with it.
13. When playing the party game which requires remembering the names of 20 objects on a tray, I always get a high score.
14. I'm good at remembering people's names, even if they only tell me verbally.
15. I can remember new vocabulary better when I actually hold the object in my hands.

When learning a language, the ears, eyes and hands are all actively involved. Some learners prefer using one sensory channel over the others, while some students prefer using a mixture of all three channels. Students with greater learning-style flexibility are also greater achievers as they are able to process information in whatever way it is presented.

With regard to the above questionnaire, if you checked off questions 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, you have a strong preference for using the visual mode; if you checked off questions 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, you prefer using the auditory mode; if you checked off questions 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, you prefer using your hands when learning. It is important to again stress that you probably do not simply use one mode but a combination of sensory channels, with one being stronger than the others.

The problem for you may be that the teaching method your teacher uses may not major on your preferred sense-mode (e.g. she likes giving lots of dictation). However, it is important to remember that becoming competent in a foreign language requires listening comprehension skills as well as reading skills. You need to be willing to use your ears more than your eyes to develop listening comprehension, and your eyes more than your ears to learn how to read. No matter what your preferred sense is, language educators believe that the best learning environment is one in which all the senses are involved. It seems that the more different associations we have with an item we are storing in our memory, the easier it is to retrieve.

How do these 3 types of learners differ in the way they learn the language? What different learning styles do they have?

VISUAL (eye-gate)

Visual learners learn better when they can read or see the information. However, it is important to note that there are two sorts of visual learners:

- a. those who prefer using the written form of the language to learn, e.g. an instruction manual that *explains* how the machine works.
- b. those who prefer using pictures, charts and diagrams to learn, e.g. an instruction manual that has lots of charts and diagrams *illustrating* how the machine works.

These two learning types both use the eyes, but the first uses more of an analytical technique while the second has more of a preference for using their intuition (see Analytical vs. Intuitive). Many of us learn in school to write everything down and so we come to rely on writing to aid memory. The problem for learners with a strongly visual preference is that they feel they just can't remember anything unless it is written down. However, it is vital for them to bear in mind that the language skills they are aiming for are mainly verbal – not written ones – and that they must develop and come to rely on the auditory mode in order to learn to understand what people are saying.

AUDITORY (ear-gate)

Auditory learners learn better when the information primarily comes through the ears. But, as with visual learners, it is important to note that there are two sorts of auditory learners:

1. those who are more comfortable processing input directly through lectures, e.g. "My talk has three points: 1a) ..., 1b) ..., 1c) ...; 2) ...; 3) ...".
2. those who are more comfortable processing input when they are able to talk about it, for instance with the teacher or in small groups.

These two learning types both use the ears: the first uses more of an analytical technique while the second learner type demonstrates more of a preference for using their intuition (see Analytical vs. Intuitive). Auditory learners have a tremendous advantage when

learning to communicate verbally in Chinese as they don't need to rely on the written form of the word!

HANDS-ON (touch & physical movement)

These types of learners learn best through total physical involvement with the learning environment, whether through handling objects or going on field trips. They prefer language learning activities that involve action. The problem for them is that most language learning classrooms major on auditory and visual skills – often leaving the learner who has a strong 'hands-on' preference feeling frustrated and being branded as a 'poor learner'.

What learning strategies will aid these three types?

VISUAL (eye-gate)

- Write your own vocabulary cards (flash cards) – the Chinese on one side and a picture/drawing or the English definition and sentence examples on the reverse side.
- When learning new vocabulary, input it into your computer, or copy it across to your notebook which has been divided up into topic areas. Re-writing helps recall.
- When hearing a new word, try picturing the object in your head with the Chinese word next to it.
- Send and receive text messages in Chinese.
- In order to strengthen your listening skills, when learning the dialogues and new vocabulary, first try using both textbook and recordings at the same time, then just listening to the recording; or alternatively, ask a friend to read out the new vocabulary and you give them the English equivalent.
- Visual learners can be frustrated when the teacher says, "Close the textbook and repeat after me". If your teacher insists on this method, ensure that you have first read it through several times.
- Use color to highlight the main ideas in your textbook.
- Most visual learners learn better by themselves.

AUDITORY (ear-gate)

- Recite out loud the new vocabulary, dialogues and drills. Try recording them, then playing them back. When going through your vocabulary cards (flash cards), read the Chinese and English out aloud.
- Try studying with a classmate so you can discuss the lesson content together.
- Listen to recordings of other Chinese textbooks for foreigners.
- Listen to radio & TV programs where the content is at your present level of Chinese (e.g. programs teaching English to Chinese beginners which will therefore use simple Chinese as well as simple English).
- When you go out walking or shopping, have a topic ready for chatting with those whom you meet in the street.
- Find a Chinese friend and exchange English for Chinese.

HANDS-ON (touch & physical movement)

- When learning verbs, do the action as you say or read the word. This helps reinforce the visual and auditory modes. For nouns, physically touch/handle the object (or draw it if it is impossible to get hold of one – e.g. an elephant!). For adjectives, draw the item you are describing.
- When learning grammar, draw pictures using the grammar point in the context of a real communication situation; or use colored rods – different colors for the different parts of speech – and lay them out on the table as you construct sentences in Chinese.
- Downloading pictures or typing the words into your computer or writing them down by hand may help you remember them.
- Whenever possible, go out and use the vocabulary in real-life situations, e.g. buying fruit & vegetables in the local market, buying clothes, ordering food in a restaurant. This helps supplement visual and auditory input.

Other Physical Factors

Other physical factors may affect our motivation for learning. How do you respond to the following?

- **TIME:** What time of day do you learn best – morning/afternoon/evening?
- **POSTURE:** Do you prefer to sit in a straight-backed chair at your desk or in the library, or do you prefer a comfortable chair, or even laying on your bed or the floor?
- **SURROUNDINGS:** Do you prefer your study room / desk to be messy or tidy?
- **LIGHTING:** Do you prefer bright lights or soft lights?
- **CLOTHING:** In class, do you prefer to dress formally or informally?
- **SOUND:** Do you prefer to study in a quiet place or with background music?
- **COMPANIONS:** Do you prefer to study alone or together with other students?
- **MOBILITY:** Do you prefer sitting down at your desk to study or frequently moving around?
- **TEMPERATURE:** do you like the studyroom/classroom warm or cool?
- **SUSTENANCE:** Do you like to eat and drink while studying, or not?
- **REWARDS:** Do you promise yourself rewards for getting started on your studies? for finishing?

A knowledge of one's own learning preferences is important for enjoying language learning and hence maintaining motivation.