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COMMON LEARNER STYLES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract:

Foreign language learners have diverse learning styles that influence how they perceive, process, and retain information. Five key dimensions are identified: **Sensing vs. Intuitive**, **Visual vs. Verbal**, **Active vs. Reflective**, **Sequential vs. Global**, and **Cognitive vs. Learning styles**. Sensors prefer concrete, structured information; intuitors favor abstract and varied approaches. Visual learners respond to images and diagrams, while verbal learners prefer spoken or written explanations. Active learners learn by doing, reflective learners by thinking. Sequential learners process step-by-step, global learners grasp holistic patterns. Learning styles are shaped by both biology and environment. Effective instruction blends teaching methods to accommodate all learner types.

Keywords:

Learning styles, Sensing, Intuitive, Visual, Verbal, Active, Reflective, Sequential, Global, Cognitive styles

Students learn in many ways—by seeing andhearing; reflecting and acting; reasoning logically and intuitively; memorizing and visualizing. Teaching methods also vary. Some instructors lecture, others demonstrate or discuss; some focus on rules and others on examples; some emphasize memory and others understanding. How much a given student learns in a class is governed in part by that student's native ability and prior preparation but also by the compatibility of his or her

characteristic approach to learning and the instructor's characteristic approach to teaching. In the sections that follow, we describe five dichotomous learning style dimensions derived from work of Felder et al, indicating the ways in which the educational needs of students with strong preferences for certain poles of the dimensions are not met by traditional approaches to language instruction. The concluding section offers a summary of suggestions for meeting the needs of those students.

Sensing and Intuitive Learners

In his theory of psychological types, Jung introduced *sensation and intuition* as the two ways in which people tend to perceive the world. Sensing involves observing gathering data through the senses;intuition involves indirect perception by way of the subconscious – accessing memory, speculating, imagining. Everyone uses both faculties constantly, but most people tend to favor one over the other. The strength of this preference has been assessed for millions of people using the *Myers – Briggs Type Indicator*, and the different ways in which sensors and intuition approach learning have been characterized. Sensor-intuition differences in language learning have been explored by Moody and Ehrman and Oxford.

Sensors tend to be concrete and methodical, intuition to be abstract and imaginative. Sensorslike facts, data, and experimentation; intuitions deal better with principles, concepts, andtheories. Sensors are patient with detail but donot like complications; intuitions are bored by detail and welcome complications. Sensors are more inclined than intuitions to rely on memorization as a learning strategy and are more comfortable learning and following rules and standard procedures. Intuition like variety,dislike repetition, and tend to be betterequipped than sensors to accommodate new concepts and exceptions to rules. Sensors are careful but may be slow; intuition are quick butmay be careless.

Moody administered the MBTI to491 college language students at the first-andsecond-year levels. Fifty-nine percent of the students were intuitors, substantially more than the 40 percent found for a sample of 18,592general college students. This

pattern is not altogether surprising if one presumes that a substantial number of the students were either majoring in a language or taking the courses as electives. As Moody notes, language is by its nature symbolic, which would tend to make it more attractive to intuitors than to the more concrete and literal minded sensors.

Ehrman and Oxford studied learning strategies and teaching approaches preferred by sensors and intuitors in an intensive language training program. Thesensors used a variety of memorizationstrategies like internal drills and flash cards,liked class material that might better be described as practical than fanciful, and likedhighly structured and well organized classeswith clear goals and milestones forachievement. Intuitors preferred teaching approaches that involved greater complexityand variety, tended to be bored with drills, and were better able than sensors to learnindependently of the instructor's teaching style.

Basic language instruction that involves a great deal of repetitive drill and memorization of vocabulary and grammar (the sort of teaching style often found in pre-college and community college classes) is better suited to sensors than intuitors. If there is too much ofthis sort of thing without a break, the intuitors—who constitute the majority of the class,if Moody's results are representative—may become bored with the subject and their courseperformance may consequently deteriorate. On the other hand, strongly intuitive language instructors may tend to move too quicklythrough the basic vocabulary and rules of grammar in their eagerness to get to "the moreinteresting material"—grammatical complexities, nuances of translation, linguistic concepts,and culturalconsiderations. While the intuitivestudents may enjoy these topics,overemphasizing such material may result ininsufficient grounding in the building blocks ofthe language. The sensors, in particular, maythen start to fall behind and do poorly onhomework and tests. Effective instruction reaches out to all students, not just those with one particular learningstyle. Students taught *entirely* with methods antithetical to their learning style may be madetoo uncomfortable to learn effectively, but theyshould have at least *some* exposure to thosemethods to develop a full range of learningskills and strategies. To be effective,

language instruction shouldtherefore contain elements that appeal to sensors and other elements that appeal to intuitors. The material presented in every class should be a blend of concrete information(word definitions, grammatical rules) andconcepts (syntactical and semantic information,linguistic and cultural backgroundinformation), with the percentage of eachbeing chosen to fit the level of the course(beginning, intermediate, or advanced) and theage and level of sophistication of the students.

Visual and Verbal Learners

We propose to classify the ways people receive sensory information as *visual*, *verbal*, and *other* (tactile, gustatory, olfactory). *Visual learners* prefer that information be presented visually—in pictures, diagrams, flow charts, time lines, films, and demonstrations—rather than in spoken or written words. *Verbal learners* prefer spoken or written explanations to visual presentations. The third category (touch, taste, smell) plays at most a marginal role in language instruction and will not be addressed further. This categorization is somewhat unconventional in the context of the learning style literature, in which sensory modalities are classified as visual, auditory, andkinesthetic. Since the five human senses areseeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling,we suggest that "kinesthetic" does not properlybelong on a list of sensory input modalities. Astudent's preference for motion or physical activity of some sort during the learning process belongs in a separate learning stylecategory: our proposed system and Kolb's model place it in the active/reflectivedimension, and the familiar model based on Jung's typology includes it in the extravert-introvert dimension.

The distinction between the visual-auditoryand visual-verbal classifications has to do withwhether reading prose is more closely related toseeing pictures (which leads to the visual-auditory contrast) or to hearing speech (visual-verbal). Three mechanisms have been proposedfor the process of extracting lexical significancefrom written words: *directaccess* (the reader jumps directly from theprinted form of the word to its lexicalmeaning), *indirect access* (the printed words are translated internally into sounds before information about their meaning can be located inlexical memory), and *dual encoding* (lexicalmemory can be reached either directly orindirectly). An extensive

body of researchsupports a form of the dual encoding hypothesis. Direct access is possible when words arefamiliar or when artificial conditions imposed in a research setting make speech encodinginefficient; however, when material is unfamiliar or difficult, lexical memory isspeechaccessed. Theimplication is that expository prose of the sort one finds in books and on classroom chalkboards is much more likely to be speech-mediated than directly accessed when silentlyread, and so belongs in the verbal rather thanthe visual category.

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