The Ultimate Guide to Language Learning Styles and Strategies
Language Learners Journal.com

Are you learning a foreign language?¹

Are you aware of the learning style you are currently applying?

Are the strategies you are applying compatible with your learning style or even your personality?

Language learning styles and strategies are among the main factors that determine how well you will learn a foreign language. This ultimate guide will help you determine your learning style, personality type, your drivers (motivators) and the different strategies you can apply to get the most out of your study sessions. This will help make you a more successful and productive language learner.

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Learning Styles

Learning styles are the general approaches you use when acquiring new skills such as learning a foreign language.

“Learning style is the biologically and developmentally imposed set of characteristics that make the same teaching method wonderful for some and terrible for others”

- Dunn & Griggs (1988)

The four main learning styles that are most associated with language learning are the sensory preferences, personality types, drivers (motivators) and biological factors. Learning styles are not set in black or white but are rather grey areas where traits of other learning styles can also coexist. Few if any people could be classified as having all or nothing in any of these categories.

1 https://languagelearnersjournal.com
Sensory Stimulus

Sensory stimulus refers to the physical perceptual learning preferences that you feel most comfortable with applying and these can be broken down into four main categories...

Visual

Visual learners like to read and can obtain a great deal from visual stimulus. Lectures, conversations, and oral directions without any visual backup can be very confusing for visual learners, therefore, video tutorials with transcripts or powerpoint presentations can work very well. Visual learners will benefit from watching movies or reading books in their target language. If you prefer using this sense then this may also be reflected in the vocabulary you use. For example “I can see where you are coming from with this...” or “I can see what you mean”
Recommended duration of study time: 40 – 45 minutes. If watching a movie break for 2-5 minutes every 45 minutes.

Auditory

In contrast, auditory learners are comfortable without any visual input and therefore enjoy and profit from, conversations, and oral directions. They sometimes, however, have difficulty with written work. The approach to start speaking from day one would be really beneficial to auditory learners. If you prefer using this sense then this may also be reflected in the vocabulary you use. For example “I hear what you are saying but...”.

Recommended duration of study time: 20-30 minutes followed by a 5-minute break then another 20-30 minutes.

Tactile and Kinesthetic

Tactile and kinesthetic are very much hands-on learners. They benefit from actually doing and require lots of physical movement. These learners feel more comfortable with working with flashcards, tangible objects, and creative means such as creating sculptures, models or collages. They are very much touch oriented. When learning languages they may the most, however having a little creativity in language learning will propel their understanding to new levels. If you prefer using these senses then this may also be reflected in the vocabulary

3 https://languagelearnersjournal.com
you use. For example “I feel that I am just not understanding the concept...”

**Recommended duration of study time:** 20 minutes followed by a 5-minute break then another 20 minutes.

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**Personality Types**

Another important aspect that Language learners need to take into consideration is their personality type. Personality type is a construct based upon the work of psychologist [Carl Jung](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Jung). If you are unsure of your personality type then check out this [free personality test – external link](https://www.personalitytype.com) for a basic overview.

**Extraverted Vs. Introverted**

By definition, extraverts gain their greatest energy from external factors such as social stimulus. They want interaction with lots of different people and have many friendships, some deep and some not so. In contrast, introverts derive their energy from their own internal world, seeking solitude and tending to have few close friendships, which are often very deep and meaningful. Extraverts and introverts can still study well together. Although extraverts need to be mindful of the introverts need for solitude and not take this personally.
Intuitive Vs. Senses

Intuitive learners tend to think in futuristic abstract forms. They like theories and discovering new possibilities. They often have sudden insights and prefer to guide their own learning so make excellent independent learners. In contrast, sensing learners are grounded in the present moment. They like facts rather than theories and can be very observant, they tend to want guidance and look for consistency. A classroom setting is often the best source of support for this personality type. A highly organized structure for sensing learners is recommended, but push boundaries with multiple options and enrichment activities just like the ones intuitive learners crave.

Judgers Vs. Perceivers

Judgers want to reach completion of tasks quickly and want clarity as soon as possible. These learners are hard-working, serious and dedicated. They like to be given written information and enjoy working with deadlines. However, research by Ehrman & Oxford, (1989) showed that their desire for closure can have an impact on the development of fluency. In contrast, perceivers (open learners) want to stay available for continuous new perceptions. They don’t take learning too seriously, treating it more like a game to be enjoyed rather than a set of tasks to be completed. Perceivers dislike deadlines; they want to have a good time and seem to soak up languages rather than apply
hard effort. Ehrman & Oxford, (1989), found that perceivers are at a disadvantage in a traditional classroom setting.

Thinking Vs. Feeling

Thinking learners are oriented toward logical reasoning – if you are a fan of Star Trek think Vulcans! They want to be viewed as competent and do not tend to give praise often – although they might have a secret desire to be praised. Sometimes thinkers can seem detached from the external world. In comparison, feeling learners value other people. They show deep empathy and compassion through words, not just behaviors. Though they often wear their hearts on their sleeves and may not respond well to constructive criticism, they want to be respected for their personal contributions and hard work.

What Drives You?

'Drivers' are just another name for our motivators. Our personal driving force that moves us forward even when we might be struggling with our language learning. What drives you, take this simple and FREE quiz to discover yours (external link). Once we know our drivers and what makes us tick we also have an increased awareness of our weaknesses, but that is a good thing as we can then do something actively about them. For example, if you are a perfectionist you may
fear making mistakes, which might put you off having conversations with native speakers.

So here’s a list of 5 drivers with a summary of the positives, the negatives, the barriers you may face and the behaviors you might display…

1. The Perfect One

The Positive

- Reputation for producing high-quality work.
- Accuracy and fact-checking.
- Prepared and good eye for detail.

The Negative

- Missed deadlines.
- Struggles to delegate.
- Critical of others (and self).

Barriers

- Failure to achieve goals (can be too hard on self).
- Fear of making mistakes.
- Fear of loss of control or others finding faults.

Behaviours

- Single-minded.

7 https://languagelearnersjournal.com
• Controlling and arrogant.
• Task orientated.

2. The People Pleaser

The Positive

• Good team players
• Empathy and understanding
• Supportive and sharing

The Negative

• Fear of upsetting people leading to lack of assertion
• Overloaded with work.
• A decrease in happiness.

Barriers

• Not able to stand up for self
• Fear of letting people down
• Rejection and risk of bullying.

Behaviours

• Not able to say no
• Resentment
• Wants to rescue others
3. The Hurrier

The Positive

- Fast worker achieving lots in a small amount of time
- Responds well to tight deadlines
- Likes having many things to do

The Negative

- Prone to making mistakes and producing low quality work.
- Rushes and speaks quickly
- Overcrowded with appointments

Barriers

- No time to think
- Fear of having nothing to do
- Slow pace – wants everything done yesterday

Behaviours

- Moans at others to ‘hurry up’
- Blame others for holdups
- Easily agitated
4. The Strong One

The Positive

- Calm under pressure.
- Reliable and steady.
- Thinks logically when others panic.

The Negative

- Dislike admitting weaknesses
- Hide difficulties
- Maybe seen as uncaring

Barriers

- Fear of being seen as weak
- Fear of rejection
- Fear of showing emotion

Behaviours

- Can become withdrawn
- Become quiet
- Deep thought
5. The Tryer

The Positive

- Pours loads of effort into new projects
- Highly motivated and energized
- See problems from different angles

The Negative

- May take on many projects at once and not actually finish them
- Distracted by new projects
- Can turn small tasks into much bigger projects

Barriers

- Total burnout
- Criticised for not caring about projects
- Irresponsible

Behaviours

- Reactive
- Sulk
- Not completing tasks, but still taking on new ones.
Biological Differences

The biological aspects of learning styles are not focused upon enough. Differences in language learning style can also be related to our biological factors, such as biorhythms, exercise, location, and sustenance.

Body clock

Biorhythms reveal the times of day when you feel good and can perform at your best. Some learners are morning people, while others do not want to start learning until the afternoon, and still, there are some language learners, myself included that are night owls happily pulling an "all-nighter" of a study session when necessary.

Exercise

Regular exercise releases the body's feel-good chemicals and can actually energize the body. It can also help with the stimulation of new brain cells so all in all when learning something new it is also a good idea to increase activity levels too!

Location
Location involves the nature of the learning environment for example; room temperature, lighting, distractions, sound, and even the level of comfort you feel. All of this will impact on your ability to learn new things. Some people thrive on having some background noise, whilst others need complete silence.

Sustenance

Sustenance refers to the need for food or drinks whilst learning. I personally prefer to have a coffee when I sit down for a study session, however, some learners feel distracted from their study by food and drink. Remember that if you are dehydrated or hungry you will not be as focused as you could be. So I also recommend always having a glass of water and ensuring you are not hungry before studying.

Learning Strategies

When language learners choose a good fit for their learning style the following strategies can become a very useful toolkit for a more focused and productive way of learning. Learning strategies can be classified into the following six groups...

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1. Affective Education

Research by Dreyer and Oxford (1996) and Oxford and Ehrman (1995) into learning foreign languages has shown that affective strategies, such as identifying mood and anxiety levels, talking about feelings, challenging belief systems and using deep breathing or positive self-talk, can be significantly beneficial for language learners. At Language Learners Journal we believe in a more holistic approach to learning and the benefits that affective strategies can have. For example, if you are stressed you are less likely to attain information, but by working on your personal well being means reducing those stress levels, therefore, making you more focused.

**Strategies:** Focus on developing your self-esteem and compassion within language learning. If you are highly stressed or finding it difficult to manage negative thinking habits check out these articles...

- 10 Tips for Mindful Language Learning
- How to Manage Unhelpful Thoughts When Learning a New Language

Language Learners Journal offers FREE 20-minute taster session on motivation, productivity and stress management.
2. Cognitive

Cognitive strategies enable the learner to manipulate the language material in direct ways via reasoning, analysis, note-taking, summarizing, synthesizing, outlining, reorganizing information to develop knowledge structures, practicing in naturalistic settings, and practicing structures and sounds formal. All learning styles can benefit from these methods.

**Strategies:** In order to begin learning you must be paying attention. The average person can hold up to 3 small learning tasks at a time and 1 complex task at a time. Next, what we are paying attention to must be stored in our memory and there are 3 stages of memory process before something is learnt! Firstly is the sensory register (seconds), then it is passed into short-term memory (20 seconds – 2 minutes), then if the word is rehearsed it short end up in the long-term memory. To achieve this you need to encode the foreign words you are learning. If you are a visual learner you could do this via reading a language book or if you are audio via listening to the language. Tactile or kinesthetic you may find flash cards work best for you.

- [How to Optimise your Brain for Language Learning](https://languagelearnersjournal.com)
3. Compensatory Learning

Compensatory strategies (e.g., guessing from the context in listening and reading; using synonyms and “talking around” the missing word to aid speaking and writing; and strictly for speaking, using gestures or pause words) help the learner make up for missing knowledge. When used in conjunction with memory-related strategies this can be pretty powerful language learning strategy.

Strategies: Watching body language to put foreign language into context.

- How to be a More Successful Language Learner in 10 Steps

4. Metacognitive Approach

Metacognitive strategies focus on identifying on a more holistic approach taken individual needs into consideration. Planning and goal setting for language learning tasks, information gathering, and organizing materials, arranging a study space and a schedule, monitoring mistakes, and evaluating task success.

Strategies: Metacognitive approach can complement affective learning strategies.

- FREE 28 Day Language Study Planner
5. Memory-related

Memory-related strategies help learners link languages or concepts with another but do not necessarily involve deep understanding. Various memory-related strategies enable learners to learn and retrieve information in an orderly string (e.g., acronyms), while other techniques create learning and retrieval via sounds (e.g., rhyming), images (e.g., a mental picture of the word itself or the meaning of the word), a combination of sounds and images (e.g., the keyword method), body movement (e.g., total physical response), mechanical means (e.g., flashcards), or location (e.g., on a page or blackboard). The probable reason for this is that memory strategies are often used for memorizing vocabulary and structures in initial stages of language learning, but that learners need such strategies much less when their arsenal of vocabulary and structures has become larger.

Strategies: The memory palace can be a pretty powerful tool here.

- Keeping actively bilingual makes our brains more efficient at relaying information
6. Social

Social strategies (e.g., asking questions to get verification, asking for clarification of a confusing point, asking for help in doing a language task, talking with a native-speaking conversation partner, and exploring cultural and social norms) help the learner work with others and understand the target culture as well as the language.

Strategies: One of the best ways to learn a new language is to ‘live it’. Fully immerse yourself in the language and no matter you sensory preferences bombarded with visual, auditory, touch, and taste.

- 24 Soft Skills Required for Language Learning

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Pushing Boundaries

Language learners really start to make the most improvement when they push the boundaries and get out of their ‘comfort zones’. Although it is important to make the most out of learning styles don’t be afraid to extend beyond your style preferences. The key is to try a variety of different activities within a more holistic learner orientated approach. Also, don’t forget about the biological structures that could be holding you back from achieving your goals.

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By applying these and also pushing boundaries you will become a much more efficient, focused and productive language learner.

References:

Bialystok, E., (1990), Communication Strategies: A Psychological Analysis of Second-language

