

LEARNING STRATEGY PREFERENCES
IN AN INTENSIVE ENGLISH PROGRAM

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The purpose of this study was to identify the learning strategy preferences of students in

an Intensive English Program and to describe their perceptions related to the application of the learning process. In this case, a sample was taken from the student population at the Intensive English Program. The sample population consisted of high intermediate to advanced groups of students preparing to attend an American university. These students were given Assessing The Learning Strategies of Adults (ATLAS) to classify participants according to their preferred learning strategy as a Navigator, Problem Solver, or Engager. Students kept a journal of their learning strategy applications as a part of the study.

Navigators are “focused learners who chart a course for learning and follow it” (Conti & Fellenz, 1999, p. 9). They are high achievers driven by results who like to plan and organize their learning activities. The primary learning strategies of Navigators include Planning and Monitoring the Learning Task, Identification and Critical Use of Resources, and Testing Assumptions. Planning involves identifying the purpose of the learning activity and determining the sequenced steps necessary to complete a learning task. These individuals base their planning on given schedules and time. They like to know what is expected of them in the learning process, so they can organize their work to gain the best results. Another learning strategy of Navigators is Testing Assumptions which falls in the category of Critical Thinking. This strategy utilizes higher order thinking skills and involves the learners ability to “recognize and evaluate specifics and generalizations in relations to learning situations” (Fellenz & Conti, 1989, p. 10) These students constantly think about what they are learning to link the information to their task at hand. Then, they apply the learned material to see if it works in their specific situation.

Problem Solvers are learners who utilize critical thinking skills. They like to “test assumptions, generate alternatives, use external aids, and identify many resources to use” (Conti & Kolody, 1999, p. 12). Additionally, they prefer to use human resources instead of reference manuals. They do well on tests with open - ended questions versus tests with multiple choice items. These learners tend to think in terms of how something works and are detail oriented in their understanding and explanation of ideas. Memory strategies are important for Problem Solvers. Problem Solvers use External Memory Aids like lists of things to do, daily planners, and schedules (Conti & Kolody, 1999, p. 12) These aids assist them with planning.

Engagers are “passionate learners who love to learn” (Conti & Kolody, 1999, p. 13) . These learners see the learning process as a pleasurable experience and are motivated to learn out of the Affective Domain in which they judge the value of a learning activity through their feelings. These learners employ the use of Metamotivation strategies such as Reward/Enjoyment and Confidence. Metamotivation is “the awareness of and control over factors that energize and direct one’s learning” (Conti & Kolody, 1999, p. 4). Engagers are greatly motivated to learn by reward or enjoyment which consists of experiencing satisfaction. These students value relationships along with accomplishments in the learning process. They recognize personal growth as a motivating factor to reach higher and farther in the learning experience. Engagers like to learn by sharing their ideas with others which brings about different perspectives into the learning opportunities. Confidence is another important learning strategy for Engagers. As a learning strategy, this means if the learners decide to do a learning task, then they

are confident that they can do it. This is related to confidence in general of having self-assurance that a task can be completed when started. Those who have confidence often have better results than those who do not. When the material is meaningful to the student, then there is more attention given to the learning, and it is retained longer in memory.

Journals, observations and interviews have given multiple perspectives to this study and the opportunity for students to express their ideas in written form. This was done over the course of the study, so participants were able to track their learning, to be made aware of their learning preferences and to find how their English skills progressed. These journals were collected by the teacher and compared to the teacher observations. The teacher kept an observation notebook recording interesting comments and actions made by the learners. As the teacher read the journals, observations were clarified. Also, through in-depth questions, the research was able to further explore additional ideas that journals and observations revealed. Utilizing all of these data collection tools gave the researcher a holistic picture of how these students learn.

The journals, observations, and interviews gleaned information about what learning opportunities most benefited the participants. Learners thought the best learning opportunities were (a) brainstorming with others, (b) being given many examples, (c) giving presentations, (d) participating in collaborative projects, (e) listening to lectures and (f) dialoguing with the professor.

Some participants felt that the best activities involved working with others. These students thought that group discussions were greatly beneficial. They revealed that they learned best and thoughts evolved most when ideas were shared with classmates. They benefited from sharing their ideas and learning from others' perspectives which were based on experiences. In Knowles' assumptions of self-directed learning, the second assumption deals with the importance of the learners' experiences as a valuable resource (Knowles, 1980, p. 20). Through group discussions, these language learners acquired more knowledge about the subject.

Some respondents thought that they learned best from activities in which they were given many examples from the professor. These learners stated that they typically needed to know "how" to accomplish a task (Kolb, 1984) and liked to look at language by taking it apart in order to put it back together in a way that made sense. Sometimes these learners indicated that they preferred to work by themselves with the skill instead of with other people.

Other students also asserted that they liked participating in presentations that were preparatory for real life experiences. Some of the learners were risk takers who benefit most from actively participating in the classes. Often times, presenting with other students was a well-liked activity because they could strengthen their language skills not only as they presented but also as they prepared the presentation. Participants appreciated activities that could help them with their English in order to communicate in everyday life.

Clearly organized lectures were better for some students. Journals reflected that these students preferred learning through logically sequenced explanations about language skills and benefited from hearing and recording the information which gave the opportunity to review what they learned. Students could also further research the acquired material by identifying resources outside of class.

Comments from the data collected for this study showed how these students learned best related to their learning strategy preferences as Navigators, Problem Solvers, and Engagers. The Navigators liked to receive information in an organized way which helped them to gain a clear understanding of the concept. In this study, the Navigators wanted to know what material was going to be covered in class ahead of time. In addition, they needed a clear methodical step-by-step explanation of the way to acquire language skills. Acquiring information by lectures is shown important for Navigators in this study. In addition, to the lectures, the Navigators expressed that they learn best by asking questions throughout the class. Teacher observations confirmed that these students were able to better comprehend the course material through class discussions from which they internally organized the information. These participants were leaders in class activities who liked to express their ideas and to see their ideas implemented. In addition, these students wanted to monitor their progress by comparing their past English skills with current skills. Then, these participants looked to the future to set learning goals for success. Teacher observations conveyed that many of the Navigators are goal oriented and consistently check their progress as they moved to the next level.

Problem Solvers are critical thinkers who are always looking for a detailed explanation full of facts and examples. In this study, these students took a lot of time asking questions about the subject matter throughout the lecture. Most importantly for Problem Solvers was to identify the primary resource from which to gain the needed information; in the classroom, this is considered the teacher. Then, they expanded their knowledge by identifying outside resources for added information and clarity. They gleaned more knowledge of the English language by this process because of their curious nature that is exemplified in the learning opportunities. These participants learned best through participation in activities that allowed for discovery methods to be employed.

Engagers are passionate learners who learn out of the affective mode. These learners put forth great effort in their learning and liked to try new things. In this study, Engagers benefited from lessons that had group work and learned best by working collaboratively with others. In addition, Engagers learned through the use of metamotivation in the class which includes reward and enjoyment. When these learners made a connection between the learning opportunity and real life, they found pleasure in the process and would acquire and assimilate the information being taught. Students often took ownership in the learning process when the information was relevant and reflected personal interest.

Major conclusions are that learning in Intensive English Programs utilize andragogical concepts such as self-directed learning. Students who take ownership in the acquisition

of material will find positive results including personal satisfaction in the learning opportunity. When students see the relationship of how they process information in relationship to the class content, one can ensure a better outcome in the learning experience.

Therefore, the results from the ATLAS were successful in giving the teacher ideas as to how to better facilitate learning activities within the classroom. This instrument helped to ensure a better understanding of the ways that students approach learning tasks. Use of this instrument gave a more holistic perspective of the individual differences found among teachers and students. Discussions of these learning strategy preferences also led to clearer communication among the members of the class.

References

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Abstract

This descriptive study utilized frequency data to identify and describe the learning strategy preferences of English as a Second Language learners at an Intensive English Institute in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Qualitative data were gathered by journals, observations, and interviews. Additionally, feedback from teacher observations were gathered. The 36 participants in this study were from 13 different countries that needed English to further their educational pursuits. The study found an equal distribution of learning strategy groups. Major conclusions are that learning in Intensive English Programs utilize andragogical concepts such as self-directed learning. Second, students from various countries greatly benefit from teachers who provide student-centered learning opportunities. This approach gives opportunity for the facilitation of individual differences in the class. The Assessing the Learning Strategies of Adults is useful when identifying and describing individual differences in the way students process the learning task. Recommendations were offered for teachers to base learning opportunities on adult learning principles and to use such instruments in the planning and facilitation of classes at an Intensive English Program.