

# Departmental Differences and Similarities in Learning English: Learning styles and objectives

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## Reference Data:

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In this paper the research aims to specify learners' preferred learning styles and objectives for learning English based on needs analysis study at the university level. A questionnaire was adapted from Richards (2001), and it has been developed and used to measure learners' preferred learning styles and objectives. Fifty students from the Engineering Department and sixty students from the Humanities Department, 110 first year university students in total participated. The result from the research shows there are clear differences between those two departments in terms of learning style and objectives for learning English. The data and findings from analysing the learners' preferred learning styles and objectives can be used for curriculum design of English courses within different departments. This study could be the basis for how curriculum designers determine the teaching methodology and the course materials for each department in an English language program.

この調査は、大学レベルでのニーズ分析を基にした、異なる学部で所属する英語学習者の学習スタイルと学習目的を明らかにすることを目的としたものである。英語学習者の学習スタイルと学習目的を明らかにすることにより、この調査結果が、異なる学部での英語の授業方法や内容のヒントとなるが見込まれる。特に、授業計画においては、この結果を元に組み立てるとそれぞれの学生によりあったものができるだろう。この調査では、Richards (2001) のニーズ分析のアンケートを修正し、第1学年の工学部の英語学習者50名、人文学部の英語学習者60名の計110名を対象として使用した。

**T**his paper explores aspects of students' preferred learning styles and objectives for learning English based on a needs analysis study conducted at Ibaraki University in 2003. Studies (Skehan, 1989) have shown that students differ in their learning styles and objectives for learning English. They differ because they have divergent needs and interests. Identifying the various factors of students' needs and interests will give us a better idea of how and what to teach in an English language class.

Based on this needs analysis study, student's preferred learning styles and objectives for learning English are analyzed and discussed. The authors hope that the results will be of use to teachers who write syllabi to teach English or design curriculum for institutions of higher learning.

## Research Methods and Participants

Fifty students from the Engineering Department and sixty students from the Humanities Department, 110 first year university students in total participated. Group administration (Dörnyei, 2003) was utilized. Group administration is a method for having questionnaires completed by language learners. Language learners study

within institutional contexts, and while they are assembled together, the questionnaires were given to the group in class. It took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. After collecting all the data, it was analyzed. In the following sections, the questionnaire is presented in English; however, a Japanese version was given to the students to make it easier for them to complete.

### Learning Styles

This section explores the degree to which there are similarities and differences related to learners' preferred learning styles between the two departments. The first column is the number of each item and the second column shows the actual item. The third and fourth columns show the data from the Engineering and Humanities Departments respectively. Each of these columns is divided into two parts: the percentage of learners who checked the items and the total number of learners who checked the items. The percentages and numbers shown below indicate the rate of the students out of 50 students from the Engineering Department and 60 students from the Humanities Department who completed the questionnaire.

To explore to what extent there are similarities and differences about learners' preferred learning styles between the departments, the items listed can be divided into three critical categories according to the percentage of the learners who selected each item. The categories are; common preferred learning styles, preferred learning styles in the Engineering Department, and preferred learning styles in the Humanities Department.

As can be seen from Table 1, the learners in both departments tended to prefer the following styles:

- (item 4) oral communication,
- (item 9) with Japanese teachers of English,
- (item 15) using interesting authentic materials, and
- (item 24) in groups.

Particularly, 75.5% of the learners prefer to learn English by oral communication (item 4). This likely to means that the learners want to improve oral communication skills by using authentic materials. Hence, the teachers at the university should take this finding into consideration when they design the curriculum, making sure that oral communication is a central theme.

The results in Table 1 also show that preferred learning styles in the Engineering Department were as follows:

- (item 1) in lessons taught only in English,
- (item 10) by watching videos for learning English,
- (item 14) by using authentic materials from my specialist area,
- (item 30) by reading English newspapers and magazines, and
- (item 36) with handouts.

**Table 1. The Students' Learning Style.**

I prefer to learn English...

#	Items	Engineering		Humanities	
1	in lessons taught only in English.	28%	14 Ss	6.7%	4 Ss
2	in lessons using English and Japanese.	66%	33 Ss	92%	55 Ss
3	by translation method.	20%	10 Ss	22%	13 Ss
4	by oral communication.	76%	38 Ss	75%	45 Ss
5	by reading English.	34%	17 Ss	35%	21 Ss
5	by listening to English.	54%	27 Ss	63%	38 Ss
7	by writing compositions.	20%	10 Ss	35%	21 Ss
8	with native teachers of English.	36%	18 Ss	30%	18 Ss
9	with Japanese teachers of English.	46%	23 Ss	53%	32 Ss
10	by watching videos for learning English.	47%	25 Ss	62%	37 Ss
11	by listening to audio materials.	40%	20 Ss	45%	27 Ss
12	on the computer and internet.	28%	14 Ss	33%	20 Ss
13	using a conversation based text book.	34%	17 Ss	33%	20 Ss
14	by using authentic materials from my specialist area.	18%	9 Ss	8.3%	5 Ss
15	using interesting authentic materials.	52%	26 Ss	58%	35 Ss
16	by using a reading skill textbook.	10%	5 Ss	12%	7 Ss
17	using a cross-cultural textbook.	10%	5 Ss	42%	25 Ss
18	with a textbook using easy English.	36%	18 Ss	43%	26 Ss
19	by grammar instruction.	32%	16 Ss	30%	18 Ss
20	by memorisation.	10%	5 Ss	6.7%	4 Ss
21	by learning vocabulary.	36%	18 Ss	37%	22 Ss
21	alone.	20%	10 Ss	22%	13 Ss
21	in pairs.	34%	17 Ss	47%	28 Ss

24	in groups.	54%	27 Ss	47%	28 Ss
25	as a whole class.	30%	15 Ss	40%	24 Ss
26	with individual attention.	12%	6 Ss	6.7%	4 Ss
27	with homework.	10%	5 Ss	3.3%	2 Ss
28	with challenging teaching materials.	2%	1 Ss	0%	0 Ss
29	with simple teaching materials.	42%	21 Ss	48%	29 Ss
30	by reading English newspapers and magazines.	30%	15 Ss	22%	13 Ss
31	with games.	40%	20 Ss	42%	25 Ss
32	with enjoyable materials.	54%	27 Ss	70%	42 Ss
33	by watching films.	68%	34 Ss	82%	49 Ss
34	by listening to English music.	48%	24 Ss	70%	42 Ss
35	by reading novels.	30%	15 Ss	42%	25 Ss
36	with handouts.	22%	11 Ss	6.7%	4 Ss

According to this result, the learners in the Engineering Department have a strong desire to learn English by using current news and the news about learners' specialist area as learning materials. It is possible to say that this trend is concerned with 'instrumental motivation' (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). One of the typical examples is that the learners prefer to learn English by using authentic materials of their specialist area.

The learners' preferred learning styles in the Humanities Department were as follows:

- (item 2) in lessons using English and Japanese
- (item 6) by listening to English
- (item 7) by writing compositions

- (item 17) using a cross-cultural textbook
- (item 25) as a whole class
- (item 32) with enjoyable materials
- (item 33) by watching films
- (item 34) by listening to English music
- (item 35) by reading novels

Broadly speaking, the learners tended to choose learning styles, which seemed to be based on 'integrative motivation' (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). For example the learners prefer to learn English by listening to English music, reading novels, watching films, and so forth. Interestingly, this tendency is completely opposite to that of learners in the Engineering Department.

It could be said that the learners in the Engineering Department tended to choose learning styles, which would benefit their study, but the learners in the Humanities Department had a tendency to decide learning styles based on enjoyment.

## Learning Objective

**Table 2. The Students' Objectives of Learning English.**

I am learning English...

R	I#	TP	TN	EP	EN	HP	HN	Items
1	4	84	92	82	41	85	51	to speak English in daily life.
2	25	65	71	52	26	75	45	to watch films in English.
3	20	62	68	66	33	58	35	to help me find a job.
4	33	61	67	62	31	60	36	because English is an important international language.
5	11	60	66	46	23	72	43	to understand basically what native speaker say.
5	18	60	66	52	26	67	40	to get enough credits in subjects.
7	23	55	61	46	23	63	38	to talk to foreign people in English.
8	24	51	56	40	20	60	36	to listen to music in English.
9	3	49	54	66	33	35	21	for business negotiations.
10	21	46	51	46	23	47	28	to get good marks in proficiency tests.
11	22	45	50	36	18	53	32	to travel overseas.
12	7	44	48	44	22	43	26	to read newspapers and magazines.
13	17	41	45	46	23	37	22	to get good marks in university.
14	12	39	43	22	11	53	32	to understand TV and radio programmes.
15	31	37	41	40	20	35	21	to improve my translation skill.
16	8	35	39	24	12	45	27	to read English books for pleasure.
17	2	33	36	34	17	32	19	to acquire a native-like speaking skill.

18	1	30	33	28	14	32	19	to improve my pronunciation.
19	10	25	27	28	14	22	13	to understand lectures in English.
20	30	24	26	22	11	25	15	to improve my vocabulary.
21	9	21	23	36	18	8.3	5	to read specialised books in my area.
21	16	21	23	32	16	12	7	to write good essays, dissertation and so on.
21	32	21	23	20	10	22	13	to improve my grammar knowledge.
24	13	20	22	16	8	23	14	to write e-mails in English.
25	29	19	21	26	13	13	8	to summarise English texts.
26	5	18	20	26	13	12	7	to participate in discussions and debates.
27	6	17	19	38	19	0	0	to improve presentation skills for my specialist area.
27	14	17	19	12	6	22	13	to write a diary and short notes.
29	26	15	16	12	6	17	10	because I like learning English.
29	27	15	16	8	4	20	12	to learn British and American culture.
31	15	12	13	14	7	10	6	to take notes in classes.
32	19	6.4	7	8	4	5	3	to study abroad.
32	28	6.4	7	8	4	5	3	to learn critical and logical thinking.
34	34	0.9	1	0	0	1.7	1	I do not have any particular objectives for learning English.

Note: R = Rankings, # = Item numbers, TP = Total percentage, TN = Total number, EP = Percentage in the Engineering Department, EN = number in the Engineering Department, HP = Percentage in the Humanities Department, HN = Number in the Humanities Department

There are thirty-four items in the objectives for learning English section. The items examined what objectives students had in learning English. The items are classified into groups: 1 to 6 (speaking), 7 to 9 (reading), 10 to 12 (listening), 13 to 16 (writing), 17 to 21 (promotion), 22, 24 to 26 (enjoyment), 23 (communication), 27 to 32 (skills and knowledge), 33 (international language), and 34 (no objective). Most of the categories have levels ranging from daily skills to academic skills.

Table 2 shows the students' objectives for learning English. The left column shows the ranking of each item. The second column from the left is the item number. The other three columns indicate what percentage of students checked each item. The other six columns indicate what percentage of students and how many of them checked each item.

Many of the participants' main objective for learning English is to develop communication skills. Eighty-four percent of them chose item 4. It was the only item that most of the students selected. Eighty-five percent of the students in the Humanities Department and 82% of the students in the Engineering Department chose it. Items 11 and 7 are also related to communication in English. The results may be based on the idea that English is an important international language to communicate with other people from other countries.

The next objective is enjoyment. Items 24 and 25 were chosen by many students, but only 15% of the students study English because they like learning it. They might want to enjoy learning English by watching movies and listening to music.

Another objective may be a desire for advancement in their future careers. Many of them are studying English to find a good job, to acquire required credits, or to get good scores in proficiency exams such as the TOEIC test. If you speak English you are able to communicate with foreign people and speaking English might help a person obtain a good job. Students usually want to get good scores on proficiency exams, because many companies in Japan require a minimum TOEIC score of 500 for job applicants.

Some of the lowest ranked items were concerned with academic skills: discussion skills, presentation skills, critical thinking, and note-taking skills. Most of the students did not select these indispensable skills for academia.

**Table 3. Department Differences of the Learning Objectives**

Item #	3	6	8	9	11	12	16	24	25
Engineering	66	38	24	36	46	22	32	40	52
Humanities	35	0	45	8.3	72	53	12	60	75
Differences	31	38	21	28	26	31	20	20	23

Table 3 shows the differences between the Engineering and the Humanities Departments in the objective section. This table shows the items, which had more than a 20% difference between the departments. Judging from the items shown in table 3, the Engineering Department has more students who needed academic skills such as presentation skills (item 6), reading skills (item 9), and writing skills (item 16) than the Humanities Department. On the other hand, students in the Humanities Department thought practical skills such as listening (item 11), pleasure reading (item 8), watching TV (item 12), watching movies (item 25), and listening to music (item 24) were more necessary than students in the Engineering Department did.

Sixty-six percent of the students in the Engineering Department chose business negotiation skills (item 3). This item was the second most chosen item in the Engineering Department. They may think that they will use English in their future jobs. Thirty-five percent of the Humanities students felt they needed these skills. There was a 31% difference between the departments.

## Conclusion

It is intriguing to mention that there are quite a variety of similarities and differences in learning styles and objectives between the two departments. A number of learners in both departments were likely to choose certain learning styles based on the daily communication skills taught with authentic materials. However, there were clear differences in learning style preference between the departments. The learners in the Engineering Department were interested in the learning styles, which would benefit their study and future jobs, yet the learners in the Humanities Department preferred learning styles, based on enjoyment. With these goals in mind, the result was influenced even on how and what to study in an English class.

There was a tendency that some students wanted to learn English to enjoy watching movies and listening to music, but not to improve academic skills. The Humanities Department had more students who wanted to enjoy learning English and didn't seem to want to improve academic skills than the Engineering Department. Some students might want to get required credits easily by doing enjoyable activities and not by doing academic ones, however it can also be said with fair certainty that they do not know what academic skills are and that can be the reason for not choosing them. This is something researchers should look into in the future.

Finally, by examining the results of this research we can conclude that there are significant factors that should be taken into consideration when designing the curriculum for English courses. The reason for this can be the fact that the differences in learning styles and objectives between the two departments seem to require different curriculum designs based on the results of this study. Several similarities, however,

also need to be considered in the curriculum design for respective departments. For example, to focus on developing the learners' daily conversation skills has to be a component in the curriculum of both departments. The curriculum for the Engineering Department could aim to improve English skills that benefit their study and future jobs (e.g. negotiation skills). For the Humanities Department, it is possible to say that the central idea is based on having fun when learning English. Hence, the teachers should develop separate curricula depending on the learners' distinct learning styles and objectives.

As part of the questionnaire the learners were asked if they would participate in follow up interviews. Most of the students replied that they would be willing to do so. Therefore, for further research it would be interesting to investigate why the students from the Engineering Department prefer to learn English within an academic context and the students from the Humanities Department would rather choose learning styles and objectives based on enjoyment.

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