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LEARNING & STUDY STRATEGIES IN A PRIVATE MEXICAN UNIVERSITY

Kutugata-Estrada Armando[1]., Araiza-Vázquez María de Jesús.[2], Orozco-Santa María, Ana María[3] & Xicoténcatl-Ramírez, Gabriela[4].

Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro[1], Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León[2] & Universidad Anáhuac[3]

akutugat@intercable.net; Cerro de Las Campanas S/N, Las Campanas, 76010 Santiago de Querétaro, Qro.

maria.araizav@uanl.mx; Ave. Universidad S/N, Ciudad Universitaria, San Nicolás de los Garza, N.L., 83294080 ext. 1956

anaorozco@prodigy.net.mx Calle Circuito Universidades No.1 Km. 7 Fraccion 2, El Marques, 76246 Santiago de Querétaro, Qro.

gabyxico@uaq.mx Cerro de Las Campanas S/N, Las Campanas, 76010 Santiago de Querétaro, Qro.

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Abstract

The following research allows determining the levels of learning and studying strategies from two courses called: Global Competence and International Context with students from a private Mexican university. The application of the inventory L.A.S.S.I. (Learning and study strategies inventory) gives the percentiles of the following areas: attitude, motivation, time administration, anxiety and concentration, process of information, selection of principal ideas, help to study, self-evaluation or control and test strategies. According to the: "Técnicas Psicométricas, Cát. II - Práctica de Investigación Claves de Corrección" from the "Asociación Iberoamericana de Diagnóstico y Evaluación Psicológica (2013)" the range from 30 to 70 in percentiles are considered acceptable, whereas the range from 71 to 90 in percentiles are very good for university students with a competitive profile. Even more, students with a range over 90 are considered extraordinary with a high level of achievement and outstanding skills and strategies. With these results, the research team would be able to compare levels of strategies between two courses from the area of humanities, in order to suggest recommendations to increase the level of learning and performance in relation to their learning and study strategies, taking into consideration the nature and structure, in terms of the activities and exercises of each course.

Key Words: Attitude, Motivation, Anxiety, Concentration, Skills & Habits

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Resumen

La siguiente investigación permite determinar los niveles de estrategias de estudio y aprendizaje de dos cursos denominados: Competencia Global y Contexto Internacional con estudiantes de una universidad privada Mexicana. La aplicación del inventario L.A.S.S.I. (Inventario de Estrategias de estudio y aprendizaje) muestra los percentiles de las siguientes áreas: actitud, motivación, administración del tiempo, ansiedad, concentración, procesamiento de información, selección de ideas principales, ayudas para el estudio, autoevaluación o estrategias para el examen. De acuerdo con el Técnicas psicométricas, Cát. II - Práctica de Investigación Claves de Corrección de la Asociación Iberoamericana de Diagnóstico y Evaluación Psicológica (2013) el intervalo entre 30 y 70 en los percentiles se considera aceptable, mientras que el rango entre 71 y 90 en los percentiles es muy bueno para los estudiantes universitarios con un perfil competitivo. Aún más, los estudiantes con un rango de más de 90 se consideran extraordinarios con un alto nivel de rendimiento y con estrategias y habilidades sobresalientes. Con estos resultados, el equipo de investigación debe ser capaz de comparar los niveles de estrategias entre los dos cursos del área de humanidades, con el fin de proponer recomendaciones para aumentar el nivel de aprendizaje y rendimiento en relación con las estrategias de estudio y aprendizaje, tomando en cuenta la naturaleza y estructura, en términos de las actividades y ejercicios de cada curso.

Palabras Clave: Actitud, motivación, ansiedad, concentración, aptitudes y habilidades

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Introduction

The main objective, in most of the private universities in the north region of Mexico, is to successfully maintain a high standard of academic excellency; in order to keep functioning in terms of competence and level of achievement from their graduates, once their academic training is concluded.

Adjusting their curriculum, training their academic staff, as well as keeping their exchange programs with other private universities abroad demands a continuous analysis of their academic processes in terms of the level of learning and studying strategies from their students.

Even though each university has their own internal quality standards such as evaluations of their professors' performances and acceptance submitted by students at the end of each semester, records of attendance and involvement in administrative and academic affairs from their staff, the level of learning and study strategies according to each student is yet to be taken into consideration, not only from the professor(s) in their own teaching planning of any course or subject, but also from directors regarding specific training courses and adjustments in their own curriculum when an area such as: attitude, motivation, anxiety, level of concentration, control and test strategies are affecting the level of learning.

In order to know the levels of such areas, the LASSI inventory (Learning and study strategies inventory) allows academics and researchers to find out high points and alert areas in which certain redirections must be taken into consideration. Furthermore, support and tutoring should also be considered when some of the previous areas are in a low range according to the analysis of such inventory.

Background

According to Hitchings & Retish, Gerber, Reis, McGuire, & Neu; as well as Ruban, McCoach, McGuire & Reis (cited by Hong, Heafner, & Slekar, 2011) successful university students are those who are able to control their strengths and limitations in relation to their performance in their educational process, achieving a better position in the employment field.

Furthermore, students with a self-determination are more likely to earn a higher income, as well as living an independent life as stated by the research done by Birel & Getxel; Madaus, Ruban, Foley, & McGuire; Stodden, Conwoy, & Chang; Wilosn, Getzel, & Browm; and Wehmeyer & Schwarts (cited by Hong, Heafner, & Slekar, 2011).

In order to develop students with these characteristics, universities and academic staff should encourage students to foster their degree of independence, responsibility and self-reliant. As a first step, professors should be able to know and understand the profile of their students, in terms of their learning and study strategies, defining areas of limitations in order to attend and guide their needs.

The use of the Learning and study strategies inventory (LASSI), will allow the academic entity to determine the areas in which students show a low rate, in percentiles. The areas covered by the LASSI are: attitude, motivation, time administration, anxiety, and concentration, process of information, and selection of principal ideas, help to study, self-evaluation or control and test strategies.

Most faculty members expect students of college to be independent, responsible and self-reliant or at least being able to demonstrate their abilities toward refining skills according to the National Survey of Student Engagement; Greene; Longley; and Shelley (cited by Hong, Heafner, & Slekar, 2011).

Literature review

Factors in learning effectiveness

Instructors and professors play a key role in the learning process of university students by providing reinforcement in learning skills. The students should be able to process values and goals beyond individual experiences into the working field (Lu & Lambright, 2010).

On the other hand, studies by Eyler & Giles (cited by Lu & Lambright, 2010) with college undergraduates' reflection activities were positively associated with problem solving abilities and older students believed that service learning improved their leadership skills, as well as the service learning had improved their abilities to work with other.

The right attitude from students has a direct relation with the positive attitude from their professors' performances. Vocalization and constant eye contact with students, improves the student's engagement and increases their level of retention according to Coats & Smidchens; Patrick, Hisley & Kempler (cited by Hains-Wesson, 2011).

Saade as well as Pierce, Stacey & Barkatsas (cited by Kara, 2009) showed that student's emotions, interest and beliefs about learning affected their behaviors. Karagiannopoulou & Christtodoulides (cited by Kara, 2009) showed that attitudes are more significant in terms of predictors in academic success in university students.

As far as motivation goes, it is important to considered the theoretical base of the concept that the main motive to learning is the gained satisfaction of the learning process by itself (de Oliveira Pires, 2009).

Taking this into consideration, we can find intrinsic and extrinsic motives towards motivation. In the intrinsic motives we find the epistemic motive as the satisfaction and pleasure of acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with the learning process. As a socio-emotional motive we find adults and young adults with the need to develop new relationships, establishing

social contacts as well as being integrated within a group. In terms of a hedonic motive the student involves in learning activities for the pleasure to participate and for the content of learning. In the extrinsic, the economic motive is related to promotion or an increase of salary that learning experience might provoke. The prescriptive motive is due to explicit external pressures such as an obligation or imposition. The derivate motive would be to avoid unpleasant situations or activities, therefore the student prefers to participate in the learning or training activity (de Oliveira Pires, 2009).

On the other hand, Patrick, Gentry and Owens (cited by Balduf, 2009) suggests looking for five indicators to continue motivating them with an interest. These indicators are: activities choices, activity level, engagement behaviors, persistence, and continuing motivation. As far as concentration goes, Stuart and Rutherford's study found that the highest level of students' attention took place within the first 10 to 15 minutes of instruction and then it decreased by progression, until the end of the lecture (Buke & Ray, 2008).

Study & Thinking Skills

According to Harris and Hodges (cited by Richardson, Robnolt & Rhodes, 2010), the concept of study skills is defined as the application of the mental faculties in the acquisition of knowledge as well as the techniques and strategies that would help a person to read or listen for specific purposes with the intent to remember the information.

In terms of higher education course design, to develop a variety of skills, the activities must foster creative and critical thinking, as well as a constructive approach, providing a training process for students that will demonstrate their behavior to organize and manage solutions to real problems (Newman, 2008).

On the other hand, the study effort operationalized as study time moderated the relationship between the ability and the academic performance, therefore students who spent more time

studying has an influence on their performance in a positive way (Nonis & Hudson, 2010). The study habits, skills and attitudes are strongly related to academic performance in college. In the same level: attendance, homework turned in, the use of a study guide, will increase a students' deep learning improving analytical thinking according to Gracia & Jenkins; Shaftel & Shaftel; Wooten; Hall, Ramsey & Raven; and Williams & Worth (cited by Yu, 2011).

Literacy & Study Struggles

Many college students struggle with the literacy skills needed to be successful in higher education according to Bettinger & Long, as well as, Snyder, Tan & Hoffman (cited by Gruenbaum, 2012). In this sense, there are several strategies to increase comprehension reading texts such as the ability to predict, clarifying the passages or section read by questioning and or summarizing the main ideas and supporting ones (Gruenbaum, 2012).

In the process of learning new concepts in the reading of texts Vermunt (cited by Van Bragt, Bakx, Bergen & Croon, 2011) mentioned five distinctive conceptions: the construct of knowledge build from a previous personal knowledge network structure; the use of knowledge emphasizing according to values acquired by knowledge and experience; the intake of knowledge focuses on the intake of information of fact retention; the co-operation by working together with other peers; and the stimulating state build by the need and impulse of learning more.

In terms of information-processing activities Van Bragt et al. (2011) found five different types which are: relating and structuring, critical processing, memorizing, analyzing, and concrete processing. However, as far as a regulation strategy refers by which a student is able to regulate himself while studying, Vermut and Vermetten (cited by Van Bragt et al., 2011) there are students who are self-regulated, able to direct themselves; external regulators, students who need someone else to direct them; and those who have a lack of regulation, students that do not know

what to do, when or why, as well as where to start and go. This last group is in high risk of losing track of their achievement and required an immediate counseling by professionals and faculty members.

Strategies & Stress factors

A learning strategy describes the learning activities students would apply to study learning material. According to Ferla, Valcke & Schuyten (2009) we have two types of learning strategies: a deep learning strategy that would involve activities relating ideas and seeking evidence with the intention of understanding what has been taught, and a surface learning strategy with the main objective of memorizing and recalling and reproducing facts without a goal of understanding and applying this knowledge. In terms of activities, these should be active, experimental and reflective having a sequence in between that could build and culminate into an integrated learning objectives and competences (Murphy, MacLaren & Flynn, 2009).

The role of the professors and tutors is crucial, since they are the ones giving feedback and direction to the efforts and performances in a time period per day, week or due time of assignments that would encourage and guide the students' quality work, as well as their own improvement of achievements with an increasing motivation and positive attitude towards their own results handed in for evaluation (Murphy, MacLaren & Flynn, 2009).

The term stress is considered the result of the individual perception that they don't have the resources to cope with a perceived situation from the past, present or future according to Lazarus (cited by Robotham, 2008). In this sense, Shields (cited by Robotham, 2008) explained that positive stressors could make a student study harder; on the other hand, negative stressors might provoke suffering health and even mental problems.

In a general sense, the source of stress as well as the intensity could vary according to the level of resistance from each person. In some students the workload could become an issue as far as

fear of failure. The management of time and lack of control over time as well as examinations could cause a range of symptoms such as nausea, changes in eating habits and sleeping patterns as well as stomach pains. Students' response to stress in an emotional way with symptoms of fear, anxiety, worry, guilt, grief and depression, in a cognitive reactions with changes of behavior manifested by crying, abuse of self or others, smoking and irritability, and in a physical way such as sweating, trembling, headaches, weight loss or gain and any other body aches according to Misra, McKean, Wes & Russo (cited by Robotham, 2008).

Purpose and methodology

Purpose

Using the statistical procedure of percentiles in SPSS v.18 of the L.A.S.S.I. (Learning and study strategies inventory) inventory the calculations of variables in a descriptive statistics in percentiles would represent the values in the sample of 44 students; were 22 students are from the course "Global Competence" and 22 students are from the course "International Context". As a result of these statistical procedures, we could establish an analysis of the outcome in order to accept or refuse our null hypothesis stated as follows:

H_o - The level of learning and study strategies in students of the course "Global Competence" is higher than the students of the course "International Context" in an average scale.

Or on the other hand, we could accept or refuse the alternative hypothesis stated as follows:

H_1 - The level of learning and study strategies in students of the course "Global Competence" is lower than the students of the course "International Context" in an average scale.

Sample

The sample used for this study is composed by two groups of students, where in the course Global Competence was integrated by 22 students, 8 males and 14 females within the range of ages between 16 through 20. On the other hand, in the course of International Context the total of students was 22, with 7 males and 15 females with the same range of ages as the first course. Both courses are part of a common trunk offered to all careers in the private university.

Instrument and Procedure

Quantitative Approach

The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the LASSI of 77 items obtained by the authors using SPSS is .88. The Cronbach's alpha obtained in our research using SPSS-18 is of .93. According to the study "Técnicas Psicométricas, Cát. II - Práctica de Investigación Claves de Corrección" from the "Asociación Iberoamericana de Diagnóstico y Evaluación Psicológica" (2013), from the 77 items from the Mexican Version of the L.A.S.S.I. inventory, 35 items are direct with the Likert Scale of Never = 0, Few Times = 1, Sometimes = 2, Frequently = 3, and Always = 4; where the inverse items are 42 with the Likert Scale of Never = 4, Few Times = 3, Sometimes = 2, Frequently = 1, and Always = 0.

The L.A.S.S.I. inventory is composed of 10 concepts, which are: attitude, motivation, time administration, anxiety, and concentration, process of information, and selection of principal ideas, help to study, self-evaluation or control and test strategies. The values of each variable are assigned by percentiles using the program SPSS v.18, assigning ranks of cases in order to calculate the percentiles using the formula (((RACT-.5(/57)*100). Afterward, the analysis is done by a descriptive statistics by frequency of percentiles. The analysis of the L.A.S.S.I. was performed as a group taking into consideration the percentiles per group, therefore, the analysis and interpretations will be performed per group.

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Data Analysis and Findings

Quantitative Analysis

Table1: Course "Global Competence" per group.

Gender	Age	ACT	MOT	ADT	ANS	CON	PDI	SIP	AAE	AOC	EDP
1	e	16	23	7	18	2	57	2	2	18	18
2	e	52	61	57	39	98	39	80	20	50	86
2	d	11	45	2	30	14	64	34	89	73	43
2	e	39	32	25	61	73	16	16	84	30	18
1	e	20	45	36	68	36	50	86	52	61	18
2	c	64	45	80	82	80	64	34	34	30	66
2	e	52	68	36	82	36	27	66	52	41	66
2	e	52	16	14	39	57	50	48	80	91	66
1	e	39	45	45	55	57	7	48	14	30	43
1	e	98	11	57	68	91	93	66	52	91	43
2	e	86	98	98	82	57	27	93	52	11	80
2	e	2	5	14	2	25	39	16	52	80	18
2	e	27	57	86	93	14	16	66	27	5	57
1	d	64	23	57	55	57	16	34	7	5	43
2	e	93	93	93	48	36	82	98	93	91	98
2	d	27	75	25	7	14	82	16	27	61	30
2	e	39	82	45	18	73	82	66	73	73	43
2	e	77	89	73	39	36	98	86	98	91	86
1	e	7	5	25	25	14	2	25	52	41	2
2	d	86	68	73	11	57	39	7	14	50	7
1	d	7	82	8	9	9	8	6	5	6	9

		0		6	8	1	2	6	2	1	3
		7		6	8	8	7	4	7	1	7
1	e	7	32	6	2	4	0	8	3	8	5

Note. Gender: 1 = Male & 2 = Female; Age: a = 16 yrs., b = 17 yrs., c = 18 yrs.,
d = 19 yrs., & e = 20 yrs.
ACT = attitude / MOT= motivation / ADT= time administration / ANS= anxiety /
CON= concentration / PDI= process of information / SIP= selection of principal ideas/
AAE= Help to Study/ AOC= self-evaluation or control / EDP= test strategies

Table 2: Course “International Context” per student.

Gender	Age	CT	OT	DT	NS	ON	DI	IP	AE	OC	DP
1		0	5	6	8	6	0	6	2	1	8
1		9	5	5	5	7		8	4	0	3
1		8	1	7	8	1	3	6	2	1	3
1		4	3	7	5	7	6	4			3
1				5	5	4		5	2	1	
1		0	2	6	8	1	2	6	2	1	3
1		7	2	6	2	4	0	8	3	8	5
2		6	3		8		7			8	8
2		2	1	7	9	8	9	0	0	0	6
2		1	5		0	4	4	4	9	3	3
2		9	2	5	1	3	6	6	4	0	8
2		4	5	0	2	0	4	4	4	0	6
2		2	8	6	2	6	7	6	2	1	6
2		2	6	4	9	7	0	8	0	1	6
2		6	8	8	2	7	7	3	2	1	0
2				4		5	9	6	2	0	8

2	7	7	6	3	4	6	6	7		7
2	3	3	3	8	6	2	8	3	1	8
2	7	5	5		4	2	6	7	1	0
2	9	2	5	8	3	2	6	3	3	3
2	7	9	3	9	6	8	6	8	1	6
2	6	8	3	1	7	9		4	0	

Note. Gender: 1 = Male & 2 = Female; Age: a = 16 yrs., b = 17 yrs., c = 18 yrs., d = 19 yrs.,
& e = 20 yrs.
ACT = attitude / MOT= motivation / ADT= time administration / ANS= anxiety / CON= concentration
/ PDI= process of information / SIP= selection of principal ideas/ AAE= Help to Study/
AOC= self-evaluation or control / EDP= test strategies

According to the "Asociación Iberoamericana de Diagnóstico y Evaluación Psicológica" (2013), the interpretation of the results in percentiles (Table 1 & 2) **accepts the Alternative Hypothesis:**

> **H_1** - The level of learning and study strategies in students of the course "Global Competence" is lower than the students of the course "International Context" in an average scale.

This result takes into consideration the following guideline: the values between 30 through 70 represent an acceptable development of the concept analyzed. However, the values between 25 or lower rank reflects concrete difficulties and areas to improve by teaching and learning strategies to reinforce the skills and abilities the students should develop and sustain along their studies. On the other hand, the values from 75 and over would represent excellent strategies, skills and/or habits that will assure them the fulfillment of their academic programs without relevant problems as far as their learning and study skills and strategies are concerned.

Group Analysis

Comparing the results in percentiles between the two groups, the students in the course "International Context" have a higher percentile for 49.9%, whereas the students in the course "Global Competence" have 39.5 %; therefore the level of strategies and study skills are higher in the course "International Context".

Taking into consideration the design of both courses, in the case of the course International Context, the students worked, by the didactic strategy of collaborative learning. On the other hand the course Global Competence worked by the didactic strategy of cooperative learning. In the collaborative learning, students are more independent and are taught to work at their own timings and rhythm. On the other hand, in the cooperative learning, the students are guided and directed permanently by a tutor or teacher, giving them the steps and process to follow (Hellstrom, 2007).

According to Brewer & Klein (2006, p. 332), "Frequently used in cooperative learning…the role of each group member is named by function. In other cases, group members are given a script or set of sequenced directions". In these sense, each student would have specific tasks to accomplish as an individual and with the effort and work of others, as a group, they will be able to reach their goal with steps or directions from their tutors or professors. However, in some cases with small groups, a reward must be offered for some students to work with others, especially when they lack of intrinsic motivation to work with one another (Brewer & Klein, 2006).

> "In the context of collaborative teaching, those college students who think relativistically…may employ different learning styles based on pragmatism in diverse contexts. On the other hand, those students with absolute or formalistic thinking are likely to choose either technical or lecturing teachers as their role models" (Chiou, 2008, p.131).

Therefore, the way of thinking within the students from university must be taken into consideration, in order to fulfill the best strategies to increase their learning and study skills. Studies focused on learning disabilities mainly analyzed difficulties in three domains such as academic, behavioral and emotional instability, and lack of success according to Baxton, Milem & Sullivan; Heiman & Parcel; and Winter & Yaffe (cited by Heiman & Kariv, 2004). In this sense, for example, students with a learning disability in reading reported also insufficient time to organize and manage their study schedules, suffering from lack of energy to address their difficulties. As a result of this condition, those students may impede social adjustment and influence his or her behavior as well as an emotional adjustment, according to Barton & Fuhnnan (cited by Heiman & Kariv, 2004).

It is relevant to consider that the perception of a learning style is understood as an individual's preferred way of responding either cognitively and behaviorally to a learning task that might change depending to the environment or context as the European Learning Styles Information

Network (ELSIN) explains according to Evans, Cools & Charleswoth (2010).

The concept of learning style has been investigated in the educational psychology literature with authors as Claxton & Murrell and Schmeck (Omidvar & Tan, 2012). “Students must also learn how to use a variety of learning strategies and resources in order to conceive innovative notions or implement them in an innovative manner” (Liu, Lin, Jian & Liou, 2012. p. 172); with this, their level of learning will increase and their level of motivation towards the learning process will be more fulfilling.

On the other hand, recognizing that students have limits in their levels of concentration, professors can intervene to solicit a higher level of concentration by varying active measures such as exercises, questions, special assignments to redirect their attention and gaining their concentration towards the course. (Burke & Ray, 2008).

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Future study and limitations

Besides the results of the L.A.S.S.I. instrument, a qualitative perspective is in order to have a holistic analysis of learning and study strategies in university students, these may include deep interviews to former students, focus groups performed with students from the sample selected, and/or a written survey with open questions which will give a rich material to add to a future research.

In order to achieve this, a financial support would be necessary as well as a large team of researchers and/or assistants to accomplish the demands of a more sophisticated research with a mixed methodology; as well as the permissions and legal authorizations required to perform the interactions with the students within the campus, were the qualitative section would take place.

However, the present research gives a complete result in terms of the levels in percentiles of the learning and study strategies in university students. Therefore, the activities from the academic staff must be taken to action in order to increase the level of the learning process taking place in the private university.

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