

# Learner variability in English for Academic Purposes classes

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As educators, we may often hear the term learner variability, especially when working with English for Academic Purposes (EAP) because classes consist of learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Before I delve into defining learner variability, I invite you to take a moment to reflect on yourself as a learner at a specific time in your life and ask yourself these questions: How old were you then? Which language(s) were spoken in your home? Which specific cultures do you think may have contributed to shaping your behaviours or activities as you grew up? How did your personal life affect your learning performance? Do you think you learned the same way as your peers did—by using the same strategies or taking the same amount of time, etc.? If you think you learned differently, what made you unique compared to your classmates? The responses to these questions may indicate some factors or characteristics that contribute to understanding learner variability. While the concept of learner variability can be studied to identify solely student needs to support student learning, Pape (2018) defined learner variability as how individuals are different from each other and how it encompasses both learner strengths and needs. Learner variability can fall into the following categories: cognitive, social-emotional, and academic (CAST, 2022b). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) addresses learner variability to foster inclusivity in the classroom (CAST, 2022a).

At this point, I would like you to think about the classes you have been facilitating. What factors related to cognitive, social-emotional, and academic skills can you observe or infer? This includes age range, first language, learning styles, personality traits, cultural background, prior learning, and academic readiness. How about the traits that are *invisible*? Some students may have health issues that negatively affect their learning performance. Some students, especially in EAP programs, may have learning disabilities, and these may go undiagnosed due to linguistic or cultural barriers. Also, students may be part of minorities. An example of a minority that I encountered recently in my class was of a student who was in a women's shelter with her child. These invisible traits will be unknown to educators unless shared by the student, but all of these factors play a role in how students relate to learning. It is crucial that learner variability be considered



the norm instead of the exception in classes, mainly in such diverse environments such as EAP.

Learner variability becomes multi-faceted in some contexts. To demonstrate how complex learner variability can be, an area worth emphasizing is culture. As Chita-Tegmark et al. (2011) stated, “culture informs all aspects of learning, from high-level reasoning skills to perceptual habits” (p. 17). However, there are so many variables within a culture. For example, people from the same culture may be divided by their socio-economic classes, gender segregation, or political affiliations. Immigration also plays a role in making culture a multi-faceted learner variability. For example, I was born in Brazil, but my first language was Japanese. Then, I moved to Canada and have lived here for almost half of my life. My cultural identity is not singular; it is plural. Culture greatly influences an individual’s values, personal preferences, and perceptions; variations exist even within a single country and are different per individual. Thus, learner variability is not static; viewpoints and experiences continue to change, and they affect students’ relationship with learning.

As educators, we can close our eyes and pretend that the one-size-fits-all teaching approach works, or we can open our eyes to the trend of identifying learner variability present in classrooms. The trend shows that there is a real need for facilitating pedagogical frameworks that account for learner variability and designing courses that differentiate learning to increase accessibility and engagement in all courses. First, we can embrace learner variability and address it in our classes. Next, we can bring different narratives to the class, so students can have exposure to similar life journeys being portrayed. Providing opportunities for students to share events that shaped their views and preferences that influence their learning allow students to connect on a personal level to the content and it helps with humanizing the curriculum making learning more relevant to each individual and it fosters long-lasting learning outcomes. Lastly, we can utilize UDL principles to address learner variability (refer to: <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>). Revising the questions in the first two paragraphs and reflecting on the response can be essential to identifying and addressing learner variability to support student success in such a diverse environment as EAP classes.



## References

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### Author Bio



Andreia Arai-Rissman has been an educator for over 22 years. She currently teaches Communication classes at George Brown and EAP at Seneca. She has experience teaching TESOL, ESL, test preparation, Event Planning, HR, and Hospitality and Leadership. She has also worked as an academic manager, a curriculum developer, a test examiner, and has worked for several colleges and private institutions. She holds a Bachelor of Arts, a Bachelor of Education, and a Master of Education. Her areas of interest are Universal Design for Learning, innovative curriculum planning, education and wellness, learning differences, psychology of learning and global citizenship.