

# EFL/ESL Freshman Students at UNA: The Case of the Millennials

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## Abstract

Higher education institutions in the modern world require meeting the needs of Millennials. These students show various learning preferences and a high degree of motivation in the process of developing their knowledge and skills with technology tools. The main objective of this study is to analyze if freshman students in three English majors at the National University (Heredia) present the characteristics of Millennials. Data were collected through a questionnaire designed by the researchers, and the results propose a series of teaching and learning strategies to help English teachers to meet the needs of these students.

**Key words:** Millennials, technological abilities, innovative teaching and learning activities, freshman students

## Resumen

Las instituciones de educación superior en el mundo moderno necesitan satisfacer las necesidades de los “Millennials” (Generación Y). Estos estudiantes muestran diversas preferencias de aprendizaje y una gran motivación en el proceso de desarrollo de conocimientos y habilidades con herramientas tecnológicas. El objetivo principal de este estudio es analizar si los estudiantes de primer año de tres carreras de Inglés en la Universidad Nacional (Heredia) presentan las características de los Millennials. Se recolectaron los datos a través de un cuestionario diseñado por las investigadoras, y los resultados proponen una serie de estrategias de enseñanza y aprendizaje que ayuden a los profesores de inglés a cubrir las necesidades de estos estudiantes.

**Palabras claves:** “Millennials”, habilidades tecnológicas, actividades de enseñanza y aprendizaje innovadoras, estudiantes de primer año de universidad

## Introduction

In the area of information, innovation, and knowledge, higher education institutions must integrate new innovative tools and emerging technologies into a traditional curriculum due to the educational needs of the *Net Generation* or *Millennials*. This new generation of students was born in or after 1982 and show different personal traits, learning styles, and life preferences. They are people who grew up during the age of video games, and are used to hypertexts, downloaded music, phones in their pockets, and a library on their laptops and have been networked most of their lives (Howe and Strauss, 2010).

This generation of students has made educators change their teaching practices and principles to meet their learning styles, needs, and attitudes. They also create challenges for educators to accommodate their demands in respect to digital knowledge, experiential learning, interactivity, and closeness. Skiba and Barton (2006) claim that contemporary higher education requires increasing demands for curriculum revisions due to the impact of information technologies on the Millennials.

Since this generation pursues digital learning, educators have raised the following questions: What makes this generation good EFL/ESL learners? How do they learn? Do EFL educators accommodate to their preferred language learning styles and strategies in the present? EFL/ESL educators have answered these questions by developing and implementing a postmodern pedagogy, learning-centered methodologies, and the use of advanced technological tools. Due to this reality in second language teaching, the purpose of this paper is to analyze if 2012 freshmen students in the courses of Inglés Integrado I and II of the Bachelor of English Teaching, Bachelor in I and II Cycle, and Diplomado in English at Universidad Nacional-Heredia have the characteristics of the Millennial generation. Likewise, it suggests how educators must use different technological and audiovisual tools in EFL/ESL classes in order to reach the students' interests to learn and to respond to the demands of this changing globalized world.

## Literature Review

This is an era defined as “the flow of technology, economy, people, values and ideas across borders” (ICDE, 2009, p.3). With the development of technology and easy access to mass media communication, it has become faster and simpler to approach new perspectives and pedagogical tendencies. For these reasons, educators need to use methods that encourage student exploration and independence to develop their own styles of learning. As Berryman (1991) states “teaching methods should give students the chance to observe, engage in, invent, or discover expert strategies in context” (p.5).

According to Amada (2008) and Morrissette (2001), educational systems today must be effective by recognizing and responding to a variety of students' characteristics which many times are external to the preparation and experience

of many educators who develop their competences probably before some decades ago. Postmodern students or Millennials, who tend to reject some teaching and learning methods and activities, encounter now some situations in the classroom that do not contribute to their own learning. They prefer to be more autonomous learners whose practices, behaviors, and attitudes contribute to make their learning effective, enjoyable, and challenging to reach the competences required to advance in their careers. Therefore, whenever educators respond creatively and pedagogically to these challenges, they have to “create and maintain stimulating learning environments with the use of effective classroom organization, interactive relationships and a climate of innovation” (Berryman, 1991, p.5).

When we mentioned the word “millennial”, we referred to a term that was ascribed to a group of students by Strauss and Howe according to Junginger (2008), and it was confirmed by a survey conducted in 1999 with students in the Fairfax County, Virginia school system. At that time, 56% of the students preferred the label “millennial generation”; “perhaps, because they are the first generation to reach adulthood in the new millennium” (p.2). They show diverse learning preferences acknowledged by Oblinger (2003) and Brown (2000) such as teamwork, a natural intelligence in understanding and using technology, using e-mail and instant messaging as natural communication and socialization tools, and a much more creative and innovative approach to solving problems. Certainly, to effectively educate them, higher education institutions must cover their learning needs and prepare educators to meet this generation in the classroom.

For Jonas-Dwyer and Pospisil (2004), these kinds of students have a high degree of motivation to look for ways to develop their knowledge and skills. They are people who grew up during the age of video games and are used to hypertexts, downloaded music, phones in their pockets, a library on their laptops, and have been connected most of their lives. This generation is also collaborative and social online and has a focus on understanding and building their knowledge through various strategies. These authors also point out that teachers need to adapt classroom methods to help students to develop the necessary competences and abilities to succeed in this globalized world; these students think critically, solve problems, use appropriate learning resources, and work cooperatively in teams and small groups. They demand from their teachers an increase in technological skill-base, to be able to communicate with them through a range of media and to change their teaching styles through the use of innovative tools such as blogs, iPods, or video games as part of their pedagogy. They should also design teaching and learning activities to meet students’ learning styles and expectations.

Several authors (Howe and Strauss, 1991; Tapscott, 1998; Taylor, 2006; Junginger, 2008; Carlson, 2005; and Monaco and Martin, 2007) have written about the characteristics of this generation. They agree that Millennials are:

- Special, team oriented, confident in their abilities, multitasking, pressured, with a strong desired to achieve and conventional
- Very technological, able to absorb information quicker, team oriented

- Independent and autonomous, open, inclusive of diversity, assertive and confident, creative and innovative, investigative, demanding of information and people
- Smart but impatient, carry lots of electronic devices.

These are personal characteristics and competences that make this generation unique. As a result, Medina (2012) recommends that a good understanding of the students' ways of learning allows educators to take different roles in and out of the classroom to achieve student academic success.

Azis (2012) recommends that in on-line courses, teachers must take advantage of the Millennials characteristics to improve the available experiences offered to the students in order to "facilitate their feelings of belonging and abilities to connect with their peers" (p. 1). Likewise, Ruppel, Griffin, and Fleming (2007) propose to accommodate these characteristics to ensure successful outcomes in the online courses. They state that the majority of these college students are very familiar with new technologies, own a computer, and use instant messaging, websites, Facebook, and other social networking sites. Oblinger (2003) explains how the flexibility provided by online courses attracts millennial students because they prefer experiential, interactive, and authentic learning situations like simulations, virtual laboratories, and games as methods to facilitate their learning.

To conclude we could say that nowadays there is a countless variety of digital tools, learning models, supporting data, and a thousand of different approaches that will help professors to prepare their Millennial students for their future jobs, and that those will be the defining characteristics that will guide the teaching and learning processes during this 21st century.

## **The study**

### **Participants**

Costa Rican students who fit in this new generation are seeking for degrees in the EFL majors at UNA, and for this reason, the researchers decided to identify the way they prefer to learn and study English as a way to promote their academic success. A study was conducted to 73 freshman students (51 female and 22 male) who were taking the course Integrado I from the Teaching English major (BEI) (23 students), English Diplomado (25 students), and I and II Ciclo English Teaching (25 students) during the first semester of 2012 (their first year in their program). The students' ages ranged between 17 and 21 years old (94% of the students). All of them lived in the Central Valley and 91% were full-time students.

## **Instruments**

To collect the data for the study, a questionnaire with open and closed questions was designed by the researchers. The first draft was piloted with five freshman students to assure their understanding in English (See appendix #1). It consists of two sections. The first section included questions: 6 for personal information and 8 for activities they practice very often or daily, and the second aimed at finding out characteristics to describe their personalities. The second section consisted of 12 questions with a Likert scale of agreement (i.e. strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree) about their learning styles, strategies, and preferences in relation to the learning of English. This was an anonymous instrument.

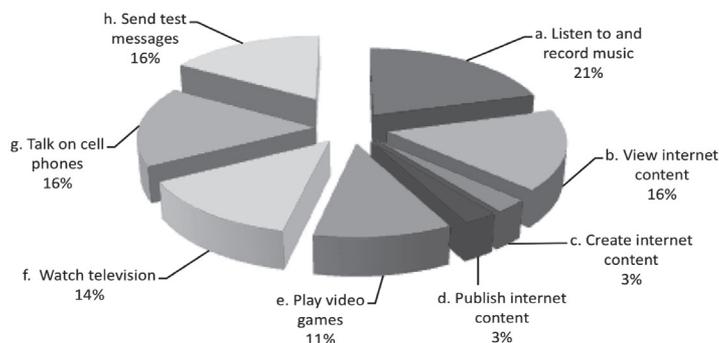
## **Procedure**

This study followed a quantitative approach to accomplish its objectives. First, the questionnaire was designed in English according to the principles and descriptions of what Millennials do. Then, it was piloted to five students in order to verify their understanding of the language. A few changes were recommended to clarify some terms. The questionnaire was administered in the 10th week of the first semester of 2012. The professors of the groups granted the permission to visit their classrooms to administer the questionnaire. The students were explained the purpose of the study, and they were given 40 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

## **Results and analysis**

As it was stated before, the participants in the first part of session one answered eight questions about activities that they practice every day (see graph 1), and 56% of them mentioned that they talk on the phone, send text messages, play video games, and view Internet content as their daily activities for natural communication and socialization tools. Also, 38% of these students mentioned digital media as most important. But only 6% actually published and created content on the Internet. This shows that they are familiar with ICTs, and digital media; so they possess useful digital skills for the use and management of those applications, but they need more practice in publishing and creating content on the Internet if they want to be successful in the world of information, with “those skills and competencies young people will be required to have in order to be effective workers and citizens in the knowledge society of the 21st century” (Ananiadou, 2009, p.8).

**Graph 1**  
**Activities practiced by Students Every Day**



In the next part of session one, a list of seven Millennial students' personal characteristics described by Tapscott (1998) (cited by Howe and Strauss, 2003) was included, and asked the students to select the ones they considered similar to their own personalities. Consequently, they describe themselves as: 26% independent, 25% curious, 14% active information seekers, 11% information and multimedia expert, 9% persistent, 8% risk-taker, and 7% resourceful (see graph 2). According to these results, the respondents fit very well under most of the Millennials main characteristics, so professors at UNA must use a variety of instructional and innovative methods to reach this generation.

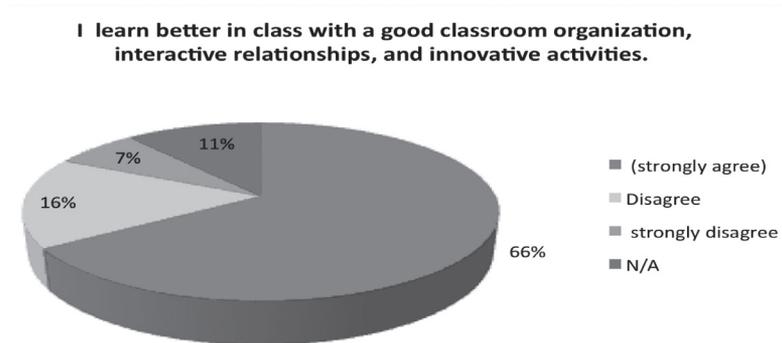
**Graph 2**  
**Characteristics that describe students' personality**



The second section consisted of 12 questions with a Likert scale of agreement (i.e. strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree) in relation to their learning styles, strategies, and preferences to learn English. In question No. 1, 66% strongly agree that they learn better in class with good classroom

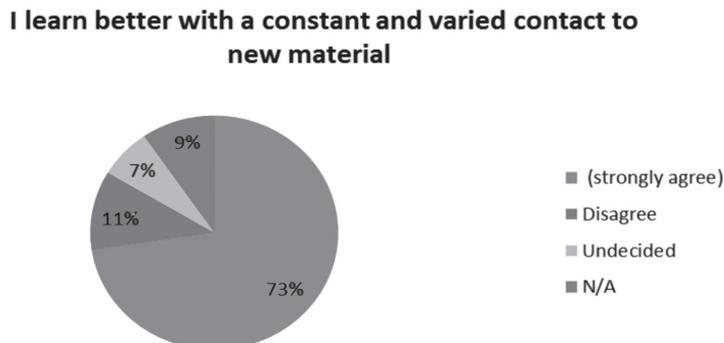
organization, interactive relationships, and innovative activities. A lower number of only, 26%, disagree or strongly disagree with this statement (see graph 3). The majority of the students, as good Millennials, care for good classroom organization: which means that the teacher plans the lesson in advance, times it from beginning to the end, and gives appropriate and clear instructions for the students to complete tasks in an interactive relationship with the content learned.

**Graph 3**  
**Question 1**



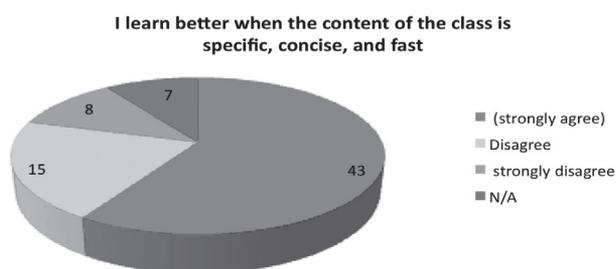
As it is shown in Graph 4, question 2 of this second part, 73% of the students strongly agree that they learn better with a constant and varied contact to new material, and only 20% of them disagree or strongly disagree to this affirmation. Motivating students is one of the abilities that effective teachers must have while using materials such as visual aids, books, games, oral presentations, and technology. This allows them to engage in critical thinking activities and construct their own learning.

**Graph 4**  
**Question 2**



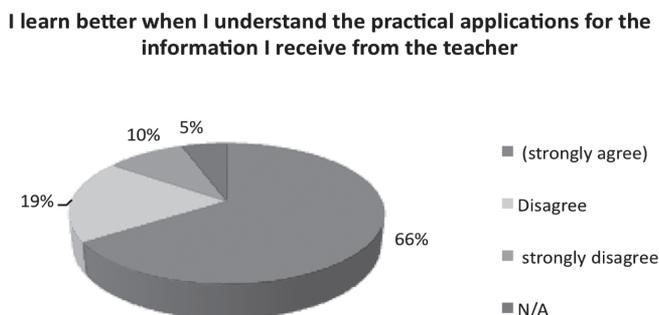
In the question 3, the students who scored higher, 59%, strongly agree that “they learn better when the content of the class is specific, concise, and fast”, and the other 31%, disagree or strongly disagree (see Graph 5). Active learning theories such as constructivism and cooperative learning organize knowledge in different ways in order to motivate students according to their learning styles and interests. Teachers can make it more fun and meaningful if they plan their classes and organize the content they will teach in a more effective way.

**Graph 5**  
**Question 3**



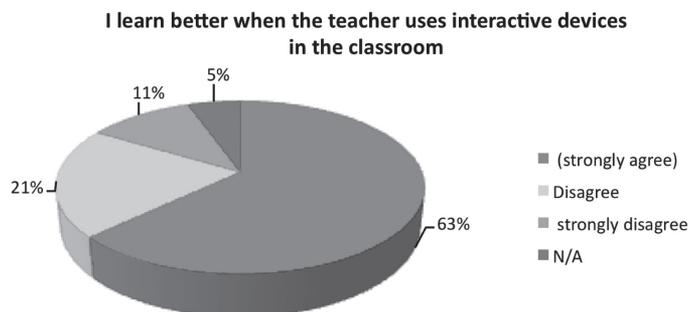
In question No 4, most of the students (66% in total) strongly agree that they learn better when they understand the practical applications of the information they receive from the teacher (see graph 6). McLeod (2010) pointed out how learning-style models classify students according to the way they receive and process information. Kolb (1984) talked about the importance of knowing the students’ learning style “to enable learning to be orientated according to their preferred method” (p. 2). That means that teachers must adapt their pedagogical practices to these learning styles in order to motivate the students in the content they learn.

**Graph 6**  
**Question 4**



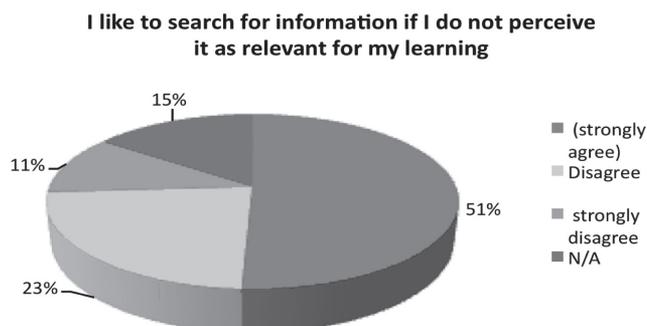
In relation to question 5, if they learn better when the teacher uses interactive devices in the classroom, 63% strongly agree with this statement and the other 33% disagree or strongly disagree with it (see graph 7). Teaching methods and classrooms are changing because of the use of ICTs in the classroom. Teachers need to be experts in the use of innovative and interactive classroom activities with the use of these new technologies to help their students to construct knowledge through their engagement and interaction.

**Graph 7**  
**Question 5**



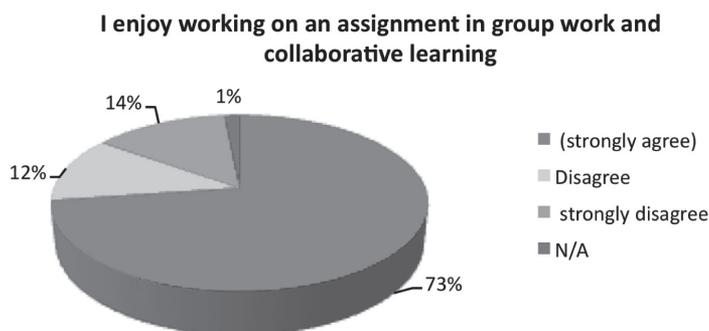
In question 8, students responded to the questions if they like to search for information when they do not perceive it relevant for their learning. 51% strongly agree, and the other 34% disagree (see Graph 8). According to Bates and Sangra (2011), Millennials prefer to learn “by doing rather than being told, and to be in an active engagement in issues that really matter to them” (p.1), and these students are no exception.

**Graph 8**  
**Question 8**



For question 9, 62% strongly agree that they prefer to design their own language study plan to make progress in English, and 28% disagree or strongly disagree. According to the results, these students showed that, as Millennials, they are characterized by the need of alternative methods to complete tasks, and do not like traditional schedules when learning English. Millennials are “team oriented” since they love to work in groups in collaborative learning, as it is showed in the answer to question 9, where 73% of the students strongly agree that they enjoy working on an assignment in group work and collaborative learning, and just 26% disagree or strongly disagree with this statement (see Graph 9).

**Graph 9**  
**Question 10**



In question 11, 64% answered that they like to learn how and where to find what they need when they need it. That means that the majority of these university students succeed when given clear and specific instructions, feedback, and the opportunity to construct meaning by themselves.

**Graph 10**  
**Question 12**



In the last question of the survey, 66% of the students strongly agree that they are very independent learners and can achieve their language learning goals on their own most of the time: 29% disagree or strongly disagree (see graph 10). Something different to what Monaco and Martin (2007) stated when they listed the “Millennials notable characteristics”, because according to them, these type of students need to have “immediate feedback and expect to succeed in the classroom, with the use of activities already planned for them” (p. 1).

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

The Millennial students that now make up the undergraduate population at UNA are different from older generations. Understanding and respecting their new personalities and characteristics prepare educators to adjust the teaching strategies to engage them in the learning process. The following are some recommendations that will help educators deal with this type of students:

- Facilitate their learning with the use of on-line courses
- Provide them with both structure and flexibility in the courses
- Motivate their preferred teamwork approach
- Provide them with collaborative environments inside the classrooms
- Access individual learning
- Challenge and provide them with relevant classroom materials and activities
- Stay current in modern topics
- Set expectations and develop new measures of learning more appropriate for them
- Entertain while educate them
- Emphasize classroom settings for group learning and problem solving activities
- Use tools and approaches to teaching and learning that reflect the experiences and communication habits of Millennials such as: blogs, wikis, social networking, podcasts, or online videos
- Offer classroom and out-of-classroom opportunities for students personal awareness
- Give less emphasis on the accumulation of personal knowledge and more on tools necessary for informational retrieval
- Model to students what is important and valued as higher learning
- Discard traditional learning and teaching methods and embrace new, technology-driven teaching
- Place the responsibility for learning on the students
- Provide students with a variety of teaching methodologies and opportunities to acquire knowledge and demonstrate their competencies
- Realize the amount of learning they need to provide the most learning to the students

This list of recommendations will help professors at UNA and other higher education institutions to be effective in their teaching processes while they deal with the learning styles and special learning characteristics that the millennial students bring to our educational centers.

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3. Place of origin: \_\_\_\_\_  
 4. Place where you currently live: \_\_\_\_\_  
 5. Current job position: \_\_\_\_\_ (If applicable)  
 6. Major: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Which of the next activities do you practice? Mark with a check. You can mark as many as you do.

Activity	Very often	Every day
a. Listen to and record music		
b. View internet content		
c. Create internet content		
d. Publish internet content		
e. Play video games		
f. Watch television		
g. Talk on cell phones		
d. Send text messages		

8. Which of the next characteristics describe your personality? Mark with a check mark.

Characteristic	
Information and multimedia expert	
Active information seeker	
Risk-taker	
Independent	
Curious	
Persistent	
Resourceful	

9. Please answer all the questions by marking one of the choices.

*SA*                      *A*                      *U*                      *D*                      *SD*  
*Strongly agree*        *Agree*                      *Undecided*            *Disagree*                *Strongly Disagree*

<b>Question:</b>	SA	A	U	D	SD
1. I learn better in class with a good classroom organization, interactive relationships and with innovative activities.					
2. I learn better with a constant and varied contact to new material.					
3. I learn better when the content of the class is specific, concise and fast.					
4. I learn better when I understand the practical applications for the information I receive from the teacher.					
5. I learn better when the teacher uses interactive devices in the classroom.					
6. I enjoy when the teachers use innovative tools such as blogs, iPods, or video games as part of their teaching tools.					
7. I prefer to use different forms of communication with my classmates and teachers such as: e-mails , wikis, webcasts, news groups, message boards or chat room.					
8. I like to search for information if I do not perceive it as relevant for my learning.					
9. I prefer to design my own language study plans to make progress in English.					
10. I enjoy working on an assignment in group work and collaborative learning.					
11. I like to learn how and where to find what I need when I need it.					
12. I am a very independent learner who can achieve my language learning goals on my own most of the time.					

Thanks for your cooperation!

