



UNIT 1.

ATTENTION: FACTORS AND DESCRIPTORS

AIM
to learn the
basic
concepts
related to
attention,
their factors
and ways to
improve it.

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Unit 1. Attention: factors and descriptors

1.1. What are the most important factors that influence students' attention span?

Attention span is the amount of time spent on focusing on a task before becoming distracted. There are multiple factors that can affect students' attention. As we can find in some studies, they can be summarised in some categories, which include:

1. **Intellectual factors:** individual mental abilities can affect the level of attention and performance.
2. **Learning factors:** methods of study, instruction and background are essential to continue engaged on one particular subject. For example, reading strategies become crucial when studying history.
3. **Physical factors:** a physical handicap can interfere with the level of attention and performance.
4. **Mental factors:** attitude plays an important role. A positive attitude facilitates the learning process.
5. **Emotional and social factors:** emotions and personal motivations affect the attention span. Some students have developed a dislike towards a specific matter, while others are eager to get some instruction on the same topic.
6. **Teacher's personality:** the instructor is a fundamental element in the learning environment. It may change the attitude and predisposition of students. A good teaching training is essential to keep students' attention.
7. **Environmental factors:** learning conditions can affect positively or negatively students' attention span and performance.

In general, attention does not only imply focusing on one task, but also ignoring the rest of elements that can disturb our environment. It implies cognitive conditions and also elements such as interest, motivation, emotions or memory. There are some points to take into account when dealing with the term:

- Attention is limited; multitasking affects it negatively.
- Attention involves eliminating distractors.
- Attention is a natural component of our cognitive system (that is to say: it is innate).

1.2. Types of attention

Attention can be divided in different categories:

- **Non-Volitional (involuntary) attention:** will doesn't play an active role in it.
- **Volitional (voluntary) attention:** it demands a certain effort to accomplish a determinate task.

- **Sustained attention:** it implies paying attention to one particular activity while avoiding distractions.
- **Selective attention:** the subject decides to pay attention to one single stimulus ignoring the rest. It depends on their particular attentiveness.
- **Divided attention:** known also as *multitasking*, it implies paying attention to two or more tasks at the same time.
- **Alternating attention:** while paying attention to two tasks, attention shifts to one to the other activity alternately.
- **Visual attention:** it consists of only paying attention to visual elements, ignoring the rest.
- **Auditory attention:** paying attention to the sense of hearing ignoring the rest of inputs.

1.3. Determinants of attention

Attention can be altered by external and internal factors:

- **External factors:** they can be connected with the nature, intensity or size of the catalyst. The extension of the exposure to the stimulus will also determine the strength of attention. There are other factors, such as motion, that can alter our attention span: a moving stimulus will catch attention faster than a motionless one.
- **Internal factors:** there are subjective factors such as interests, motive, attitude or moods that can affect attention. In addition, the mental readiness of the subject will also play a role in their attention span.

1.4. How to keep students' attention activated

Research has revealed that explicit instruction on how to keep students' brain activated and focused can help them to support self-directed learning. The objective is to help them understand that they can control and maintain their attention on a task in a conscious way.

There are many examples of moments when students keep all their attention on a single task, such as reading a good book or perfecting a ballet move. This way, they can purposely focus on a different task, as a learning subject. We can describe some examples of how attention improves the learning process:

- Being at school, paying attention to the lesson ignoring all noise coming from the hallway, for example.
- Switching from one subject to another when there are different lessons in a day.
- Finishing homework or assignments before checking the mobile phone or playing a videogame.
- Identifying the most important aspect of a task and focusing only on that.

As any other skill, attention can be trained to get the most of it and students must know it. Teachers/trainers must give students good reasons to train for it. People with a good attention span are better at remembering things, have a higher level of metacognition and higher-order thinking processes.



Teachers must also regulate their level to match the attention span of their students. An interesting way to do it is presenting the new knowledge in small pieces or *chunks*, especially for the youngest ones. Other ways to increase the level of attention could be:

- Build curiosity to make students interested in the matter.
- Find ways to make content relevant for students' interests.
- Ask questions to engage them in the subject.
- Prepare a variety of activities.
- Emotions can help an activity to be interesting or appealing.

References

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