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The research presented is the first part of a longitudinal study whose aim is to obtain a better understanding of students' academic behavior from the time they enroll at the university until the conclusion of their studies, in other words, during their academic trajectory. Based on demographic particulars and students' perceptions of their experiences in terms of factors known to affect academic performance, the current findings provide a profile of undergraduate students at an early stage of their studies in English Language Teaching Programs in public universities in Mexico. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire administered to 446 students at eight participating universities belonging to the states of Aguascalientes (UAA), Puebla (BUAP), Hidalgo (UAEH), the state of Mexico (UAEMEX), Tamaulipas, Tlaxcala (UAT), Colima (UCOL), and Veracruz (UV).

The questionnaire was constructed in keeping with the definition of *academic trajectory*, proposed by Cuevas (2001) in Fernández, Peña, and Vera (2006), as "...a set of factors and data that affect and account for the students' school behavior during their stay at the university. These factors can either be psychological and sociological (qualitative), or they can provide more precise data (quantitative) about students' academic performance." An analysis of the study's data reflecting the aforementioned factors reveals that there are more similarities than differences among the student cohorts, including a strong consensus that students are pleased with their BA programs.

The study's major findings suggest proposals for BA programs and university officials to consider in three broad areas. The recommendations respond to 1) students' interest and expectations about studying and working abroad; 2) students' neutral or mixed perceptions of tutorial programs vis-à-vis how well tutors respond to their academic and professional needs, concerning, for example, the development of stress-management skills and good study habits, as well as what guidance they receive related to personal concerns such as relationship issues; and 3) students' views, evident in their perceptions of teachers' performance and other classroom realities, on the importance of supportive and meaningful learning environments. The researchers conclude that follow-up and interventionist steps are warranted to address students' needs and, by doing so, to respond to universities' concerns about improving the quality of tertiary education in Mexico.

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Mtra. Bertha Guadalupe Paredes Zepeda  
Dra. María Cruz Chong Barreiro

Studies of student trajectories  
in language teaching programs in Mexico

# Studies of student trajectories in language teaching programs in Mexico



Mtra. Bertha Guadalupe Paredes Zepeda  
Dra. María Cruz Chong Barreiro



## MTRA. BERTHA GUADALUPE PAREDES ZEPEDA

Bertha Gpe. Paredes Zepeda is a full time professor at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo and for the past years teacher trainer and consultant in ELT. She holds a BA in ELT from Thames Valley University, UK; as well as an MA in ELT from the University of Warwick, UK. From 2003 to 2004 as a Fulbright teacher (FTEP), she taught English as a Second Language to Chinese immigrants in New York City, USA. She has published several articles, books and book chapters. Currently she is the head of the Applied Linguistics Department.

## DRA. MARÍA CRUZ CHONG BARREIRO

María Cruz Chong Barreiro is a full time professor at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo (UAEH). She holds a BA in Psychology from the Fundación Universidad de las Américas Puebla; and an MA in Education with a specialty in cognitive development from the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, as well as a PhD in Education Sciences from UAEN. Her main interest as a researcher is evaluation and educational planning. Chong Barreiro has published several articles and book chapters. She has also participated in research projects with funds obtained from CONACYT and PROMEP. She is currently the head of the Education Department at UAEN.

# Studies of student trajectories in language teaching programs in Mexico

Bertha Guadalupe Paredes Zepeda  
María Cruz Chong Barreiro  
(coordinadoras)



Universidad Veracruzana



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madrid@plazayvaldes.com  
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# CHARACTERISTICS AND ACADEMIC TRAJECTORY OF STUDENTS IN THE BA IN ENGLISH PROGRAM AT THE AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF TAMAULIPAS

*Nancy Audrey Delgado Hoy  
Efrén David Brande Martínez  
José Luis Martínez Guevara  
Mary Grace Killian Reyes*

## **Introduction**

At the Autonomous University of Tamaulipas, UAT (Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas), the BA degree in English is known as Licenciatura en Idioma Inglés (LII). Previously called Licenciatura en Lengua Inglesa (LLI), the degree was established in 2001 in the Unidad Académica de Ciencias Jurídicas y Sociales (School of Law and Social Sciences) at UAT in response to needs from several sectors of the labor market and, specifically, a call for bilingual (English-Spanish) professionals with strong communication skills. As Chris Kennedy, teacher, teacher trainer, and past president of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) has written: "... globalisation processes have resulted in changes in the status and use of English and especially in the spread of English as a global language" (Kennedy, 2012). The demand continues to grow as regional and national economies gain access to the global marketplace.

The significance for the University of Tamaulipas and other institutions of higher education in Mexico of this ever-increasing clamor for trained bilingual professionals may be described as follows:

- Firstly, as a need for qualified professionals with knowledge of English as a second language in the education, industry, and tourism sectors in Mexico and Latin America, and for the professionals' ongoing bilingual development.

- Secondly, as a need to improve the English-language skills of employees already in the marketplace, professionals who must demonstrate a strong command of English to have access to the diversity of job opportunities offered by companies who require trained personnel who can communicate confidently in English.
- And thirdly, as a need for professional translators skilled in fulfilling the specific requirements of various social sectors, mainly those related to the translation of official documents and academic and technical texts.

This growing need for English proficiency is further demonstrated by the findings of several studies. Data available from Randstad, an international employment-services and consultancy firm, indicate that, in several countries of Latin America, 75% of high-level management positions and 58% of companies offering jobs to undergraduate students require a certain level of proficiency in English (Universia, 2014). Further, the Research Center for Development, Centro de Investigación para el Desarrollo, A.C. (CIDAC), an independent, nonprofit think tank that conducts research and proposes viable policy alternatives for the medium and long-term development of Mexico, recently reported on a Professional Competence Survey (*La Encuesta de Competencias Profesionales*). It concluded that in the last two decades, there have been initiatives to improve English-language proficiency in Mexico, but in the opinion of some companies, the country is far from its goal to have Mexican undergraduates using English in a functional manner (CIDAC, 2014). Likewise, a paper by Diaz (2012) describing labor-market trends and requirements for business graduates from the University of Guadalajara reported that human resource managers and entrepreneurs, as well as employment agencies, recognizing that undergraduates' command of English falls short, suggested that English be included in university curricula.

During its 14 years, LII has graduated over 550 students in 19 classes. Most graduates are currently working in the private and public sectors of the region defined by the southern cities of Tampico, Madero, and Altamira, as well as 76 municipalities of the Huasteca zone, including the states of San Luis Potosi, Hidalgo, Veracruz, and Tamaulipas. A small number of graduates work as translators or draw on a combination of language skills to work as freelance translators and teachers, offering their services to the general public.

The current LII curriculum consists of a credit system in which subjects are organized into three nuclei focusing on different types of knowledge: Basic Education (Basico Universitario), Education in a Particular Discipline, and Professional Education. The curriculum offers two academic programs: the first, English Teaching; the second, Translation English-Spanish and Spanish-English. Both programs require students to take mandatory and elective courses, with the latter chosen according to students' personal interests and professional expectations. Curriculum paths are flexible, allowing students the freedom to select trajectories that reflect their specific needs and situations. The LII curriculum also provides opportunities for students to participate in either national or international academic mobility programs, in which they have the opportunity to complete a portion of their credits in similar programs abroad. To follow a typical completion timetable (TCT) for the BA program, a student's academic career spans four years, divided into eight semesters.

The study of students' academic trajectories at the Autonomous University of Tamaulipas described in this chapter is set in this curricular framework. It is worth noting that this research is the first of its kind at the university, an effort to identify students' characteristics and their perceptions of their academic experiences. The cohort of student-

participants surveyed began their studies in August 2013. At the time of the study, these BA-in-English students were in their third semester, August-December 2014.

Central to the rationale for conducting the study was the teacher-researchers' objective to know the program's students in a meaningful way. The researchers wished to determine students' perceptions of their academic achievement and university experience as well as their expectations for the future based on their studies in the BA program in order to better provide opportunities for enriching their academic performance while meeting their educational needs. This study gathered demographic and socioeconomic information about the student cohort so the data could be used, for instance, to infer or understand the causes of significant issues that arise for students during their university studies. Furthermore, the researchers envisioned that the students' own feelings and perceptions about such factors as their teachers' performance, the school's environment, and the content of the courses could be taken into account in efforts to restructure the current curriculum and review teachers' performance both as academics and tutors.

The next portion of the chapter describes how the data were collected and the makeup of the research instrument.

## **Methodology**

Forty-four students comprised the research cohort, 14 males and 30 females. As mentioned earlier, the students began their studies at LII in the August-December 2013 term and participated in the research during their third semester of the BA program.

The students were surveyed using a three-part printed questionnaire. Section A was designed to gather general quantitative information about the students including their socioeconomic status, previous educational trajectory, and tutoring history at the university.

Section B addressed students' perceptions related to factors likely to affect their university experience, including teachers' performance, theoretical and practical aspects of courses in the curriculum, the overall BA program, academic issues due to both external and personal factors, and involvement in the tutoring process. Students were also asked about their career beliefs and expectations. In response to these seven factors, students rated variables associated with the factors using a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing *Totally Disagree*, 3 signifying a *Neutral* response, and 5 meaning *Totally Agree*. Section C of the questionnaire looked for qualitative input from the participants. They were asked an open-ended question intended to gauge their feelings about the degree program and their academic experience thus far.

The 44 student-participants completed the questionnaire in their classroom during class time. The researchers gave precise instructions prior to distributing the instrument and responded to students' questions related to completing it. Since the questionnaire was administered by one of the authors of the study, knowledge and familiarity of the instrument was guaranteed, and students received proper orientation to it.

## **Results and Discussion of Results**

This section of the chapter reports on the results obtained directly from the questionnaires and provides analysis and comment on the data presented in tables that correspond to the discussion.

Turning first to personal demographics, the data reveal that nearly everyone in the cohort of 44 students is between the ages of 18 and 23. The outliers are one student who is 28 and another who is 43. In other words, there is no significant difference in the ages of most participants in the study. As indicated earlier, most students (60.2%) are female. Only

one respondent is married. Two students (4.5% of the respondents) have children; at the time of the study, one student was pregnant. This information is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1                    Age and Gender Profile of the Research Population**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Profile</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>
Age of Student-Participants	18-23	42
	24 or older	2
Gender	Female	30
	Male	14
Marital Status	Single	43
	Married	1
Students with Children	Yes	2
	No	42

Student-participants in the study come from five different states in Mexico. Most respondents (36 out of 44) hail from cities in Tamaulipas -- e.g., Tampico (52.3%), Ciudad Madero (22.7%), and Altamira (4.5%). This distribution is understandable given that the university campus is located within an urban area comprised of these three cities. González is the other Tamaulipas city identified in the data. Noteworthy is that the states of San Luis Potosí (6.7% of the sample) and Veracruz are also represented with students coming from Naranjos, Tantima, and the city of Veracruz. Tabasco and Nuevo León round out the list of “home” states for this student cohort.

According to their responses, students currently live in the cities of Tampico, Ciudad Madero, and Altamira, part of the previously identified urban area where the university is located. The city of Tampico was mentioned most often, by nearly two thirds of the students (63.6%), as their place of residence. Pánuco, a city in the northern part of Veracruz, was mentioned once. Pánuco is located 55 kilometers (34 miles) from the university which suggests that this student’s commute to class is likely 50 minutes, twice a day. The students’ places of origin and residency data are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2 Place of Origin and Current Residence of Students**

Variable	Place of Origin	Current Residence
Urban area (Tampico, Madero, or Altamira)	35 students	43 students
Other cities	9 students	1 student

The socioeconomic data obtained from the questionnaire include the education levels of the students' parents, as shown in Table 3. Twenty-five percent of respondents listed *high school* as their fathers' level of education, while 2.3% indicated that their fathers had attended high school but did not graduate. According to the responses, 20.5% of students' fathers attended elementary and middle or junior high school. One student reported that his/her father has a professional-technician degree; nearly 5% of students described their fathers' higher education studies as unfinished; nearly 30% indicated their fathers graduated with bachelor's or engineering degrees. Seven students (15.9%) reported they did not know their fathers' education level. The data for mothers' education levels covered a wide range -- from no studies (one mother) to a doctorate (one mother). Four students (9.1%) identified their mothers' level of education as *elementary school*. Middle school and high school accounted for more than half (52.3%) of the mothers' formal schooling, while three students (6.8%) identified *professional technician* as their mothers' education level. In addition to the mother who holds a doctorate, eight other mothers have higher education degrees (seven, a BA; one, a master's).

**Table 3 Educational Profile of the Students' Parents (N= 44)**

Education Level	Father		Mother	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
No Studies	0	0	1	2%
Elementary School	5	11%	4	9%
Junior High School	4	9%	8	18%
High School, Unfinished	1	2%	0	0

High School Graduate	11	25%	15	34%
Bachelor's Degree, Unfinished	2	5%	2	6%
Professional Technician	1	2%	3	7%
Bachelor's Degree	13	30%	8	18%
Master's Degree	0	0	1	2%
Ph.D.	0	0	1	2%
Doesn't know	7	16%	1	2%

Table 4 presents a summary occupational profile of the students' parents who work in a variety of employment spheres. Nearly 20% of students categorized their fathers as *general employees*; coincidentally, the same percentage of students reported that they do not know what their fathers do for a living. Some employment labels students assigned to their parents -- cabinetmaker and carpenter, for example; and teacher and professor -- show overlap. Other paternal occupations cited by the students were worker (9.1%) and driver (6.8%). A total of eight students indicated that their fathers work as engineers, professors, electricians, and teachers (two students named each profession). Turning to mothers' occupations, the cohort described 27 mothers (61.4%) as homemakers. This information could be interpreted to mean that most of the students' mothers are available to monitor and tend to the at-home needs of their children. It is important to note that the next highest occupation category mentioned for mothers was *teacher*, with seven mothers (15.9%) working in classrooms. It would be interesting to research further what, if any, impact the mothers' experiences in teacher-training programs have had on their children's decisions to study in the BA in English program at the University of Tamaulipas.

**Table 4 Occupations of the Students' Parents (N = 44)**

Employment	Number of Fathers	Number of Mothers
Unemployed	1	1
Retired	1	1
Various job titles including general employee, worker, office clerk, driver, etc.	21	5
Employed in the field/discipline in which they studied	10	8

Businessperson or Entrepreneur	2	1
Homemaker	0	27
Student doesn't know or didn't answer	9	1

In addition to identifying their parents' occupations, students were asked about the work their partners do. In fact, the study revealed that the great majority of students (70.5%) have no partner; among those who do, the most frequent occupation given for partners was *student* (18.2%). This is not surprising, given the age of the respondents. Other partner occupations offered by the respondents were offshore worker, supermarket employee, chemical engineer, teacher, and worker – each appearing once in the data.

Turning to economic aspects of their attendance at UAT, students were asked to describe their weekly educational expenses. Most (88.6%) reported that they consider the funds they use each week to pay for their studies to be a small or medium amount. In only five cases did students indicate that paying for their higher education is a *significant* expense. Therefore, one could assume that economic issues do not constitute a major hindrance to or burden on the students' educational experience. Further, one could suggest that their academic performance is not likely influenced by their perceptions of how much money they spend weekly on their formal studies. Table 5 summarizes these results.

**Table 5      Students' Perceptions of the Weekly Cost of Their Education**

Perceived Economic Cost	Frequency	Percent of Students
Low	14	31.8%
Middle	25	56.8%
High	5	11.4%

When asked about their work outside of school, most respondents (35 students, or 80% of the subjects) declared that they currently are unemployed. This information, combined with their youth (all but two students are between 18 and 23), supposes that they depend on the economic resources of their families to meet the costs of

their education. In fact, 90.9% of the students said their parents are the main providers of economic support. Nevertheless, nine students have jobs; three of these work in education or translation. Eight of the employed students reported that they work five to seven hours a day, almost full-time. Five students verified that their income falls short of serving as their main source of funds. Some students cited other financial obligations: Three indicated they have two dependents, and one student reported having four dependents.

In contrast, most students (93.2%) have no financial obligations beyond their own. Table 6 summarizes students' responses to questions about their economic resources and their employment. One of the 44 students indicated an additional monthly income apart from parental support or his/her own salary. The researchers infer that the additional income is from a scholarship the student received. From the data compiled, it may be said that studying in the BA program is the main activity for the majority of respondents.

**Table 6 Profile of Students' Economic Resources and Responsibilities**

Status		Frequency	Percent of Students
Employment Status	Not working	35	79.5%
	Working 4 hours per day	1	2.3%
	Working 5 hours per day	3	6.8%
	Working 6 hours per day	1	2.3%
	Working 7 hours per day	4	9.1%
Work related to the BA degree	Not related	6	66.7%
	Directly related	3	33.3%
Dependents	No	41	93.2%
	Yes	3	6.8%

The final socioeconomic aspect covered in the study questionnaire addressed where students live. The data are summarized in Table 7. According to their responses, 75% of students live in their parents' house that is not leased. This implies a measure of stability in their housing situations, which, in turn, may have a favorable impact on their academic

performance. As to the students' specific living arrangements, there was great diversity in their responses. Twenty-two students (half the cohort) live with their parents and siblings; the remaining students live with various combinations of extended family. In most cases, at least one parent is present. The fact that students live with their parents could be interpreted as assurance or stability; it might even influence the perseverance with which students pursue their studies. In other words, a student could perceive a parent near at hand as an interested observer – albeit, an informal one – monitoring his/her academic progress.

**Table 7** **Students' Housing Profile**

Living Conditions and Circumstances		Frequency	Percent of Students
Type of Housing	Leased	9	20%
	Owned	33	75%
	Other	2	5%
Living with...	Family (one or both parents, grandparents and/or siblings)	32	73%
	Siblings only	4	9%
	Friends	2	4.5%
	Cousins	1	2.3%
	Alone	2	4.5%
	Partner/spouse	2	4.5%
	No answer	1	2.3%

The last portion of Section A of the research questionnaire addressed students' previous academic records and their participation in the tutoring programs at the university. Students come to the University of Tamaulipas in similar numbers from public and private schools, as indicated in Table 8. Of those entering higher education from public schools, most have graduated from technological schools known as Dirección General de Educación Tecnológica Industrial (DGETI). Fewer students in the research cohort graduated from public "Science and Humanities Schools," which provide a general education in science and the humanities, with no focus on technological education. The private schools students

attended would be classified as small and medium-sized educational institutions established by local investors.

**Table 8**                      **Where Student-Participants Attended High School**

<b>High School</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent of Students</b>
Public Technological Schools	19	43.2%
Public Science and Humanities Schools	4	9.1%
Private Schools	21	47.7%

The data (Table 9) show that 55% of the respondents earned high school GPAs of 8.0; 32% of the students graduated from high school with a GPA of 9.0; and about a tenth of the students earned a GPA of 10.0. The range of grades reflects that students in the study cohort had a positive academic record upon entering the BA in English program.

**Table 9**                      **Students' High School GPAs**

<b>GPA</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent of Students</b>
7.0	2	4.5%
8.0	24	54.5%
9.0	14	31.8%
10.0	4	9.1%

Regarding the students' participation in the university's tutorial program (Table 10), the data show that nearly all students (90.9%) in the study were assigned a tutor. The BA degree offers students the opportunity for both individual and group tutoring. In the cohort of 44 respondents, almost half (45%) received both types of tutoring, while nearly as many (39%) participated in only group tutoring. Because there are too few tutors available, four students in the BA program had no experience with the tutoring process. Students who have not been assigned a tutor may request one, but the data do not indicate that any requests were made.

**Table 10**                      **Students' Tutorial Experiences**

<b>Type of Tutoring</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent of Students</b>
Individual	2	4.5%

Group	17	38.6%
Both	20	45.5%
No Tutoring	4	9.1%
No Answer	1	2.3%

Students attend tutoring sessions for many reasons. A recurring motivation to participate, as evidenced by the cohort's responses, is to receive information about one's academic standing. Table 11 offers a summary, using the students' own words indicated in italics, of their reasons to take part: *to review my academic transcript; to know my grades; to receive information on my academic performance*, etc. It is remarkable that some students indicated they attend tutoring sessions because they feel it is required: *I'm obligated to attend; I'm asked to go; I need to sign documentation; I was assigned to it*. In only a few cases did students perceive tutoring as helpful to them in their academic trajectory. Such responses included the following: *to receive general orientation; to check on my needs for orientation (about the BA program in general); and I have trouble with some subjects*.

**Table 11** Why Students Attend Tutoring Sessions

Students' Responses	Frequency	Percent of Students
<i>I have almost no tutoring</i>	1	2.3%
<i>We have tutoring when there's information for us</i>	1	2.3%
<i>I'm obligated to attend</i>	1	2.3%
<i>I was assigned to it</i>	2	4.5%
<i>I want to know my grades</i>	1	2.3%
<i>I'm asked to go</i>	7	15.9%
<i>I don't attend regularly</i>	4	9.1%
<i>We haven't got any tutoring</i>	3	6.8%
<i>I have no assigned tutor</i>	5	11.4%
<i>I've never attended</i>	5	11.4%
<i>I've never needed a tutor</i>	1	2.3%
<i>I receive information on my academic performance</i>	2	4.5%
<i>I receive general orientation</i>	1	2.3%
<i>I check on my needs for orientation</i>	1	2.3%
<i>I have trouble with some subjects</i>	1	2.3%
<i>I need to sign documentation</i>	2	4.5%
<i>I review my academic transcript</i>	6	13.6%

Table 12 shows that seven of the 44 students in the study attend the university on a scholarship. Six receive funding from PRONABES (PROgrama NAcional de BEcaS y Financiamiento), the National Financing and Scholarship Program. Additionally, one student in the BA program has a scholarship from the University Workers Union. Both scholarships provide 750 Mexican pesos per month.

**Table 12 Scholarship Profile of the Student-Participants**

Scholarship Details	Frequency	Percent of Students
No scholarship	37	84.1%
PRONABES	6	13.6%
Union Scholarship	1	2.3%

The discussion of the research results now turns to an analysis of the findings from Section B of the questionnaire. As mentioned earlier, students were asked to respond to seven factors affecting their academic trajectories and university experience by using a rating scale of 1 to 5, with 5 meaning *Totally Agree* and 1 signifying *Totally Disagree*.

Table 13 indicates that, in general terms, the students' perceptions regarding their teachers' performance (Factor 1) tended toward *agreement*, a rating of 4 on the Likert scale. (The Table also indicates that not all students responded to every variable.) The two variables with the highest *agreement* means were *explain content clearly* (4.2) and *adhere to the syllabus* (4.3). The means that clustered around a *neutral* perception (3, on the rating scale) were for the variables *identifies students' strengths* and *identifies students' limitations*.

**Table 13 (Factor 1) Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Performance**

Variable – Teachers...	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Provide feedback on students' participation	44	1	5	3.6	0.85
Motivate students to improve	43	2	5	3.7	0.79
Offer suggestions for improvement	44	1	5	3.5	1.13

Identify students' strengths	44	1	5	3.1	0.90
Identify students' limitations	44	1	5	2.9	1.07
Stimulate critical thinking	44	1	5	3.8	0.98
Have positive expectations of students	44	1	5	3.5	0.90
Explain content clearly	44	3	5	4.2	0.73
Adhere to the syllabus	43	2	5	4.3	0.86
Encourage academic discussion	43	1	5	3.6	0.80
Observe students' performance	44	1	5	3.5	0.92
Are mindful of students' previous knowledge	44	1	5	3.5	1.01

The data for the next factor measuring *Students' Perceptions of the Theoretical and Practical Knowledge of the Courses* appear in Table 14. The means in this case are higher than those for teachers' performance. The mean values registered above *agree* except in the *knowledge can be used in daily life* variable that was quite close to *agree*. The researchers can infer that students perceive the theoretical and practical knowledge in their courses to be useful, relevant, and up-to-date for their professional preparation. Further, students seem to have the opinion that the content of their courses is appropriate and adequate for their future teaching careers and that what is covered meets their needs as they recognize them at this stage of their training.

**Table 14** (Factor 2) **Students' Perceptions of the Theoretical and Practical Knowledge of the Courses**

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Knowledge in courses is useful	44	3	5	4.3	0.61
Planned activities contribute to learning	44	3	5	4.1	0.72
Knowledge provided is up-to-date	44	3	5	4.2	0.74
Knowledge can be used in daily life	44	1	5	3.9	0.95
Courses improve critical thinking skills	44	3	5	4.2	0.78
Courses contribute to problem solving	44	2	5	4.0	0.76

Factor 3 in the research instrument focused on how students perceive the BA program in general. The results are summarized in Table 15. In complement with students' assessment of the course content highlighted in Factor 2, they appear to believe that overall the language-training program and topics covered therein are up-to-date and pertinent for

their professional preparation. The data show students see the content of their courses as suitable for what they expect they will need to know as future teachers. However, the mean of 3.7 (a *neutral-tending-toward-agree* response) for the variable *content of courses needs updating* could be interpreted as an acknowledgment by students that all course content ought to be reviewed to meet the demands of particular contexts as well as the dynamic nature of the classroom. For the purpose of this investigation, it would be appropriate to query students further, to ask them in what ways they perceive their courses need improvement.

**Table 15** (Factor 3) **Students' Perceptions of the BA Program in General**

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Program has high standards	44	2	5	3.6	0.94
Courses foster the development of students' skills in group work	44	2	5	3.9	0.80
Content of courses is relevant	44	2	5	4.1	0.72
Content of courses is up-to-date	44	3	5	4.1	0.76
Content of courses needs updating	44	1	5	3.7	1.09
Hours allotted for courses are adequate to cover course content	44	1	5	3.7	1.13
Teachers work collaboratively to design program materials	44	1	5	3.6	0.99

According to the data presented in Table 16, addressing whether external factors contributed to students' academic difficulties, it appears that students did not perceive outside influences as hindering their studies. (As with Factor 1, a few students did not respond to every variable.) Overall, individual responses to the variables tended to fall in the *disagreement* range. It could be proposed that, absent other negative influences, positive academic performance may, in part, be a result of students' perceptions that external factors have had little effect on their studies.

**Table 16** (Factor 4) **Students' Perceptions of Academic Difficulties due to External Factors**

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Demanding teachers	44	1	5	2.7	1.06
Dissatisfaction with course content	44	1	5	2.7	1.13
Administrative processes	43	1	5	2.5	1.22
Complex course content	44	1	5	2.4	1.12
Distractions that inhibit studying	43	1	5	2.7	1.24
Program not meeting students' expectations	44	1	5	2.0	1.09
Presence of economic problems	44	1	5	2.2	1.26
Relationships with classmates	44	1	5	1.7	1.13
Relationships with teachers	44	1	5	1.9	1.09
Administrative procedures	44	1	5	2.2	1.24

As with perceptions of external factors, the results for Factor 5 that focus on the impact of internal factors on students' academic performance indicate that students do not seem to identify personal concerns as adding to whatever academic difficulties they have had, with the exception of the *family problems* variable that resulted in a mean of 4.0, or *agree*. The data are presented in Table 17. Although an analysis of the combined data for Factors 4 and 5 related to academic difficulties suggests that neither external nor personal aspects had a negative impact on students at this point in their academic trajectory, it would be valuable to check in with these students as they continue their studies to see whether or how the significance of these variables changes.

**Table 17** (Factor 5) **Students' Perceptions of Academic Difficulties due to Personal Factors**

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Lack of previous knowledge	44	1	5	2.0	1.09
Lack of dedication to studies	44	1	5	2.4	1.33
Problems relating to others	44	1	5	1.9	1.14
Lack of interest in content	44	1	5	2.3	1.20

Lack of stress-management skills	44	1	5	2.4	1.14
Personal problems	44	1	5	2.3	1.32
Poor study habits	44	1	5	2.5	1.35
Family problems	44	1	5	4.0	1.07

Factor 6 measured students' beliefs and expectations about their future lives as teachers. Participants' responses, summarized in Table 18, show positive expectations about their professional future and confidence that good job opportunities will improve their economic status. The results further reveal that these students identify with the BA's professional profile and that they have high expectations of their work life after graduation. The lowest mean (2.3) for Factor 6 showed *disagreement* with the variable *would consider changing their BA, if possible*. This finding appears to support the students' dedication to continuing their teacher-training studies, corroborated by a mean of 4.4 (*agree+*) for the variable that addressed their commitment to the program.

**Table 18** (Factor 6) **Students' Vocational Beliefs and Expectations**

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Envision themselves as English teachers in the future	44	1	5	4.3	0.98
Believe that the BA will allow them to have a teaching career	44	3	5	4.5	0.72
Believe that completing the BA is a factor in improving their economic status	44	1	5	4.3	1.00
Committed to studying in the BA program	44	1	5	4.4	0.97
Would consider changing their BA, if possible	44	1	5	2.3	1.55
Expect to develop professionally	44	2	5	4.2	0.98
Would consider the possibility of working or studying abroad	44	2	5	4.3	0.80
Expect to earn a good teaching salary in the future	44	2	5	3.6	0.93
Believe good job opportunities exist for graduates	44	2	5	3.9	0.83

The data in Table 19 capsule students' perceptions of their tutorial experience at UAT. (More than for any other factor, students did not respond to several variables.) The

researchers note that students' opinions of their tutors and the tutoring process tended toward *neutral*, with the exception of students who identified their tutor as someone who treats them ethically and respectfully (a mean of 3.9, nearly at the *agreement* level). The next highest mean, 3.5, reflected students' opinions of their tutors' communication abilities and whether the tutors demonstrated trust and empathy toward them. On the other hand, low means (2.4, 2.0) that expressed *disagreement* imply that students did not see their tutors either as resources who could provide information regarding scholarships or as guides who could suggest activities to complement their education and contribute to their personal development.

**Table 19** (Factor 7) **Students' Perceptions of the Tutorial Experience**

Variable – A Tutor...	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Treats students ethically and respectfully	44	1	5	3.9	1.07
Carefully supervises students' academic trajectory	41	1	5	3.3	1.19
Makes suggestions for improvement	41	1	5	2.9	1.25
Respects students' time and keeps appointments	41	1	5	3.1	1.10
Communicates well and shows trust and empathy	41	1	5	3.5	1.07
Is responsible and willing to compromise	41	1	5	3.2	1.16
Provides information about scholarships	41	1	5	2.4	1.13
Offers social support for achieving goals	41	1	5	2.6	1.15
Offers cultural support for achieving goals	41	1	5	2.6	1.21
Offers emotional support for achieving goals	41	1	5	2.6	1.11
Assigns activities integral to learners' development	41	1	5	2.4	1.05
Proposes extra activities unrelated to students' personal development	41	1	4	2.0	0.99

Finally, the discussion of research results turns to Section C of the questionnaire where students were invited to respond in their own words to a general question about their experiences in the language-teaching program: *How have you felt being in this degree*

*program from the beginning of your studies until now?* A brief summary of their comments follows.

Overall, students expressed affirmative opinions on the questionnaire. They wrote that they *feel OK* in the program, have a generally good perception of their teachers and their performance, and have a positive view of how the BA degree is organized. Their responses indicated that they have learned a great deal thus far.

A few negative opinions were also shared. Students pointed out that the resources for practicing English at the Self-Access Center are insufficient. They also felt that the topics included in the Núcleo de Formación Básica Universitaria (Nucleus of Basic University Education ) -- general topics such as math and socioeconomics for the state of Tamaulipas -- have *no impact* on their education, are *not interesting*, and have little relation to the degree program in which they are studying.

## **Conclusions**

Capsulizing the study results of the 2013 cohort of LII students, researchers at the University of Tamaulipas can describe the group with a number of summary statements. Of the 44 students, the majority are women. Most students in the cohort are unmarried and between the ages of 19 and 20. They matriculated at the university directly after receiving their high school diplomas. The students come from or reside in the zone formed by the cities of Tampico, Madero, and Altamira. They are still part of a nuclear family. The students' parents support their children's studies by providing economic resources that the students perceive as adequate for meeting their monthly expenses.

In most cases, these students are the first generation in their families to have an opportunity to study at the university. The researchers note that the families tend to have

one working parent, in most cases the father, and that the mother remains at home taking care of the home and family. A few students reported combining their academic study with a paying job. Among the nine who work in addition to studying, three have jobs – namely, English teaching -- related to their university studies.

Students in this cohort arrived at the university with overall GPAs of 8.5, and they have thus far maintained this level of academic performance. In educational terms in Mexico, they could be described as *regular-outstanding* and *regular* students. Based on this empirical evidence, the researchers presume the students will continue along this positive academic path during the course of their university studies.

Analyzing the results of students' perceptions of several factors affecting academic performance, the researchers conclude that students find that the BA program meets their overall needs. The evidence for this is reflected in their positive opinions about their teachers, the practical and theoretical content of their courses, and the body of knowledge in the LLI program that they consider appropriate for their professional study. The students also expressed high expectations for their future vocation as teachers.

Because the students' perceptions of the tutorial process were less than positive (the mean for Factor 7 variables registered 2.9, slightly below a *neutral* rating), the researchers infer that students do not consider attendance at tutoring sessions to be a relevant activity for their academic studies. Some students described their attendance at tutoring sessions with the adjective, *mandatory*. The researchers propose that students' somewhat indifferent perceptions of their tutoring experiences can be explained, at least partially, by the fact that they appear to have good study habits, maintain their level of high-school GPAs in their university studies, and do not seem to have problems linked to internal and personal factors affecting their academic trajectory. One could surmise that perhaps students in this cohort

do not currently have a great need for a tutor's input, guidance, or resources. However, the researchers conclude that the students' needs may change and whatever effects personal and external factors have on their academic development are worthy of study as they continue along their academic trajectory.

Considering the above factors and students' responses, the researchers conclude that thought and deliberation must be given to how tutorial services are provided at the university and how a tutor's relevance as a supportive component in a student's educational experience is measured. The results of careful scrutiny will inform the university's strategies for improving the tutorial process, thereby making it integral to students' academic and personal development.

Toward this end, one aspect of the tutoring process that may require a new definition is how to effectively incorporate activities that address the needs students have both during their academic trajectory and in their development of professional competences. More attention on the part of teachers, tutors, and BA administrators will need to be paid to the complexity of students' learning objectives related to course content and to teaching-learning strategies that promote meaningful transfer of knowledge from the university classroom into real-world contexts. Such contexts, whether in translation, English-teaching practice, or another sphere of communication, represent professional and increasingly bilingual workplace environments that require English proficiency.

Awareness of changes in the academic directives this cohort of students face and *how* the students face them will guide decision-making in the BA program at UAT. Tutors and the tutorial process will need to adapt to the ever-evolving demands that affect students' academic trajectories. Meaningful changes in the tutorial experience will contribute to the quality of the students' education and, in a broader sense, may be seen as

an integrated response to the global call for skilled bilingual communicators across many sectors of society.

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# EDUCATIONAL TRAJECTORIES OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS IN THE LANGUAGE TEACHING PROGRAM AT THE AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF TLAXCALA

*Rosalina Domínguez Angel  
Manuel Camacho Higareda*

## **Introduction**

Most public state universities in Mexico currently apply unprecedented educational policies to ensure annual increases in the number of first-year students in their respective academic programs. Universities must be flexible in these efforts in order to attract a broad range of students reflecting the country's high rate of high-school graduates. One important by-product of these attempts to increase university-student enrollments might be the mitigation of the disturbing phenomenon of the NEETs, an acronym used to identify youth who are not engaged in education, employment, or training.

According to the country note for Mexico in *Education at a glance 2013*, a report published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), basic education levels have improved greatly since 2005. In 2011 virtually all 4-year-olds in Mexico were enrolled in school; but, according to this report, enrollment rates after compulsory education are low. The proportion of adults (36%) who have attained at least an upper secondary education is one of the lowest among OECD countries where the OECD average is 75%.

The OECD numbers indicate that only 27% of 20-year-olds are enrolled in educational institutions and only 12% of the country's 20- to 29-year-olds pursue higher education. This is equivalent to half the rate among the same age group in Argentina (28%) and Chile (27%) and across OECD countries (28%). It is not surprising, then, that Mexico has the third highest percentage of NEETs of this age group among all OECD countries.

The trajectory of higher education in Mexico in recent years has been marked by an extraordinary growth in enrollment. Tuirán (2012) explains that in the academic year 2006-2007 the enrollment was 2,525,000 students, while in 2011-2012 it stood at about 3,240,000, mostly in the in-person<sup>1</sup> modality. The increased enrollment in higher education in Mexico has been favored by the high rates of learners graduating from high school. Further, according to Tuirán (2012), the systematic increase in university graduation rates is evident by comparing the rate for 2006 (58%) with the rate for 2012 (71%).

The significant growth in higher education brings to light various needs worth addressing. Robertson and Baker (1987) in McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) state the following: “The stress should not only be on admitting a wider range of students, but also on giving them the support and help needed to ensure a reasonable chance of success” (p.3). Concurring with this analysis, this study’s researchers consider that institutions of higher education ought to be concerned with the identification and exploration of factors that determine the academic success of university students in order to plan intervention processes and support services that positively impact retention, achievement, and attrition indexes as well as typical and atypical completion timetables, graduation rates, and other measures of university performance.

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<sup>1</sup> Remote or distance-learning students were not considered.

The university system in Mexico serves only 11.5% of the overall demand. Furthermore, statistics indicate that half of university freshmen drop out. These figures suggest that monitoring students' trajectories is necessary in order to understand how learners accommodate, embrace, or reject their formative studies. This is especially important in the first year of university study, which often functions as an experience filter through which students decide to remain in their respective academic programs, look for other educational options, or abandon their university studies. In this regard, Cain and Ramírez (1997) in a study of scholar trajectory at the Universidad Veracruzana reported that 36% of first-year students abandoned their university studies. Within the context of English Language Teaching, a study was conducted by Pérez, Bravo, and Isabeles (2008) on attrition indexes in the language program at the University of Colima. The study reported even higher attrition indexes: 53.7%, 56.2%, and 59.5% for the years 2005, 2006, and 2007 respectively. High attrition rates may indicate a misappropriation of resources, may negatively impact a university's reputation, and may well carry implications regarding its ability to attract new students (Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence, 2002).

Therefore, it is of paramount importance for university language programs to investigate the number of students admitted each term and to analyze their demographics, academic history, motivations for enrolling in a language-teaching program, how they manage their studies, which resources they utilize as students, and other issues through which a profile of first-year students can emerge. It is also essential to collect information on students' behaviors in terms of indexes of academic performance, success and failure rates, course repetitions, typical and atypical completion timetables, attrition rates, and graduation rates. These indexes constitute the so-called "academic trajectories" that according to Barranco and Santacruz (1995) in García and Barrón (2011) imply the

observation of an individual's behavior in terms of course approval (success), course failure, academic development, etc., during an academic term in a determined cohort.

Covo (1988) in de los Santos (2004) states that these indexes are interrelated and are part of the same phenomena present in a complex dynamic in which individual, family, social, and institutional issues impact learners' scholastic performance; hence, the indexes require an integral analysis to understand the various causes of these phenomena.

When students enter their respective academic programs -- in this case, the BA in Language Teaching -- they arrive with a wide range of characteristics and backgrounds. Teachers can observe these differences even in initial contacts with students during their candidate interviews for entering the program. Candidates vary in terms of age, work experience, educational background, self-esteem, social status, study habits, communication skills, interpersonal skills, and command of the English language and English-language culture, an aspect especially evident in students who have lived in and attended high school in the United States.

Although these student variables have been noted, they have not been tracked to determine to what extent such differences influence students' academic performance and academic trajectory in general. Stillman (2009) asserts "first-year students are also faced with dealing with an educational environment which is new to them and brings uncertain expectations concerning both learning and social situations" (p. 3). Hence, the researchers acknowledge that in Mexico as in many other countries, first-year students feel uncertain about their expectations and their performance in a new academic context.

The aim of the present study is to explore personal, academic, cognitive, and demographic predictors of academic success (McKenzie et al., 2001) in order to examine and identify the learning experiences of first-year students related to teachers, curriculum,

and educational environment. This data will inform better understanding of how to meet learners' current needs and increase awareness of the needs of those deemed to be at risk of failing in their academic endeavors, i.e. to understand learners' needs in order to find ways to improve the likelihood of success through remedial assistance at an early stage.

The identification of academic predictors of academic success is a critical issue for educators (Smith, Therry, and Whale, 2012), and identifying students at risk is important in order to implement interventions or remedial strategies as support services. As noted by Scouller, Bonanno, and Krass (2008), enhancing student performance in the first year -- especially aiding at-risk students and increasing retention rates -- has become an important priority for universities.

The present study is part of a broad collaborative project of eight state universities in Mexico that offer a program in Language Teaching. This chapter reports specifically on data collected from 57 students enrolled in the Language Teaching Program in the Letters and Philosophy Department at the Autonomous University of Tlaxcala (UATX) in central Mexico. Before turning to a methodological overview of the study followed by a discussion of the results, it is important to provide a contextual backdrop for the research recently completed at UATX.

The Autonomous University of Tlaxcala is located in 10 different municipalities in the state of Tlaxcala. The university consists of five research centers, 11 multidisciplinary divisions, and two academic units. The multidisciplinary unit known as the Letters and Philosophy Department offers five different programs: History, Anthropology, Philosophy, Hispano-American Literature and Language Teaching. The last program, Language Teaching, is the focus of the present investigation.

The Language Teaching Program at UATX was implemented in 2012, along with academic programs within the framework of a new educational model known as the Humanistic and Integrative Model Based on Competencies. This new academic program trains language teachers to work in different contexts and with students at different educational levels. The program is based on competencies within a flexible curriculum. It offers two teaching options -- French or English -- which must be chosen at the start of the program. The curriculum incorporates transverse components focusing on the development of literacy skills, the deepening of cultural knowledge, and the application of learning strategies as a means to establish learner autonomy.

Specific entrance criteria required of new students are the following:

a) proof of English proficiency at the A2<sup>2</sup> level; b) successful completion of the CENEVAL<sup>3</sup> test; c) completion of the SOV profile (a vocational profile); and d) an academic interview. In addition to entrance criteria, *permanence* criteria are pertinent to students' standing within the university environment: a) Students must meet the academic and administrative guidelines established by the Rules of Academic Assessment, the General Staff, and other systems in the institution; b) Students cannot fail more than 12 evaluations (including *ordinary*, *extraordinary*<sup>4</sup>, and certificate of proficiency exams) in accordance with article 81 of the General Statutes of the university; and c) Students must comply with the obligations under article 79 of the General Statutes of the university.

The BA in Language Teaching is a classroom program with 58 courses that may be covered in eight semesters of 20 weeks each. Table 1 lists the courses the study participants completed during the first two semesters of their BA program. The program offers

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<sup>2</sup>According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

<sup>3</sup>National Evaluation Center for Higher Education.

<sup>4</sup>These exams are second and third opportunities for students to pass a course after the course is over.

**Table 1** **Courses in the First and Second Semesters of the BA in Language Teaching**

Semester	Course Number	Course Title	Hours per Semester		Credits
			Theory	Practice	
1	LEL1311	English I	100	100	12
1	LEL1112	Cultures and Civilizations of Mexico and Latin America	48	12	4
1	LEL1103	Principles of Self-Learning	48	12	4
1	LEL1124	Theories of Learning	48	12	4
1	LEL1135	Spanish Grammar	36	24	4
1	LEL1136	Linguistic Models	48	12	4
1	LEL1117	Strategies for the Development of Vocabulary and Reading	30	30	4
2	LEL2311	English II	100	100	12
2	LEL2112	Transcontinental Cultures and Civilizations	48	12	4
2	LEL2103	Digital Skills Workshop	24	36	6
2	LEL2124	Approaches and Techniques in Learning Foreign Languages	42	18	4
2	LEL2235	Phonetics and Phonology	36	24	4
2	LEL2236	Morphology	36	24	4
2	LEL2107	Academic Communication	24	36	4
2	LEL2118	Strategies for the Development of Reading and Writing	30	30	4

students an opportunity to gain access to placement tests and determine what steps they need to take to build their academic career. Students may complete their undergraduate degree in a minimum of seven semesters and a maximum of 10.

### **Methodology**

As noted earlier, the research cohort consisted of 57 students who had recently completed their first year in the Language Teaching Program. To collect data for this investigation, the UATX researchers used a questionnaire on the trajectories of students in English Language Teaching and similar disciplines. The questionnaire in the study was adapted from García and Barrón (2011) who explored the school trajectory of 29 students in the PhD in Pedagogy program at the Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM). Their objective was to analyze aspects that affected the development and conclusion of the PhD program. The analysis was especially focused on graduation and attrition indexes.

The research questionnaire in the current study was adapted by researchers from each university who proposed modifications in order to suit the new objectives, which were the tracking of school trajectories not at the *end* of the students' university studies but after the conclusion of an academic year. The researchers made further adjustments and appropriate changes to ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument, and it was piloted with 15 students at the Autonomous University of Puebla (BUAP) and 15 students at the Autonomous University of the State of Hidalgo (UAEH).

The questionnaire was comprised of three main sections: Section A consisted of several questions addressing students' demographic particulars related to the following: general information, socioeconomic conditions, high-school information, information from the first two semesters at the university, and the tutorial process. Section B collected learners' views about seven aspects of their university experience: 1) the teachers; 2) theoretical and practical knowledge; 3) the BA program as a whole; 4) their academic difficulties due to external factors; 5) their academic difficulties due to personal factors; 6) their vocational beliefs and expectations; and 7) their tutorial experience. The students recorded their perceptions using a scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 represented *Totally Disagree* and 5 represented *Totally Agree*. The last section (Section C) of the instrument was an open question aimed at gathering qualitative information related to learners' feelings and beliefs about their learning experiences in the previous academic year.

The information collected was codified and accessed using the SPSS<sup>5</sup> program in order to obtain descriptive information of the factors included in the questionnaire. The participating institutions agreed on certain conditions for the administration of the

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<sup>5</sup>Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.

questionnaire. The UATX group adhered as much as possible to the following conditions and procedures:

1. Inform students about the administration of the questionnaire in advance.
2. Confirm students' willingness to participate.
3. Check on the completion of the needed materials.
4. Enlist a team to help in the administration of the questionnaire.
5. Assemble students in one place and eliminate extraneous noise or other distractions.
6. Ensure that all cell phones are turned off.
7. Explain to participants the importance of individual answers.
8. Read aloud the instructions for each section in the questionnaire and clarify as needed.
9. Explain that every question must be answered, as this affects the results of the study.
10. Check that all the questionnaires have been completed.

## Results and Discussion of Results

The results will be discussed in the order of the three sections of the questionnaire. Table 2 reflects age-related data obtained from students' demographic information gathered from Section A.

**Table 2** **Age of the Participants**

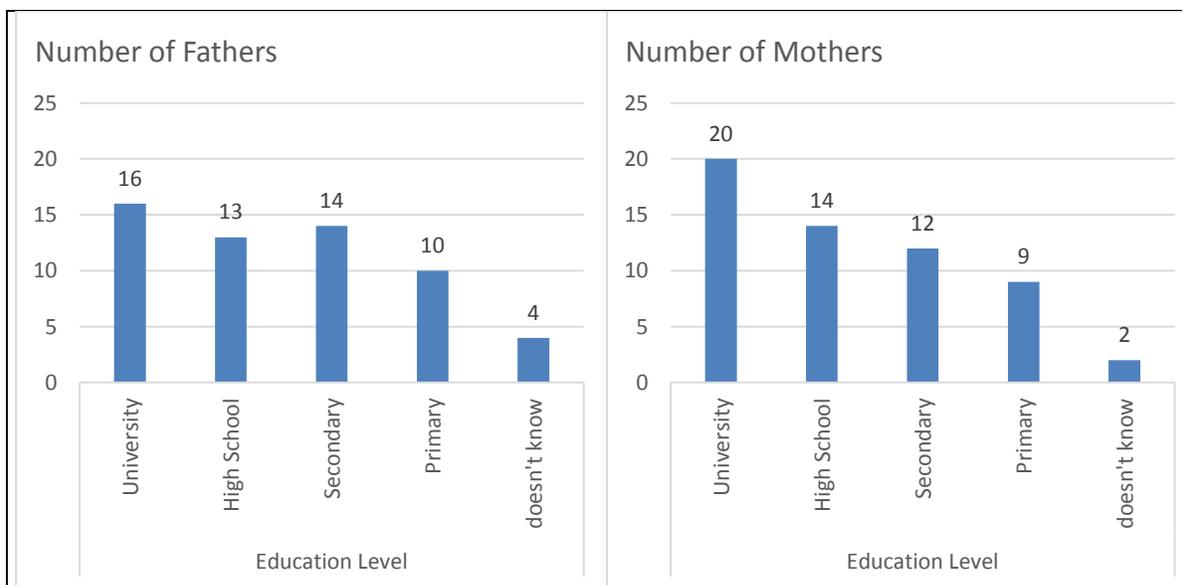
<b>Age</b>	18	19	20	21	22	23-28	<b>Total</b>
<b>Frequency</b>	3	29	11	4	4	6	57
<b>%</b>	5%	51%	19%	7%	7%	11%	100%

The data indicate that most of the 57 participants, 22 males and 35 females, fall within the typical pattern of students who enter university when they are 18 years old. After the first academic year, the data show that 51% are 19 years old; 5% are 18 years old; 19% are 20 years old. The remainder of the cohort are in their twenties: 7% are 21, 7% are 22, and 11% range from 23 to 28 years old. Additional data collected reflect students' marital status: 95% identified themselves as single and 5% as married. Of the latter group, 4% have children and one student (2%) was pregnant.

The questionnaire addressed another demographic variable -- the schooling of the students' parents -- that often has a direct influence on the academic success of learners.

Figure 1 provides the profiles. Parents' education level can be pivotal in the academic trajectories of students because parents who have higher education backgrounds are more likely to support their children's academic efforts, motivate them in those efforts, and advise them regarding diverse school issues.

The profile of the parents' schooling and their subsequent occupations is particularly interesting. The data show that mothers have a higher level of education than fathers: Thirty-five percent of mothers (20) have studied at a university vs. 28% of fathers (16) with university studies. These percentages are high compared with those reported in García and Barrón (2011) where mothers with an undergraduate degree were 24% of the population and fathers, 21%. The difference (7%) between mothers and fathers in the current study is higher than the 3% difference in García and Barrón. The researchers can assume that the subjects in that study, PhD students in the Pedagogy program at UNAM, were likely older than the current research population. The age difference may also be a factor when considering the parents' education levels.



**Figure 1** Educational Profile of the Students' Parents

A summary of the students' parents' occupations is given in Table 3. The most often cited job for mothers was *homemaker* 58% (33) followed by *teacher* (16%). Nearly 60% of mothers, therefore, do not work outside the home in a job that reflects their academic training. One interpretation could be that the women are not putting into practice the knowledge they received during their formal education; on the other hand, the educated women, available at home, are contributing fulltime to the welfare of their home and family. In general, 75% of fathers achieved a level of education between secondary school and university while 82% of the mothers reached the same level of education. Jimenez (2009) reported in her study that 40% of mothers and fathers fell within the same educational category. The Jimenez study aimed at exploring the work trajectories of students with undergraduate studies in agricultural biology. The comparison is pertinent to the current research because the subjects in the Jimenez study were students at UATX; in other words, the social context may be similar.

In this vein, it is surprising to note that 11% of the students who participated in the study did not know their parents' education level; however, they seem to be more informed about their mothers' education than their fathers' (91% vs. 68%).

**Table 3** Occupations of the Students' Parents

Mothers' Jobs					Fathers' Jobs				
Homemaker	Teacher	Employee	Retailer	Dress-maker	Teacher	Factory Worker	Retailer	Peasant	Driver
58%	16%	7%	7%	3%	18%	20%	12%	9%	9%

In their responses, 9% of the participants mentioned jobs for mothers and 21% identified jobs for fathers that do not fall within the realm of occupations presented in Table 3. Interestingly, 11% of the responses for "fathers' jobs" had *no answer* as the response. This may suggest that the fathers currently are unemployed or that they are no longer part

of the nuclear family. Another notable piece of information is the number of parents who are teachers. It would be interesting to know of the 34% of mothers and fathers who teach, how many are teachers of English in schools and what effect this may have on their children's educational trajectories. Historical and anecdotal data known by the researchers suggest that some students decide or are advised to enroll in a language-teaching program because their mothers or fathers, about to retire, wish to leave their place to a son or daughter, regardless of whether the son or daughter is interested in becoming a language teacher.

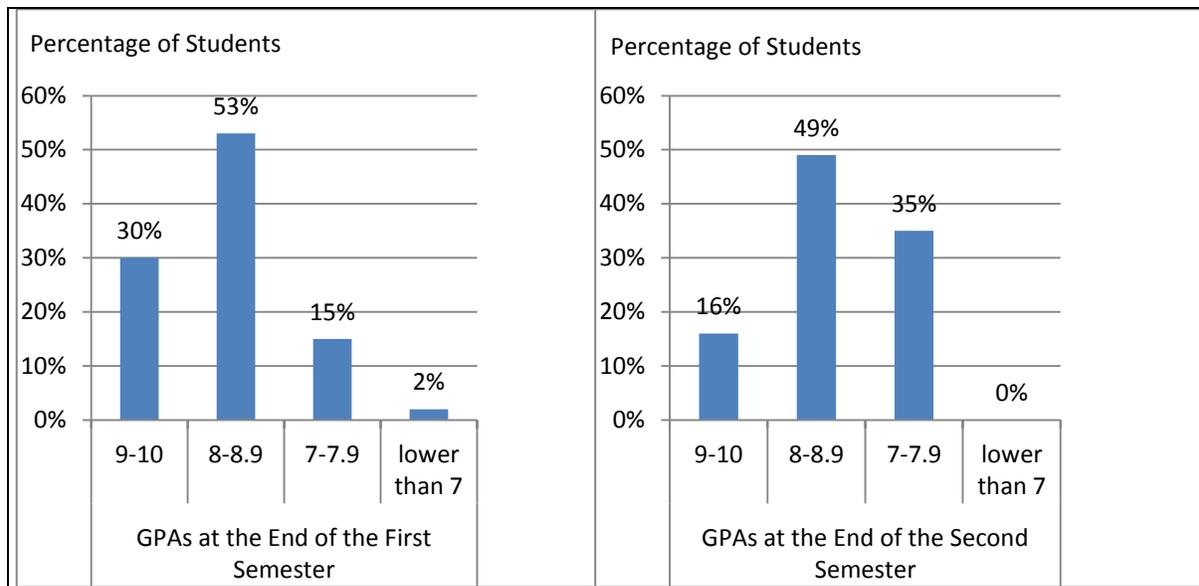
Turning to students' own work apart from their studies, 74% reported they are not employed, while 16% said they have jobs. Of those who work, 5% have a job to which they devote 10 hours a day; 7% devote 8 hours a day, and the remaining 4% have a job at which they work from 3 to 5 hours a day. In most cases, the students' jobs involve activities that are not related to their academic discipline. Studying the academic progress of those who devote eight or more hours a day to *outside* jobs might prove revealing. How and how well these students manage their academic load and their employment responsibilities could explain to what extent they feel overwhelmed with out-of-class demands and homework.

Although 16% of the students work, 88% of respondents said they depend economically on their parents; 7% pay their expenses with their own salary; 5% rely on their husband or wife for economic support. These data indicate that most students, even if they have jobs of their own, still depend on their parents' finances.

Further, in the realm of demographic data related to economic resources, participants were asked about their economic status. Sixty percent reported their families have a mid-level income; 39% said their families have a low income; and one participant reported his family's income as high. This suggests that most of the students in the program







**Figure 2** Participants' GPAs in the First Academic Year

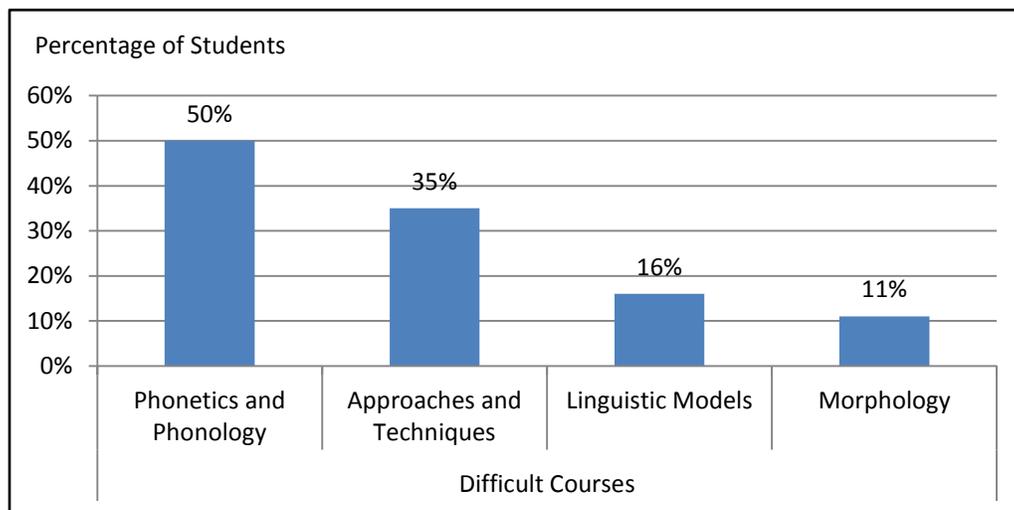
When compared with the students' high-school GPAs in Table 5, the GPAs in the graph on the left in Figure 2 reveal good student achievement in the first semester at UATX; in other words, the data show a significantly higher percentage of GPAs in the 9.0 - 10.0 range during the first semester at university than in high school. The bulk of the first-semester averages were in the 8.0 - 8.9 category. The percentage of students with GPAs of 7.0 - 7.9 registered similar numbers in both high school and university measures.

The right-hand graph in Figure 2 suggests a different story. It shows that the overall GPA of the learners fell significantly in the second semester at university; in fact, the number of students in the top GPA group, 9.0 - 10.0, fell almost 50% (30% vs. 16%). Similarly, the percentage of students at the 8.0 - 8.9 GPA level was lower in the second semester than in the first (53% vs. 49%). In keeping with the overall decline in GPAs in the second semester, the number of students in the 7.0 - 7.9 GPA range increased.

To get a broader picture of students' academic performance over time, the researchers took these findings and correlated the 57 participants' GPAs in high school

(8.18), in the first university semester (8.48), and in the second semester (8.19) and discovered a significant positive correlation between high-school GPA and first-semester GPA ( $r= 0.498$ ,  $n= 57$ ,  $p<0.000$ , one tailed). Another Pearson correlation was made between high-school GPA and second-semester GPA where a significant positive correlation ( $r= 0.572$ ,  $n= 57$ ,  $p <0.000$ , one tailed) was also found. The results indicate that students' grades were fairly consistent in the three stages observed: entry grades, first-semester grades, and second-semester grades.

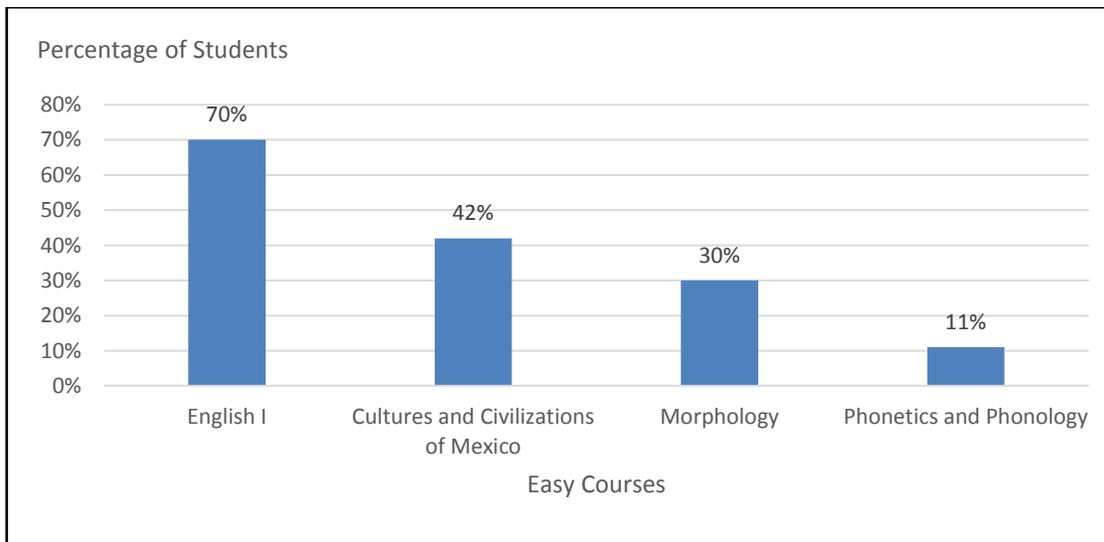
Nevertheless, based on their responses, the second semester was more difficult for students than the first. This is corroborated by the data in Figures 3 and 4, which reveal students' responses to a question about which courses they found more difficult and less difficult in both semesters.



**Figure 3** Courses Identified as Difficult by First-Year Students

Figure 3 indicates that the most difficult courses for students were Phonetics and Phonology, Approaches and Techniques in Learning Foreign Languages, and Linguistic

Models. These courses, given in the second semester of the program, apparently contributed to the lower GPAs.



**Figure 4** Courses Identified as Easy by First-Year Students

In the group of courses identified as *easy*, English was mentioned by 70% of the students. As most of the learners took the Key English Test (KET) as an entrance requirement and their levels were considered in the designing of the syllabus and the selection of the teaching materials for the English course, they were not taking a course for true beginners.

The next course students considered *easy* was a series of two courses -- *Cultures and Civilizations of Mexico and Latin America* and *Transcontinental Cultures and Civilizations*. Because students did not indicate which course in the series was not demanding, researchers assume students identified them both in this way. The courses cover general knowledge of civilizations -- Mexican, Latin-American, and others -- which have had a significant historical and sociocultural impact on the world.

The third course identified as *easy* was Morphology. It appears that students have little problem distinguishing the grammatical categories in Spanish, identifying their functions in sentences and texts, and knowing the form and function of Spanish morpho-functional categories as distinctive from other languages (Language Teaching Curriculum, 2011).

The previous paragraphs focused on results of Section A of the questionnaire, data obtained from the student-participants, codified, and reported in order to show clear frequencies and patterns. The next section of the Discussion of Results portion of the chapter highlights data from Section B of the questionnaire that reveal students' views concerning seven factors affecting their academic development during the previous academic year. Their responses indicate values between 1 and 5, with 1 signifying *Totally Disagree* and 5 meaning *Totally Agree*.

The results tabulated in Table 6, *Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Performance*, indicate that students believe their teachers perform best in the following areas: a) being mindful of the previous knowledge of the learners; b) teaching all material outlined in the syllabus; and c) explaining course content clearly. Students identified the poorest showing of teachers' performance in the following areas: a) identifying students' limitations, b) identifying students' strengths, c) stimulating critical thinking, and d) having positive expectations of students. The variables with a high standard deviation indicate that learners' answers varied widely. The figures raise doubts about whether students fully understood either the meaning of these aspects of teaching or how the teaching practices/behaviors were exhibited in the classroom. The mean of the responses for all the variables in Factor 1 was 3.68.

**Table 6** (Factor 1) **Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Performance**

Variable – Teachers...	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Provide feedback on students' participation	57	3.5	.84
Motivate students to improve	57	3.6	.83
Offer suggestions for improvement	57	3.8	.91
Identify students' strengths	57	3.2	1.07
Identify students' limitations	57	3.1	1.02
Stimulate critical thinking	57	3.5	1.08
Have positive expectations of students	57	3.5	1.01
Explain content clearly	57	3.8	.80
Adhere to the syllabus	57	4.0	.78
Encourage academic discussion	57	3.7	.89
Observe students' performance	57	3.6	.91
Are mindful of students' previous knowledge	57	4.2	4.11

Students' opinions on Factor 2 focusing on the theoretical and practical knowledge of the courses in the BA appear to be more positive than their assessment of teachers' performances. A summary of the responses appears in Table 7. Students found course content to be useful, up-to-date, and beneficial to their educational development. Critical-thinking skills fared better in students' evaluations of their courses than in how teachers addressed or approached the teaching of critical thinking. The lowest scores reflected students' opinions on the relevance of the knowledge they acquired in solving problems of daily life. In general, Factor 2 on the content of the courses yielded positive evaluations from students; their combined responses reflected a score of *agreement* with a mean of 4.13.

**Table 7** (Factor 2) **Students' Perceptions of the Theoretical and Practical Knowledge of the Courses**

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Knowledge in courses is useful	57	4.4	.92
Planned activities contribute to learning	57	4.1	.90
Knowledge provided is up-to-date	57	4.2	.82
Knowledge can be used in daily life	57	3.8	.93
Courses improve critical-thinking skills	57	4.1	.86
Courses contribute to problem solving	57	3.9	.95

Table 8, a summary of Factor 3 responses, is a digest of learners' views of the BA program in general. The variables that reflected the highest ratings dealt with the relevance of the course content and how up-to-date the courses were. This last item can be considered a double check of a similar item in Factor 2. The researchers note that the answers are consistent and the means are very close (4.2, 4.1). The variable measuring students' opinions about the need for updating courses registered the lowest mean for this factor (3.6, nearly midway between *neutral* and *agree*). This was expected because the curriculum and syllabi are new; but perhaps the mean needed to be lower to indicate that according to students' assessments, no updating is needed. The variable addressing how much time is devoted to covering course content also had a relatively low mean (3.7). Students' opinions differed widely and thus registered a standard deviation of 1.10. Perhaps this was due to the fact that when classes are cancelled for various reasons during the semester, teachers may be pressed to cover all the material in the syllabus. One variable the researchers considered crucial in Factor 3 asked students to consider whether the BA program has high standards. As students' responses were not across-the-board positive, it would be worthwhile to explore in more depth what aspects of teaching and learning they believe need to be addressed or improved in order to raise the standards. The mean of the set of values in Factor 3 was 3.86.

**Table 8** (Factor 3) **Students' Perceptions of the BA Program in General**

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Program has high standards	57	3.7	.80
Courses foster the development of students' skills in group work	57	3.8	1.09
Content of courses is relevant	57	4.1	.82
Content of courses is up-to-date	57	4.1	.92
Content of courses needs updating	57	3.6	.94

Hours allotted for courses are adequate to cover course content	57	3.7	1.10
Teachers work collaboratively to design program materials	57	3.8	.85

The data for Factor 4, summarized in Table 9, indicate that students in this cohort generally do not have academic difficulties due to external factors. The mean for each variable fell into one of the two *disagreement* categories. However, two variables – *demanding teachers* and *distractions that inhibit studying* -- may call for further scrutiny. These items registered a high standard deviation suggesting that perhaps when responding, students forgot the value of the numbers in the scale they were asked to use. Turning to other variables, the data indicate that students do not have problems with classmates or with administrative processes, which, by the way, had a double check (administrative procedures) that also had a low mean, signaling *disagreement*. Noteworthy is that students' responses to expectations about the program indicated that the BA in Language Teaching satisfies their expectations at this point in their academic trajectory. The mean of this set of responses for Factor 4 was 2.33.

**Table 9** (Factor 4) **Students' Perceptions of Academic Difficulties due to External Factors**

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Demanding teachers	57	2.8	1.09
Dissatisfaction with course content	57	2.6	.89
Administrative processes	57	2.2	1.00
Complex course content	57	2.4	.88
Distractions that inhibit studying	57	2.9	1.16
Program not meeting students' expectations	57	2.0	.91
Presence of economic problems	57	2.1	1.15
Relationships with classmates	57	2.1	1.20
Relationships with teachers	57	1.8	.90
Administrative procedures	57	1.9	1.00

The results for Factor 5, *Students' Perceptions of Academic Difficulties due to Personal Factors*, shown in Table 10, suggest that students' academic difficulties related to

personal factors are minimal. The means here were even lower (signifying *disagreement*) than for the question addressing difficulties attributed to external factors. These results point to a positive profile: Students do not seem to have problems associated with lacking previous knowledge, relating to others, or family issues. It would be worthwhile to further study variables such as students' *dedication to their studies* and the development of their *study skills* and *study habits* (variables with the highest means in this group of responses). It is important to remember that the participants in this study have decided to stay in the program, and their stable academic status allows them to do so. The mean of the cumulative responses for Factor 5 was 2.12.

**Table 10** (Factor 5) **Students' Perceptions of Academic Difficulties due to Personal Factors**

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Lack of previous knowledge	57	1.9	.86
Lack of dedication to studies	57	2.5	1.16
Problems relating to others	57	1.9	1.01
Lack of interest in content	57	2.1	1.09
Lack of stress-management skills	57	2.2	1.16
Personal problems	57	2.0	.96
Poor study habits	57	2.4	1.19
Family problems	57	1.8	.96

The next factor students responded to in the questionnaire, Factor 6, dealt with their beliefs and expectations for the future, for *their* future as English teachers. The responses summarized in Table 11 paint a picture of their degree of commitment to becoming language teachers and working as teachers in the future. The respondents seem to be convinced that this BA program will provide them with the necessary tools to be English

teachers, that they will be able to continue their professional development, and that this is definitely the academic discipline they want to pursue. Their responses indicate that they believe working as an English teacher will help them reach a good economic status, and they see great possibilities for working in other countries. They do not feel particularly positive about earning a good salary and getting a job easily, however. At the same time, only a small percentage of students indicated they would consider leaving the program and enrolling in a new one. This would be verifiable were researchers to analyze students' comments integrally evaluating their learning experiences in the first academic year. The mean of students' responses after removing the variable concerning changing/leaving the BA program was 3.99.

**Table 11** (Factor 6) **Students' Vocational Beliefs and Expectations**

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Envision themselves as English teachers in the future	57	3.9	1.28
Believe that the BA will allow them to have a teaching career	57	4.3	1.01
Believe that completing the BA is a factor in improving their economic status	57	4.1	1.12
Committed to studying in the BA program	57	4.2	1.14
Would consider changing their BA, if possible	57	2.2	1.26
Expect to develop professionally	57	4.0	.99
Would consider the possibility of working or studying abroad	57	4.2	1.12
Expect to earn a good teaching salary in the future	57	3.3	.94
Believe good job opportunities exist for graduates	57	3.5	.94

This research study explores many variables related to Factor 7 of the questionnaire, *Students' Perceptions of the Tutorial Experience*. A brief overview of the tutoring process provides a context for the students' responses. At UATX every full-time teacher may be

assigned to serve as a tutor for 15 to 20 students with three obligatory meetings scheduled per semester. The main purposes of the meetings include the approval of courses for which students register<sup>6</sup>, the dropping of courses, and the review of students' general academic standing. The nature of the tutorial work appears to be purely academic; however, with the implementation of UATX's new educational model, tutors are required to go beyond academic concerns and address issues integral to learners' development.

An analysis of the Factor 7 results in Table 12 reveals that most students reported being treated ethically and respectfully by their tutors. They agreed overall that their tutors exhibit qualities such as responsibility, willingness to compromise, good communication, trust, and empathy. They seemed to understand that the tutors review students' trajectories and give advice when needed. Students appeared to be more reluctant, however, to fully recognize social, cultural, and emotional support from their tutors. The researchers speculate there may be two reasons for this: First, students have had only limited experience with tutors, given that they have spent only one academic year at UATX and sometimes tutors are not assigned immediately at the start of the academic year; and second, the prevailing approaches to tutorial work do not include addressing students' psychological or emotional needs. On the other hand, teachers, especially if they know their tutees from previously working with them, *can* begin to address these issues and/or direct students to psychologists or other professionals who can help them with individual concerns and problems.

The data verify that students' responses to items related to tutorial work showed wide divergence. Because they have different tutors, it follows that the type and quality of the tutoring they receive and the experience overall will be individual and distinct. The

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<sup>6</sup> Tutors do this by checking the learners' records in the university's electronic platform.

standard deviation for every variable in Factor 7 was higher than 1.0, with the greatest deviation for items related to offering emotional support and suggesting activities integral to learners' development. In other words, student responses varied considerably, especially in these two areas. This suggests that more information is needed to better understand how the tutorial process is helping or not helping students academically. The cumulative mean of all the variables in Factor 7 was 3.4.

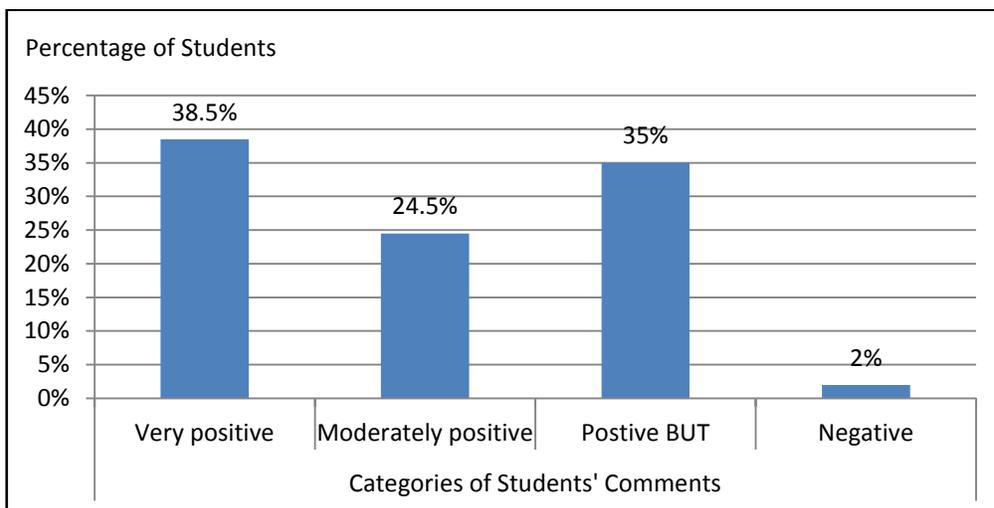
**Table 12** (Factor 7) **Students' Perceptions of the Tutorial Experience**

Variable -- A Tutor...	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Treats students ethically and respectfully	57	4.2	1.03
Carefully supervises students' academic trajectory	57	3.7	1.29
Makes suggestions for improvement	57	3.5	1.26
Respects students' time and keeps appointments	57	3.7	1.25
Communicates well and shows trust and empathy	57	3.8	1.29
Is responsible and willing to compromise	57	3.8	1.13
Provides information about scholarships	57	2.9	1.21
Offers social support for achieving goals	57	3.5	1.22
Offers cultural support for achieving goals	57	3.3	1.17
Offers emotional support for achieving goals	57	3.2	1.31
Assigns activities integral to learners' development	57	2.8	1.34
Proposes extra activities unrelated to students' personal development	57	2.4	1.14

This chapter's final data analysis focuses on students' comments in Section C of the questionnaire, an open-ended query in which they were asked how they felt about their experience in the first year of the program. The responses give substance to the information obtained in the other parts of the questionnaire and offer insight, via the students' own words, into their prevailing thoughts and concerns about participating in the BA program in Language Teaching at UATX.

A thoughtful look at the students' comments led the researchers to categorize the students into four groups. The first group of students represents those who expressed only positive aspects about their learning experiences in the previous academic year and their

plans for the future. The second group is characterized by students who had positive opinions about the program and their learning, although their comments were rather laconic. The third group of learners had positive comments but highlighted aspects of the program they did not like or personal factors they believe need improvement. The final group (two students) wrote about aspects of the program that did not satisfy their expectations. The percentages for all four groups appear in Figure 5.



**Figure 5 Students' Impressions of Their Learning Experiences at UATX**

Learners considered as part of the *very positive group* (38.5%) provided generous and favorable feedback about their experiences in the first academic year. This group was made up of eight males (14%) and 12 females (21%). Their positive comments referred to aspects such as a) the quality of teaching, b) the courses and the curriculum, c) the atmosphere, and d) the amount of knowledge they acquired. A sample of their comments, using student numbers to maintain confidentiality, follows.

*S 48 -- I feel excellent because I have learnt many things, I have met many people and I appreciate the work of the teachers. It is because of them that you feel like going further...*

S 28 -- *I feel very good because I like my BA program a lot. The courses have some difficulties, as normal, but if I do my best, if I practice and I dedicate time I will surely succeed. Teachers look mean, they are strict but really they help you to understand contents. I like the school because all are concerned about the students and their problems. I feel in a nice environment...*

S 47 -- *In general I think that the university is good, there are very good teachers and the curriculum is well structured. I have learnt a lot throughout the last academic year and I am very happy with the results.*

S 21 -- *I feel very well and at ease because this academic program offers me more than I expected, it has excellent teachers who have helped me to reach my goals.*

The researchers identified the second group as *moderately positive* because the students' comments were discreet and reserved; in short, they chose not to elaborate or provide details. These students (7% males, 18% females) comprised 24% of the student population studied. Their responses included thoughts about how well they performed, whether they achieved their goals, and their general state of mind. A sample of their comments follows.

S 5 -- *I feel good because I was able to finish one term more in the university without failing courses...*

S 10 -- *I feel very confident and comfortable here.*

S 46 -- *I feel well and at ease, I like my program.*

S 54 -- *I feel well, hoping that in the current semester I can get the grades I want.*

S 1 -- *I feel satisfied because I am learning new things.*

S 41 -- *I am very happy with the results I got.*

S 39 -- *I feel satisfied with my performance but I know I can improve.*

S 34 -- *I feel good, I like the courses and the way teachers perform their job.*

The third group made up 35% of the research population in equal percentages (17.5%) – 10 females and 10 males. The students in this group expressed positive

comments but highlighted difficulties they encountered in the previous year, especially with certain courses. Their responses may be related to the courses they identified as difficult, courses which some of them failed. A sample of their comments follows.

S 37 -- *I feel incredible because I passed to the next cycle. There is a course that I find difficult but I will do my best to pass it.*

S 43 -- *This first year has been difficult but satisfactory at the same time because after 2 years without going to school, it is difficult to adapt to the new rhythm, especially because my practice with English was diminished and it is difficult to be at the level my classmates are.*

S 49 -- *I've felt very comfortable in the program, in general, I've had ups and downs but I have always known how to solve my problems.*

S 14 -- *I feel a little bit upset because I would have liked to take another language apart from English. Concerning the teachers I am very happy because they are really qualified.*

The last group -- two learners -- gave negative comments about their learning experience in the Language Teaching program. One student expressed dissatisfaction with the school's facilities.

S 52 -- *I feel perhaps unhappy because this university lacks many things. It requires the implementation of different facilities for the optimum learners' development.*

The comment appears justified to the extent that students in the Language Teaching program do not always have access to the Internet outside the classrooms, and they frequently complain about the lack of an appropriate computer laboratory exclusive for language learning. Currently, there is space available for a language-teaching library, and small book collections have been located in common rooms and offices instead of being located in a central library in the Letters and Philosophy Department.

## **Conclusions**

We teacher-researchers have intuitions and ideas about learners' backgrounds, and when we evaluate our courses, we come to know the opinions of students related to the learning-teaching issues they experience in the classroom. This exploratory study, however, has provided information that further illuminates the detailed profile of our current second-year students.

It is valuable, for example, to know that the majority of the student-participants (72%) met the minimum GPA average needed to enter the university but that 28% did not. With this revelation, it becomes evident that monitoring the academic performance of the students admitted with lower GPAs would assist not only in determining how best to support them in their academic ventures, but also to verify their performance in relation to course credits earned, course-failure indexes, and dropout rates.

Another finding of this study – identifying which courses students found difficult – will help us inform teachers and strengthen the pedagogical resources that can be used to make the courses more accessible for students. Review and analysis of the teaching of Phonetics and Phonology, Approaches and Techniques in Learning Foreign Languages, and Linguistic Models will help determine what types of scaffolding for student learning may be indicated.

Furthermore, in conducting this research, we have learned from the students' point of view the strengths teachers have. The results indicate teachers are effective in covering the content of the courses, giving explanations, and providing suggestions for student improvement. They appear to lack, however, sensitivity in identifying learners' strengths and limitations. This situation is understandable in the first-year courses where class size may be 30 or more individuals; in other words, giving personalized attention to students' needs may be difficult. Therefore, we reiterate the importance of exploring in more depth,

how the tutorial work done by teachers is functioning. Appropriate tutorial work together with the support of the students' teachers each semester could help a great deal toward personalizing the treatment of students and identifying both their strengths and the areas where they need more help and support.

Our research reveals that in student-participants' views both the courses and the entire Language Teaching program have high standards. Students rated the courses as up-to-date, but how their content is useful in solving real-life problems may be unclear. This student assessment may be natural since the participants are in the preliminary stage of their university studies; perhaps they need more experience in order to understand how the content of each course applies to real-world situations and specific circumstances.

In reviewing the results related to possible problems students identified during the two semesters, no areas of concern were detected. Furthermore, external and internal causes of academic difficulty appear to be few and insignificant. Perhaps more revealing are the responses reflecting students' current vocational attitudes that lead us to conclude that the students are committed to staying in the BA program to become teachers of English, despite a clear awareness of the low salaries that teachers earn.

Further, we see in the qualitative information generated by the questionnaire that, in general, participants' evaluative opinions concerning their learning experiences in the first academic year are quite positive. It is notable that they reiterated their assessment of teachers' performance by highlighting teachers' positive qualities and their commitment to students. A complementary aspect frequently mentioned in students' responses was the friendly atmosphere they sensed in their first academic year.

A final comment on the results of the study concerns the tutorial system. At this crucial stage of the students' educational development, it is important that tutors approach

and interact with their tutees with greater attention in order to monitor their progress and identify problems they may have in their academic trajectories.

To conclude, the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data gathered in this study reiterates the significance of monitoring students' academic trajectories. Concomitant studies on the needs of learners who have lived and studied abroad and then enroll in Mexican universities would reinforce this view. The importance of knowing from the very beginning the profile of our new students and being informed of their strengths and weaknesses and their expectations and needs would assist university administrators and teachers in their efforts to educate students to become successful language teachers.

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