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Mra. Bertha Guadalupe Paredes Zepeda
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Studies of student trajectories in language teaching programs in Mexico



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Dra. María Cruz Chong Barreiro



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.



P Y V

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(coordinadoras)



Universidad Veracruzana



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Contents

Foreword	11
Introduction	
<i>Bertha Guadalupe Paredes Zepeda</i>	15
Theoretical Framework for the Research Study	
<i>Octaviano García Robelo y Eleanor Occeña Gallardo</i>	17
Research Methodology	
<i>Octaviano García Robelo y Eleanor Occeña Gallardo</i>	27
AGUASCALIENTES STATE UNIVERSITY (UAA)	
The School Trajectory of BA in ELT Students at Aguascalientes State University	
<i>María Esther Lemus Hidalgo y Piry Herrera Alvarado</i>	35
AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF PUEBLA (BUAP)	
An Initial Study of the Academic Trajectory of the 2013 Cohort in the Undergraduate English Language Teaching Program at the Autonomous University of Puebla	
<i>Rebeca Elena Tapia Carlin, María del Rocío Vélez Tenorio, Eliphelet Rivera Cuayahuitl y Julio Brandon Pérez Flores</i>	53
AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF HIDALGO (UAEH)	
Academic Trajectories in an English Language Teaching Program: A Study of Students' Paths at the Autonomous University of the State of Hidalgo	
<i>Bertha Guadalupe Paredes Zepeda, Eleanor Occeña Gallardo y Norma Angélica Espinosa Butrón</i>	73

AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF MEXICO (UAEMex)	
Academic Trajectories of Students from the Class of 2013 in the Faculty of Languages at the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico	
<i>Uriel Ruiz Zamora</i>	99
AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF TAMAULIPAS (UAT)	
Characteristics and Academic Trajectory of Students in the BA in English Program at the Autonomous University of Tamaulipas	
<i>Nancy Audrey Delgado Hoy, Efrén David Brande Martínez, José Luis Martínez Guevara y Mary Grace Killian Reyes</i>	115
AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF TLAXCALA (UATX)	
Educational Trajectories of First-Year Students in the Language Teaching Program at the Autonomous University of Tlaxcala	
<i>Rosalina Domínguez Angel y Manuel Camacho Higareda</i>	135
UNIVERSITY OF COLIMA (UCOL)	
A Study of Students' Paths in the School of Languages at the University of Colima	
<i>Evangelina Flores Hernández y Alejandro Silvestre Tello Moreno</i>	163
STATE UNIVERSITY OF VERACRUZ (UV)	
Profiling a Cohort in the BA Degree in English at the University of Veracruz	
<i>Gabriela Guadalupe Estrada Sánchez, Oscar Manuel Narváez Trejo y Patricia Núñez Mercado</i>	179
Conclusions from the Multi-University Study of Academic Trajectories of Students in BA in Language Teaching Programs in Mexico	
<i>Bertha Guadalupe Paredes Zepeda y María Cruz Chong Barreiro</i>	203
Glossary of Acronyms	221
Appendix	225

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-person¹ 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.

¹ 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 A2² level; b) successful completion of the CENEVAL³ 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*⁴, 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

²According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

³National Evaluation Center for Higher Education.

⁴These 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 SPSS⁵ 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

⁵Statistical 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**

Age	18	19	20	21	22	23-28	Total
Frequency	3	29	11	4	4	6	57
%	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.

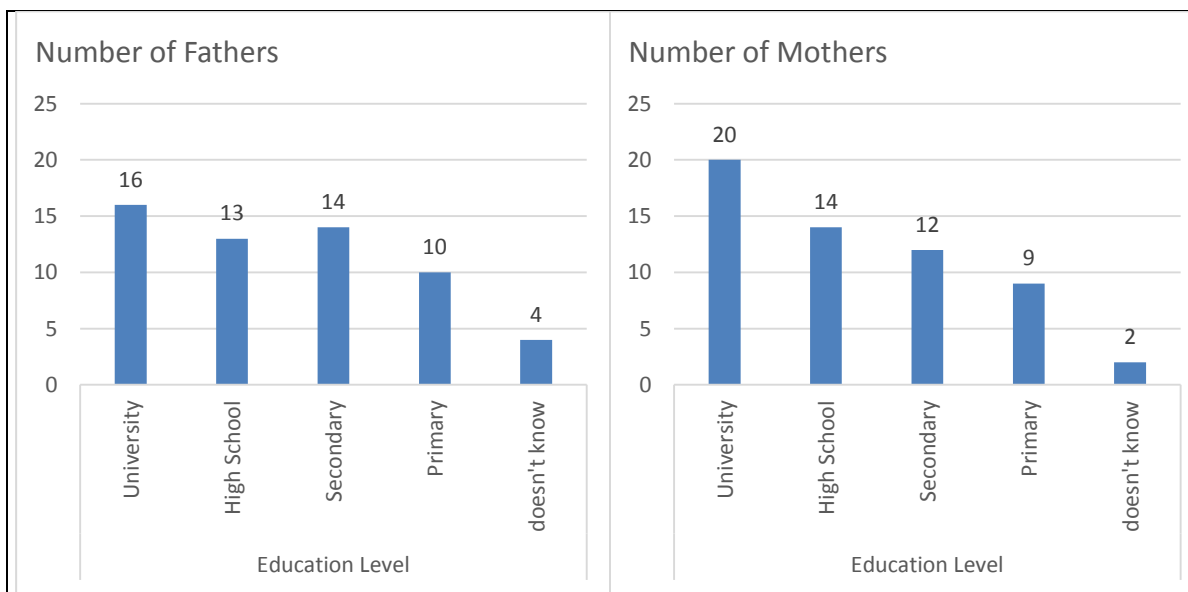


Figure 1 Educational Profile of the Students' Parents

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

come from low-income or middle-class families. One assumes it would be difficult for a low-income family to afford the high fees required for enrollment at UATX. The fees for one semester include registration, monthly tuition, and other charges that amount to approximately 4,000.00 pesos. Moreover, students must budget for materials, photocopies, and books; in addition, those who have moved to the city of Tlaxcala in order to be better situated to attend classes must pay for living expenses such as food and transportation, as well as rent.

Another important aspect in the questionnaire addressed the recent scholastic history of the students -- in other words, the high schools from which they graduated. The students' data appear in Table 4.

Table 4 **Where Student-Participants Attended High School**

School	COBAT	CECYTE	CBTIS	Private Institutions	Others
Frequency	23	7	10	4	14
%	40%	12%	17%	7%	24%

The data indicate that most of the students enrolling in the BA in ELT program at UATX come from the state of Tlaxcala's largest high school system, COBAT, *Colegio de Bachilleres*. This education system with 24 schools throughout the state graduated the largest number (40%) of students in the cohort under study. The next highest number of graduates (17%) attended a high-school system known as *Centro de Bachillerato Tecnológico Industrial y de Servicios*, CBTIS. Twelve percent of the student-participants came to the BA program from another technical institution, *Colegio de Estudios Científicos y Tecnológicos* (CECYTE). Graduates from private institutions represent 7% of the research population. The category *Others* in Table 4 refers to local high schools and distance programs (tutorial programs) where students completed their high school requirements, as well as high schools in the United States from which some student-

participants graduated. The UATX researchers believe that these students merit a separate study.

As a reflection of students' academic achievement, information was gathered on their final high-school grade point averages (GPAs). The data are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 **Participants' High School GPAs**

Range of GPAs	9.0 – 10.0	8.0 - 8.9	7.0 - 7.9	Lower than 7.0
Frequency	5	36	16	
%	9%	63%	28%	

It is important to note that one of the application requirements for all BA programs at UATX is a minimum GPA of 8.0. As the table reveals, a great majority of the students (63%) were within the range of 8.0 - 8.9. The table also shows that 28% of the participants had GPAs that did not meet the standard. It is assumed the students were admitted without complying with the entrance requirements. Additionally, Table 5 shows that students with high GPAs represent 9% of the first-year population. The researchers set out to correlate these historical GPA data with the grade point averages obtained after the first and second semesters at UATX to analyze whether the levels were maintained or how they fluctuated. The information provided in Figure 2 charts students' GPAs during their first year at the university.

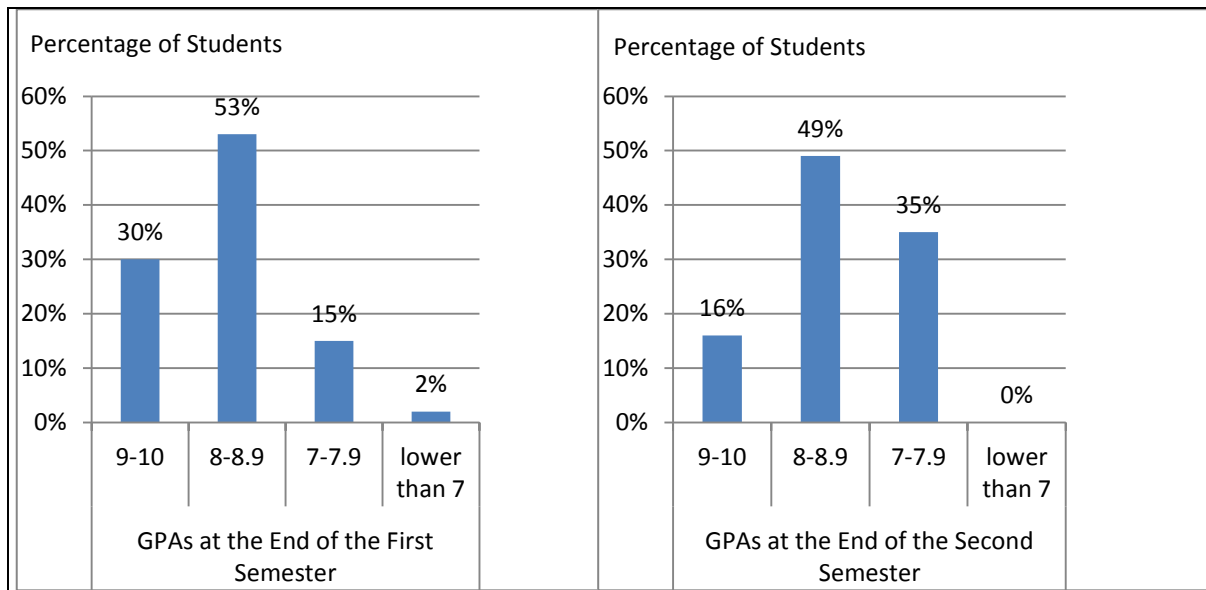


Figure 2 Participants' GPAs in the First Academic Year

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.

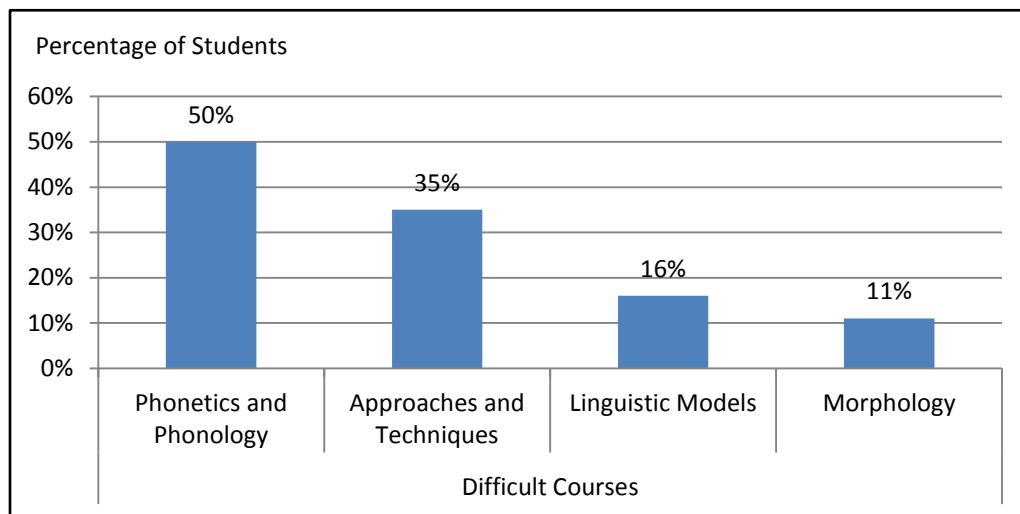


Figure 3 Courses Identified as Difficult by First-Year Students

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.

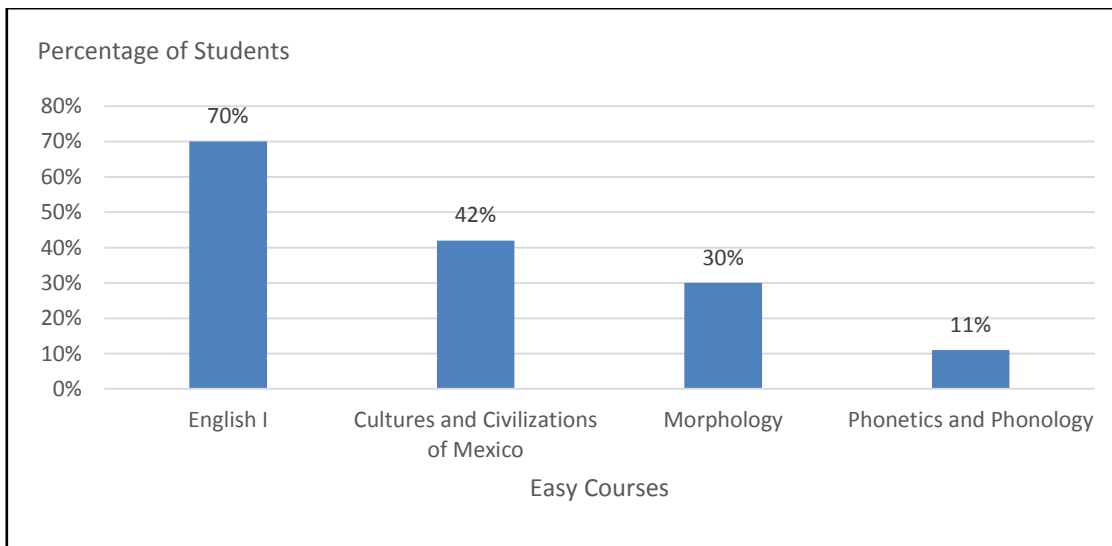


Figure 4 Courses Identified as Easy by First-Year Students

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 register⁶, 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

⁶ 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.

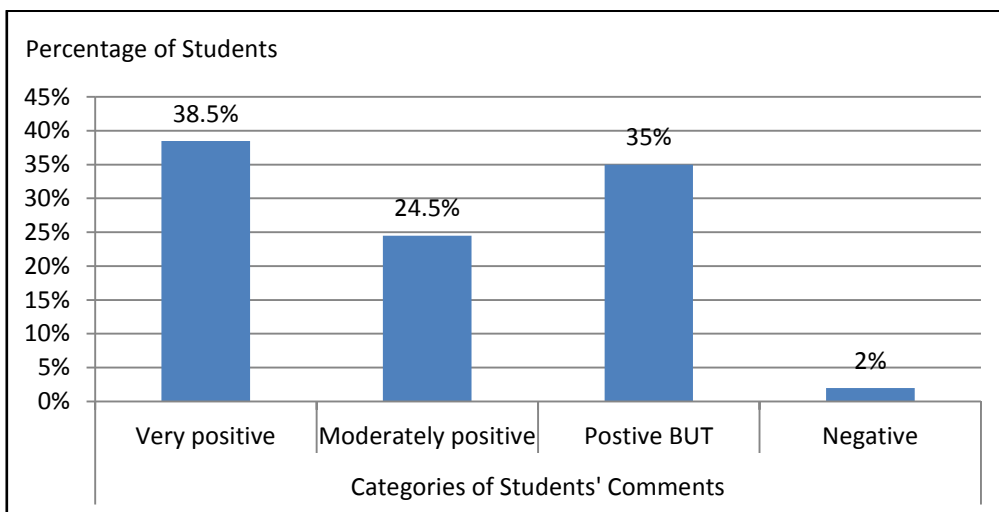


Figure 5 Students' Impressions of Their Learning Experiences at UATX

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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