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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.



P Y V

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

Studies of student trajectories
in language teaching programs in Mexico

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Studies of student trajectories in language teaching programs in Mexico

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(coordinadoras)



Universidad Veracruzana



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**ACADEMIC TRAJECTORIES IN AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING
PROGRAM: A STUDY OF STUDENTS' PATHS AT THE AUTONOMOUS
UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF HIDALGO**

*Bertha Guadalupe Paredes Zepeda
Eleanor Occeña Gallardo
Norma Angélica Espinosa Butrón*

Introduction

The BA in English Language Teaching (ELT) program at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo (UAEH) began in the July-December 1999 school term, in response to societal demands for professionals with the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes to teach English. To date, 21 generations -- a total of 933 graduates -- have completed the program.

The BA in ELT, known as Licenciatura en Enseñanza de la Lengua Inglesa (LELI), is housed within el Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades (ICSHu) – Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities -- in Pachuca, Hidalgo, which is one of six institutes that constitute UAEH. ICSHu has nine postgraduate programs of which seven belong to the National Ranking of Educational Programs of Quality and nine Bachelor of Arts programs of which seven have been awarded a Level 1 ranking by the Comités Interinstitucionales de la Evaluación de la Educación Superior (CIEES), an accrediting body that measures the educative quality of undergraduate degree programs in Mexico. In 2006, the BA in ELT received a Level 1 designation by CIEES. In 2011, the program was evaluated favorably by another prestigious accrediting body, el Consejo para la Acreditación de Programas Educativos en Humanidades (COAPEHUM). In April 2014, the ELT program was re-

accredited by CIEES. In May of the same year the program was redesigned and approved by the university's Board of Regents (Honorable Consejo Universitario).

It is important to note that the student population studied in this research effort is not part of the recently redesigned ELT program at ICSHU; rather, the subjects – identified as the July-December 2013 cohort in LELI – belong to the former ELT program which is based on the following strands of instruction: Productive, Instrumental-Investigative, Humanistic, and Educational. These academic threads pervade and inform the program through the knowledge areas that sustain it: English Language, Linguistics, Pedagogy, Culture, and Research. The program, whose main objective is to prepare future English teachers and English-teaching consultants, covers 60 subjects that incorporate the instructional strands previously mentioned. In addition, students may choose a total of 4 electives (required) from 10 possible options. The minimum number of credits per semester is 36; the maximum is 45. The total number of credits required to complete the program is 360 which can be taken in eight, nine, or 10 semesters. Beginning with the third semester of study, the medium of instruction is English. The ELT program accepts one or two groups of 40 students each semester. Candidates' demand for this undergraduate program has always surpassed the number of students admitted each term.

The entry requirements for the BA in ELT program, as well as the requirements for obtaining the degree and diploma, are the same for all undergraduate programs at UAEH. The only difference is that in order to graduate, LELI students must have an international certification of English proficiency equivalent to the B2 level of the Common European Framework, or 550 points on the TOEFL Examination. (This requirement has recently changed, and in the near future, students must have a C1 level of proficiency to graduate.)

To better understand the BA in ELT program, one must consider it in the context of the university's broader educational goals. Undergraduate and postgraduate programs at UAEH are designed and administered according to the principles stated in the university's Educational Model. The Educational Model of the Autonomous University of the State of Hidalgo is composed of sections called *dimensions* that establish the institution's course of action. The philosophical framework of the UAEH Educational Model is founded on humanistic theories, cooperative learning, critical thinking, and the social construction of knowledge.

In order to put this Educational Model into practice, the university adheres to an Institutional Development Plan (PDI -- Plan de Desarrollo Institucional) that establishes guidelines inherent in achieving the institution's goals and commitments to excellence in higher education. Among the many indicators called upon to gauge the university's success in accomplishing its aims are a number of quantitative measures relating directly to students, including typical and atypical completion timetable (TCT, ACT) rates and dropout rates. For institutional transparency, these quantitative statistics are made available on the university's web page. However, the raw numbers alone do not provide the information required to devise appropriate strategies for positively influencing the aforementioned indicators.

In an attempt to gain a more integrated view of students' behaviors in the ELT program, the BA administrators designed a database of student profiles including basic information related to socioeconomic demographics, academic status (e.g., attendance and completion timetables), and grades. However, the data collected did not provide the substantive information desired. Therefore, the academic staff and BA administrators continued to explore other ways to gather relevant and precise student information.

As part of this effort, in 2013 the Linguistics Academic Area at UAEH participated in a collaborative research project with the Autonomous University of Puebla (BUAP) and other state universities in Mexico to investigate how a group of students from the 2009-2 cohort (those who entered the BA program at BUAP in July 2009) may have been hindered in their efforts to successfully complete their degree. The findings of the study shed light on students' behaviors as they transitioned through various stages of the BA. The results indicated that while the 2009-2 cohort began with 36 students, only 10 graduated. (For comparison, this represents a typical completion timetable rate of 27.8%, which is lower than the overall UAEH rate of 42%.) Of the original group in the collaborative research project, 21 students (58.3%) dropped out. The remaining five students (13.8%), according to their school records, were expected to conclude their degree studies by the end of the school term July-December 2014.

These revealing figures indicated to teachers and researchers that further studies were needed. In fact, an academic-trajectory study seemed imperative, in order to gain a better understanding of students' behaviors and experiences that, in turn, could lead to implementing strategies to address the low completion-timetable rates and significant dropout rates. According to Cuevas (2001) in Fernández, Peña, and Vera (2006), academic trajectory can be defined 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.”

The study of students' academic paths during their university years may well be informed by their educational experiences prior to entering the university. Those who have achieved success in school endeavors tend to value such pursuits, which in turn, often pave

the way for future educational efforts. One such achievement worthy of mention is the completion of an upper secondary education, which, according to the **Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)**, consolidates students' basic skills and knowledge, forging the direction toward an academic or a vocational education (OECD, 2013). In other words, earning a high-school diploma prepares students for either tertiary education or the labor market. In fact, the OECD states that attaining an upper secondary education is often considered the minimum credential for successful entry into the labor force. Studies have shown that students who leave the education system without an upper secondary education subsequently face severe challenges in their work life: They may have difficulty entering and remaining in the labor force; they encounter the hardship of earning lower wages; they have a greater risk of poverty and a greater chance of becoming an economic and social burden on society (Le Métais, 2003; Levin, 2012; Lyche, 2010). It is not surprising that the OECD encourages educational institutions to commit to the task of ensuring that students successfully deal with the transitions intrinsic to completing an upper secondary education.

The literature indicates that university students, too, face transitions during their higher education experience. Studies published by Burton and Dowling (2005) show that students entering university are confronted with a transition phase and that this transition period varies from student to student. How students work through the transitions is equally individual. Some may view the new challenges of learning and social engagement optimistically, while for others, the experience may not be as positive and could even be “traumatic,” leading to “an early end” of their pursuit to attain a degree. Burton and Dowling (2005) note that some students leave university because “they come to the realization that university is not for them...at that crucial moment in time.” This suggests

that the experience of managing transitions throughout one's university education can have a profound and significant effect on one's success therein.

It is, therefore, of great importance to any educational institution dedicated to preparing future professionals that attention be given to student trajectories that may affect both students' overall university experience and their successful pursuit of a degree. Kemm and Bleja (2012) of Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia, have referred to such attention as "students' early intervention and assistance" intended for those who appear to be in academic "trouble" or "at risk" of not continuing their studies.

In 2011, Cristoforó, Luévano, and Sandoval presented a paper at the XI National Congress of Education Research at the Autonomous University of Nuevo Leon in Mexico titled "Lengua Inglesa, factores determinantes en la permanencia" (English Language: Factors Determining Its Permanence). The objective of their study was to obtain a better understanding of the school trajectories of students in a BA in English Language program where English is the medium of instruction. Their research highlighted a study by the National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions (ANUIES, 2005: Asociación Nacional de Universidades y Instituciones de Educación Superior) emphasizing the need to examine the experiences of students during their stay in a university with the objective of developing theoretical explanations that would provide a better grasp of what university students undergo.

According to Cristoforó, Luévano and Sandoval (2011), studies indicate a number of determining factors important in the examination of school trajectories. These include students' background and general demographic information (gender, age, previous schooling, work experience, socioeconomic situation, etc.), as well as the orientation they receive from the institution they are attending, their knowledge of the academic program in

which they are enrolled, their social and academic integration, and their expectations regarding the benefits of obtaining a professional position upon completion of a degree. Not all studies, however, use the same factors to chronicle academic trajectory. For instance, in the Proposed Model of School Trajectory written by and for the University of Quintana Roo (Propuesta de Modelo de Trayectoria Escolar para la Universidad de Quintana Roo), the researchers cite Bautista and Roldan (1996) who suggest that the factors to be considered in trajectory studies are continuity of studies, academic success, educational efficiency [graduation rate], progression, delays [atypical attendance timetables], and school withdrawal [dropout rate].

Notwithstanding the various lenses researchers use to study students' trajectories, the purpose of the investigations identifying relevant factors affecting learners' experiences is to attain a meaningful analysis of academic paths that can lead to informed action on the part of educational institutions in service to students. With the benefit of the knowledge from this prior research as a guide, the current study's researchers developed a questionnaire and a research approach briefly described in the next section of this chapter.

Methodology

The research approach for this project is a case study. The results of case studies tend to be qualitative and illuminative rather than conclusive as they may not be representative of what happens in general (Bell, 2004). That is to say, it cannot be implied that the findings of this study are true in the same way for all BA in ELT students. However, although circumstances and students' psychological and sociological factors vary, the current study set out to cast light on students' behavior during their stay at the university with the

intention that what was learned about students' experiences could be used to illuminate the BA program's efforts on behalf of students.

The research technique employed to gather data was a questionnaire taken and adapted from García y Barrón (2011). The choice of a questionnaire as the research tool for this study was based on its efficacy for tapping into the knowledge, opinions, ideas, and experiences of the research population to be studied; further, the information gathered is then available for subsequent reflection and analysis (Wallace, 1998).

The questionnaire comprised three sections. Section A addressed the research subjects' demographic information, including their socioeconomic conditions, academic trajectory to this moment in the BA, reactions to their first-year courses in the BA, and details of their tutorial experience at UAEH. Section B dealt with factors impacting students' behavior and performance during their tenure at the university (e.g., teachers' praxis, the program *per se*, theoretical and practical knowledge acquired in their courses, students' psychological and sociological attributes, their expectations about the program, their experience with tutorials, institutional and administrative aspects of the BA, etc.). In Section B of the questionnaire, students were asked to record their perceptions of variables related to these factors. To do so, they used a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 signifying *Totally Disagree*, 3 representing a *Neutral* response, and 5 meaning *Totally Agree*. Section C of the research instrument consisted of an open-ended question to which students responded in their own words. More detailed information about the questionnaire is provided in the Research Methodology chapter of this book.

Results and Discussion of Results

Prior to the analysis and discussion of the research data obtained from each section of the questionnaire, it is necessary to provide background information that explains the composition of the cohort being studied. As has been previously mentioned, the questionnaire was administered to the July-December 2013 cohort. At the outset, the cohort was comprised of 38 students. By the end of the first semester, only 28 students had successfully completed the required courses. In other words, 10 students (26.3%) did not continue with the program beyond the first semester. Data gathered by the BA program identified the main reasons that 10 students dropped out of the program.

- Seven students (70%) mentioned that the BA program did not cover their expectations.
- Three students (30%) failed 50% of the mandatory subjects that must be taken during the first semester. UAEH policy establishes that students in order to continue with their degree studies must pass at least 50% of the courses within the semester.

Before the end of the second semester, three additional students dropped out. They stated that the main reason for not completing the semester was that they did not see themselves as teachers of English.

In light of the circumstances described, the research population for this study was made up of 25 students. Data contributing to a combined demographic, socioeconomic, historical, and academic profile of these students were gathered from Section A of the questionnaire. Eighteen females (72%) and seven males (28%) participated in the study. It should be noted that typically more females than males enroll in the BA in ELT program. The students' ages ranged from 18 to 32. Within this cohort, the majority of the students

(84%) initiated their university studies at the expected or typical age of 18 years. None of the students was married; one lived with a partner.

The majority of the students arrived at UAEH from different communities. This is a recurrent pattern among the LELI school population. In the current research population, only five students (20%) are from Pachuca and live with their families. Eleven students (44%) live in rental housing, sharing expenses with one or more roommates; two students (8%) live with relatives in Pachuca and contribute a monetary sum to help defray the family's expenses. Seven students (28%) travel to Pachuca from surrounding towns and cities to attend classes every day; the round-trip commute may take them more than two hours.

From previous experiences with students, the researchers have noticed that those who do not live with their families may not be used to living on their own. In other words, they are not prepared for handling the new found *freedom* of being on their own, and therefore, their living situations may pose risks vis-à-vis their academic behavior. In fact, recurrent absences from and late arrivals to early-morning classes were factors that contributed to a second-semester student dropping out of the program. In addition, it should be noted that the rental properties where students live are not usually near the university facilities and frequently are ill equipped for comfort. As a result, *the study conditions* (adequate lighting, desk space, quiet atmosphere, etc.) for many of these students are less than ideal, a factor that may represent an extra burden for them.

With regard to students' socioeconomic factors, eight parents (32%) hold a degree in higher education; five are mothers, three are fathers. (Four mothers work, and one is retired.) All the parents with higher education currently have or have held jobs related to their fields of study. Research has shown parents' expectations of and demands on their

children’s education differ according to whether they have or have not earned degrees in higher education. Of the remaining 41 parents (one student has a single parent), 27 mothers and fathers are employed outside the home; 13 mothers work as homemakers for their families; one father is not employed. A summary profile of the 25 student-participants appears in Figure 1.

Demographics		July-December 2013 Cohort	
Sex		Male (28%)	Female (72%)
Marital Status		Single (96%) Lives with a partner (4%)	
Age		18-32	
Origin	State	Hidalgo (100%)	
	Current Residence	Pachuca (72%); Outside of Pachuca (28%)	
Work		No (84%) Yes, only on the weekends (16%)	
Studies	Father	No higher education (43%)	
	Mother	No higher education (40%)	
Social Status		Lower Middle Class (100%)	
Previous Studies		Public System (100%)	
GPA in High School		8.0 - 8.9 (64%); 9.0 – 9.7 (32%)	

Figure 1 Demographic Profile of the Research Population

As to the income of LELI students in this cohort, seven have benefited from having a scholarship granted by the Mexican Bureau of Education (SEP). Four students work during the weekends in fields unrelated to their degree studies. Most students rely on their parents for economic support. Students’ responses on the questionnaire reveal that their families’ incomes are quite basic.

In addition to the above socioeconomic information, the questionnaire provided valuable data on the students’ educational histories. The majority of students come from different educational systems; that is to say, some students concluded their studies in

technically oriented high schools whereas others graduated from *preparatorias*¹. This means that students' educational backgrounds, schematic foundations, and knowledge of the world are different. These factors may be reflected in their academic performance and behavior. For example, with regard to English, the tendency is, and the members of this cohort are no exception, that students who have studied in regular *prepas* are more proficient in the use of English-language particulars (practical use of English, sociolinguistic awareness, etc.) and this is often reflected in their grades. It is interesting to note, however, that one student in the research population whose level of English is outstanding studied in a technical high school. The apparent reason for this anomaly is that the student comes from Ixmiquilpan, a community in the state of Hidalgo, where the rate of immigration to the United States of America is quite high. In his early childhood, the student, a son of immigrants, lived and studied in the United States.

Turning to courses the research population found difficult, students identified Research Methodology as the most troublesome. It should be noted that at this stage of the program, the course is taught in Spanish, and in the sixth semester, students must begin writing a research paper in English. Throughout the sequential process of the research-methods course, a teacher provides necessary guidance, help, and support to the students. Students' reasons for citing this course as the most difficult dealt mainly with the challenge of writing a cohesive and coherent research paper. At the other end of the spectrum, students identified as least problematic a course known as Linguistics Historical Development whose content they considered easy to learn and understand.

¹ Preparatorias are secondary schools from which students graduate prior to beginning their university studies. In contrast to technical schools that focus on vocational education, *prepas* prepare students to continue their learning in institutions of higher education.

The last items in Section A of the questionnaire queried students about tutorials. Students' perception with regard to tutorials is still not fully understood, as they appear to conceive tutorials as the means by which to deal with administrative problems in the BA program and not as an opportunity to receive guidance in developing their basic academic and professional skills. This is in contrast to the desired aims of the tutorial process that include, for example, identification and evaluation of relevant resources for students, improvement of students' oral and written communication, introduction of time-management and self-assessment skills, and general counsel for students during their university tenure. Consequently, based on the information gathered from the questionnaire, the BA administrator-researchers recognize the need for designing strategies to foster a closer relationship between student and tutor over the course of the academic degree, thereby personalizing students' university experience and supporting students' overall personal development throughout their student career (University of Barcelona, 2004).

The next portion of this chapter focuses on the information gathered from Section B of the research instrument. The data gathered in both Section B and Section C of the questionnaire were codified and accessed using the SPSS program to obtain descriptive information of the seven factors the questionnaire measured, factors that affect students' behavior and experience at the university.

The results displayed in Table 1 below show that the 25 student-participants perceive that their teachers perform best in the following particulars: stimulating critical thinking, being mindful of the students' previous knowledge, and encouraging academic discussion. Students reported the poorest showing of teachers' performance in the areas of identifying students' limitations and identifying students' strengths. One variable that attracted the researchers' attention was students' perception of the feedback their teachers

provide. The findings show that only 8% of the respondents *totally agree* with the way their teachers provide feedback on students' work and participation. However, when combined with the *agree* responses for this variable, the percentage jumps to 64%, which raises the question: "Why are one third of the research population noncommittal (*neutral*) regarding the feedback they receive?"

The implications of these figures suggest that the input students are getting in how to deliver feedback is not significant for them. According to a number of researchers, among them Harmer (2008) and Ur (2008), the information provided to students about the performance of a learning task is a key element in the language-learning process. Hence students who will become teachers of English need to be trained not only methodologically, but by example. In other words, their teachers should serve as "models" in the process of giving feedback to language learners.

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

Variable	Totally Agree 5	Agree 4	Neutral 3	Disagree 2	Totally Disagree 1	Mean	Standard Deviation
Provide feedback on students' participation	8%	56%	36%			3.7	0.61
Motivate students to improve	20%	48%	32%			3.8	0.72
Offer suggestions for improvement	16%	60%	24%			3.9	0.64
Identify students' strengths	20%	28%	36%	16%		3.5	1.00
Identify students' limitations	12%	28%	48%	12%		3.4	0.86
Stimulate critical thinking	36%	48%	8%	8%		4.1	0.88
Have positive expectations of students	20%	52%	24%	4%		3.8	0.78
Explain content clearly	12%	52%	36%			3.7	0.66
Adhere to the syllabus	20%	48%	16%	16%		3.7	0.97
Encourage academic discussion	32%	44%	20%	4%		4.0	0.84
Observe students' performance	20%	48%	24%	8%		3.8	0.86
Are mindful of students' previous knowledge	28%	60%	8%	4%		4.1	0.72

In contrast to the previous factor, *Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Performance*, where the cumulative mean of participants' responses hovered just below 4,

the rating for *agree*, the results for Factor 2, *Students' Perceptions of the Theoretical and Practical Knowledge of the Courses*, are markedly positive. It appears that learners, registering a combined *agree* response of 92%, believe the knowledge their teachers provide is current. The researchers interpret the favorable response as a reflection of learners' trust in their teachers' ongoing commitment to professional development.

A detail pertinent to this trust is that in the pursuit of quality in the academic programs at UAEH, teachers at the end of each semester attend training courses offered by a university department whose main objective is to present courses that update teachers' knowledge vis-a-vis international trends in education. The courses explore educational models and the movement and direction of technology in learning and teaching, and they provide expert information in disciplines related to the field of education. Every semester, it is also quite common for prestigious speakers in the areas of teaching and learning to deliver lectures or make presentations to students and teachers at UAEH. In this way, students become aware of the importance of training and updating one's knowledge, especially in one's chosen academic sphere.

Another Factor 2 finding evident in Table 2 suggests that a majority of students (a combined *agreement* score of 96%) believe that the knowledge in their courses is useful and that it improves critical-thinking skills. However, researchers note that the combined *agreement* score dropped to 84% when students considered the variable dealing with the use of this knowledge in daily life. This aspect obtained the lowest score, a mean of only 4.2, in spite of the fact that students overwhelmingly believe the knowledge in their courses is useful. The researchers submit that the learners may not yet be creating a practical link between their academic learning, their use of English, and the real world outside the classroom.

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

Variable	Totally Agree 5	Agree 4	Neutral 3	Disagree 2	Totally Disagree 1	Mean	Standard Deviation
Knowledge in courses is useful	60%	36%	4%			4.5	0.58
Planned activities contribute to learning	60%	36%	4%			4.5	0.58
Knowledge provided is up-to-date	64%	28%	8%			4.5	0.65
Knowledge can be used in daily life	40%	44%	16%			4.2	0.72
Courses improve critical thinking skills	60%	36%		4%		4.5	0.71
Courses contribute to problem solving	48%	44%	8%			4.4	0.64

The findings for Factor 3 measuring students' points of view with regard to the BA program in general appear in Table 3. The results indicate that they believe the content of the courses is up-to-date and relevant. This information can be closely correlated with students' responses in Factor 2 regarding their perception that the knowledge provided is current, which also obtained the highest (64%) *totally agree* score. The answers are consistent and the means of the variables being considered are very close (4.5, 4.3, 4.2). The lowest mean (3.5) in Factor 3 occurred in students' perceptions' of the need to update courses. The researchers surmise that this midpoint between the choice of *Neutral* and *Agree* may be a response to information provided by teachers. At the end of each semester, teachers conduct an informal course evaluation to gauge students' perceptions, opinions, and suggestions for improving the course. Students' responses help the teachers determine what additions and modifications to make in the course content and how it is taught. It could be said that the participants' somewhat lukewarm response to this variable, *Content of courses needs updating*, was influenced by the fact that they know their teachers request, at the end of a course, suggestions for improvement.

Contrary to the teacher-researchers’ expectations, the item that received the second-lowest mean score, 3.6, measured learners’ perceptions about whether their teachers’ work collaboratively to design program materials. There were no *totally agree* responses for this variable in the raw data. LELI administrators have made special efforts to create a collaborative culture among faculty members and strongly concur with the adage, “two heads are better than one.” The administrators recognize that building a team of individuals with diverse strengths allows LELI to improve the quality of its English teacher-training program. Therefore, the mean for this variable presents an opportunity for LELI to develop strategies that could modify students’ perceptions of their teachers’ efforts at teamwork. Interestingly enough, while the cohort did not perceive their teachers as engaging collaboratively, 80% (combining the *totally agree* and *agree* responses) of the students indicated that their *courses foster the development of students’ skills in group work*. In this age of global citizenship, the trend both in the workplace and the realm of daily life is that problems are solved by groups, rather than individuals. To prepare students for their social and professional life in the 21st century, they must have examples of *how* to work and live collaboratively.

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

Variable	Totally Agree 5	Agree 4	Neutral 3	Disagree 2	Totally Disagree 1	Mean	Standard Deviation
Program has high standards	36%	44%	16%	4%		4.1	0.83
Courses foster the development of students’ skills in group work	48%	32%	8%	12%		4.1	1.02
Content of courses is relevant	48%	32%	20%			4.2	0.79
Content of courses is up-to-date	44%	48%	8%			4.3	0.63
Content of courses needs updating	20%	24%	52%		4%	3.5	0.96
Hours allotted for courses are adequate to cover course content	20%	48%	24%	8%		3.8	0.86
Teachers work collaboratively to design program materials		60%	40%			3.6	0.50

Factor 4 focused on *Students' Perceptions of Academic Difficulties due to External Factors*, and the results are summarized in Figure 4. The evidence of standard deviations above 1.0 reflects a wide variety of opinions. The researchers note that a fair number of students (64%) indicated dissatisfaction with course content by selecting one of the *agreement* responses. Still, the mean score (2.8) for this variable was low, and the standard deviation was 1.1, causing researchers to wonder how students interpreted the meaning of this item. (Were they dissatisfied with the level of difficulty of the content, the amount of content, the length of time needed to cover the content, or some other aspect of the subject being studied?) The researchers infer from the mixed results that there is room for additional research on how this external factor (course content) contributes to students' academic difficulties.

The item that received the next highest combined *agreement* score (48%) reflects learners' opinions that external distractions inhibit their studying. As mentioned earlier, several students in the study come from nearby communities and many live on their own or share a living space with roommates. According to Burton and Dowling (2005), students entering university face a transition phase that varies from student to student. How they work through the transitions is equally individual. Adjusting to a new living environment may contribute any number of distractions for students, and this could have influenced their responses. At the same time, the data also reveal that nearly one third of the respondents chose the *neutral* option for this variable. The researchers agree that if nearly half of the students are negatively influenced by outside distractions, the variable is worth exploring in more depth. Another variable that calls for further exploration addressed *demanding teachers*. A not-insignificant number of students (the combined *agreement* score was 44%) perceived them as contributing to their academic difficulties.

The fact that 48% of the cohort agreed that *Administrative processes* added to their academic difficulties was not a surprise to the researchers because it is common for students to grumble about administrative requirements at the beginning and end of each semester. (It is uncertain why the corresponding variable *Administrative procedures* registered only a 32% combined *agreement* level from the respondents, except to surmise that students' interpreted these similar variables in different ways.)

Contrary to the researchers' expectations, the findings on students' perceptions of economic problems contributing to their academic difficulties revealed quite a low mean of 2.1. Research studies carried out by Cristóforo, Luévano, and Sandoval (2011) have shown that socioeconomic problems do have a negative impact on students' academic performance. In fact, some students from this cohort, who dropped out of the BA program at the end of the first and second semesters, claimed that economic problems contributed to their decision not to continue with their degree studies.

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

Variable	Totally Agree 5	Agree 4	Neutral 3	Disagree 2	Totally Disagree 1	Mean	Standard Deviation
Demanding teachers	12%	32%	32%	24%		3.1	1.02
Dissatisfaction with course content	24%	40%	16%	16%		2.8	1.10
Administrative processes	16%	32%	20%	24%	8%	3.2	1.20
Complex course content	4%	16%	36%	40%	4%	2.7	0.92
Distractions that inhibit studying	20%	28%	32%	20%		3.4	1.04
Program not meeting students' expectations	8%	0%	16%	28%	48%	1.9	1.18
Presence of economic problems	0%	16%	24%	20%	40%	2.1	1.14
Relationships with classmates	8%	4%	16%	16%	56%	1.9	1.28
Relationship with teachers	8%	28%	20%	16%	28%	2.7	1.36
Administrative procedures	12%	20%	24%	36%	8%	2.9	1.18

The data for Factor 5, *Students' Perceptions of Academic Difficulties due to Personal Factors* (summarized in Table 5) yielded interesting information. As with the

results for Factor 4, the occurrence (in all the variables, in fact) of standard deviations above 1.0 shows a wide range of student responses. At the same time, the data suggest that students' academic difficulties related to personal issues have *less* of a negative impact on their academic performance than those due to external variables. The researchers view the Factor 5 data positively, proposing that students appear to perceive personal difficulties as more manageable. However, it is noteworthy that students perceived a lack of stress-management skills – 40% of students registered *agreement* with this item that had the highest mean (3.1) of all the variables in this factor – as contributing to their academic difficulties. This information will assist LELI's administrators conjointly with tutors to design strategies for lowering students' anxiety by developing their stress-management capabilities.

The researchers also notice that *personal problems* (combined *agreement* of 40%) and *poor study habits* (combined *agreement* of 44%) had the next highest means (2.9 and 2.8, respectively) for variables in this factor. It would be valuable to explore ways that experts in life-skills management could be enlisted to help students develop coping and problem-solving skills to increase both their self-confidence in dealing with personal issues and their concentration in cultivating positive study habits. Other data in this factor reveal that students do not perceive *lack of previous knowledge* as a significant variable (a mean of 2.3) in their academic difficulties. The researchers note that one third of the students (36%) appear to recognize that *lack of dedication to studies* may negatively impact their academic performance.

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

Variable	Totally Agree 5	Agree 4	Neutral 3	Disagree 2	Totally Disagree 1	Mean	Standard Deviation
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Lack of previous knowledge	4%	12%	20%	44%	20%	2.3	1.07
Lack of dedication to studies	0%	36%	16%	16%		2.5	1.29
Problems relating with others	4%	8%	20%	24%	44%	2.0	1.17
Lack of interest in content	8%	20%	24%	16%	32%	2.5	1.35
Lack of stress-management skills	24%	16%	20%	28%	12%	3.1	1.39
Personal problems	24%	16%	20%	12%	28%	2.9	1.56
Poor study habits	8%	36%	12%	24%	20%	2.8	1.33
Family problems	8%	16%	8%	20%	48%	2.1	1.40

Students' responses to Factor 6, *Vocational Beliefs and Expectations*, provide researchers with a good idea of the commitment students have to the program and some indication of what kind of teachers the students wish to become. Some time ago, one of the most challenging problems the BA program in LELI faced stemmed from a particular belief many students held. Rather than learning *how to teach English*, many assumed that earning a BA in English Language Teaching would allow them to *learn English* or to lead them to a career in translation. The data presented in Table 6 suggest that something has changed. In this study, four fifths of the research population (a combined *agreement* total of 80%) envision themselves as English teachers in the future and 100% (80%, *totally agree*; 20%, *agree*) believe that the BA will allow them to have a teaching career. These variables represent the highest means, 4.3 and 4.8, respectively, for this factor.

These data are quite promising as they reveal students' trust in the program and their belief that the knowledge they acquire will facilitate their professional development. Furthermore, the combined total of *agreement* responses for students *considering the possibility of working or studying abroad* is 100% with a *mean* of 4.6. It appears that respondents are aware of the fact that knowing English will help them obtain scholarships offered not only by UAEH but also by Mexico's National Educational Bureau (SEP). The numbers also reflect learners' strong commitment to studying in the BA program, as evidenced by a mean of 4.2 for this variable. Additionally, students also believe that the

completion of their degree studies will allow them to improve their economic status (mean, 4.2).

In contrast, their expectations of earning a good teaching salary in the future registered a mean of 2.9, suggesting that they are aware of the historical realities in their chosen field. The item that was awarded with the lowest mean (2.5) asked students whether they would consider leaving the program and enrolling in a different BA. The combined *agreement* total for this variable was 20% (12%, *totally agree*; 8%, *agree*). The researchers may infer from this data that these future English teachers are, by and large, dedicated to staying the course, and they do not seem dissuaded by the realization that as teachers they may not earn high salaries. Further, it appears that the BA is meeting students' vocational expectations. This factor reflected the highest percentage of positive (*agreement*) responses in the research questionnaire.

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

Variable	Totally Agree 5	Agree 4	Neutral 3	Disagree 2	Totally Disagree 1	Mean	Standard Deviation
Envision themselves as English teachers in the future	68%	12%	12%	4%	4%	4.3	1.11
Believe that the BA will allow them to have a teaching career	80%	20%	0%	0%	0%	4.8	0.40
Believe that completing the BA is a factor in improving their economic status	48%	36%	12%	4%	0%	4.2	0.84
Committed to studying in the BA program	60%	16%	16%	8%	0%	4.2	1.02
Would consider changing their BA, if possible	12%	8%	28%	24%	28%	2.5	1.32
Expect to develop professionally	48%	36%	12%	0%	4%	4.2	0.96
Would consider the possibility of working or studying abroad	64%	36%				4.6	0.48
Expect to earn a good teaching salary in the future	8%	24%	40%	8%	20%	2.9	1.22
Believe good job opportunities exist for graduates	4%	68%	20%	8%		3.6	0.69

The final factor in the research questionnaire, Factor 7, focused on the tutorial process. This has always been an area of concern at UAEH. It is a requirement that

teachers, including full-time teachers at UAEH, serve as tutors for an entire class, from 20 to a maximum of 30 students. A tutor's responsibility is based on the principles stated in the university's Educational Model. According to the model, a tutor's main objective is to move beyond the traditional role of helping students with their academic concerns and assist them in a more holistic way during their university tenure. Toward this end, the tutors and their tutees must meet at least three times per semester, and the tutors must keep online records to use as a guide for knowing what kinds of help and support students need.

It should be pointed out that special efforts have been conducted by UAEH to train teachers to become more effective tutors, since the tutor's responsibility has not always been fully understood. The data summarized in Table 7 reflect students' perceptions that their tutors treat them ethically and respectfully. This variable garnered the highest *agreement*, a combined total of 96%. Students also agreed (68% responded with either 4 or 5 on the Likert scale) on the fact that their tutors communicate well and show trust and empathy.

On the other hand, the data for this factor indicate *disagreement* among the respondents in the majority of the variables, with the highest combined *disagreement* total of 84% reserved for the item *Proposes extra activities unrelated to students' personal development*. The data suggest that students do not believe their tutors are providing the support they expect from them. The researchers surmise that these results correspond mainly to the fact that the majority of LELI's academic staff consists of part-time teachers who do not devote their entire day to teaching at LELI; many of them also teach in other institutions. With regard to full-time teachers, the reality is that LELI does not employ enough full-time teachers to attend to the needs of all students. Another element of concern related to tutorials is that teachers need to be trained to assume the role of tutors and that

this preparation must include both methodological and psychological aspects of the work. It is not enough to be cognizant of the technical and procedural aspects – e.g., how to access a web page for keeping records – to be an effective tutor. Therefore, the researchers believe it is worth looking in more depth at this factor and how it affects students so that administrators and teachers can begin designing action plans and support programs to ensure that students have a more positive tutorial experience and, by extension, a more positive university experience.

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

Variable	Totally Agree 5	Agree 4	Neutral 3	Disagree 2	Totally Disagree 1	Mean	Standard Deviation
Treats students ethically and respectfully	56%	40%			4%	4.4	0.86
Carefully supervises students’ academic trajectory	28%	24%	32%	8%	8%	3.5	1.22
Makes suggestions for improvement	12%	8%	56%	20%	4%	3.0	0.97
Respects students’ time and keeps appointments	32%	24%	28%	8%	8%	3.6	1.25
Communicates well and shows trust and empathy	40%	28%	20%	12%		3.9	1.05
Is responsible and willing to compromise	28%	28%	16%	24%	4%	3.5	1.26
Provides information about scholarships	4%	12%	44%	20%	20%	2.6	1.08
Offers social support for achieving goals	4%	36%	28%	24%	8%	3.0	1.05
Offers cultural support for achieving goals	4%	16%	40%	28%	12%	2.7	1.02
Offers emotional support for achieving goals	12%	8%	44%	32%	4%	2.9	1.03
Assigns activities integral to learners’ development	4%		28%	36%	32%	2.0	0.99
Proposes extra activities unrelated to students’ personal development	0%	4%	12%	24%	60%	1.6	0.86

The final data analysis in this research study explores students’ comments in Section C of the questionnaire. Their responses are used to substantiate and expand upon the data gathered in other parts of the questionnaire and further illuminate the findings that can be used to improve the educational quality of the BA program. The qualitative data from Section C -- the participants’ own words and summaries of their comments -- are

grouped into three categories based on the most recurring responses. The categories are identified in this way: Administrative, Classroom Experience, and Miscellaneous. The researchers paid special attention to respondents' reflections and to comments that might be considered contradictory.

In response to the question about their overall feelings toward the BA in ELT program at UAEH, 95% of the students (23) openly stated satisfaction regarding their BA studies. Further, some students included positive comments about their teachers and the content of their courses. A sample of responses excerpted from the questionnaire follows, with student numbers randomly assigned to preserve the respondents' anonymity.

S 1 -- *...al principio no estaba segura pero ahora estoy segura... los profesores son muy buenos*

-- ...in the beginning I was not sure, but now I am...the teachers are very good

S 3 -- *...al inicio fue complicado, pero sé que estoy donde realmente quiero estar...*

-- ...in the beginning, it was complicated; but I know I am where I really want to be...

S 5 -- *...no sabía que esperar pero en verdad me gusta esta licenciatura... las materias son muy interesantes*

-- ...I did not know what to expect, but in fact, I really like this BA... the courses are very interesting

S 7 -- *...me encanta enseñar...*

-- ...I love teaching...

Students' suggestions for improving the BA program were expressed mainly in terms of administrative aspects and classroom experiences. With respect to administrative aspects, students made the following recommendations:

The university web page should be updated.

There should be changes in the class schedule.

The university should improve its administrative procedures.

Although the last suggestion concurs with 48% and 32% of respondents who registered *agreement* that administrative processes or procedures, respectively, contributed to their academic difficulties, the standard deviations of 1.20 and 1.18 for these variables indicate that the responses are not tightly clustered around *agreement* and, therefore, are in concert with the high-satisfaction qualitative comment registered in Section C.

A summary of participants' recommendations related to classroom experiences follows.

All the semesters should be taught in English.

We have had native speakers in our classes and this should continue.

More guidance from the teachers is needed.

More communication between teachers and students is needed.

More meetings with the tutors are needed.

With respect to the first suggestion, the researchers note that not all students' English-proficiency levels are the same when they begin the BA program. LELI's educational strategy, therefore, is to teach the first and second semesters in Spanish, in the belief that by the third semester most students will have achieved a language-proficiency level sufficient for success in an English-speaking classroom. Regarding the last three suggestions, the researchers believe that tutorials as they are currently handled in LELI require follow-up study as they do not appear to be giving students the desired results.

As can be anticipated in this type of research, when respondents are given the freedom to express their opinions, the opinions may contradict information previously obtained -- in this case, in other sections of the questionnaire. For example, some

respondents observed that the teaching quality should be improved; they even suggested a need for updating training courses for teachers. This information counters a variable included in Factor 2 in which 92% of the respondents' perceived that the *knowledge provided is up-to-date*; the same percentage of students perceived in Factor 3 that the *content of the courses* is also current. The researchers note that the knowledge presented in the courses and the course updates are provided by teachers who are asked to review their courses at the end of each semester. It is unclear whether the students' comments about a need for updating relate to teachers and their academic skills or whether they have a different type of training in mind. It would be worthwhile to look into these variables further to get a better understanding of respondents' perceptions.

Another contradiction can be found with students' comments about the need to improve critical-thinking skills. In Section B of the questionnaire, in Factor 1, *Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Performance*, 84% of the respondents perceived that their teachers stimulate critical thinking. However, in Factor 2, *Students' Perceptions of the Theoretical and Practical Knowledge of the Courses*, 96% of the respondents held the opinion that the courses improve their critical-thinking skills. The researchers grant that the inconsistency in students' responses likely reflects a wide range of definitions for what constitutes *critical thinking* in the minds of third-semester students who are in the formative stages of understanding its elements and how the skills that inform critical thinking develop over time and with practice.

The third category of responses, *Miscellaneous*, includes suggestions touching on various aspects of the students' BA experience.

It is a fact that we need more information related to employment opportunities in teaching.

We need more information about classroom management and other real-world teaching challenges.

A self-access center should be built on the ICSHu campus.

Excerpts of additional student reflections follow.

S 9 -- *tengo que mejorar mis hábitos de estudio...*

-- I have to improve my study habits...

S11 -- *he mejorado mi nivel de inglés y eso me hace sentir muy feliz...*

-- I have improved my English level and that makes me feel very happy...

S13 -- *el hecho de tener contacto con hablantes nativos me ha ayudado no solamente a aprender y practicar inglés sino a aprender sobre su cultura, una experiencia que ha sido impresionante...*

-- the fact of having contact with native speakers has helped me not only to learn and practice English but also to learn about their culture, an experience that has been amazing....

S15 -- *...mi experiencia en esta licenciatura me ha ayudado a crecer como persona...*

-- ...my experience in this BA has helped me to grow as a person...

Conclusions

This exploratory study has provided us with information and particulars that not only enable us to have a better understanding of the behavior of our research population – the July-December 2013 cohort -- but also to make changes and improvements in the BA program and the policies that affect it to improve the academic quality of students' experiences. As has been previously mentioned, the research is part of a longitudinal study whose main objective is to follow a cohort in terms of indexes of academic performance, success and failure rates, course repetitions, typical and atypical completion timetables, attrition rates, and, of course, graduation rates in order to give students the support and help

needed to ensure a reasonable chance of success as discussed by Robertson and Baker (1987) in McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001).

One of the main concerns for LELI administrators, academic staff, and university directors is the BA program's high dropout rate; for example, this cohort began with 38 students and by the end of the first semester, only 28 students finished the required courses. Before completing the second semester, three more students dropped out. These numbers represent a high rate of students abandoning their studies. According to the information gathered, the main reason for these numbers is that the students did not perceive themselves as future teachers of English. Hence, we administrators of the program are compelled to devise strategies so that future candidates applying to this BA will obtain more information in terms of the program's syllabus and the kind of training involved in preparation for the real world of language teaching.

One aspect affecting learners' academic trajectories that demands our attention is tutorial. Even if a tutor is assigned to every student, it is clear from students' perceptions in Factor 7 and comments provided in Section C that tutors are not providing the support students envision they need. Other factors worth exploring in more depth are students' perceptions of the feedback they receive from teachers (Factor 1); how and whether they see teachers working collaboratively (Factor 3); and how the program addresses and develops students' stress-management skills (Factor 5).

In addition, this study has yielded valuable information in terms of a particular course respondents perceive as the most problematic: Research Methodology. With this information, program administrators can explore in more detail what the writing of a cohesive and coherent paper implies for students and how the sequence of courses leading

to this task can scaffold students more effectively so that they find success in the undertaking.

To conclude, the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data gathered in this research gives us a deeper understanding of students' behavior during their tenure at the university. The comparative aspects of the study – eight public universities in Mexico participating in research investigating students' academic trajectories in language-teaching programs -- will enable us to know and learn from what is happening in other universities that offer similar BA programs. The similarities and differences among the programs and most importantly the careful analysis of students' profiles and perceptions in terms of the programs' strengths and weaknesses will generate discussion and inspire action to improve the quality of student experiences in teacher-training programs. In other words, the results of this study will allow us to help our students to become more competitive in their future praxis as teachers.

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