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

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

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

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

Studies of student trajectories  
in language teaching programs in Mexico

# Studies of student trajectories in language teaching programs in Mexico



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



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# Studies of student trajectories in language teaching programs in Mexico

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Universidad Veracruzana



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## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*Octaviano García Robelo  
Eleanor Occeña Gallardo*

The following study is qualitative. It is descriptive, not experimental, because it is characterized by the observation of a phenomenon from its natural context so as to allow for analysis without manipulating the variables; the collection of data for the research was accomplished in a single moment (Mertens, 2010; Hernández, Fernández, and Baptista, 2010). It is important to make clear that some universities involved in the study made adjustments to the methodology in order to suit their particular contexts. Any adjustments are noted and explained in the individual university chapters.

### **Participating Institutions**

A total of eight state (public) universities in the Mexican Republic and their respective BA in English Language Teaching programs participated in this research study. The universities involved in the study are the following: Autonomous University of the State of Hidalgo -- Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo (UAEH); Autonomous University of Tlaxcala -- Universidad Autónoma de Tlaxcala (UATX); Autonomous University of Puebla -- Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP); Autonomous University of Tamaulipas (UAT) -- Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas; University of Colima -- Universidad de Colima (UCOL); Autonomous University of Aguascalientes -- Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes (UAA); Autonomous University of the State of Mexico -- Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México (UAMex); and University of Veracruz -- Universidad Veracruzana (UV).

## Criteria for Selection of the Research Population

To conduct the research and analysis in this study monitoring the school trajectories of university students, it was determined that the research population would be made up of the total number of students of a recent cohort (Hernández, Fernández y Baptista, 2010) in each of the BA in language-teaching programs of the participating universities. Table 1 is an overview of the study's particulars arranged by university. The size of the research population for each university differs because the student-participants were chosen according to the number of students enrolled at the time the study was done. The researchers at each university decided on the number of students from a particular cohort to include in their research population either because of particular factors they cited (a common student-matriculation date, for instance) or because they used a random sampling.

**Table 1** Participating Universities and Students in Their Research Populations

University	BA Program	Cohort	Semester	Research Population		
				Males	Females	Total
Aguascalientes State University (UAA)	BA in English-Language Teaching	2013	Third	15	30	45
University of Colima (UCOL)	BA in Language Teaching	2013	Third	23	37	60
Autonomous University of the State of Hidalgo (UAEH)	BA in English-Language Teaching	2013	Third	7	18	25
Autonomous University of the State of Mexico (UAEMex)	BA in Languages	2013	Third	23	54	77
Autonomous University of Puebla (BUAP)	BA in English-Language Teaching	2013	Third	22	8	30
Autonomous University of Tamaulipas (UAT)	BA in English	2013	Third	14	30	44
Autonomous University of Tlaxcala (UATX)	BA in Language Teaching	2013	Third	22	35	57
University of Veracruz (UV)	BA in English	2014	First	43	65	108
<b>Total</b>						446



## Methodological Strategy and Instrument

For the collection of information, an instrument titled “Questionnaire on School Trajectories in BA in English Teaching Programs and Related Courses” was developed and then adapted (García y Barrón, 2011) by each university according to its characteristics. The questionnaire consisted of three sections (see Appendix):

Section A focused on gathering general information about the students, including their previous school trajectories and their socioeconomic situations. Section B addressed seven factors, described in the previous chapter and established for this study:

- Students’ perceptions of teachers’ performance
- 
- Students’ perceptions of basic and practical knowledge of the courses
- Students’ perceptions of the BA program in general
- Students’ perceptions of academic difficulties due to external factors
- Students’ perceptions of academic difficulties due to personal factors
- Students’ vocational beliefs and expectations
- Students’ perceptions regarding the tutorial process

Section C of the questionnaire consisted of an open-ended question intended to gather students’ personal opinions regarding their experience in their respective BA programs. The collection of this qualitative data contributes an important element in the analysis of students’ total academic experience. Their comments add a personal dimension to the scrutiny of the quantitative demographic information gathered in Section A of the questionnaire and students’ rating of their perceptions of factors affecting their academic performance as recorded in Section B of the questionnaire.

In Section C, students were asked the following question: *In general, how do you feel about your first year in the BA program?* Students responded in their own words. It

should be reiterated that student-participants were in the third semester of their respective BA programs when they replied to the open-ended question. In other words, their reflections emerged from looking back on the first year of their university experience. It should be noted, however, that in the case of one university, the cohort that completed the research instrument had just begun the BA program. To respond to the question in Section C, the students in this cohort drew on their experience from the opening weeks of their first semester in the program.

Before administering any data collection instrument, it is necessary to verify its validity and reliability to ensure it is evaluating precisely what it was designed to measure. In this study, the Alpha de Cronbach method was used, in which the results of the measurement are based on values between 0 and 1, where 0 means that there is no reliability and 1 represents total reliability. In other words, when the results are close to 1, the reliability of the instrument is greater. This means that the questionnaire items are correlated with each other positively and are included to evaluate an object of study in common, and that the results of the questionnaire agree with the results of the same questionnaire administered on another occasion (Massui, 2011; Kerlinger and Lee, 2002). Accordingly, this research instrument was piloted and validated obtaining an Alpha .90. Therefore, it can be said that the data collected were significant and the instrument's level of reliability enabled an appropriate analysis (Quero, 2010; Nunnally, 2009).

### **Results of the Piloting of the Research Instrument**

As mentioned above, the Alfa de Cronbach method for analyzing the reliability of the research instrument was used; the levels of reliability appear in Table 2 showing the

significant reliability levels obtained for each of the factors the instrument evaluated, as well as the instrument as a whole.

The pilot population was made up of 15 students from the Autonomous University of Puebla (BUAP) and 15 students from the Autonomous University of the State of Hidalgo (UAEH). All students, totaling 30, were enrolled in their respective university's BA in English program.

**Table 2 Reliability of the Research Instrument**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Name of the Factor</b>	<b>Reliability</b>
1	Students' perceptions of teachers' performance	<b>.86</b>
2	Students' perceptions of theoretical and practical knowledge of the courses	<b>.86</b>
3	Students' perceptions of the BA program in general	<b>.55</b>
4	Students' perceptions of academic difficulties due to external factors	<b>.84</b>
5	Students' perceptions of academic difficulties due to internal factors	<b>.85</b>
6	Students' vocational beliefs and expectations	<b>.40</b>
7	Students' perceptions regarding the tutorial process	<b>.91</b>
	<b>Overall Reliability of the Instrument</b>	<b>.90</b>

The level of reliability that the instrument showed was .90; therefore, it can be concluded that the questionnaire used by the participating universities to gather data is a highly valid and reliable instrument. To determine its validity, a Factorial Analysis was carried out with the purpose of observing the correlation, distribution, and grouping of the factors for each of the items. To determine validity with precision, only items with probabilities higher than .35 were chosen. This was immediately followed by an analysis to determine if the items that were grouped under certain factors really evaluated the construct.

### **Placement of the Sample and Administration of the Instrument**

Representatives of the research teams at each participating university met and agreed on the date and place for the administration of the questionnaire which was administered in a single time period and in a space far from noise and interruptions. The

students who completed the questionnaire expressed willingness and consent to participate in the research activity. Prior to completing the questionnaire, the student-participants were instructed to read the items carefully and to answer each one truthfully.

When the students completed the questionnaire, the administrators of the study at each of the eight universities carefully checked that students had answered the questions appropriately. When information was lacking or incomplete, they asked students to fill in what was missing; or, in some cases, they contacted students to return and finish completing the information required. Afterwards, the questionnaires were secured in a safe place for later extraction and analysis of the information.

### **Procedure for the Analysis and Interpretation of the Research Results**

Once collected, the data were run in a data base of the statistical software SPSS, Version 19, in order to continue with the statistical analysis and finalize the compilation of results.

Two sections of the questionnaire were analyzed using this software. As indicated earlier, Section A covered students' demographics, including their previous school trajectories and their socioeconomic conditions. Section B asked students for their perceptions of seven factors identified as affecting academic performance. The factors were *teachers' performance, the theoretical knowledge and practice of the courses in the program, the B.A. program in general, academic difficulties due to external factors, academic difficulties due to internal factors, and the tutorial process*. In addition, students were asked about their *vocational beliefs and expectations* (Factor 6 in the questionnaire).

To evaluate the data obtained from Section A of the questionnaire a descriptive analysis was used, drawing on figures for frequency, percentage, mean, minimum and maximum value, and standard deviation (Pérez, 2009) to illustrate the findings. The

purpose of this data analysis was to learn the general characteristics of the students in each BA program. Afterwards, the researchers compiled brief summaries (with formats determined by each university research team) of the salient characteristics of the student cohorts according to their trajectories and university contexts.

The examination of the data from Section B of the research questionnaire also requires a descriptive analysis. The students' responses in this portion of the instrument were their perceptions of the seven factors (and corresponding variables) affecting academic trajectories. Students chose from Likert-scale options numbered from 1 to 5 to record their perceptions. The meaning of each choice is explained thus:

- 1= Totally Disagree
- 2= Disagree
- 3= Neutral
- 4= Agree
- 5= Totally Agree

Finally, a third analysis of the data was conducted using students' qualitative comments obtained as responses to the open question in Section C of the research questionnaire. The responses were interpreted singularly as well as in conjunction with the data from the other sections of the research instrument.

In the following chapters, each participating university describes certain aspects of its institutional history and academic programming as a contextual backdrop for this research. Further, the university teacher-researchers cite studies in the scientific literature on the value of academic-trajectory research in higher education and other research informing institutional responses to students' needs and the needs of society in general. Many chapters also include researchers' motivations for participating in the study along with their expectations for how the findings will be used.

In the process of mining the data from the research questionnaires and conducting their analyses of the information collected, the university teams have compiled descriptive profiles of the students in their respective BA programs. The researchers offer conclusions about what factors affect students' academic trajectories and whether and how these factors suggest the need for regular monitoring throughout students' experiences in higher education. By extension, the research teams have begun to substantively examine the BA programs themselves, as well as the infrastructure of their universities to help determine whether and how these universities are delivering quality educational opportunities and contributing to students' learning and growth.

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