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Comparative Analysis of English Language Student's School Paths at a Mexico University

Abstract

Seven factors related to academic paths of students of the Bachelor of English Language of a public university in Mexico are investigated. With a non-experimental descriptive design, a Likert scale was applied to evaluate the college students' perception of these factors. A comparative analysis between three types of school paths was performed. It was found that students with irregular school paths show higher academic difficulties by internal and external problems, such as difficulties in their study habits, problems with their teachers, personal problems and economic problems. Most students reported having difficulties with management of stress, among other important results. This research provides useful information to improve teaching practices, curriculum and mentoring. Psychological and external problems were identified as factors that can be integrated into programs of prevention or intervention, to help improve the education of students and increase terminal efficiency in this university.

Keywords: academic paths, higher education, English language

Introduction

In Mexico, universities face the problem of low completion rate of students related to the laggard, failure, poor performance and abandonment of their studies (ANUIES, 2001; Garcia, 2014). This paper presents a research job exploring the students' perception of the Bachelor's degree program of English Language Teaching at the Autonomous University of the State of Hidalgo regarding a number of factors affecting their academic path. The academic path is defined as the history of each student since the admission to graduation from college, considering that there are many factors influencing either the successful completion of their studies or even the failure (Ponce de León, 2003). In Mexico, according to the analysis of a series of research jobs within the study of languages, English is the language which is most studied, followed by French language. The main reasons are that, in addition to the establishment of educational government policies for English teaching at schools, English is the foreign language most taught in our country. Besides, Mexico is located between two countries where English is spoken (southern with Belize and the north with United States). Also, the current dominance of English as the main language in trade, political and cultural relations (Ramirez-Romero et al., 2013).

Conducting research on academic paths is important because data and information are collected which are useful for decision-making to help students to carry out their professional studies in college; plus, it is a responsibility of each university (Díaz-Barriga, 2009). Factors which were analyzed were: teacher's

perceptions acquired knowledge and skills during their training, perceptions of plans and curricula, academic difficulties due to external factors, academic difficulties due to internal factors, job expectation and mentoring. These factors are evaluated by applying the test that was applied to data collection.

Methodology

A quantitative research methodology, including a descriptive non-experimental design was used to observe the phenomenon within its natural context and then analyze it, without manipulating variables. Data were recollected at a specific moment (Mertens, 2010; Hernández, Fernández & Baptista, 2010).

Sample

The sample consisted of 8 men and 17 women, with a total of 25 students in their second semester of the Bachelor's Degree in English Language Teaching at the Autonomous University of the State of Hidalgo, cohort 2014. The university is a public school.

In order to perform the analysis and follow the academic paths of students, it was considered necessary to choose the last cohort; therefore, it was decided that the sample should be purposive and include the total number of students of the recent cohort (Hernández et al., 2010) of the Academic Programme in English Language Education.

Assessment tool

The data collection tool employed for this study is questionnaire, the first section of which evaluates general data; the second section evaluates seven factors, including a series of items as statements with Likert-type answers. The instrument was previously tested and validated; a Cronbach's alpha of .90 was obtained. For the purpose of this paper, only results from the second section are presented.

Data analysis

For data analysis, students were organized according to their academic paths. Three were obtained: students with Excellent Paths, who did not fail any subjects and have a Grade Point Average (GPA) between nine and ten; students with Regular Paths who failed subjects and have a GPA between 8 and 8.9, and students with Irregular Paths having a GPA below 8 and have one or more failed subjects.

Then, the mean response of the three types of paths, i.e., of the three groups was compared. A descriptive statistics analysis was made only considering the average total response for each factor and for each group. Then, the response of each reagent of the factors analyzed was analyzed, considering that the answers have options 1 to 5. The response options were as follows:

1 = Strongly disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Neutral
4 = Agree
5 = Totally agree

Results analysis per factor

It was generally necessary, for the analysis and interpretation for each of the seven factors and their respective items, to consider the type of academic path of the students and their mean responses, which can gradually go from 1, which means Strongly disagree, to 5, which means Totally agree. The types of paths analyzed were: Excellent Path (1), Regular Path (2), and Irregular Path (3).

Thus, in these results, according to the descriptive analysis, an average response of 3.9 was found among Excellent Path students (N = 14), an average response of 3.5 for Regular Path students (N = 8) and an average response of 3.5, too, among Irregular Path students (N = 3). In general, these results allow inferring a regular perception among students regarding the teacher's role, considering that most responses among students are located between level 3, Neutral, and level 4, Agree.

On the contrary, there was a very clear difference in the item evaluating the students' perception about whether "the teacher encourages an active participation": Irregular Path students seem to agree less regarding this role of the teacher, less agree on the role of the teacher, as compared to the perception of Excellent Path students.

Meanwhile, among the results obtained regarding the "Perception of knowledge and skills" factor which was acquired by students during their professional training, an average response was found among Excellent and Regular Path students of 4.4, an average 4.1 for Regular Paths and an average of 4.1 for Irregular Paths. These results show that students seem to agree regarding the fact that knowledge and skills they acquire during their training are useful and important, slightly better perception of students with Excellent Paths.

As for the "Perception of the Bachelor's degree program during training" factor, a favorable response was also found in which the average response for Excellent and Regular Path students was 4, the average response for Regular Path students was 3.7 and the average response for Irregular Path students was also 3.7. These responses indicate that they maintain a positive perception regarding the program.

An analysis per reactive stresses that students in the three paths agreed that "the activities planned in the program allowed them to increase their abilities to work together", "contents are updated", "the educational program level is excellent", "subjects are relevant to their training".

As for the "Perception of academic difficulties due to external factors" factor, an average response of 2.7 was found for students with excellent school paths (N = 19), an average response of 2.6 was found for students of regular school paths (N = 4), and an average response of 3.2 was found for students with irregular paths (N = 2). These results indicate that students with an Irregular Path tend to show more academic difficulties, due to external factors.

Specifically, it is interesting that Irregular Path students fully agree in that "having learning difficulties because they are easily distracted". These students tend to agree that they have "school problems because are not satisfied with complex contents", "administrative procedures", "the career does not meet their expectations", "economic problems" and "difficulties with their teachers".

Regarding the results for the "Perception of academic difficulties due to internal factors" factor, an average response of 2.4 was found for Excellent Path students (N = 19), of 2.9 for Regular Path (N = 4) and of 3.3 for Irregular Path (N = 2).

Generally, those who reported having more school difficulties due to internal factors have Regular and Irregular Paths.

Specifically, students with Irregular Paths perceive having school difficulties, because they have "problems in their study habits" due to "personal problems", "a lack of interest in the contents" and a "lack of dedication to their studies". Students with Regular Paths have a smaller ratio of these problems. The three types of students show difficulties due to the "lack of stress management".

Regarding the results for the "Vocational expectations of students" factor, a favorable mean was generally found, and the average response of students with an Excellent Path was 4, it was 3.7 for students with a Regular Path, and also of 3.7 for Irregular Path students. This average response seems to show that they still agree and have positive vocational expectations.

In the analysis per item being favorable stresses the fact that students with the three paths almost fully agree that "the career being studied will allow them to work as teachers", and the response of Excellent Path students was slightly higher. Similarly, they seem to agree regarding the fact that "completing their studies will give them the opportunity to work abroad".

As for the item valuating "whether they would change their career", Excellent Path students disagree, Regular Path students have a neutral response and Irregular Path students said they agree to study another career.

As for the "Perception of mentoring" factor, an average response was found for Excellent Path students of 3.1, of 2.7 for Regular Path students and 2.8 for Irregular path students. Since the response was at an intermediate level, their response was neutral; however, both the Regular Path and the Irregular Path responses were slightly lower, and it was slightly better for Excellent Path students.

In the analysis made per item students with the three paths agreed that "the guardian assists with respect and ethics during counseling and supervision". On the other hand, they disagree regarding whether "the tutor assigns activities not related to personal development". Another reagent in which their disagreement is similar is related to the fact that the "tutor facilitates those processes for the obtainment of the grant".

Conclusions

In conclusion, results show that students from the three school paths agree, since their responses were near level 4, considering that their teachers properly exercise their teaching activities. However, it is necessary that teachers continue to be updated, to self-evaluate their educational practices, to improve their teaching methods and strategies and adapt their students' learning to real contexts (Díaz-Barriga, 2010; Sola & Moreno, 2005).

As for two factors: perception of the theoretical and practical knowledge acquired during training, and the perception of academic plans and programs, students with the three types of paths showed a response between levels 3 and 4, so these factors are acceptable. Recent authors (Lavín & Farías, 2003) do not separate plans and programs from the constant changes faced by higher education; they say that one of the objectives of plans and programs is to ensure the student's general training by means of quality and innovation contents and the inclusion of supports such as mentoring, new learning models, evaluation, accreditation and certification.

So, it is important to have continuous evaluation, updating and innovation of curricular plans and programs regarding the knowledge acquired by the students who wish to obtain the Bachelor's Degree in English Language and consider the needs in the labor market.

Students with Irregular Paths reported having academic difficulties due to economic problems. These data are similar to those reported by Rodríguez in Chile (2015), where English language students with limited economic resources are those with the greatest difficulties, so it is suggested to look for alternatives to support the students' economic situation; for example, promoting and increasing the number of scholarships for students with greater financial needs.

Finally, the perception of mentoring in general. The response offered by students of the three paths was located at about level 3, thus suggesting the need to improve the tutorials offered to these students with different needs (García, 2014).

Globally, according to the perceptions of students of the three types of paths, they reported different needs to improve the quality of their learning. So school paths should continue to be analyzed, so as to find out which factors are relevant and which remedial intervention and prevention programs might be generated to help students develop professionally, successfully complete their studies and improve the terminal efficiency of their programs and university (García & Mendoza, 2015).

The findings for English Language student's paths in universities from Mexico provide useful information to improve the teaching and learning processes of English language. Students need support to improve their learning strategies. Teachers have to review their educational practice, as well as improve mentoring skills for students with difficulties.

Finally, this research was limited by the size of the sample, with the need to expand and work with large samples that allow statistical analysis to help relate or infer possible variables or factors with more accurately and statistical rigor. The research was conducted only with a sample of Mexico, it is important to conduct a comparative study with other universities in other countries, in order to analyze the behavior of this phenomenon and determine what could be resumed from other universities to help improve the training and terminal efficiency of these English language students.

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