

Studies on the Teaching and Learning of Languages at Mexican Universities

Coordinadoras

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**Perspectives of Academic Achievement
in a Mexican University, the Case of
Stakeholders
in the BA in English of the University of
Veracruz**

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Abstract

Among the major challenges facing public higher education are school dropouts, low academic achievement, failing and lagging, which are due to a large number of factors that affect students and reflect badly on low graduation rates. From a qualitative stance, this study explores these educational phenomena at a Bachelor's Degree in English Language in a Mexican public University from the

perspective of the main educational stakeholders (students, teachers and administrators). Given the negative impact of these phenomena in educational institutions, it is proper to present what these actors perceive as the underlying factors. For this purpose, students, teachers and administrators of the educational program were interviewed and official documents were reviewed to identify the rate of failing in English educational experiences (EE). The results allowed identifying the failing rate, the average score and the factors that the participants attribute to academic achievement, highlighting its multifactorial origin. The results will be useful not just for professors of the educational program in question but for those who work in similar programs at any level of education in English, and even for students from similar programs as identified factors can be considered to mitigate its negative effects.

Key words: *Academic Achievement, English Language, Higher Education, Stakeholders' Perspectives*

Introduction

Academic achievement and related notions (failing, lagging, and dropping out) have been identified as some of the barriers that have to be overcome in Mexican Higher Education Institutions (HEI) since they are detrimental to the quality of education these institutions offer. Thus the need to contribute to the existing body of knowledge is undeniable. Studies on

academic achievement may not only help identify who is being left behind but also might indicate which factors are present in the student population and how they foster or hinder students' performance. Furthermore, the results could allow the institutions to detect moments of vulnerability when students may decide to leave the university in response to these factors. This information, in turn, might let institutions plan improvement strategies according to the influential factors so identified. Studies on achievement invariably deal with other closely related phenomena: failing, lagging behind and dropping out. Finding out what aspects contribute to these phenomena, may help determine to what extent an institution contributes to students' academic development as well as what impact the educational institution has on students' personal lives. In short, academic achievement studies provide data that can be used to make more informed academic and administrative decisions related to improving the quality of service universities offer their students.

Given the potential significance of such studies and cognizant of the impact of such studies, the members of a researcher group from the BA degree in English at the University of Veracruz (UV) decided to conduct a study on academic achievement and related notions, especially because no previous investigation of this type had been done at the University of Veracruz. This chapter reports on the study aimed at identifying the factors that influence academic achievement, failing, lagging behind and dropping out. Considering that the main goal of a study

of this type is to deepen understanding of factors affecting university students' academic achievement, the researchers decided to incorporate the perspectives of those stakeholders intimately related to the educational phenomena: students, teachers and administrators.

The information hereby provided may be useful for teachers, school authorities, and teacher trainers. For instance, knowledge of the factors affecting student performance and achievement contributes to informed decision-making by teachers, tutors, and administrators charged with supporting appropriate teaching approaches and methodologies, implementing retention strategies, detecting precise moments of student vulnerability, and recognizing specific issues affecting student achievement— all considerations that impact students' experiences in higher education.

As noted earlier, the researchers found no trace of previous investigations of academic achievement in the BA in English Language (LLI hereafter). Therefore, the current study aims to fill the existing knowledge gap on this relevant topic. However, the findings of four recent studies, discussed below, are germane to this objective. These addressed, from various educational actors' frames of reference, the following issues: dropping out, perceptions on the curriculum, student trajectories, and students' perceptions of effective teaching.

In the first study, Hernández & Narváez, (2014) investigated the dropout phenomenon in LLI. In the study, teams of researchers explored the perspectives of teachers, high-

achievement students, and at-risk students, and considered institutional data in search of plausible explanations for the high rate of attrition at the institution. The study provided an in-depth description of how different players envision the educational environment and its effects on students' academic behavior. The authors concluded that student abandonment is a multifactor phenomenon and as such, it is difficult to describe precisely. The authors highlighted that the educational practices in LLI appear to be traditional and hierarchical and that these seem not only to affect students' motivation but also to cause negative attitudes toward the program. This information is valuable for the current research described in this chapter, considering that achievement may be hindered or fostered due to outdated and stratified teaching, identified as influential in the study.

The second study (Narváez, Estrada & Núñez, 2015) investigated students', teachers', and graduates' perceptions of the curriculum. Three groups of student-participants reported a positive perception of the BA program's objectives and found the components of the curriculum to be pertinent. Likewise, the degree of satisfaction regarding the curriculum was relatively high in the three groups. The researchers learned that the teaching staff identified research as one of the strengths of the program; additionally, both students and graduates regarded research and linguistics as strengths of the curriculum. Nonetheless, the degree of satisfaction with the curriculum varied as students advanced through the program; in other words, they seemed to

value the curriculum more positively toward the conclusion of their studies. This finding appears to open a research path that focuses on the development of the academic trajectory in order to identify a breaking point (or points) in which students change their perspective toward the LLI curriculum.

With this background in mind, the researchers of the present study decided to participate in a project investigating school trajectories of students in Language Teaching programs in public universities in Mexico to deepen their understanding of the students who decide to study in the BA Degree in English (Estrada, Narváez & Núñez, 2016). This study profiled the LLI 2014 cohort. For this study, a questionnaire was administered to 108 participants. Apart from providing demographic information about this student cohort; the instrument gathered information about, students' perception of: teachers' performance, the theoretical and practical knowledge of the courses. As well as students' perception of the BA program in general, students' perception of academic difficulties due to external factors, students' perception of academic difficulties due to personal factors, students' vocational beliefs and expectations, students' perception of the tutorial experience. In conclusion, the main two factors that the researchers detected as possible problems for this cohort were poor study habits and lack of stress-management skills.

In a study aimed at identifying the students' perceptions of the attributes of effective EFL teachers (Narváez, Núñez & Estrada, 2017), the researchers concluded that students think that, ideally, teachers should master the English language, have optimal teaching skills in order to be able to transmit knowledge as well as a positive personality. The latter includes being patient and aware of the students' achievement considering that not all students learn at the same pace. EFL teachers are still role models for university students and they tend to mirror teachers' behaviour. The explanations of why such characteristics have been singled out were also quite informative and useful for gaining deeper insights into the motivations behind the students' perceptions.

Considering the previous information, the researchers decided to implement a large-scale research project on academic achievement, failing, lagging and dropping out as part of the activities of the research group they belong. This project was financed by the federal Program for Professional Teaching Development (PRODEP, for its initials in Spanish) considering the relevance of the problem investigated. In what follows a review of the literature is discussed. This comprises the scarce available literature on the issue emanated from Mexican institutions. That is, only studies carried out in Mexican HEI were considered.

Achievement, failing, lagging and dropping out in Mexican Higher education institutions

Academic achievement

Different factors can affect students' performance in a positive or in a negative way. Achievement has been found to depend on economic, personal and institutional factors. Carrillo, Ríos (2013) and Gómez, Oviedo & Martínez (2011) concluded that one of the variables most certainly to predict achievement at university is the grade point average (GPA) obtained in the previous educational level; the lower the GPA, the poorer their achievement at university. Carrillo & Ríos (2013) found out that having a job has a negative impact on students' academic progress because it significantly reduces their available time to do their school and personal activities. Gómez *et al.* (2011) discovered that there is a close relation between achievement and the students' satisfaction of their degree.

Ceballos & Bravo (2008) and Martínez (2015) agree on students' English skills having an influence on their poor academic achievement. Ceballos & Bravo (2008), mentioned that students do not have the desirable entry profile (linguistic skills in English), while Martínez (2015) stated that teachers should make students think in English and get them used to listening, speaking, reading and writing in English in order to develop the necessary linguistic skills to succeed at the program.

It is noticeable that one of the indicators that may define student academic performance is the grade point average (Carrillo & Ríos, 2013). The fact of working and studying at the same time has a negative impact on achievement because, when students get involved in a job they are exposed to having long workdays and the probability to get low grades is higher (Carrillo & Ríos, 2013). On the other hand, the satisfaction about their BA has a strong relation with the grade point average; if students' expectations are accomplished, they will probably have a better performance which might be reflected on their grades (Gómez *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, in programs in which English is the main goal, skill development play an important role in students' academic progress, since most of the problems that students face in a BA are because they lack the desirable entry profile (Ceballos & Bravo, 2008). Another aspect that must be taken into consideration is that sometimes students have the skills to perform satisfactorily but some teachers do not exploit them (Martínez, 2015).

Failing

Failing is the consequence of low academic achievement or poor learning; this is usually manifested in a grade in numeric or alphabetical form. When a student fails it does not mean that s/he did not learn; sometimes people confuse this term because they believe that the student leaning is the equivalence of the grade obtained in an exam, and it is a big mistake because

passing is not guarantee of learning (Monge, 2006). There are different causes that lead students to fail such as teachers' teaching performance, student's effort, class motivation, class atmosphere, among others (Ponce, Castillo & Carrillo, 2011). According to the previous studies, lack of effort is considered as one of the main causes of failing. Students recognized that they usually study the night before the exam and the minority said to organize their time to study during the day; that is, student participants claim that they do not expend a great deal of effort, which lead them to fail the course (Ponce *et al.*, 2011). According to Ponce *et al.* (2011), students and teachers should work together because it is unreasonable to expect an acceptable level of knowledge in student when the professor does not have a good preparation for the subject they teach. In Gudiño & Habash (2010), it is mentioned that participants are conscious of the fact that if they make a good effort they will obtain good results because they see the effort as a factor of success.

Lagging behind

Lagging behind is associated to personal and institutional factors and the consequence of low academic achievement. Vera *et al.* (2012) found out that within the personal factors are high school average, results obtained in the university entrance exam, labor situation and student's motivation. Therefore, we can conclude that students' academic background in high school

has a significant impact on their academic progress during university. In relation to institutional factors, the BA syllabus, university administration, students' behavior in selecting their classes, college's guidance, and support to students are considered the main causes of lagging behind. Legorreta (2014) also indicated that within the normative factors associated with lagging behind, are: the entry requirements, organization of subjects, types of examination, the number of opportunities to take the same subjects or take extraordinary examinations. As well as the modalities to obtain the degree (thesis, monograph, research report, GPA, general knowledge test and the like) and the normative period to complete their studies have been stressed.

Early leaving

Perhaps the most studied phenomenon related to achievement is early leaving or dropping out. Several studies in HEIs have addressed this issue. Among the factors leading to early leaving, several studies have identified the following: personal, socio-economic, institutional and pedagogical. Dzay and Narvez (2012) and Buentello, Valenzuela and

Juarez (2013) agree that school schedule and workload are factors that lead students to abandon university since most of the time the schedules were inconvenient for the students causing extra expenses. These studies report that class schedules are not flexible while at the beginning of

the BA the academic workload affects students socially and emotionally.

Dzay & Narváez (2012) and Palomino (2011) mentioned that early leaving is related to economic problems. In the first study the participants expressed the necessity to change of residence to continue their studies and work to afford them. In Palomino (2011), a significant finding was that participants identified their economic situation as a factor that forced them to leave school.

Surprisingly enough, several studies have identified the academic staff at university as directly involved in students' decision to drop out (Buentello *et al.*, 2013; Busseniers, Hernández & Núñez, 2014; Hernández & Giles, 2014; Herrera, Ramírez & Estrada, 2014; Narváez & Garrido, 2014). In Buentello *et al.* (2013), teaching is considered traditional and routine. Busseniers *et al.* (2014) concluded that teachers show traditional attitudes. In Hernández & Giles (2014), it is said that lack of support by the administrative staff and professors' demands discourage students instead of supporting them; from the student's perspective, teachers' performance is not the most appropriate because they are too demanding but they do not show support to students. In Herrera *et al.* (2014) teachers' hiring is considered one of the causes of early leaving since teachers' performance is not the most appropriate. In addition, the counseling system is not working in a satisfactory way. In Hernández & Giles (2014) and Pérez, Bravo & Isabeles (2008), the lack of interest from students is one of the main

causes of dropping out. In both studies, the authors mentioned that students' lack of interest could be related to professors or academic staff. Narváez & Garrido (2014) concluded that the university and the academic staff have a great responsibility in the students' decision to abandon their studies because they are not guided enough to avoid future problems in the BA.

Dzay & Narváez (2012) and Hernández & Giles (2014) agree that the BA program does not accomplish students' expectations. In both studies according to a quantitative analysis, students leave school because the BA program does not meet their expectations. Furthermore, both BA programs are de-contextualized so that it stops knowledge integration. Another factor that contributes to early leaving is the recurring behavior of apathy from students which is probably related to teachers and the university management (Hernández & Giles, 2014). In Pérez *et al.* (2008) the lack of interest from students was one of the most prominent causes of dropping out.

Buentello *et al.* (2013), Hernández and Giles (2014), Herrera *et al.* (2014) and Pérez *et al.* (2008) concur with the lack of information about the BA as a cause of dropping out. In Buentello *et al.* (2013) and Hernández & Giles (2014), it was found out that the lack of information causes students to feel frustration and disappointment during their studies. Herrera *et al.* (2014) concluded that one of the causes of early leaving is the lack of information about the BA requirements. In Pérez *et al.* (2008), the lack of information and interest from students about the BA were identified as

the main causes of early leaving. Students reported feeling frustrated and disappointed during their trajectory because they did not know the institutional objectives, goals and commitments, provoking student's isolation, apathy, and finally the abandonment of higher education (Buentello *et al.*, 2013; Narváez, 2006).

The Study

Context

This study took place at a public university English Department in Mexico in 2017 during the academic term February-July 2017. The goals of the programme are: to help students reach a good command of English equivalent to C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL), and to provide students with the necessary competences to teach EFL adequately at different levels of education. Given the characteristics of the major, English Language courses comprise six levels ranging from Beginners to Advanced.

The English courses are complemented by several courses in other areas of knowledge in which English is the means of instruction; thus, students not only improve their English levels but also complement their professional education.

The teaching staff within the program comprises 66 professors, of which 32 are full time teachers, 22 are

permanent teachers and 12 have long-term contracts. 12% of the professors hold a PhD degree, 75% hold a masters' degree, 6% have a Diploma in TEFL while 7% have only a BA degree. The BA admits 220 students every year.

Participants

The research consisted of two stages. In the first stage, 100 students belonging to the 2014 cohort was surveyed. They answered a questionnaire focused on external and internal factors that could influence their academic achievement. The second stage consisted in interviewing 7 teachers and 5 administrators. All data informing this study were gathered in Spanish as the participants are Spanish speakers and the intention was to obtain as accurate information as possible by giving participants freedom to express themselves in their mother tongue.

Method

The present study employed a multi-method approach to data collection in an attempt to enhance validity in the findings. It followed a mixed-approach since it included the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data not only to enhance and enrich stakeholders' perspectives but also to develop a more complete understanding of the issue. A definition of this approach was provided by Creswell, (2009) in the following words:

'Mixed methods research is a research design with philosophical assumptions as well as methods of inquiry. As a methodology, it involves philosophical assumptions that guide the direction of the collection and analysis of data and the mixture of qualitative and quantitative data in a single study or series of studies. Its central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems that either approach alone' (P 5).

From this perspective, the mixed methodology contributes to a clearer understanding of the phenomenon under study since it reflects both sides of the research: quantitative interpretations of students' perceptions and teachers and school authorities' comments. The quantitative data were gathered using a questionnaire (See Appendix A) addressing students' demographic and socioeconomic realities and their perceptions (using a Likert scale) of factors affecting academic achievement. This instrument was originally developed for and used in the trajectories study reported above (Estrada, Narváez & Núñez, 2016). For this study, the authors only considered the data relating to students' perception of academic difficulties due to external factors and students' perception of academic difficulties due to personal factors.

The qualitative data were gathered through open ended interviews to teachers and administrators. In these, participants were mainly asked to describe the factors that in their consideration could affect students' academic achievement. This combination of data collection and analysis can help develop or inform the

other method, thus increasing the validity of results. To categorize the participants, the following abbreviations were used: PA= participant 'A'; Aut=authorities; T=Teacher; Int=Interview

Data analysis

Data emanating from questionnaires were captured, manipulated and processed using Microsoft Excel. That is, basic statistical analysis was used to run descriptive statistics. Results are presented in table forms and discussed.

All interviews were recorded digitally and later transcribed and translated into English. The responses were analysed following the Constant Comparative Method (Strauss, 1987) by listing the factors identified by two or more participants and discarding those identified by only one participant. After the compilation of identified factors, these factors were later grouped into broader themes. These are presented below.

Results

In what follows, the main findings of the study are presented.

Students' Perceptions of Academic Difficulties due to External Factors

The following table shows whether students identify any external factor that can influence their academic performance at the BA.

**Table 1. Students' Perceptions
of academic difficulties due to External Factors**

<i>External Factors.</i>	5- <i>Totally disagree</i>	4- <i>Disagree</i>	3- <i>Neutral</i>	2- <i>Agree</i>	1- <i>Totally agree</i>
Demanding teachers	8%	25%	43%	17%	6%
Dissatisfaction with the course content	14%	38%	32%	15%	1%
Administrative processes	39%	34%	13%	12%	2%
Complex course content	4%	25%	45%	22%	4%
Distractions that inhibit studying	25%	38%	28%	6%	3%
Program not meeting students' expectations	27%	24%	25%	17%	8%
Presence of economic problems	16%	13%	25%	23%	23%
Relationship with classmates	20%	27%	9%	24%	21%
Relationship with teachers	31%	22%	25%	12%	10%
Administrative procedures	28%	28%	28%	9%	7%

Data indicates that students seem not to perceive the listed factors as problematic. Most of the high rated points are in the section “disagreement”; this might imply that students do not consider aspects such as *dissatisfaction with the course*,

administrative procedures and *administrative processes* as influential in their poor academic achievement. However, two factors that might influence students' performance is *relationship with classmates* and *presence of economic problems*. From these, economic problems are a constant in achievement studies. Regarding relationship with peers, it would be interesting to pursue further research to deepen into how relationship with peers affects their achievement.

*Students' Perceptions
of Academic Difficulties
due to Personal Factors*

The aim of the following table is to show students' perceptions of academic difficulties due to personal factors. These are related to aspects that can affect the students' achievement and performance in the BA.

**Table 2. Students' Perceptions
of academic difficulties due to Personal Factors**

<i>Personal Factors</i>	5- Totally agree	4- Agree	3- Neutral	2- Disagree	1- Totally Disagree
Lack of previous knowledge	12%	15%	33%	31%	9%
Lack of dedication to studies	5%	9%	20%	34%	33%
Problems relating with others	16%	31%	20%	23%	10%
Lack of interest in content	5%	14%	30%	26%	25%
Lack of stress-management skills	7%	7%	25%	27%	34%
Personal problems	14%	17%	18%	34%	17%
Poor study habits	5%	14%	28%	35%	18%
Family problems	30%	16%	20%	22%	11%

In terms of internal factors that might affect students' academic performance, it can be seen that the factors calling for careful monitoring as potentially problematic are *problems relating with others* and *family problems*, which students have identified as influential in their development.

As shown, students do not consider the rest of the factors in the questionnaire relevant.

These data seem to indicate that participants generally do not attribute academic difficulties to external factors nor to personal ones. Nonetheless, two closely related factors, *relationship with classmates* and *relating to others*, seem to cause some sort of conflict and might influence achievement; in the same tenor, *distractions that inhibit studying* is also signaled as influential. The *economic* situation of the country which permeates all spheres of society appears to affect negatively students' academic progress as well as *family problems*. Another interesting research path would be to investigate these two aspects as they might have the same origin.

School authorities' perceptions

To have a more in-depth knowledge of the factors that may influence the low academic achievement, failing and lagging, the school authorities were interviewed. thus, the following findings are related to what these authorities reported regarding their perceptions of the students' academic performance and achievement. The results were threefold. Firstly, the general factors are presented and discussed. Secondly, the factors related to specific subjects in the curricula which present a high percentage of failure are outlined; thirdly, the factors that influence students' achievement are mentioned.

General Factors influencing students' academic development

Some of the factors that the authorities and administrative staff at the School of languages mentioned as strong influencers on students' academic development and performance:

The lack of options in the enrollment process; the fact that some students take more courses than they can study in one term-because the educational model allows it-, the socio economical factor and the little or non- existent empathy of some teachers, motivation and autonomy. At the school of languages, there is a limited number of groups, called '*secciones*', per subject. Consequently, not all students are able to take all subjects that they are supposed to. This may be a negative aspect that the authorities have not been able to solve appropriately. Another important aspect is the socioeconomic factor, as many students have to work to support their studies; this becomes more complicated and difficult if they are outsiders as their personal responsibilities might take time. Then, school authorities identified the lack of empathy with students from different backgrounds. They claimed that, most of the time, university students are regarded as adults, who can take care of themselves, which is not necessarily the case in all of them. In these respects, the authorities stated:

'The subjects students require are not always offered' (PA/Aut)

‘Many students have to work to support their studies... the fact that they are thinking about having to eat and to fulfill their academic and labor chores may influence their academic development’ (PC/Aut)

‘In the first terms, it is very common to find students with certain difficulties not just in the English language, but in their mother tongue as well. This makes the learning process more difficult, and there are some teachers who do not take this into consideration. They (teachers) do not take care of such deficiencies, leading students to a not very good performance’ (PE/Aut). All of the above statements were translated from what the school authorities commented.

As it can be seen, the factors that negatively influence the students’ performance are varied and should be considered seriously. However, there are some intrinsic factors that do not necessarily have to do with the institution such as motivation, autonomy and taking this BA as a trampoline to migrate to another degree. As long as these factors are taken into account, it is more likely that students would continue having a poor academic performance.

Subjects with a high failure rate

It is well known that in every single school there are subjects that show either a low or high failure rate. The English language is not exception and all of the participants agreed on the fact

that the English and Spanish subjects are the ones in which students show a very high failure rate. Some of the reasons why this happens have to do with the fact that a) English is the core of the BA, so teachers are strict in this area; b) Spanish is also a very important subject as it is our mother tongue, thus it is essential that students know it well. However, it seems that the lack of Spanish language is quite significant among our cohorts. In this matter, the participants mentioned that students do not seem to possess enough knowledge of ‘both English and Spanish languages’ (PB, PC, PD and PE/Aut).

Nevertheless, it must be said that school authorities also think that the lack of knowledge of the BA is an important factor that must be mentioned. According to the authorities participating in this study, some students come to this program with the idea to ‘just’ learn English and not the other subjects related to Culture, Translation, Teaching, Research, and of course Spanish. Writing in both languages is another area in which students seem to struggle since it is here where this lack of knowledge is reassured.

It can be said then that it is essential to inform the future English BA students about this specific program so as to avoid surprises and misunderstandings. It is also of paramount importance to provide students with some kind of introduction to English language and a review of Spanish before starting the official courses.

Low and high academic achievement

In this regard, the participants mentioned that some of the factors that influence low achievement are related to:

- i) Not having previous knowledge of the program, which may lead to learners' frustration and demotivation;
- ii) Students enrolling in this specific program as a trampoline to switch BA as soon as they can,
- iii) The lack of appropriate learning strategies and;
- iv) Having few opportunities to be in touch with the English language before coming into university.

The standardized exam is another factor considered as quite negative in the academic development as students seem to study to pass the exam and not to really learn 'I can tell students are worried and stressed from one week before the standardized exam... they just focus their knowledge on what they see in a book' (PE/Aut). The aforementioned factors affect negatively in the students' academic achievement, and this can be seen in every single cohort. What is more, despite the fact of being aware of such factors, the institution can barely do anything to avoid attrition and dropping out.

Nonetheless, the five participants also claimed that there are positive factors that help students be successful. They stated they have seen that students that come into university with certain knowledge of the English language are more

successful than the ones who do not. The number of students who possess a national or international certification is growing and this may grow more in the future years. Motivation and autonomy play an important role in high achievement; participants mentioned that the students who find a way to become more autonomous and are naturally motivated to go further in the program are more successful than the ones who wait to be spoon-fed.

Another aspect is that many students seem to read more for pleasure, which is something that the participants regard as positive and meaningful. In this matter one participant mentioned ‘the students are more engaged with literature so we can say that they will read what the teachers tell them to’ (PC/Aut). Thus, we can say that if it were possible that students had the chance to be prepared for this BA, they would be more academically successful.

Teachers’ perceptions

To teachers, it seems to be very clear which factors affect students’ academic performance. They identify the phenomena under study as multifactorial; that is, they seem to be aware that several factors interfere in students’ progress. From these, they identify the personality traits, which have been discussed in the literature: learning strategies and styles, motivation, degree of autonomy and multiple intelligences. These aspects operate at both levels; if students are on the positive end of the pendulum,

their academic achievement is higher. On the contrary, if students do not have or have poor learning strategies, their learning styles do not match the implemented pedagogy, if they are not intrinsically motivated nor are proactive towards their learning, their academic progress is slow or absent.

Participant teachers also identified more school-related issues such as negative backwash effect caused by either ‘teachers just teaching to pass the exam or students only focusing on passing and not on learning’ (Tr7 Int). Nonetheless, it is notorious that they place much of the responsibility on students. Teachers mention that students’ academic achievement is affected negatively by their ‘laziness and irresponsibility’ (Tr1/Int); ‘their lack of autonomy and over-dependence on teachers’ (Tr2/Int); as well as ‘their lack of or poor study habits’ (Tr5/Int) and their lack of commitment. All these aspects are reflected on their relaxed attitude and lack of practice or lack of initiative to search opportunities and be exposed to the language (Tr1, Tr7 and Tr8/Int). As it can be perceived, teachers expect students to be *model students* and behave idealistically as successful learners. Some teachers are more realistic and were able to identify other equally influencing factors. Among these, teachers describe students’ lack of confidence or shyness as impeding their academic achievement; high levels of stress and anxiety when students take the standardized test, which may be due to students not knowing how to prepare for the examinations (Tr1, Tr5 and Tr6/Int). Another factor contributing to students’ low academic achievement might be

the time constraints to cover all the contents in the syllabus, which in turn might make teachers' 'cover the book' (Tr5/Int) regardless of students' learning. Some teachers even recognise that students may have different interests than those of the English curriculum. Noticeably, only two teachers commented on their own responsibility as affecting factors; even so, they blame students:

“The teachers and the program may be part of the problem [low academic achievement], but it is the students' lack of responsibility which is more harmful” (Tr1/Int)

“Teachers doing nothing but complaining about the situation and the students' lack of commitment” (Tr5/Int)

Discussion

The research design aimed at identifying the significant factors that influence students' academic achievement from the educational actors' frame of reference; that is, no prior theoretical framework was used nor hypothesis was considered for the implementation of the study. It was found that students do not seem to consider any personal factors as directly affecting their progress. From the external factors considered, *family problems* and *relating with others* was identified as a possible influential factor. From the teachers' point of view, a combination of cognitive, affective and school-related factors might intervene in students' academic achievement; however, teachers highlighted personal factors such as poor *study habits*,

lack of autonomy and *lack of dedication to studies* as highly influential in students' poor academic achievement. School authorities recognised that some administrative issues may negatively affect students' academic achievement together with teachers' attitudes towards students. They also believe that students with prior English knowledge are better achievers.

The results of the study are supported by those reported by Estrada, Narváez & Núñez (2016), which showed that students did not relate to any of the personal or external factors considered in the research instrument. This is consistent with the results of this study in which no strong correlations were found. However, data in this study indicates that economic problems may impact students' progress. Attention should also be paid to the type of relationships established in the classroom as two factors having to do with relations were signalled as influencing learners' achievement negatively. Teachers' perceptions, nonetheless, are consistent with the findings reported by Narváez & Majín (2017). The researchers found out that students identified their own attitude towards their studies, time management, interest paid in class, learning strategies and study habits as having more weight than any other factors. That is, participant students were fully aware of their responsibilities as language learners and conscious of the personal factors that might affect their achievement.

The academic achievement of university students is the result of a myriad of factors that may operate in favour or against students' progress. This has been corroborated in

the study reported in this paper. It should be noted that the educational actors consulted tend to emphasise different factors which, put together, may provide a clearer picture of the phenomenon but also of its complexity. Also noticeable is the fact that economic factors negatively affecting students' academic achievement by students and authorities. Finally, the limitations of this study are that all participant students are students of a BA degree in English and the phenomena of low academic achievement, lagging behind and dropping out are issues regarding most areas at a university level; expanding the study to include other degrees would be worth pursuing. Secondly, the research instrument used to obtain students' perceptions analysed only the impact of specific factors on students' achievement. Thirdly, a limited number of teachers and school authorities was interviewed thus the insights presented represent only those of that particular group of stakeholders. It would be interesting to further investigate this educational phenomenon in other university programs and widen the scope of the study.

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