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Título del Trabajo
Students’ Perceptions of their Learning Environments

Línea de Generación y Aplicación del Conocimiento al que se adscribe el presente proyecto

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Abstract

In this work, I report a study conducted at an English Language BA of a public university during 2013, aimed at identifying students’ perceptions about their learning environment. A common thread in research in student learning refers to the ways in which students go about learning. In searching students’ perceptions about their learning environment, I based this study in Lizzio et al. work, who adopted Biggs’s theory explained in his 3P model (1989), as a conceptual framework for this study. A theory of learning that accentuates the interaction between the person and the situation is presented. An adaptation of the Course Experience Questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were used as instruments to gather the information about the students’ perceptions of their learning environment, as the first step to raise their awareness regarding their learning approaches and its relation with their outcomes. The participants were students taking the Upper Intermediate English course at the B.A in English, as the students taking these courses have the language level to answer the questionnaire, which is in English, and would be easier to track for the next stage. The findings could be of high relevance in similar and other contexts within the educational system in Mexico.

Key words Perceptions and Learning Environment
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**Introduction**

This study is the first step of an action research which seeks to make a theoretical contribution to the literature regarding university students’ perceptions of their learning environment and the influence of this on their learning approaches and outcomes.

This work is based on the research of Lizzio et al. in Australia who, at the same time, based his theoretical framework on the conceptualization of the learning process analysed by John B. Biggs in which a set of three variables interact systematically and are explained in his 3P Model: Presage, Process and Product. In this model, learning environment and student characteristics refers to the presage stage, students’ approach to learning to the process stage and learning outcomes to the product stage. This relationship of variables is explained by Lizzio as follows:

“In basic terms, the model proposes that, firstly, personal and situational factors influence a student to adopt a particular approach to learning which, in turn, mediates or influences the types of outcomes achieved; and secondly, that presage factors can also directly influence learning outcomes.” (Lizzio, 2002:28).

It is for this reason that this study concerns on understanding the impact of university educators’ program, course and class design decisions on students’ learning and based on this impact be aware of the type of learning environment within which students is the best to learn influencing on they approach to their learning and the quality of the outcomes that students are able to achieve in the context which this study is applied.

Chapter 1 set this study in the context where it is applied. It explains the characteristics of the institution and the role of this into society. Furthermore, this chapter introduces the question that is the basis of this first step of action research in the value of students’ perceptions of their learning environment and the objectives of this work are established.
Chapter 2 provides a review of the background regarding to the relation between learning environment and students’ perceptions about this. Furthermore, summarize other studies before the present one and detailed the study on which this is based on.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology used for this study and the reasoning for this method; the type of study, context and procedures for choosing the participants who helped to complete this research; the data collection instruments which are the Course Experienced Questionnaire used in previous studies and a semi-structured interview and the data collection procedures and analysis for both instruments.

Chapter 4 presents the findings organised by the information collected by both instruments described before during the period of time when this study was performed. It presents findings emitted by the questionnaire and the interview. Over the course of this study, students’ responses to the questionnaire were analysed, their voices were listened to in an interview, the results and comments were compared and classified.

Chapter 5 discusses findings by providing further descriptions of events in order to explain and understand them. As well, other factors are considered that may have influenced the students’ responses. Results are evaluated.

Finally, Chapter 6 draws conclusions, suggests future directions for this research, and summarizes the study.

This study is an exploration of students’ perceptions of their learning environment in higher education. Exploring implies that new territory is being uncovered, new paths are being taken, and new insights are being gained. When teaching and learning are seen as explorations, there is suddenly a sense of freedom: the freedom to discover at one’s own pace the sense of experiences. This is the invitation to integrate the discoveries of this work to the experiences and knowledge which have been established in previous researches.
Chapter 1: Context & Focus

Before describing the study and its main findings, we need to contextualize it. In this section the features of the educational program in question are described.

1.1. Education in Mexico

The Educational System in Mexico is organized in four levels: Basic, Upper Secondary, Tertiary and Higher Education. The first three levels are ruled by the Ministry of Public Education. Higher Education is formed by public and private autonomous universities and institutions of technology which curricula are autonomous.

English language is part of the curricula created by the Ministry of Public Education. It is also part of the curricula of some universities and institutes of technology, even some private institutions in basic education. Besides, there is pilot program to introduce English Language in Public Basic Education. (Holcomb, 1998).

1.2. Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language in Mexico

Teaching and Learning English is a common practice in Mexico and although there are some teachers which native language is English, English language is a foreign language in Mexico since there is not an official language spoken in this country.

It is taught at all levels and in both public and private schools as part of the educational system of the nation. Besides, there are other private institutions specialized in teaching English as a Foreign English for those individuals who desires to learn this language as an extracurricular activity.

Because of this expansion in teaching and learning English, there are different type of methodologies, strategies, materials, activities, environments, students’ motivation and other important factors which are related with the English teaching-learning context. As Holcomb says:
“Since English language instruction is carried out so widely and in so many diverse teaching and learning situations, it follows that there are vast differences in instructional programs, objectives, teaching materials, working conditions, student motivation, and many other factors of greater or lesser importance which enter into and influence the language teaching and learning context”. (Holcomb, 1998:IX).

1.3. Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language in higher Education in Mexico

One of the most outstanding characteristics of education in Mexico today is its difficulty in meeting the educational needs of an ever-increasing number of students. This increase in the school-age population is the immediate result of Mexico’s excessive demographic growth. (Holcomb, 1998:209).

Mexican educators and educational authorities have not been idle, many steps have been taken in an effort to alleviate some of the problems caused by the increasing number of school-age Mexicans. Classrooms, laboratories, workshops, and annexes have been constructed and equipped at different educational levels in all parts of the country.

Various types of programs have been designed to prepare teachers of English in Mexico: the Escuela Normal Superior and its program to train foreign language teachers for Mexican federal education, teacher training certificate programs offered by institutes which are primarily dedicated to English language teaching, and the English teacher preparation programs offered by Mexico’s public and private universities. (Holcomb, 1998:213).

1.4. English Language in Higher Education in the State of Veracruz

As the rest of the public education in Mexico, education in the State of Veracruz is ruled by the Ministry of Public Education and is divided as well in four levels: basic, upper secondary, tertiary and higher education.
Higher Education in the state, as the rest of the country is divided in Public and Private Education furthermore the institutions of Technology. English as a foreign Language is taught compulsory in many of these autonomous programs, some of them have it as part of their curricula programs and some others have the program of English as a Foreign Language itself with different names and purposes depending on the institution.

1.4.1. Institutes of Technology

There are twenty five Institutes of Technology in the State of Veracruz which are within higher education framework. Their programs are regulated by the Chief of Technology Education of the State of Veracruz which is ruled by the Ministry of Public Education of the State of Veracruz Statutes.

Within the non-formal learning programmes of the Institutes of Technology modern languages are included in which English Language is also taught. Nevertheless, it is not expected students have an excellent command of this language since their finality is just to understand academic texts related with their field of study.

1.4.2. Private Universities

Most of the private higher education offers English as a Foreign Language as part of the non-formal learning programmes. Nevertheless, there are some of these private institutions which offer the English Language BA as a complete programme with the objective of educating professionals specialized in the field of languages.

1.4.3. Public Universities

The two main public universities which are in charge of higher education in the State of Veracruz: the University of Veracruz and the Popular University of Veracruz. Each of them has different programs and goals and they were planned for different types of candidates.
1.4.3.1. The Popular University of Veracruz

The Popular University of Veracruz was founded on 2008 and one of the purposes was to bring higher education to the most remote communities of the geography of the State of Veracruz, claiming that men and women of any socioeconomic status have equal rights to access the different levels and types of schooling taught in Veracruz. According to this, this institution focus on educating men and women of any socioeconomic condition in order they regain self-esteem, a safety life, respect of the rest of the society and especially self-confidence.

The main aim of this university is to train professionals under a comprehensive development perspective, through the promotion of their potential by placing them as the protagonists of their own learning and decisions. Create, promote and establish undergraduate programs related to the regional development of the state, to enable the undergraduates to improve the quality of their lives and contribute to their community.

This institution has the program of English Language which is an undergraduate program designed to train professionals with the necessary language skills to communicate effectively in the different fields of knowledge. Because of the labour demand, this programs claims to prepare professionals to command the English Language (oral and written) and to teach it. This undergraduate program is settled in the city of Acayucan in the State of Veracruz.

1.4.3.2. The University of Veracruz

The University of Veracruz was founded on September 11th of 1944, and one of the purposes was to unify the institutions of higher education of that time. This is the reason of this University is the main institution of higher education in the State of Veracruz.

The University is a confederation of Schools, Faculties, Departments and Colleges. The Colleges are governed by their own regulations, but are integral to the statute of the
University. There are 314 programmes in the University of Veracruz as part of the Formal Learning Programmes of the University. Besides, there are other non-formal learning programmes which include courses of arts, music, sports, for children, for foreign students, and modern languages.

For the modern languages courses, including English as a Foreign Language, the University of Veracruz has the Language Centre Institution, the Self-Access Resource Centre, the Foreign Languages Department, and the School of Languages.

In 1999, the Learning of English as a Foreign Language started to be compulsory in all the programs of the University of Veracruz. This was through a Basic program which is included in all the programs of the University and it is formed of five different disciplines, English Language one of them. The University claims that they have an internal relationship with the rest of the programs since they contributed in knowledge, ability developments, attitude towards communication and self-learning which are important for the academic and personal development of the student and, later on, their professional development.

The Language Centre and Self-Access Resource Centre Department is the Department in charge of the English as a Foreign Language Teaching and Learning at the University of Veracruz. The teaching of Foreign and National Languages is their aim and were considered, at time of the foundation of these centres, part of the culture. They are offered to university students and professionals, professionals of different disciplines and those who are interested in learning a foreign language. Their main language taught is English since it is the most requested. The Program is equivalent to obtain an A1 certification according to the European Framework for Languages and to influence students to continue studying in order to obtain a more advanced English level achieving a B1 level which allows the internationalization of the University of Veracruz.

Furthermore the basic program to learn the language, the University of Veracruz has the program English Language BA which belongs to the School of Languages of the University. This program has the main purpose not just to undergraduate students
obtaining a B2 certification, according to the European Framework for Languages, but to also to prepare individuals to perform different work areas where English is the main component as well as language teaching in different educational and translation.

1.5. Objective of the study

The purpose of the present study is to identify the students’ perceptions of their learning environment and which aspects of the learning environment have more positive or negative perspectives according to students. This was reached by reviewing related literature, applying questionnaires and interviewing students, analysing this information and organise it. After this, findings were reported and a research written report was presented.

The present study seeks to address two questions. Firstly, what are students’ perceptions of their learning environment? Secondly, which aspects of the learning environment have more positive or negative perspectives according to students?
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In previous studies it has been framed that what a student perceives about his context may affect his learning. In words of Entwistle:

“...it is students’ perceptions of the learning environment that influence how a student learns, not necessarily the context in itself.” (Entwistle 1987).

According to this, students’ perceptions of their learning environment may affect his learning since context is an integral part of his experience of learning. This refers to is not the framework of courses and assessment itself, but how students construct their learning from this framework (Ramsden, 1997).

2.1. Learning Environment

Several studies about learning have investigated how context influences students’ learning. These works have explored attributes such as the degree courses offered, size, proximity to other institutions, or source of finance. (Ramsden, 1979). Different students’ feedback by questionnaires has helped to frame what type of context of learning influenced them the most. Some of the aspects included in a learning environment that was reunited by studies referred to content, workload (pace and difficulty), organisation of the course, explanation, enthusiasm, openness, empathy, assignments, and assessment procedures as the most relevant aspects of the context of learning. (Ramsden, 1979). In the process of collecting information of the questionnaires, re-designing those with the feedback provided and collecting information again, several dimensions have emerged but referring to the studies in United States and Australia a more specific framework was found.

One of the first researches which started to study the influence of this aspect of the learning was Paul Ramsden who has continued working in this field until nowadays. Ramsden first work consisted on examined the academic environment in six
departments at one British university. This study gave information about the influence of the students’ perceptions of their departments on their approaches to learning. In words of Ramsden, this research suggested:

“...that a student’s perception of a particular learning task influences the level at which he tackles it.” (Ramsden, 1981:411).

John Biggs, in his study of *Student Approaches to Learning and Studying*, mentioned how the situational factors may influence learning. The way students perceive these factors may affect students’ motivation to the task and its effectiveness:

“The amount of time spent on a task, the difficulty of the task, the structure of the course, and methods of learning and evaluating, all have direct effects on performance.” (Biggs, 1986).

According to their studies and findings, a learning environment was defined by Ramsden as the relationship between student learning and its academic and social context. More specifically:

“By context, or environment, is meant the teaching, course organisation, subject areas, and assessment methods of university departments: this definition excludes variables such as the provision of study space, residential accommodation, libraries or teaching aids. This paper examines students’ own perceptions of their courses and teachers.” (Ramsden, 1979).

For purposes of this work and since it is based in this line of investigation, this concept of learning environment is what is applied to this study since Lizzio et al. who this work was adapted used this definition of “Learning Environment” in their study.

2.2. Prior Studies

Ramsden & Entwistle (1981) were the first to establish a relationship between approaches to learning and perceptions of the academic environment. In this purpose,
an exploration through an analysis of the scales of the Approaches to Studying Inventory (ASI; Entwistle et al., 1979) and the Course Perceptions Questionnaire (CPQ; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983) administered to English higher education students. The information resulted in a strong association between students’ perceptions of a heavy academic workload and an adoption of surface approach to study. However, no association was evident between students’ perceptions of other aspects of the learning environment and the adoption of a deep approach to learning.

Consequently, independent studies follow their investigation. Meyer & Parsons (1989), replicated Ramsden & Entwistle’s (1979) study a large sample of South African students. In this investigation the resultant findings were also an association between course workload and a reproducing study orientation, but no associations were found between any other aspects of the learning environment. But, the important contribution made by Meyer & Parsons investigation was an empirical and conceptual analysis of the instruments used to measure students’ perceptions and approaches to learning.

Comparing differences between the two investigations and the findings obtained from English (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983) and South African students (Meyer & Parsons, 1989), Meyer & Parsons proposed that a number of the categories measured by the ASI may be culturally or contextually defined, with the consequence that the meaning, and therefore the structure, of some subscales may vary across different student populations, defined either in terms of cultural or institutional contexts. Regarding the CPQ, Meyer & Parsons reported difficulty in replicating the scale structure arguing that the CPQ restricts the measurement of the learning environment since this did not permit an adequate exploration of potential relationships between contextual factors and the approaches to study of individual students. Entwistle (1989), in response to Meyer & Parsons, agreed that there may be measurement problems with the CPQ, and argued for the development of a measure more sensitive to individual perceptions of the learning environment (Entwistle & Tait, 1990).
Following Entwistle’s (1989) suggestion, subsequent researches have explored the relationship between approaches to studying and perceptions of the learning environment at the faculty or departmental level, since that findings at this level may be more productive since lead directly to the review and modification of course design and teaching practices. A small number of studies, using a mixture of populations and methodologies, have addressed this task. Eley (1992), used a modified version of the CPQ with a small sample of Australian second year students, findings reported more surface approaches when courses emphasised formal achievement, and more deep approaches when courses were perceived as high on supportive teaching, independent learning and clear structure. (Lizzio et al., 2002).

2.3. The original study

The original study was made in Australia by Alf Lizzio, Keithia Wilson & Ronald Simons (2002) and it is named University Students’ Perceptions of the Learning Environment and Academic Outcomes: implications for theory and practice. In their study they investigated the relationship between university students’ perceptions of their academic environment, their approaches to study, and academic outcomes at both university and faculty levels.

They based their research efforts addressing the impact of students’ perceptions on Biggs’s (1989) 3P model, which conceptualises the learning process as an interacting system of three sets of variables: the learning environment and student characteristics (presage), students’ approach to learning (process) and learning outcomes (product). In basic terms, the model proposes that personal and situational factors influence a student to adopt a particular approach to learning which, in turn, mediates or influences the types of outcomes achieved. (Lizzio et al., 2002).

According to most of the studies cited before, students’ perceptions of heavy workload and inappropriate assessment influenced students towards surface, and perceptions of good teaching towards deep approaches to study. Students’ perceptions of their current learning environment were a stronger predictor of learning outcomes at
university than prior achievement at school. Protocols were proposed to guide more fine-grained analysis of students’ perceptions. (Lizzio et al. 2002:27).

According to the findings of Lizzios’ study (2002) some propositions were presented: Perceptions of heavy workload and inappropriate assessment influence students towards surface approaches to study, but perceptions of appropriate workload have no necessary influence students towards deep approaches to study; perceptions of a good teaching environment influence students towards deep approaches to study, and equally, students’ perceptions of a bad teaching environment influence them towards surface approaches to study. (Lizzio et al, 2002: 43).
Chapter 3: Methodology

In this section the type of study is described as well as the methodology used and the reasoning for this method; the context and procedures for choosing the participants who helped to complete this research; the data collection instruments which are the Course Experienced Questionnaire used in previous studies and a semi-structured interview and the data collection procedures and analysis for both instruments.

3.1 Type of study

The present study is the first step of a cycle of an Action Research project in order to explore the apparent paradox identified by Entwistle et al. (1991) as to how students’ approach to learning can both be established and influenced by the perceptions of their learning environment (Perry, 1981, 1988), and can also be influenced by that learning environment (Biggs, 1989; Dart & Clarke, 1991). The whole action research study seeks to follow the model developed by Biggs in which presage (students’ perceptions of their learning environment), process (students’ approach to learning, deep or surface) and product (students’ outcomes) are described. In this first step of the action research, the presage stage is explored through a mixed approach analysis of students’ answers in the Course Experience Questionnaires developed by Meyers (1991) and a semi-structured interview.

This part of the study is quantitative because it includes statistics obtained from the Course Experienced Questionnaire conducted, as well as the presentation of the data and their analysis. It is qualitative from the fact that it considers the students’ thoughts regarding their perceptions of their learning environments incorporating feelings and opinions about the topic, which were explored using a semi-structured interview.

In this first step of the action research, the focus is the perceptions of upper intermediate language undergraduate students about their learning environments. This enables the researcher to closely examine the data within the specific research
context from the subjects’ perspective. In addition, this allows the researcher to generalise, to a certain extent, the results from the sample to the whole universe.

3.2 Context

This action research first step was carried out from February to June 2013 and takes place at a Mexican public university. This university offers an English Language undergraduate programme (English B.A., hereafter), which follows a curriculum implemented in 2008, called Integral and Flexible Educational Model (MEIF for its initials in Spanish).

The School of Languages is the place of this inquiry. It offers three BA degrees: English Language, French Language and Teaching English; two MA degrees, Teaching English and Teaching French; and a Doctoral Degree, Language Science. Besides, it offers a series of different general language courses to the general public, and a general English language course for children.

The School of Languages was founded 38 years ago. It is part of the University of Veracruz and it is placed on Fco. Moreno, Col. Ferrer Guardia, C.P. 91020, Xalapa, Veracruz in the Humanities Campus of the University of Veracruz. It has its own Self-Access Centre and a Resource Centre both of them created for the students and academic necessities.

There are more than 1,000 students from all corners of the state of Veracruz and nearly 100 staff; it offers 120 places for their English Language BA and 80 for their French Language BA with a demand of 120% each year.

The School of Languages aims at training professionals in English and French Languages as well as teaching English, French and Translate through its undergraduate and graduate programs which help to meet the needs of intercultural communication, generate knowledge and whose students are able to have ethics, accountability, efficiency and justice professional activities. Its curriculum is designed to train individuals with a wide domain of the foreign language, prepared to perform different
work areas where English or French is the main component as well as language teaching in different educational and translation. Graduates will be critics, purposeful, respectful, that by using foreign languages as tools, participate in the construction of a society with more and better opportunities.

In order to do this, it is necessary to have high standards in teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language since the students of the School of Languages will be those who will be teaching this language around the country even further more. Their perspectives about their learning environments in the School of Languages could be really significant in their learning approaches and outcomes and affect their performance later on.

According to the English B.A. curriculum, there are five mandatory courses of English focused on providing students with grammar and vocabulary, and opportunities to develop writing, reading, speaking and listening skills. For these courses, the English textbook (student’s book) and complements (teacher’s book, workbook, class audio CDs) used are Upstream Series whose “syllabi reflect the guidelines of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages,” CEFR, (Express Publishing, 2012) and the key language found on them is accumulative. In addition, in each course, students are expected to improve their proficiency in English which is backed by the book used. Due to the course and book used at this school, learners can be divided into three main categories in regard to the CEFR levels: basic user (beginner, elementary), independent user (pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate) and proficient user (advanced).

3.3 Participants

For the purpose of this research, this study was conducted with students taking the upper intermediate English course of their B.A. They were chosen for three main reasons: 1) they are supposed to have a language level that would allow them to answer the Course Experience Questionnaire, which was in English; 2) because of their
academic progress, they will still be studying their B.A. for at least one year from now, and therefore, can be located for the following steps of the action research project; and 3) it will be easier to locate as they will be whether repeating the upper intermediate English course or taking the advanced English course.

For this school term, there are 42 learners altogether attending Upper Intermediate English level divided into two groups. They are taking their English course with the same teacher in the afternoon. A total of 35 questionnaires were administered and answered. It was not possible to locate the other 7 students because they do not attend their English course regularly.

For the interview, 4 students from the ones who had answered the questionnaire were chosen. They were chosen according to their outcomes during this term. Two of them obtained the highest scores in their Upper-Intermediate English course and two of them obtained the lowest scores. They were selected this way to take into consideration the perceptions of different type of students and therefore have the possibility to establish actions to improve the learning approach and outcomes of those students who need it most.

3.4. Data collection instruments

The data collection instruments used for this study are the Course Experience Questionnaire and a semi-structured interview based on the categories of this questionnaire. In the original study, the questionnaire was used to obtain data from (participants of the original study). In this part of the study, the purpose is to explore the perceptions that upper intermediate students of an English Language B.A. in a Mexican public university have of their learning environments.

3.4.1. The Course Experience Questionnaire

The specific environment instrument used is called “Course Experience Questionnaire” (CEQ) which has been applied, analysed and reorganized for more than fifteen years in Australia, and it was designed for a higher education context.
This questionnaire contains the following six scales (CEQ document): Good Teaching Scale; Clear Goals Scale; Generic Skills Scale; Appropriate Assessment Scale; Appropriate Workload Scale; and Emphasis on Independence Scale. This instrument originally consists of 37 questions in total with a randomly number of questions per scale. For an easiest answer and cooperation of the participants, it was adapted to four questions per scale which led to a final version containing four items per scale. Each item is responded to on a five-point scale with the alternatives of Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly agree. Items in the CEQ were arranged in cyclic order so that the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth items respectively in each block measures Good Teaching, Clear Goals, Generic Skills, Appropriate Assessment, Appropriate Workload, and Emphasis on Independence. For example, items 1, 7, 13, and 19 belong to the Good Teaching Scale. Similarly the second scale, Clear goals, consists of items 2, 8, 14, and 20.

3.4.2. The interview

The interview is a semi-structured qualitative research instrument in which a group of people chosen by the researcher are asked about their opinions, perceptions and beliefs towards a topic in order to discuss and elaborate a situation related to the research. A semi-structured interview was conducted so that the interactions were direct and encouraging to make information flow. Its justification and validity are based on the sense of participants to be a representative sample of what happens in and with the universe since their discourse generates concepts and ideas shared by the community or social group they belong to.

The interview contained the six scales of the CEQ questionnaire: Good Teaching Scale; Clear Goals Scale; Generic Skills Scale; Appropriate Assessment Scale; Appropriate Workload Scale; and Emphasis on Independence Scale. A main question for each scale was formulated and three alternative questions per each main question was designed as emerging questions to give further information if it was required.
3.5. Data collection and analysis procedures

After the data-collection procedures have been completed, the analysis of the data obtained from each instrument will be analysed separately. The analysis processes are described below.

3.5.1. Data collection and analysis of the Course Experience Questionnaire

The questionnaire includes five-point scale of agreement questions that limit the respondent to choose between Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, or Strongly agree answers. In other words, the items asked are considered as parameters presented in a way that the respondents can decide between the possible choices, depending on what it is inquired.

The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) has been used for the past seven years to survey all graduates from Australian universities. As the descriptive document of the Course Experience Questionnaire developed by the Department of Education of Australia affirms:

“The CEQ is considered a valuable instrument in this country because the purpose of this questionnaire is to improve the quality of teaching in universities and also to inform student choice, manage institutional performance and promote accountability of the higher education sector.” (McInnis, 2001).

The CEQ asks students about their undergraduate degree to agree or disagree (on a five point scale) with 37 statements related to their perceptions of the quality of their overall course. The results are reported course by course for every university and have been widely used to support internal quality assurance processes.

The CEQ does not account for the social dimension of the student experience and the learning climate that is very much a product of a mix of student attitudes, outlooks and behaviours. Further, the CEQ does not attempt to address ‘higher-order’ outcomes of the student experience, and gives little direct attention to the area of intellectual stimulation and challenge. Related, and of particular significance to the issue of
lifelong learning, is the growing importance of resource-based learning, and the encouragement of independence in learning that must be part of it.

Two measures are used to analyse responses to the CEQ survey: the Agreement percentage and the Value. The Agreement percentage shows the number of students who gave a positive response to a question, while the Value uses weightings to assess the overall response to a question.

For each question in the questionnaire, there are the following possible responses:

0 – No response,
1 – Strongly disagree
2 – Disagree
3 – Undecided
4 – Agree
5 – Strongly agree

For both scales, a response must be valid to be included in the calculations. A valid response is where the student has answered at least half of the questions for the scale.

The response rate is the number of valid respondents divided by the number surveyed.

The Agreement percentage is calculated by adding the number of 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree) responses for the question and dividing that number by the total number of all responses to the question. Where a scale is made up of multiple questions, the Agreement percentage is calculated by adding the number of 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree) responses for all questions (in the scale) and dividing that number by the total number of responses to all questions (in the scale).

The Value uses the following weightings:

Strongly disagree = -100
Disagree = -50
Undecided = 0
Agree = 50
Strongly agree = 100
The weighted responses are calculated for the question by multiplying the number of responses in each category by the weighting for each category, e.g. 5 Agree responses will result in a weighted total of 250. Then all weighted category totals are added together and the result is divided by the total number of responses for the question. Where a scale is made of multiple questions, the Value is made up of the accumulated weighted total from all questions (in the scale) divided by total number of responses for all questions (in the scale).

3.5.2. Data collection of the interview

The 4 subjects under investigation were interviewed individually by the researcher to discuss some qualitative aspects relevant to the ongoing research. Each participant was recorded with a tape recorder and then transcribed. For the purpose of the present research and to reach the aim of this instrument, students spoke in Spanish for a better understanding and explanation of what they needed to express about the questions formulated.
Chapter 4: Findings & Results

In this chapter, the findings and results corresponding to both the Course Experienced Questionnaire (CEQ) and the semi-structured interview are described. The findings are presented according to the original categories used in the Course Experienced Questionnaire.

The categories analysed appear in the order that they were asked in the questionnaire: teaching practice, clear goals, other skills, assessment, workload and independence. First, the percentage of students’ agreement with the quality of the category is presented along with a brief description of the implications of this percentage. Then, students’ responses to the category in the semi-structured interview contribute with further information about the category described.

4.1. Teaching Practice

Only half of the students who answered the Course Experienced Questionnaire were satisfied with the Teaching Practice of the Academics of the University were this research was carried out, as shown in the following chart:
This is exposed by the following comment in the interview:

“...algunos tienen mejores formas de enseñanza que otros...” (Int. P3)

When analysed in depth, the answers of the interview show three main aspects which students considered important for good Teaching Practice: the methodology used, the level of knowledge of the teacher, and the motivation the teacher provided.

About the methodology, students perceived that they were alone in their learning and there was no presence of the teacher, as the following comments suggest:

“...los maestros solamente te guían, te enseñan las bases y ya todo lo demás lo demás depende de ti...” (Int. P3)

“...si quieres ser mejor, pues vas a ser mejor por tu propia cuenta no por los maestros.” (Int. P3).

When students mentioned that anything else depended on themselves and if they would improve themselves it was because their own work and not because of teachers’ it could be interpreted as if all the progress they have had it is because they have been working alone to improve themselves.

Another important aspect that a student mentioned in the interview and which may be interpreted as if students were learning by their own and not because the teacher was guiding them appropriately through the curriculum of the program is the following comment which showed that this teacher in that moment did not follow the program of the course:

“...algunos maestros no... se acoplan al programa...” (Int. P2).

The level of knowledge of the teacher is also important for these students; this was affirmed in the following comments:

“y que tenga yo un buen manejo del inglés...” (Int. P3).
“...algunos maestros tienen un poco más de conocimientos que algunos otros...” (Int. P3).

Finally, the importance given to motivation can be perceived in the following instances:

“...hay algunos maestros que te motivan a ser [...] a terminar tu carrera...” (Int. P3)

“(hay algunos maestros) como que te motivan a ser como ellos en su forma de enseñanza...” (Int. P2)

“...quisiera tener más motivación para aprender... poder asistir a más eventos o estar más en contacto con gente...” (Int. P4).

There was another aspect that was considered important by the students interviewed. One of the participants mentioned that:

“...depende del maestro... la manera en que trabaje el maestro... hay veces que si hasta nos sobra tiempo pero hay veces que sí, de hecho no vemos la mitad del contenido...” (Int. P3).

It is worthy to notice that this student pointed out that he considered that finishing on the time the contents of the course may rely on the role of the teacher.

4.2. Clear Goals

Regarding this issue, also only half of the students had it clear what the goals of the program were, which is shown in the following chart:
Some of the students expressed their perceptions about the final professional goal at the end of the program as follows:

“...que llegue a ser un buen maestro algún día... o un traductor... depende del área que elijas...” (Int. P1)

“...que sea un buen maestro...” (Int. P3)

“... se esperaba un profesionista que se supiera desenvolver en las áreas de [...] donde el inglés es hablado...” “...desarrollar programas educativos en los que el inglés juega un papel preponderante para las nuevas generaciones...” (Int. P2)

“...contribuir más en un aprendizaje nuevo para las nuevas generaciones...” (Int. P4)

According to these answers, it was found that students’ perceptions about the goals at the end of the program aim at preparing English Teachers, Translators, English Language Curriculum designers or a professional to be in any place where English Language is spoken show.

This diversification, and apparent ambiguity, in students’ perceptions could have its origin in the ambiguity of the general goal established in the program, previously mentioned in the methodology:
“La licenciatura en Lengua Inglesa tiene dos metas fundamentales: lograr que alcances un alto dominio del inglés —correspondiente al nivel C1 del Marco de Referencia Europeo de Lenguas Extranjeras— y que obtengas los elementos indispensables para que te puedas dedicar a la docencia y/o a la traducción, o en cualquier otra área en donde la lengua inglesa sea una herramienta principal.” (taken from: http://www.uv.mx/idiomas/principal/lengua-inglesa/).

At the beginning of the objective, it is affirmed that there are two main goals, but at the end the objective it is mentioned that the purpose is to reach a high proficiency in the English Language, the elements for teaching practice, translation practice and any area where English Language is the main tool, which corresponds to the description mentioned by the participants in the interview.

4.3. Other Skills

63% of the students agreed that they have developed other skills apart from the established in the curriculum of this program. This is shown in the following chart:

In spite of this agreement, it was not clear for the students what type of skills they were since there were just three comments that referred to this in all the interviews.
One of these skills is identified as communicative skills:

“... si las habilidades de poderme comunicar con las personas...” (Int. P2)

The other one is related to confidence:

“...mi confianza ha incrementado a la hora de hablar con otras personas y en público...” (Int. P3)

The last one is related to socialization:

“... pues para ser [...] más social, o sea, ser más abierta a, pues gente muy diferente a mí...” (Int. P4)

Students’ responses were focus on other aspects of the program and provided few or any type of information related to other skills that they have improved because of the program. This could be interpreted as the skills improved are not clear or sufficient enough in order students can identify and talk about them.

4.4. Assessment

This category and the following one were those in which the participants expressed more disagreement in the questionnaire. As the following chart shows, a relatively small number considered assessment appropriate:
This chart suggests that a high percentage of students disagreed with how they were assessed; that is, they considered the assessment of the courses inappropriate.

The first comment affirmed that some elements should be considered in the assessment of a course and they were not:

“...siento que deberían evaluar otras cosas... faltan ahí otras cosas que también se pueden evaluar...” (Int. P1)

Other comments referred to the fairness of the assessment:

“...en las otras (experiencias educativas)... siento que es más equitativo porque se basan en toda la [...] o sea, todo el desarrollo que tuviste en el semestre...” (Int. P1)

“...algunas han sido justas, otras... han sido injustas...” (Int. P3)

Another participant affirmed that the type of assessment depends on the teacher and his methodology of assessment:

“...algunos maestros son razonables en sus formas de evaluar algunos otros son muy flexibles, pero hay otros que... son muy estrictos en su forma de evaluar...” (Int. P3)

Another response showed some type of negative perception about the modes of teachers assesses students’ achievement:

“pues hay varias formas (de evaluación), cada maestro tiene su forma de evaluar y pues hay que ajustarse a ellas... los maestros son los que ponen las formas de evaluación y pues uno tiene que cumplir con ellas...” (Int. P2).

This participant said that he accomplishes what he was told to do as if there were no other option to choose, since he said that students had to obey with the way of assessment that each teacher had.
Another factor that was mentioned in the interviews was feedback since this participant wanted to know about the decisions of the grades established at the end of the course:

“...en otras pues quisiera... tener más información porque fui [...] evaluada [...] con bajos valores, tener más conocimiento de cómo fue [...] como es que he estado haciendo...” (Int. P4).

In the end she said that she would like to know about their achievement during the course.

4.5. Workload

This last category established by the Course Experienced questionnaire has also one of the highest percentages of students who do not agree or completely agree with it:

Some participants’ perceptions about the quantity of workload were that it is reasonable enough:

“pues hasta ahorita no, no han sido muchas las tareas que me dejan” (Int. P2)
“...es razonable la cantidad de tareas no es mucha, a la semana no es mucha, igual tenemos días para hacer las tareas...” (Int. P3)

It should be pointed out that these two opinions were given by the participants whose score is the highest in their level which means that perceptions about the quantity of workload may be a variable to consider for analysing the outcomes of students.

A participant pointed out that the quantity depends on the teacher of the course:

“...algunas (veces) no te dejan mucha, depende del maestro...” (Int. P1)

This same student commented that the biggest effort was at the beginning of the program:

“...al principio me costaba un poco, pero ya después como que me fui confiando con más cosas...” (Int. P1)

Moreover, these participants agreed that workload is adequate to the contents of the course:

“... está bien las tareas que dejan porque te sirven para practicar todo lo que sabes...” (Int. P1)

“...siempre pensamos que es mucho... pero yo sé que esto nos ayuda a aprender más...” (Int. P4)

In these comments, it is interpreted that students were aware of the importance of the tasks done for their courses but in the last opinion, this participant mentioned actually they perceived that it is a lot of work to do.

4.6. Independence Development

Almost half of the students agree that this program develops their autonomy as it is shown in the following chart:
This perception is confirmed in the following comment mentioned by one of the participants:

“…la misma universidad y la carrera te… implican algo de autonomía y el autoaprendizaje en el cual te vas desarrollando…” (Int. P2)

But it seems that this perception of independence might have a negative connotation from students’ point of view, since their comments in the interview showed some type of annoyance. For example:

“en la materia de inglés he tenido que ser más independiente y practicar yo…y tener apoyo extra… para ayudarme” (Int. P1)

This participant used the words “I have to” which can be interpreted as if she has no other option but to find a way to help herself.

Another example that could indicate a negative connotation is the following:
In this participant’s comment, she mentioned that she learned to be autonomous because “learning depends on you”. However, she commented that it is up to the students to learn ALL the vocabulary, and ALL the grammar, as if there was no teacher involvement in the process at all.

Another possible negative connotation was implied by another participant as follows:

“... yo busco las maneras de... aprender...” (Int. P4).

When providing her answer, the tone of her voice could be understood as if she were complaining that she was not taught how to learn by herself and so she had to find a way to do it.

Therefore, students seemed to be complaining that they have not received the support needed to develop autonomy and anyway have very often been left on their own to learn.
Chapter 5: Discussion & Reflections

Several reflections can be made from the study findings. It is clear that none of the six categories has a strong percentage of either agreement or disagreement, which probably means that students’ perception of the learning environment of the Bachelor program is not covering the students’ needs as expected. This was especially evident for two categories in the questionnaires, which were weakest in agreement compared with the rest: assessment and workload. Nevertheless, when interviewing the students, the only evident complaint was regarding assessment.

It is important to mention that while in the study of Australia these six categories derived independent among them, in this study, the role of the teacher emerges as an important variable to consider in the learning environment, since most of the comments extracted from the interviews of the participants related the categories, in one way or another, to the teacher’s role. For example, in assessment:

“...algunos maestros son razonables en sus formas de evaluar algunos otros son muy flexibles, pero hay otros que... son muy estrictos en su forma de evaluar...”
(Int. P3).

In this opinion, participant 3 mentioned that it is the teacher who assesses them and their grades depend on the teacher and his/her criteria, rather than on the method used. Furthermore, another participant affirms that teachers decide how they assess students, which can vary from teacher to teacher, and that they have no choice but to try to adapt to them to meet the teachers’ expectations:

“pues hay varias formas (de evaluación), cada maestro tiene su forma de evaluar y pues hay que ajustarse a ellas... los maestros son los que ponen las formas de evaluación y pues uno tiene que cumplir con ellas...” (Int. P2).

This suggests that this student believes that there is no room for the opinion of the students when it comes to assessment, and probably feels there should be.
Another opinion that shows the importance of the teacher’s role in assessment is the feedback received:

“...pues en algunas ocasiones se me ha hecho... justo, la forma en las que me han evaluado en otras pues quisiera... tener más información porque fui [...] evaluada [...] con bajos valores, tener más conocimiento de cómo fue [...] como es que he estado haciendo...” (Int. P4).

In this extract, it is suggested that teachers sometimes do not explain the assessment criteria to the students either why they obtained the grades they were given. Again, it is not about the method, but how the teacher interpreted it and the fact that the students were not informed about it.

Talking about workload, one of the participants also related this category with the role of the teacher:

“algunas (veces) no te dejan mucha, depende del maestro...” (Int. P1)

Again, the teacher here is seen as the authority with the power to decide how much students will have to work, giving no room for the students’ opinion.

Talking about the participants, from the interview answers, the relation between students’ perceptions and their outcomes starts to emerge, since most of the positive opinions regarding the learning environments were given by the students who scored highest in their Upper-Intermediate English course, and the negative opinions were mainly given by those students who scored the lowest. Moreover, the highest achieving students gave more information in their interviews than those students who were low achieving.

For example, the information for the category of Teaching Practice was mainly provided by participants 2 and 3, the highest achieving students. Only one of the low achieving students somehow refers to the teaching practice and motivation, providing a negative comment, as well as the other participants’:
In the category of development other skills, it was again participants 2 and 3 who provided information to identify which type of extra skills they developed during their studies of the BA. However, in the category of assessment, the lowest in agreement in this study, it was participants 1 and 4, the low achieving students, who expressed more their opinion regarding the way they are assessed, connecting this to the teacher’s role.

About the category of workload, although all the interviewed participants gave a positive opinion about the quantity of workload, it was students 1 and 4, the low achieving, who related workload with the role of the teacher. This seems to confirm that low achieving students are more dependent on the teacher than high achieving students.

Summarizing, according to students’ responses, there are some variables to consider when taking this study to the next stage. These are that teaching practice is related by students to the methodology used by the teacher, the level of knowledge of the teacher and the motivation that the teacher provides to their students. Regarding other skills developed by the program, students mentioned communicative skills, confidence and socialization abilities.

Moreover, according to participants’ answers in the interview, it is important to consider the role of the teacher as a variable that influences the categories of assessment and workload. This relationship was mainly expressed by those students who were the low achieving, which suggests a high degree of students’ dependence on their teachers. This is similar to certain extent with the results of the original study by Lizzio et al.:

“It is clear that ‘teaching quality’ (as a composite of good teaching, clear goals and standards, appropriate assessment and emphasis on independence) has the
strongest influence, both directly and indirectly, on learning outcomes.” (Lizzio et al., 2002:45).

Finally, there seems to be an urgent need to revise the general goal of the program, since the information gathered to this respect shows some type of ambiguity. It is important to mention, however, that the information in the interviews is not enough to relate students’ perceptions with their outcomes. Nevertheless, this could be taken as a reference to start exploring this area in the next step of the action research.
Chapter 6. Conclusions & Implications

As mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of this study was to explore students’ perceptions of the learning environment. This exploration aimed at identifying such perceptions to develop a plan of action to help low achieving students improve their outcomes.

In the spirit of translating research findings into practice, it is necessary to process all the information given by the Course Experience Questionnaire and the semi-structured interview as a base for the planning of improvements. Although the interviews provided useful information about students’ perceptions, it is necessary to collect more information of this type from students, since different information presented in the categories of the Course Experienced Questionnaire appeared and it is necessary to go more in depth about this information.

Yet, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, the information provided by the interview suggests that elements of the learning environment which are under the teacher’s control can influence both the way students approach their learning, and the learning outcomes they may achieve. In the next stage, a model of an appropriate academic environment is need to be developed and implemented with the low achieving students who answered the questionnaire not only in order to collect more information about the influence of the role of the teacher in the learning environments and their perceptions, but also to improve their learning outcomes.

Nevertheless, Lizzio et al. (2002) suggest that this would not be the starting point of the next stage. Their proposal is to review workload and assessment practices for three reasons. First, these two aspects of the learning environment have been influenced students toward a surface approach to learning in previous studies, and in the original study. Second, appropriate interventions in these aspects offer potentially great rewards in terms of positive impacts on learning. Third, a change in these aspects of the learning environment may influence a possibility of initial success to other areas (Lizzio et al. 2002:45).
Although some information about students’ perceptions and their outcomes started to emerge in this stage of the present study, in the next stage, it is necessary to develop a useful instrument which provides reliable information about the relationship between students’ perceptions and their outcomes as Ramsden (1992) reports on his study, where their interview evidence indicates that a deep approach and course satisfaction demonstrate a reciprocal relationship. Clearly, future research should seek to address this question from a more interactive and systemic perspective.

Students’ perceptions are only one source of information in making decisions. The world of learning is a huge dimension where many aspects are yet unexplored. It is for this reason that it is important to ask questions and search for the answers in the real context. Then, over time we will see changes in our educational system that generates students who goes beyond in learning and prepare them for the real future.
References


Appendix 1. The Course Experience Questionnaire

Please tell us about your course experience. The term “course” in the questions below refers to the major field(s) of education or program(s) of study that made up your qualification(s). Please think about the course as a whole rather than identifying individual subjects, topics or lecturers.

This form of the questionnaire assesses your opinion about what this course is actually like. Your responses are strictly confidential and will not be seen by teaching staff.

**INSTRUCTIONS**

Indicate your opinion about each questionnaire statement by ticking (✓) the option that best fits your answer:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The teacher staff puts a lot of time into commenting on my work.</td>
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<td>2. It’s always easy to know the standard of work expected.</td>
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<td>3. I am a great deal of choice over how I am going to learn in the course.</td>
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<td>4. To do well on the course all I really need is a good memory.</td>
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<td>5. The workload is too heavy.</td>
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<td>6. There are few opportunities to choose the particular areas I want to study</td>
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<td>7. The teacher staff gives me helpful feedback on how I am going.</td>
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<td>8. I have a clear idea of where I’m going and what’s expected of me.</td>
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<td>9. The course has sharpened my analytic skills.</td>
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<td>10. Feedback on my work is usually provided only in the form of marks and grades.</td>
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<td>11. It seems to me that the syllabus tries to cover too many topics.</td>
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<td>12. The course has encouraged me to develop my own academic interests as far as possible.</td>
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<td>13. The teacher staff of this course motivates me to do my best work</td>
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<td>14. The teacher staff makes it clear right from the start what s/he expect from me.</td>
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<td>15. The course has developed my problem-solving skills.</td>
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<td>16. It is possible to get through the course just by working hard around exam times.</td>
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<td>17. I am generally given enough time to understand the things I have to learn.</td>
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<td>18. I often discuss with the teacher staff or my tutor how I am going to learn in the course.</td>
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<td>19. The teacher staff is extremely good at explaining things.</td>
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<td>20. It’s often hard to discover what’s expected of me in this course.</td>
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<td>21. The course has improved my skills written communication.</td>
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<td>22. The teacher staff frequently gives the impression they have nothing to learn from me.</td>
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<td>23. The sheer volume of work to be got through the course means I can’t comprehend it all thoroughly.</td>
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<td>24. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course.</td>
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</table>
Appendix 2. The Semi-structured interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Research Question</th>
<th>Research Sub-Questions</th>
<th>Main Interview Question</th>
<th>Alternative Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Which are the perceptions of the students of upper intermediate of the English Language BA of the Language School of the University of Veracruz of their learning environments? | Good Teaching Scale | ¿Cómo describirías la enseñanza que recibes y recibiste por parte de los catedráticos de la Licenciatura que actualmente cursas? | ¿Has recibido suficiente atención por parte de los catedráticos?  
¿Ha sido innovadora?  
¿Ha sido motivante? |
| | Clear Goals and Standards Scales | ¿Sabes qué es lo que se espera de ti al final de la licenciatura? | ¿Sabes cuál es la meta final de la licenciatura?  
¿la meta final coincide con el objetivo de las experiencias educativas?  
¿Cuál es la formación que se te está dando? |
| | Generic Skills Scale | ¿La licenciatura ha desarrollado en ti otras habilidades? | ¿Te ha ayudado en tu capacidad de análisis?  
¿Te ha ayudado en tu habilidad para resolver tareas difíciles?  
¿Ha promovido valores? |
| | Appropriate Assessment Scale | ¿Qué opinas sobre la manera en que has sido evaluado en tus experiencias educativas? | ¿Tu evaluación ha sido justa?  
¿Tu evaluación ha sido razonable?  
¿Tu evaluación ha sido acorde con los contenidos? |
| | Appropriate Workload Scale | ¿Qué opinas sobre la cantidad de tareas? | ¿La cantidad de tareas ha sido mucha?  
¿Has tenido el tiempo suficiente para terminar todos los contenidos de una experiencia educativa? |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emphasis on Independence Scale</th>
<th>¿Has tenido el tiempo suficiente para asimilar todos los contenidos de una experiencia educativa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>¿En qué medida, esta licenciatura te ha ayudado a volverte más autónomo en tu aprendizaje?</td>
<td>¿Tengo claro cuáles son los contenidos necesarios para que mi aprendizaje sea completo?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuando tengo dudas acerca de algún contenido, ¿sé a qué lugar recurrir para aclararlas?</td>
<td>¿He hecho tareas fuera de lo que me piden mis maestros que haga?</td>
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