

Factors Contributing to the Academic Performance of BE Learners'

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REsUMEN

Se analizan los factores que intervienen en el rendimiento académico de los estudiantes del Bachillerato en la Enseñanza del Inglés (BEI) de la Universidad Nacional (Costa Rica) . El contexto universitario, el papel de los profesores, la motivación en los estudiantes y los hábitos de estudio son condiciones para fomentar el éxito académico. Según los resultados, los aprendientes necesitan ciertas características personales, motivación y metas para tener éxito en su trabajo académico . Este estudio de caso contribuye a una mejor percepción de los factores que influyen en el mejoramiento de las aptitudes de estudio y aprendizaje, así como los que intervienen en el logro de las metas académicas .

ABsTRAer

This analysis refers to factors contributing to the academic performance of the students majoring in the teaching of English at the Universidad Nacional (Costa Rica) . The university context, the professors ' role, students' motivation and their study habits are conditions for fostering academic success. The findings indicate that learners need certain personality traits, motivation and goals to succeed in their academic work. This case study provides insight on the factors that influence the enhancement of study skills and learning, as well as other factors that contribute to the accomplishment of academic goals.

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Keywords: academic performance, study skills, English teaching

Introducción

Educators, university administrators and students have always been particularly concerned with factors contributing to academic success. College learners' pivotal goal worldwide is to attain their academic aims and graduate proudly with the competencies required to succeed in life. Therefore, one of the main objectives of higher education is to ensure student success by providing high quality education, including high levels of institutional commitment, satisfaction with faculty, encouragement and guidance.

When students encounter this kind of support, they respond positively in their pursuit of permanence and success in their academic endeavors. The diverse components of a university program must focus on helping learners on their journey towards a prosperous career that will contribute to the country's development. This university culture keeps students actively involved in their own learning, a key element for academic achievement. In this regard, the university should ensure the permanence of students by offering the services and orientation needed for them to reach the main academic goals in their majors.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the factors that contribute to academic success for third and fourth level-

students of the UNA- BEI . This study was carried out with thirty-three students in Novem- ber 2009. Fourteen students were in the fourth level and nineteen in the third level . The study aims at determining the factors that the stu- dents consider paramount to progress in their studies and fulfill their academic goals. The findings suggest that they have positive results due to factors such as university context, professors' role , their own study habits, and motivation for lifelong learning.

This study contributes to the field of education, first, by showing that students must have the services they require in order to satisfy their academic needs. Second, it is essential for professors to ensure that their practices, attitudes and methodologies have a positive impact on students' learning and academic achievement. Finally, students are required to develop study habits and an optimistic attitude toward second language acquisition and progress in their major. Although research has been conducted on these factors in other educational contexts, our intention is to examine their relevance in this sample, as being particularly representative of the BEI.

The UNA Context

This university is characterized by its humanistic curriculum that strengthens inherent factors in the components of different study programs, faculty commitment, student involvement, and facilities to foster students' academic success. Due to the great demand for professionals in the language field, part of the mission of the ELCU is to contribute to the development of Costa Rica with the knowledge of areas such as linguistics, literature, second language teaching and translation. With this university commitment in mind, educators and administrators must then provide learners with an adequate environment to allow them to succeed in their academic work and professional life.

³⁶ The ELCL Strategic Plan states the need to create a program of university life in order to take best advantage of free time, thus encouraging students to commit themselves to their

university studies and prevent desertion . Another essential factor is the professors' influence on their students' professional life; the UNA Pedagogic Model establishes respect, tolerance and dialogue in the learners' and professors' relationship. These conditions have a positive influence on the students' satisfactory completion of the program

⁴ Escuela de literatura y Ciencias del Lenguaje (School of Literature and Language Sciences).

The BEI is also a major accredited by SINAES5 , the national accreditation system, which certifies quality in the following components: curriculum, faculty, learners, administrative staff, infrastructure and university services . The main benefit of the accreditation process is the constant improvement of all the components that help create a success-oriented campus culture and learning environment. This demands a great commitment from those involved in the program to guarantee high quality.

UNA's humanistic curriculum is concentrated on the development of the students as creators of their own learning. In a humanistic approach to teaching, learning is student-centered and personalized where affective and cognitive needs are met in order to educate competitive students in a cooperative and supportive environment. In addition, it promotes a setting where learners have the opportunity to reinvent , participate freely and work on problem-solving and decision-making tasks. Discovery learning, respect for feelings and aspirations, and the right to self-determination are aspects that lead students to become active, determined individuals who treasure the opportunity to keep abreast of recent developments in their field .

To ensure the students' transformation into creative and critical individuals, the educators' role includes the responsibility of being committed to their students. The quality of the

education that a learner receives depends a great deal on the professors' excellence . Teaching requires a broad knowledge of the subject matter, ethics and standards , enthusiasm, a caring attitude and a love for learning, familiarity with classroom management techniques , a full-time lifelong commitment and a desire to make a difference in the lives of learners.

- 5 Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior (National System for the Accreditation of Higher Education).

Good teachers must:

- Set high expectations for all students
- Have clear, written-out objectives
- Be prepared and organized
- Engage students and get them to look at issues in a variety of ways
- Form strong relationships with their students and show that they care about them as people
- Be masters of their subject matter
- Give constant praise

By inspiring and engaging students in university life and its challenges, educators' teaching styles have a positive impact on students' achievement. The well-known educator Freire points out that teaching is a task that requires instructors to "develop a certain love not only of others but also of the very process implied in teaching. It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving up."⁷

Gardner, moreover, asserts that in order to prepare students for the future, educators need to cultivate both academic skills and character. In his new book, *Five Minds for the Future*, he describes five kinds of minds, or ways of thinking and acting. As the world continues to change, educators must frequently reevaluate the goals of education, and the type of "minds" individuals need to

cultivate. He goes on to say that the future will demand workers and citizens with "out-of-the box" and non-linear thinking to solve increasingly complex challenges.

- 6 Great Schools, What makes a great teacher? (2006), <www.greatschools.org/improvement/quality-teaching/what-makes-a-great-teacher.gs?content=79>, retrieved 15 January 20 10.
- 7 Paulo Freire, Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach (Boulder: Press, 2005) 5.
- 8 Howard Gardner, Five Minds for the Future, presented at the Opening Plenary in "N, MA, IO USA. 44th Annual Convention and Exhibit. Boston, USA. March 24, 20

Likewise, other factors helping students in their pursuit of accomplishment include university services ranging from freshman seminars to university life, financial aid, health services, psychological treatments, career orientation, student organizations, use of resources and cultural and recreational activities, among others (Stevens9). This enables students to find the path for their future journey with the proper knowledge and skills. At the same time, students acknowledge the importance and benefits of these factors as they advance toward their graduation, job or professional development expectations.

The objective of the UNA Academic Success Program (*Programa Éxito Académico*), under the direction of the office of the Vice-Chancellor of Academic Affairs, is to provide academic and personal support to the students through strategies that strengthen comprehensive development and competencies to ensure academic success. Students are offered tutorials in Mathematics, English and other subjects, writing workshops, study habit workshops, freshman orientation, leisure activities, and others. This type of program gives assistance to students' by responding to their needs and inquiries, thus enabling them to adjust to university demands.

Clear Pathways to Students' Academic Success

Research shows that students attribute academic success to study habits such as reading skills, examination techniques,

time, note-taking skills, organization of work and revision, lecture-content, interest, motivation, ability, peers and financial security, among others (Fontana and Williams 2010). Also, traits such as self-motivation, self-

9 Tom Stevens, Maximizing Counseling Center Impact (2004), <<http://www.csulb.edu/~tstevens/maximizingCounselingCenterImpact.htm>>, retrieved 30 January 2010.

10 David Fontana and Era Williams, "Students' Attributions of Academic Success," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* XI, 2 (1996): 105-116; <<http://www.informaworld.com/asmpp/content-db=all-content=a739128241>>, retrieved 27 January 2010.

Management, self-responsibility, self-awareness, interdependence, lifelong learning and self-esteem are paramount to attain outstanding achievements in higher-level academic settings (DowningII).

Moreover, according to Loots, academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environments constitute the five clusters of effective educational practices¹². This academic setting supports students in their endeavors, enhances their motivation and builds a positive attitude towards satisfaction and commitment to their studies. Frost, on the other hand, claims that research on college students suggests that activities like advising could increase students' involvement in their college experiences¹³. She recommends that universities use strategic planning to design advisory programs based on relationships of shared responsibility and focused on students' success. Perceptive advisers share the responsibility for counseling students about educational and career planning; they also inspire them to focus on exploring life, career and educational goals. Success in any field creates positive feedback that increases motivation and performance, thus encouraging more success.

The Case Study

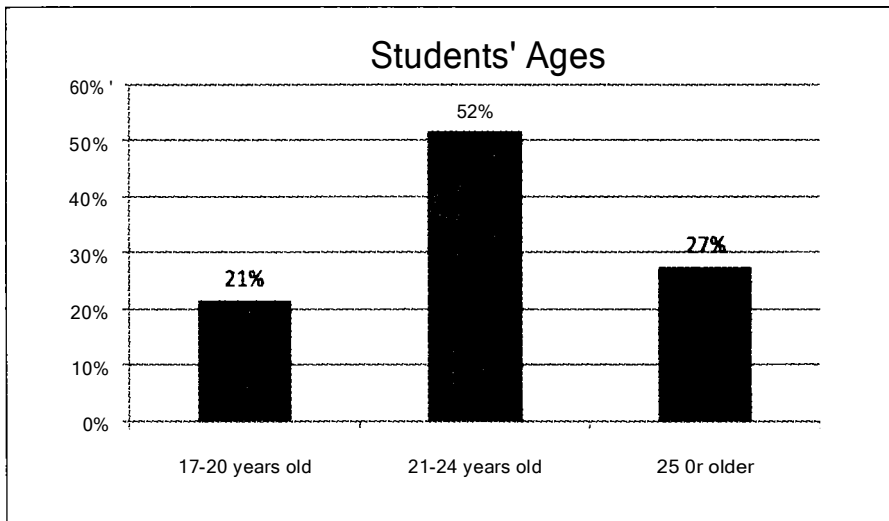
Vital information about the factors influencing BEI students' academic success was gathered using a survey (see Appendix) designed by the researchers and conducted in November 2009. The

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- 11 Skip Downing, On Course: Strategies for Success in College and in Life (2000), <[http://www.oncourseworkshop.com/On%20Course%20\(The%20Book\).htm](http://www.oncourseworkshop.com/On%20Course%20(The%20Book).htm)>, retrieved 30 January 2010.
 - 12 A. G. J. Lott. "Student Involvement and Retention in Higher Education: The Case of Academic Peer Mentoring Programs for First-Year Education as Change XIII, 1 (2001): 235, <<http://www.informaworld.com/ismpp/content-content=a911251892&db=alcl>>, January 2001.
 - 13 Susan Frost, Academic Advising for Student Success: A System of Shared Resources, ERIC Digest, Nov 91 ERIC Digest. <<http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/bib/91-1/dig.htm>> .

questions were grouped into three main areas: 1. personal factors (8 questions); 2. university context (3 questions), and 3. the professors' role (5 questions).

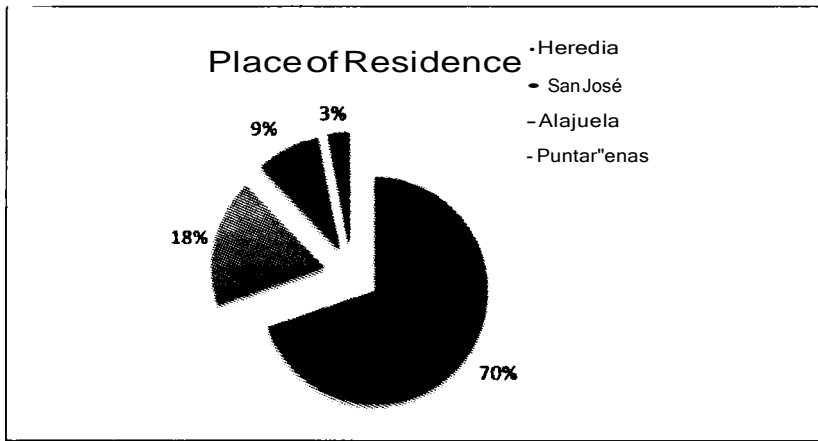
The sample includes the opinion of 33 learners (19 third-year students and 14 fourth-year students), 20 of whom are female and 13 male (see Graph 1). The majority (52%) is from 21 to 24 years old; with 21%, under 20; and 27%, over 25.

Graph 1: Students' Ages



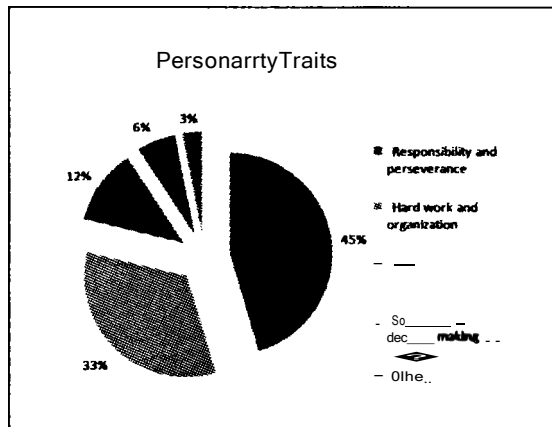
Many (70%) are currently living in Heredia (see Graph 2). Those living in cities amount to 58%.

Graph 2: Place of Residence



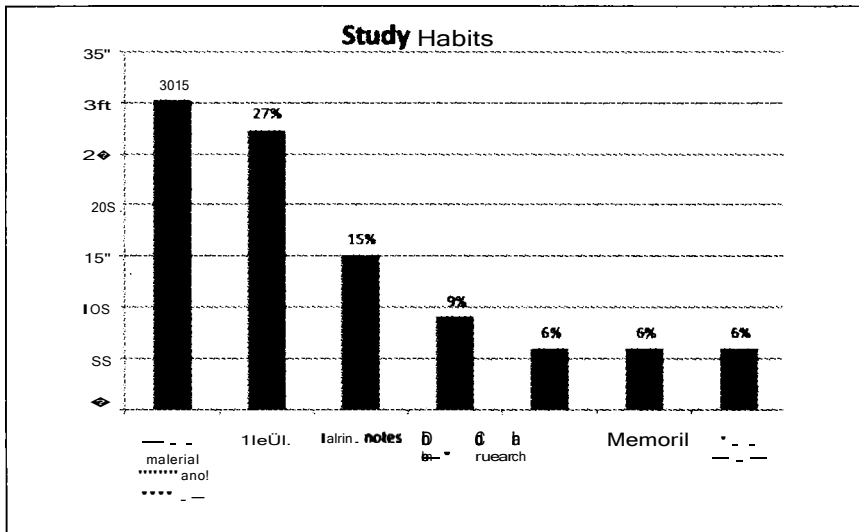
Regarding the first criterion, the personality traits that students perceive to be the most important to succeed in their studies are responsibility and perseverance (45%), hard work and organization (33%), motivation (12%), and others like self-confidence, decision making and punctuality (6%). This appears to indicate that students do care about their studies and work hard to meet the course requirements. See Graph 3.

Graph 3: Personality Traits



Furthermore, in terms of study habits (Graph 4), learners considered reviewing material before and after class, reading, taking notes and doing homework as the most important. Similarly, students' learning preferences include interacting with others, reading, using visual aids, learning about new topics and listening. These aspects show that students like dynamic classroom experiences that promote interaction and the inquiry of appealing topics for discussion and presentations.

Graph 4: Study Habits



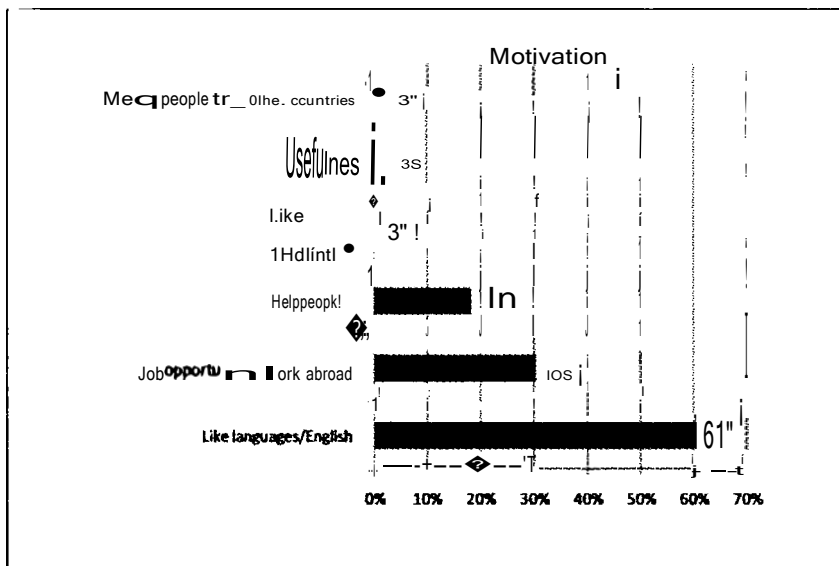
Students were also asked what motivated them to study English teaching. According to Norris-Halt,14 motivation is divided into two basic types: integrative and instrumental. Integrative motivation is characterized by the learner's

positive attitudes towards the target language group and the desire to be integrated into the target

14 Jackeline Norris-Holt, "Motivation as a Contributing Factor in Second Language Acquisition," The Internet TESL Journal VII, 6 (2001), <<http://iteslj.org/Articles/Norris-Motivation.html>>, retrieved 25 February, 2010.

In the language community, Instrumental motivation underlies the goal to achieve some social or economic reward through L2 achievement, thus linking to a more functional reason for language learning. This can be shown in the students' answers in relation to their motivation to study English teaching: 61% of the learners mentioned, as the first priority, their interest in languages, especially English; 30% cited the motivation to have job opportunities, including working abroad; and 18% mentioned the possibility of helping others. See Graph 5. This suggests that BEI students are motivated to learn the language as a way to build better opportunities in life.

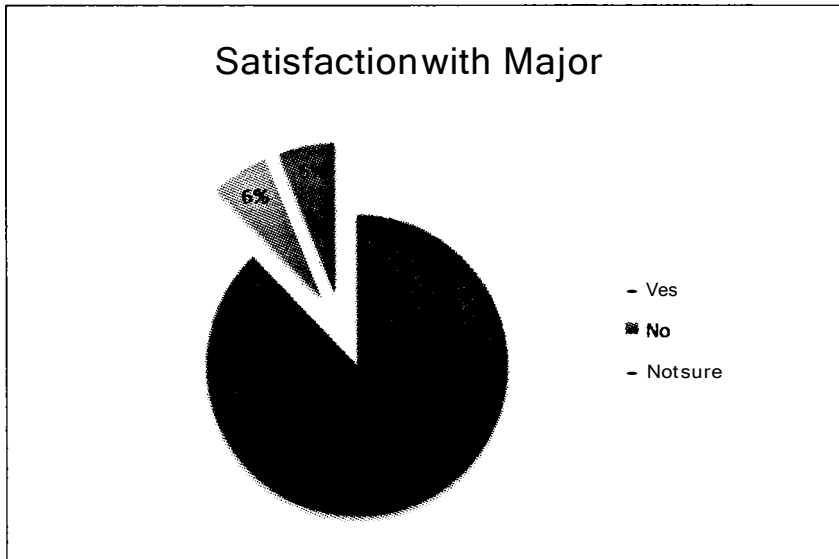
Graph 5: Motivation



This motivation in students is shown in their satisfaction with the major, since 88% of them indicated that

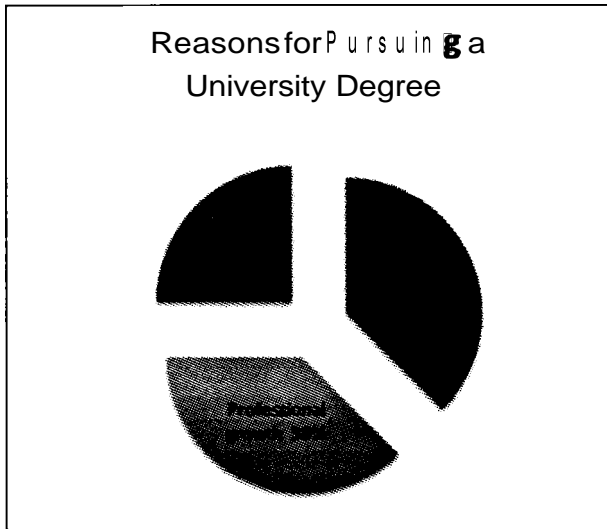
they like what they are studying, as seen in Graph 6.

Graph 6: Satisfaction with Major

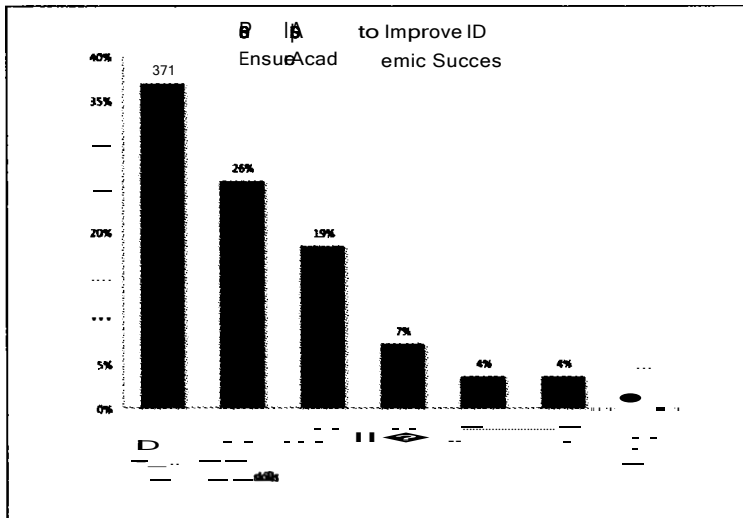


Pursuing a university degree is essential for them because by receiving a college education they are assured a better lifestyle, as they grow personally and professionally (Graph 7, 8 and 9). To achieve this, constant improvement is necessary; students said that dedicating more time to their major (37%), becoming better at their own learning and language skills (26%), and showing more interest in their studies (19%) would definitely influence them positively on their way to academic success. In addition, the learners' short-term personal goals include graduating with a major in English Teaching, pursuing graduate studies and finding different job opportunities.

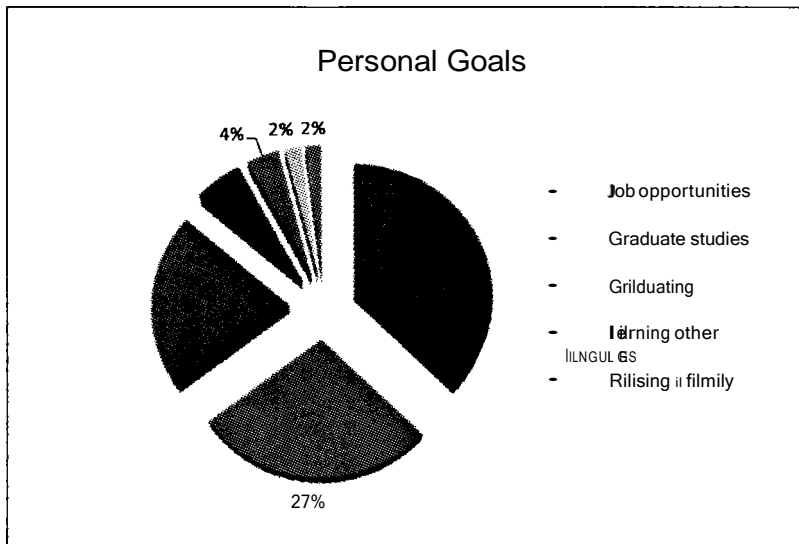
Graph 7: Reasons for Pursuing a University Degree



Graph 8: Personal Aspects to Improve to Ensure Academic Success

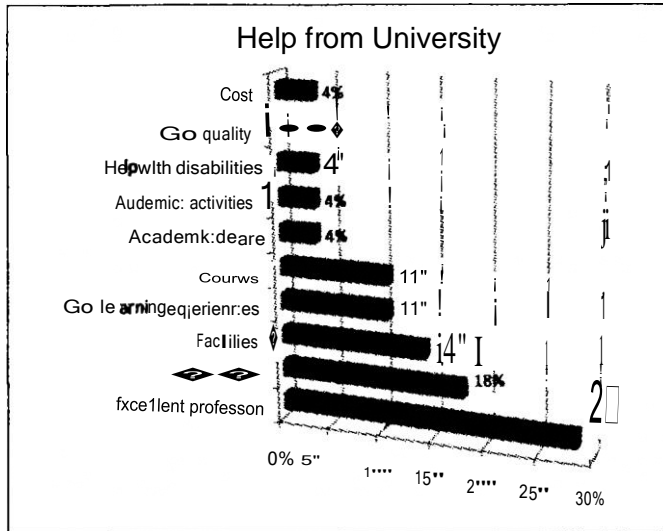


Graph 9: Personal Goals

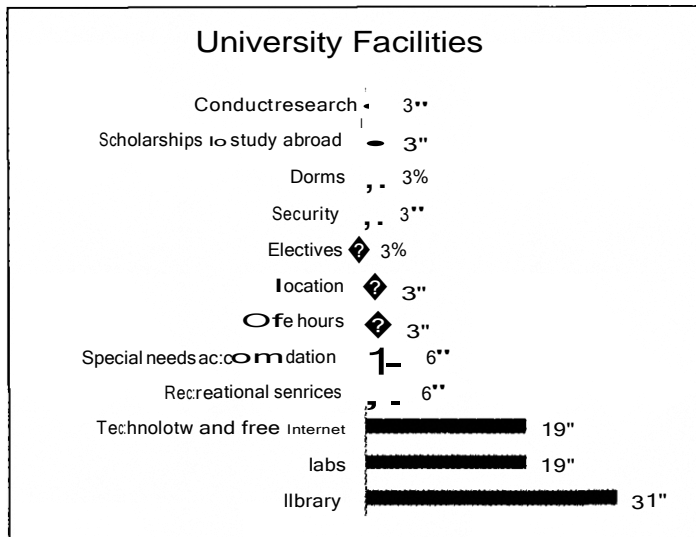


Regarding the university context, students indicated that UNA has helped them reach their academic goals by offering excellent professors, financial aid, facilities, good learning experiences and a variety of courses, including extra-curricular ones (Graph 10 and 11). Some aspects the university offers learners to help them in their studies are the two libraries, specialized material, a connection to on-line resources, the language and multimedia labs, technology and free access to Internet, recreational services like cultural and sports events, and facilities for people with special needs.

Graph 10: Help from the University

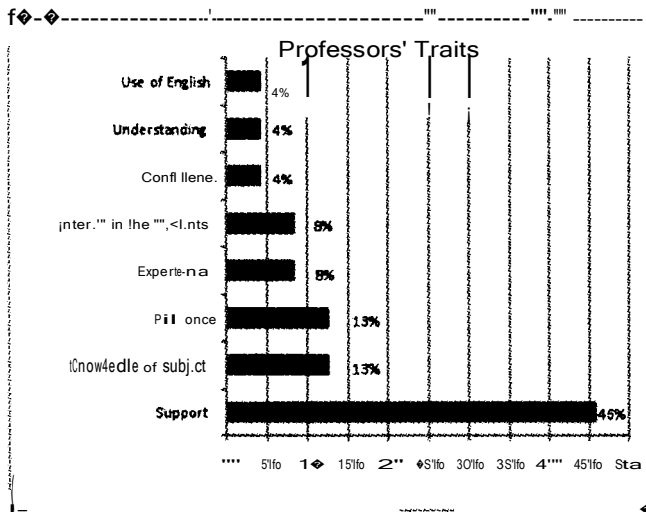


Graph 11: University Facilities



The professors' personality is, indeed, considered to be a key factor for students' success. As stated by Ghanizadeh and Moafian¹⁵, "Teachers who displayed more friendly and understanding behavior in their interactions in the classroom tended to enhance not only learner achievement but also their attitudes towards the subject matter" (cited in Williams and Burden). Regarding the qualities professors should have in order to help learners in their academic goals, the students responded that traits such as support (with a 46%), knowledge of subject (13%), patience (13%), experience (8%), and interest in the students (8%) were the most important ones. See Graph 12.

Graph 12: Professors' Traits



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- 15 Afsaneh Ghanizadeh and Fatemeh Moafian, "The Role of EFL Teachers' Emotional Intelligence in Their Success," *ELT Journal* (Advanced Access) (2009), <<http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/search?fulltext=academic+success>>, retrieved 25 February 20 10.

Moreover, as stated by Miranda, 16

I believe that to contribute to our students' academic success, we first must accept them as individuals. All of them should be accepted whether they are enthusiastic and hyperactive, or shy and quiet. The professor has to build an atmosphere of trust in the classroom so that students feel secure and can strengthen their self-confidence in their social abilities for learning. It is important to awaken their joy of learning and of continuing to learn throughout their lives. The subject matter is not so important; they will master it if they feel that learning is rewarding and satisfactory, and the only way to do that is to create trust between student and professor and to feed the self-esteem of every student without judging anyone or measuring them up against anybody else. They must be accepted just the way they are, so that they are able to accept themselves and trust themselves. When there is self-trust, self-confidence and self-esteem, people can learn anything that they want to because they feel that it enriches their lives and is not a threatening or traumatic experience.

In terms of successful professors' teaching strategies, interactive activities and clear and organized explanations were the ones mentioned the most by all learners. As a result, students are inclined to participate in those learning experiences that, under adequate instruction, actively involve them.

Conclusion

A study program like the BEI and the professors working in it must feel the need to improve in order to achieve academic success in learners, the main goal. In this

regard, students' experiences and opinions are essential .
As an illustration, an interview was conducted with a senior
BEI student in March 2010. The objective of this

16 Rocio Miranda, ELCL profesor; interview conducted on March 4, 2010.

interview was to find out how she had achieved academic success in her major.

First , I would say that my desire is to learn, not only from books but also from other people 's experiences . I also find it very important for the professors to show interest in what other students have to say, their opini ons , and I like the fact that they motivate the students throughout the learning process . I really enjoy it when they ask us to do an activity or an assignment where they challenge us to show our knowledge about the target language and its culture .

With this in mind , this case study suggests that the ELCL- BEI provides students with the academic factors required to foster their motivation and a sense of commitment to their studies . The university's goals are met in the sense of offering students the neces- sary context, facilities and a high quality education so that learners can strive for excellence and accomplishment of personal and pro- fessional aspirations .

The UNA-BEI offers students what is required to succeed academically, including its course program, university context and professors' role . The results of learners' efforts and enthusiasm will be shown in their future work as professors of English in various institutions of our country, or even abroad. This case study contributes to the field of Applied Linguistics by addressing the factors that should be carefully considered to guarantee excellence in education and academic success for learners.

The field of second language teaching has been

enhanced with the results of this study, which indeed strengthens the significance of constant assessment of learners' intrinsic motivation and personal traits that help them learn English. Students can improve their learning skills when they encounter an academic environment conducive to achievement and high standards of performance. As a result, areas such as new methodologies implemented in the BEI, changes in the

-_ || ldy program and students' background should be further resear- | ||t'd further due to their influence on learning enhancement. This ||' sl'arch has also identified an area of the curriculum that welcomes ||||provement and shows that greater emphasis must be placed on the |al'l ors that boost outstanding achievement. The resulting combina- 11 1111 of these new methodologies can provide an additional bench- ||||ark towards a standard of excellence.

Appendix: Survey

*Universidad Nacional (UNA)
Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del Lenguaje*

The intention of this survey is to collect information on the factors that contribute to your academic success at this university. The findings will be presented in the International Congress of Higher Education (UNA, March 2010). We appreciate your collaboration in completing the following anonymous questionnaire.

- *Personal information*

Gender: Female Male

Age: 17-20 years old 21-24 years old 25 or

older Place of origin: City Countryside

Place where you currently live:

Year you became a university

student: Year in your major: 3rd

D

4th D

• *Personal factors contributing to your academic success*

1. What personality traits help you succeed in your studies?

2. What kind of study habits do you have?

3. How do you like to learn?

4. What motivates you to study English teaching?

5. Do you like your major? Yes No Not sure

6. Why are you pursuing a university degree?

7. What would you like to improve personally to ensure aca- demic success?

8. What are your goals in the close future? How do you plan to achieve them?

• *The university context*

1. How has the university helped you reach your academic goals?

No

2. Do you receive a scholarship? **D** Ves

3. How else does the university help you in your studies?

The role of the Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del Lenguaje

How have the following criteria supported you in your studies?

SATISFACTORY ADEQUATE UNSATISFACTORY

1. The program **D** **D** **D**

2. Professors **D** **D** **D**

3. Course schedule **D** **D** **D**

4. Infrastructure	D	D	D
5. Labs	D	D	D
6. Library	D	D	D
7. Outdoor areas	D	D	D
8. Administrative staff	D	D	D

• *The professors' role*

1. What qualities in the professor help you in the comprehension and acquisition of knowledge?

2. Which teaching strategies are more successful for you?

3. How do UNA professors help you succeed in your academic work?

4. What other qualities would you like professors to have to support you in your studies?

5. What kind of activities do you prefer to learn English?

- Other important aspects

1. How does your classmates' academic success influence yours? _____

2. As a future English teacher, what would you do to ensure that your students will accomplish their academic goals?
k

Thank you for your cooperation!