

Foreign Languages and Internationalization: Analyzing of the Foreign Language Skills of Graduating Students at a Public University in Paraguay

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The IAFOR International Conference on Education in Hawaii 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The knowledge of foreign languages among final-year undergraduate students is important considering the local labor market's competitiveness and the opportunities for academic studies abroad. This research focuses on obtaining data that informs on the knowledge or lack of knowledge of foreign languages for accessing competitive job opportunities and the possible application for scholarships for study abroad by students at the Universidad Nacional de Asunción, Paraguay. The study followed a convergent mixed-methods triangulation design using a semi-structured questionnaire and qualitative interviews with final-year university students. The results show that while a majority of students report knowledge of foreign languages, a significant percentage report the opposite. Students associate foreign languages and their importance with issues related to work, improving the quality of their studies, access to knowledge in a foreign language, research and scholarship opportunities, as well as personal development. Internationalization in higher education has become a key indicator of quality for universities and other higher education institutions, so providing students with tools that enable greater participation in internationalization processes is of vital importance. Recommendations include the creation of a university language center.

Keywords: Foreign Languages, Internationalization, Higher Education

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1. Introduction

Paraguay is developing its national development plan and educational agenda based on international guidelines for its better insertion in the world (National Development Plan, 2014). Higher education in Paraguay is once again facing great challenges when implementing practices that aim at internalization and help students graduate with the necessary tools to face and solve problems in an internationalized and globalized world (CONES, 2017). In other words, "academic mobility is an important component of the global higher education landscape" (UNESCO, 2019).

In this way, the knowledge of foreign languages takes a major and determining role since students receive the same quality of higher education at the university but the study of foreign languages is not part of the curriculum (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Albach et al., 2019). The lack of such language skills separates those who despite having excellent academic backgrounds are at a disadvantage to students who have such skills hindering student and faculty mobility. The implementation of foreign languages in the curriculum is a key strategy for the internationalization of the tertiary curriculum and student mobility. Having students proficient in foreign languages provides the university with an important population of people who, in addition to being academically prepared, have the linguistic tools that make it possible to build bridges of communication with regional and international agents such as universities and companies (Vogel, 2001). The results translate into cooperation and bilateral relationships that strengthen the internationalization strategy as a means for knowledge production based on international collaboration (CRES, 2018). Foreign languages, such as English, offer greater labor adaptability, generate access to global best practices and promote international communication (EF, 2019). In summary, the knowledge of foreign languages is a key factor for the internationalization of higher education, being the "international dimension of higher education an intrinsic element of its quality" (UNESCO, 1998; p. 3). Thus, the objective of this research was to analyze the foreign language proficiency of university students in the last academic year of the degree programs offered at the Universidad Nacional de Asunción and its implications for taking advantage of academic opportunities abroad.

2. Methods

The study followed a QUAN-QUAL convergent triangulation mixed methods design (Creswell, 2017; Hernández Sampieri et al, 2014), using a semi-structured questionnaire, in order to have a broad scope to students in the last year of the careers offered at the UNA. The universe of the study includes students in the last year of the careers offered by the academic units of the UNA. The sample used in this work is from the pilot test conducted with 79 senior students who completed the questionnaire for validation.

In order to achieve the expected results, data collection techniques were implemented, including literature review and field work, through the application of semi-structured surveys. For the collection of quantitative data, a set of closed questions based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which is the international standard that defines linguistic competence (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 24-29), was used. This includes a self-assessment grid (SAG) that describes levels of language use at six levels (Glover, 2011). The closed-ended questions aim to determine the level of language knowledge and use, as well as the perceived usefulness of languages for the labor field and advanced studies by further adapting the questionnaire designed by Leslie and Russell

(2006). The questionnaires were administered through the Google form tool. The results were tabulated using MS Excel. The open-ended questions were analyzed by means of an inductive analysis based on the objectives of the study.

3. Results and Discussion

The descriptive results of the survey conducted with senior students at UNA are presented below. The general data show that the majority of university seniors report having some knowledge of foreign languages. However, with regard to prior foreign language knowledge, of the 79 respondents, a representative portion indicated having no knowledge of a non-native language, as can be seen in Figure 1, below. This result shows the deficiency of language teaching in undergraduate courses in universities in general and not only in UNA (Altbach & Knight 2007) despite the importance of foreign languages for the internationalization process (UNESCO, 1998; p. 3).

Do you think that you have some knowledge of a foreign language?

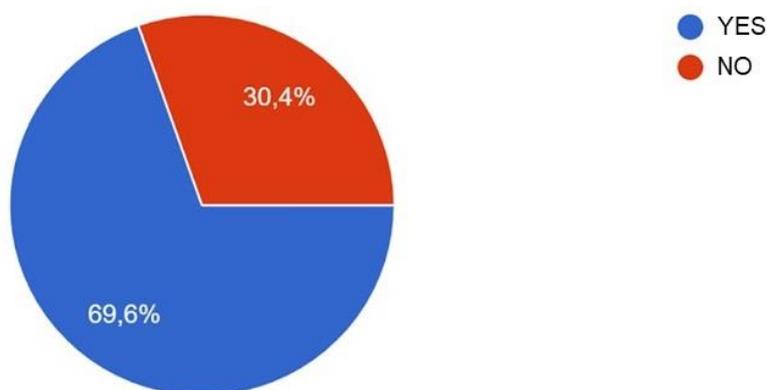


Figure 1: Foreign Language Knowledge

Of the students who said they knew a foreign language, the majority assigned English as the most known language at all levels, from basic to fluency level. Portuguese has a high level of users, mainly at the lower levels: basic and intermediate, and although it is still highly represented at the other levels, the number of users of Portuguese is no longer so different from that of the other foreign languages (Figures 2 and 3, below).

Which foreign languages do you know and at what level?

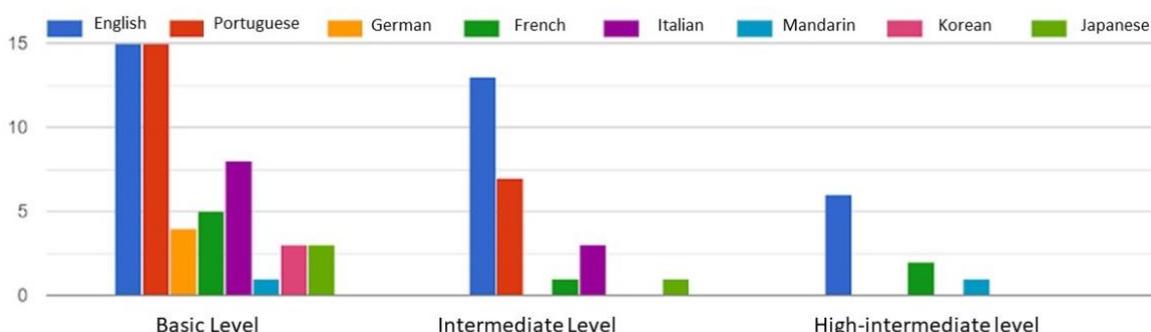


Figure 2: Level of foreign language proficiency

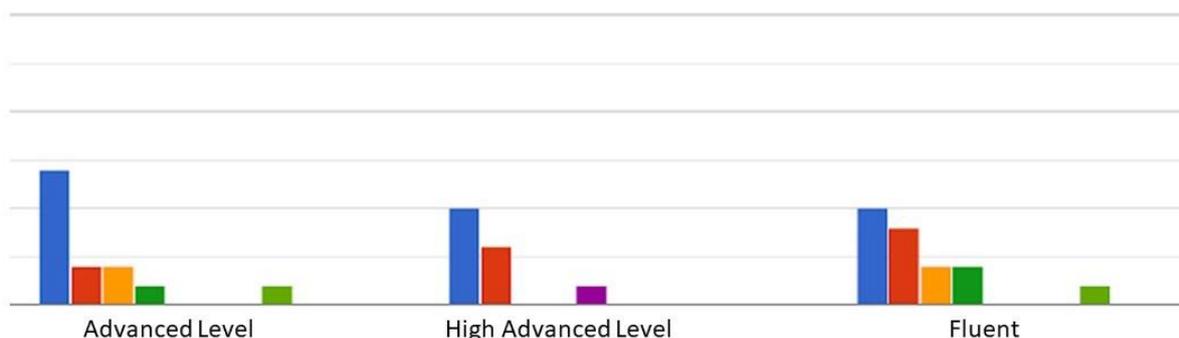


Figure 3: Foreign language proficiency, advanced levels

In addition to the languages pre-selected on the form, students in the last period of the undergraduate programs also assigned the following languages, with one user each: Danish and Russian, plus an assignment to Latin, although it is not a living language.

In accordance with the Common Reference Levels (CRLs) we presented a self-assessment grid describing levels of language use at six levels - A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2 - (Glover, 2011) and obtained the results evidenced in Figure 4, below:

Compare the boxes below and select the one you consider represents the level of the language you know best:

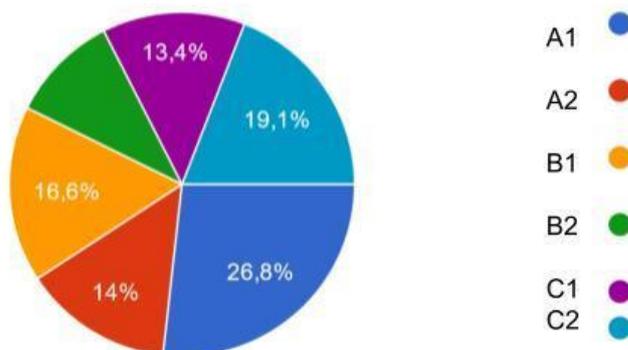


Figure 4: Proficiency level according to CEFR

This information is relevant in the cross-referencing with the previous one, which shows the student's perception in relation to the level of mastery of a language. In this last figure, whose levels are framed by certain linguistic skills, it is noted that the mastery of advanced levels of a foreign language was declared in a more optimistic way with 18.2% and 23.6% affirming to have levels C1 and C2, respectively.

Still in relation to languages and with the first specific objective, we also asked students in the last year of undergraduate courses at UNA which language they would like to study and we obtained the following response (Figure 5):

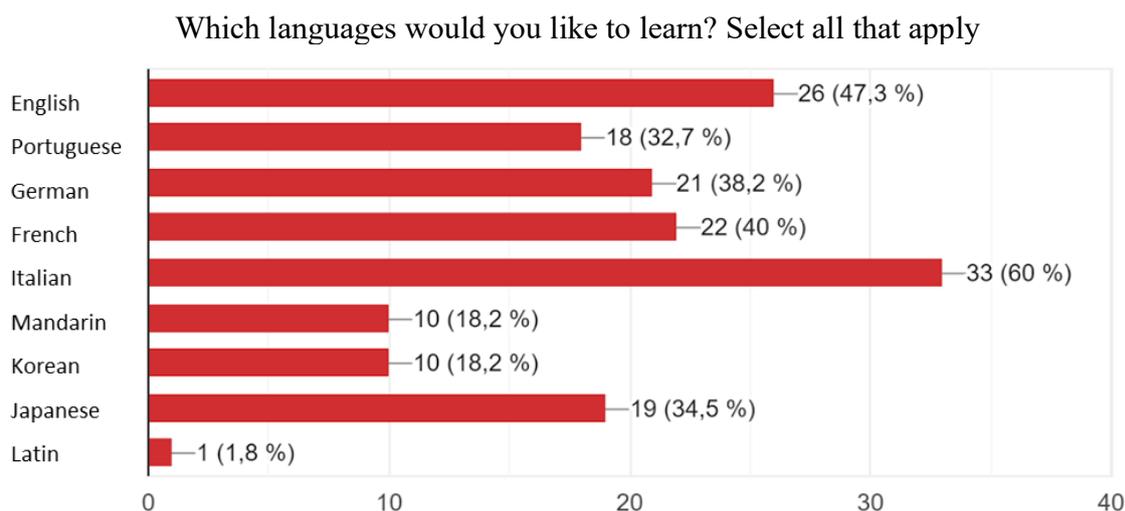


Figure 5: Foreign languages desired by students

Considering that English and Portuguese are the languages most used by the students surveyed, see Figures 2 and 3, as desired or additional languages, Italian and Japanese stand out, followed by French and German, although English and Portuguese also have a good representation as additional languages.

Regarding the importance of learning languages, the students stated that it helps in the improvement of the labor field, access to international scientific literature, compliance with international quality standards, research, training abroad, personal development, access to foreign funding sources and obtaining scholarships.

Regarding the level of information that students have about foreign programs and agreements that require a language other than Spanish, fifty-five students answered the question about knowing any program or agreement that offers studies abroad in a language other than Spanish, most of them stating that they do not know any. The responses evidence the fact that yes, higher education in Paraguay faces great challenges when implementing the necessary tools to face and solve problems in an internationalized and globalized world (CONES, 2017), and that these challenges may be related to very basic aspects, such as the effective circulation of information and of the criteria and possibilities of access to international programs that are disclosed in the institutional pages of the UNA, as shown in Figure 6, which shows that most have never learned of the existence of a program or agreement for access to studies in non-Spanish-speaking foreign countries. Of those who have found out, it is clear from the data that most access the information through internal dissemination, a reasonable amount, although less than internal dissemination, through social networks and few through other means.

How did you learn about the program/agreement?

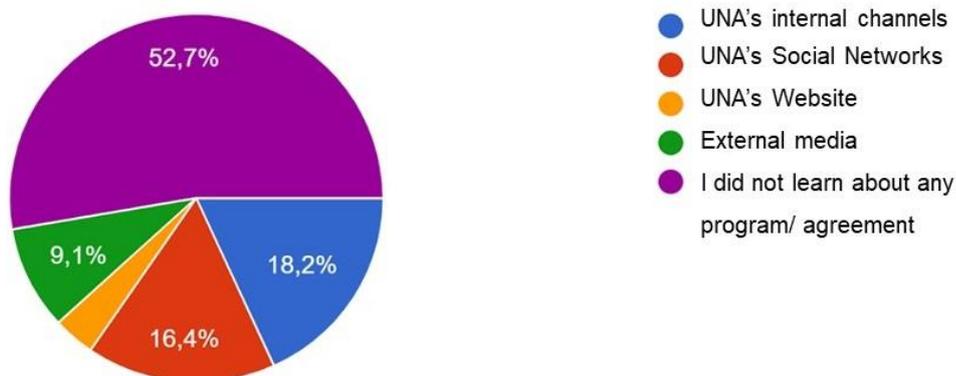


Figure 6: Access to information

Of the students surveyed, if we take into account that most of them had never known about programs and agreements abroad, only 7% participated in student mobility activities abroad. Of those who participated in mobility programs, the main programs used were: BECAL-CPK, Washburn University, one for 4 months and another for one semester; International Summer University, Darmstadt, Germany, for 3 weeks; and Erasmus+, Greece, for 2 semesters. Responding to the way in which language learning can facilitate academic exchange, the students stated that it facilitates communication, more opportunities, training, better links and adaptation to the host country, as well as a better experience.

In relation to establishing the level of projection that the students of the last period of the UNA have in student mobility, it was seen that the level of intention to enroll in a program or study abroad agreement is relatively high (65.5%). Students who report the intention to study abroad expressed the intention to go to countries such as France, Japan, Brazil, United States, Australia, Ireland, United Kingdom and Germany. Students also expressed their knowledge of the language level required to apply for a study abroad program or agreement. While on the one hand, the majority reported knowing the necessary level to apply for a program abroad, on the other hand, a minority confirmed that they had the necessary level (Figure 7).

If you would like to apply, do you think your foreign language proficiency level is sufficient?

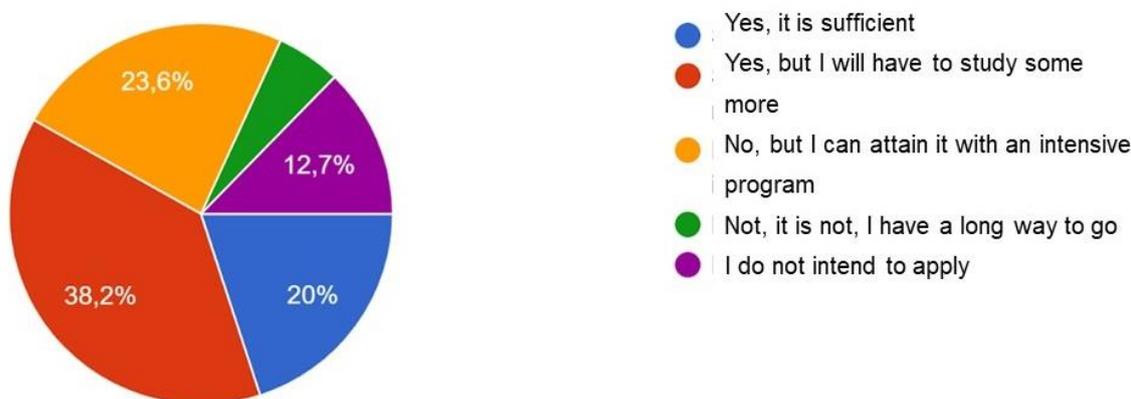


Figure 7: Language proficiency level

And finally, regarding how learning foreign languages can help with study abroad, students stated that it can provide them with a better education, new experiences, scholarships, opportunities abroad, cultural, work and business opportunities.

4. Conclusion

Considering the results, the research shows that the foreign languages most used or most required by students in the last period of undergraduate courses at UNA are English and Portuguese, with Portuguese having a greater prominence in the most basic levels, very similar to English, and then less than English in the more advanced levels. Among the most desired languages are, in addition to English and Portuguese, Italian, French, Japanese and German. In relation to the data from the open-ended questions, it can be extracted that the students associate foreign languages and their importance with aspects that focus on work, improving the quality of study, access to knowledge in a foreign language, research, obtaining scholarships and personal development.

It is also evident that there is a lack of information on the part of the students in relation to possible study abroad agreements, which represents a great challenge for the processes of internationalization of education. There is also evidence of a good participation in mobility programs, which could be a contradiction with the fact of not having adequate information, but it should be taken into account that many of those who responded that they knew about study abroad programs did it through internal disclosure of the University, which shows that the internal disclosure works well.

Finally, it was found that most of the students intend to enroll in a study abroad program or agreement, mainly from countries such as France, Japan, Brazil, United States, Australia, Ireland, United Kingdom and Germany. They also stated that they know the language level necessary to apply for the study programs, but most of them recognize that they do not have a sufficient language level. It is possible to relate the experience or the projection of exchange experience with the benefits that students assign to the exchange, which are cultural, access to academic literature in a foreign language, a better education and new experiences and work opportunities.

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