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Underprepared Overachievers: A Study of Latin American Graduate Students Studying Abroad in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Given recent study abroad trends, Latin America (LATAM) offers untapped potential to contribute to U.S. campus internationalization. To diversify student populations and increase enrollment from LATAM, stakeholders should consider the language, academic, and cultural experiences of LATAM students admitted to U.S. graduate schools. This study bridges the gap between higher education institutions and potential students. To do so, mixed methods were employed to analyze the following: (1) responses to a 67-question survey completed by LATAM graduate students ($n = 126$) studying abroad at a large public R1 university in the Midwest, (2) TOEFL scores, and (3) transcripts of 13 follow-up interviews about academic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. Results underscore the importance of effective English language instruction during college years to help students meet graduate school admission scores, especially in cases where K-12 English language training was inadequate. The study considers the extent to which participants became part of a community of practice, characterized by attributes such as language proficiency, high levels of achievement, and personal investment in education.

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Although the role of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has expanded globally over the last several decades (O'Neil, 2018), there is a perception that English in Latin America (LATAM) is still generally restricted to specific, often privileged contexts. Consequently, LATAM countries are seldom cited in discussions of global English (Montes, 2016; Velez-Rendon, 2003). Macaro et al. (2018), for example, do not mention Latin America in their systematic review of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), which covers Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. This lack of scholarly attention does not indicate disinterest in English among LATAM countries. The number of English users in LATAM has been increasing, and English has replaced Romance languages in the foreign language curricula at most schools (Graddol, 2006).

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In fact, despite clear limitations in English instruction in their home countries, a growing number of LATAM university students, including graduate students, are currently engaged in study abroad in English-speaking countries such as the U.S.

LATAM graduate students benefit from study abroad because there are significant differences between graduate programs at U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs) and those in the Global South (Rahal, et al., 2023). For example, U.S. HEIs, especially those ranked R1, are more likely to offer research mentorships, access to laboratories and software, and opportunities for participation in global conversations across scientific fields — conversations which are usually conducted using ELF. In addition to benefits for the students themselves, increasing LATAM enrollment is beneficial for HEIs. In the last decade, there has been a push from U.S. institutions to diversify and internationalize student populations (Moody, 2020; O'Neil et al., 2022; Study International, 2019), yet finding students qualified in both disciplinary knowledge and functional English proficiency has not been easy. One challenge is that the demographics of international student populations have shifted in the last eight years. Causes include travel abroad trends in countries such as South Korea, the impact of global oil prices on scholarship opportunities in oil-dependent countries, and travel bans on Middle Eastern countries issued by the U.S. government (Anderson, 2017; Smith, 2017). Meanwhile, the potential of the LATAM region remains relatively untapped despite growing interest in studying abroad among LATAM students (such as those investigated in this article).

One obstacle to tapping the potential of the LATAM region is the demand for students at U.S. graduate schools to become proficient in English. This difficulty is compounded by educational inequities between the Global North and South because the slow growth of English in LATAM is tied to larger problems in the region's public education systems. Some rural areas lack access to education, and PISA and UNESCO report that 50% of third-grade students in LATAM have not achieved a basic level of competency in math, while 30% have not achieved basic literacy (OECD, 2016; UNESCO, 2016). Among the issues that surround education in LATAM are national economic instability and food insecurity. Teachers earn low salaries and have limited access to teacher training, support, and professional development. These deficits also negatively affect English language instruction. Indeed, some governments have prioritized core subjects other than English, deeming L2 study an unnecessary privilege in the context of more pressing struggles (UNESCO, 2020; Villegas-Reimers, 1998).

The challenge of expanding English language education in LATAM is reflected in the low ranking of the region in Education First's (EF) English Proficiency Index (EPI) (Education First, 2021). The EPI is based on the EF SET, an adaptive online test that assesses reading and listening skills and uses

a scale comparable to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels. The EF SET has strong concurrent validity arguments, and its correlations with the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) iBT and IELTS are high for the whole region ($r = 0.82$ and $r = 0.71$, respectively). Though Argentina achieved a relatively high score on EF SET's 5-point scale, all other LATAM countries scored at the lowest levels. Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panamá, and Venezuela were at the two lowest levels. The population demographic of ages 18–20 featured the lowest average score: 3.8 points below the global average (Education First, 2021). It should be noted, however, that these levels reflect improvement from the region's performance on previous reports.

The demand for English instruction in LATAM may be described as a facet of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992). Although the neo-colonizing endeavors of Anglophone countries such as the U.S. are a legitimate concern in discussions of ELF, foreign language training in English is not necessarily a form of colonization in its intentions or effects. In LATAM, the privileged position of English is commonly based on its instrumental value in social, economic, and political functions. Because English has a higher symbolic and instrumental value than Spanish or Portuguese in academic and scientific fields (Phillipson, 1992), LATAM researchers may derive academic and cultural advantage from acquiring the language. In this sense, ELF functions as a method of spreading messages that are more likely to be ignored when published in LATAM L1s. ELF facilitates the dissemination of research carried out in the Global South, allows for advancements in scientific knowledge, and encourages changes in English language conventions through translanguaging. According to Rodríguez-Fuentes and Denny, “writing in Spanish is, in many fields, a ticket for isolation, ostracism or simply having an article with limited reach” (2023, p. 5). In the deeper sense of language ideologies, communicating in English might work to reinforce the particularities of the LATAM identity, ethos, and voice. Ideas of linguistic imperialism, while present, are generally overridden by the instrumental value of ELF to support empowerment of the Global South's academic community.

In the current study, we examine the academic and social backgrounds — with a special emphasis on language preparation — of LATAM graduate students studying at a large public R1 university in the Midwestern U.S. The functional language proficiency of students successfully studying abroad in English-speaking countries is worthy of investigation given the implications of this proficiency on admissions and retention rates at U.S. institutions. Granted that studying abroad is beneficial for LATAM graduate students, the LATAM region, and HEIs, it is important to understand how success is defined in the narratives of LATAM study abroad participants. Understanding the qualities of successful students, as well as their challenges and setbacks, could lead to practical policy proposals for both LATAM and U.S. HEIs. To this end, our

study was guided by the following research question: What are the linguistic, academic, and cultural experiences, both prior to and during their time abroad, of LATAM students admitted to graduate school in a U.S. R1 university?

Results show that despite limited language preparation at the secondary level, study participants achieved English proficiency during their undergraduate years through a variety of channels. Furthermore, while in graduate school, these students formed a strong community of practice (COP) characterized by academic overachievement, English proficiency, and high levels of personal investment in education. In the conclusion, we suggest strategies for educational systems in LATAM and the U.S. to support and replicate the success of this LATAM study abroad COP.

Literature review

Study abroad

For the purposes of this article, study abroad is defined as “a temporary sojourn of pre-defined duration, undertaken for educational purposes” (Kinginger, 2009, p. 11). The components, expectations, and outcomes of a study abroad program defined in these terms vary widely. Freed (1995) states that it is impossible to describe with precision the quality and extent of associated social contacts and linguistic interactions that may occur. Though there are mixed findings in the scholarly literature on study abroad programs, there are salient trends with respect to language acquisition. First, students who have the opportunity to study abroad produce more of the target foreign language than those who do not. Further, study abroad students are more fluent, speak at a faster rate, use fewer filled pauses, reformulate more often, and produce longer stretches of speech. Such students also utilize a wider range of communicative strategies and are better at maintaining interaction, among other sociolinguistic and pragmatic variables (Huebner, 1995; Kasper & Kellerman, 2014; Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018).

According to Kinginger (2009), SLA during study abroad can be divided into two contexts: instructed versus naturalistic language development. Instructed language is formally taught, usually in a classroom and with examples that are external to the context. Naturalistic language learning strategies include the use of the environment as a source of communicative opportunities (Kaiser, 1995). “Sojourners,” or study abroad learners, are a hybrid variety because they have access to instruction, input, and interaction in the target language and immersion context. The effects of study abroad on linguistic knowledge are usually studied via holistic constructs: proficiency, fluency, listening comprehension, reading, and writing. Proficiency is defined as distinct from achievement

and based on criteria established in specific instructional contexts (Kinginger, 2009). Accordingly, a proficiency test is assumed to “measure an individual’s general competence in a second language, independent of any particular curriculum or course of study” (Omaggio, 1986, p. 9). Many valid and reliable tests measure proficiency, including the TOEFL and a scale adapted for academic purposes by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and in cooperation with the Educational Testing Service. Thanks to widespread critical views on language testing in general, and tests like the TOEFL and ACTFL, shifts have occurred in the priorities given to proficiency components, such as a rethinking of the native speaker standard (Hurie, 2018; Moussu & Braine, 2006).

Length of stay is an important factor in the effectiveness of SLA during study abroad. Jackson (2008) and Serrano et al. (2011) found that during short stays (2–14 weeks) linguistic competence developed at a faster pace than intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity, or sociopragmatic awareness. Nevertheless, other studies found that sojourners in short-stay programs have superior linguistic proficiency to those who study at home in a “domestic immersion” situation or a traditional language course. Segalowitz and Freed (2004), Dewey (2007), Juan-Garau and Pérez-Vidal (2007), and Foster (2009) found that language learner experiences in both domestic and study abroad may result in similar linguistic proficiency. During short stays, improvements in linguistic competence are most noticeable in speaking and listening skills (Allen & Herron, 2003; Segalowitz et al., 2004). Remarkably, long-term study abroad experiences develop linguistic knowledge, as well as confidence, socio-linguistic skills, intercultural awareness, and the creation of social networks (Dwyer, 2004).

Magnan and Black (2007) found that living arrangements (e.g., living with a host family, in an individual dorm, or with non-target language speakers) did not make a significant difference in the sojourners’ language gains. This finding is supported by Segalowitz and Freed (2004) and Wilkinson (1998), who found that the experiences of learners with their host families were varied. Another factor that did not have a strong overall influence on international students’ language gains was the amount of language exposure in a study abroad experience. For language improvement, it was more important to observe who the students spent their time with rather than the amount of time they spent interacting (e.g., while watching TV, reading newspapers, or speaking with fellow L1 speakers in the target language). Crucial factors for improving language fluency while studying abroad were prior language coursework and contact with target language speakers (Magnan & Lafford, 2013). These factors, including prior language learning experiences, are pertinent to the COP of LATAM sojourners in this study.

Communities of practice

Acceptance into the graduate school examined in this article is contingent on applicants meeting a specified English proficiency requirement. To address the question of why and how LATAM students meet this requirement, it is useful to reference Bell's (1984) "initiative design," defined as a speaker's efforts that exceed the desire to match the proficiency of an audience. Due to the diversity in dialect, language, geographical origin, and socioeconomic background of LATAM graduate students, this motivation may be categorized as the creation of a COP within the university community. As Wenger (1998) argues, COPs share a joint-negotiated enterprise, and they share a repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time, such as English language proficiency. A COP, which is not necessarily circumscribed by a geographical location and may not be perceived by its own members, is defined as "a collection of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some common endeavor" (Eckert, 2006, p. 683). Engagement in the COP might happen in an isolated way and unconsciously. As Wenger-Trayner (2015) argues, intentionality in the creation of COPs is possible but not necessary. In many cases, such as in this study, the COP may be incidental. The pragmatic socialization provided by a COP is unique in every context. However, when included in EFL instruction, a COP conditions and modifies the social ecosystem of the learner beyond the classroom by creating new hierarchies, social structures, ideologies, and conventions.

Being part of a community of learners sets up the foundations for becoming part of a COP mediated by a foreign language. A common example of this type of interaction in an ESL classroom is turn-taking. Minimizing status markers and downplaying status differences between the teacher and learners supports an environment of confidence and participation characterized by horizontal relationships (Poole, 1992). Students with prior experiences in academic environments featuring EMI experience new hierarchies, social structures, and pragmatic uses of English distinct from those traditionally found in a LATAM language classroom.

COPs are not necessarily created from scratch but arise from social circumstances that attract prospective members through shared interests, experiences, and common goals. Each member has a unique history of English foreign language acquisition. If this acquisition occurs within a formal educational system, it is assumed that the motivation to learn English is part of an investment endeavor with expectations of some type of social or capital "revenue." In other words, individuals may be willing to invest in learning English to increase their odds of getting a raise, finding a job, or getting into college. According to Norton (2013), the construct of "investment" involves contextual elements such as social, political, and economic power, as well as status. These elements channel a single motivational factor that determines

new character traits, outlines new values and aspirations, and eventually influences identity.

In a language COP, members not only use the same code, but more importantly they adopt a common linguistic style that influences both conventions and meanings (Lewis, 1969). At the HEI examined in this article, for instance, LATAM graduate students are expected to follow certain conventions of academic English, but L1 transference may also become part of language use. In the case of language, as in any other COP experience, participation in the larger group is required, which influences group identity and leads to a linguistic practice that articulates this identity (Moore, 2003). In fact, linguistic variables were found to have a stronger correlation with COP participation than other classically inferred factors, such as parents' social class (Eckert, 2000). Graduate students as well as other L2 learners might be influenced by university English practices that condition their perception of the world and experience a yearning to gain new knowledge or satisfy ambitions that would be impossible without the second language. Eventually, social contact and relationships turn individuals into a community with a shared repertoire of resources that can be used to solve problems, approach challenges, and undertake initiatives (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). As will be shown in the Results and Discussion below, the LATAM sojourners from this study formed an incidental COP, and the characteristics and constitution of this COP are important in understanding the group's success.

Methods

The current study, conducted in 2018, was designed in the mixed methods tradition that “involves a process of collecting, analyzing, and mixing quantitative and qualitative methods” (Kim, 2013, p. 3687). Mixed methods research combines the strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods while reducing their weaknesses. The combination integrates not only procedures but also assumptions and theoretical frameworks — a union that is expected to result in a more complete understanding of the research problem than would be possible with either approach alone (Creswell, 2014). Mixed methods involve collecting both qualitative and quantitative data and analyzing each type of data under its own paradigm (sampling, sources, and step of analysis); eventually, both types of data need to be connected, merged, or embedded in the analysis (Johnson et al., 2007). For this investigation, the most appropriate approach was Sequential Explanatory Design, a method of two phases in which quantitative data is collected first and qualitative data is collected later in order to explain or aid interpretation of the findings of the quantitative results, as can be seen in [Figure 1](#) (Creswell, 2014).

The sampling method in this study was voluntary response. The only inclusion criterion was that the respondents were enrolled in the university as

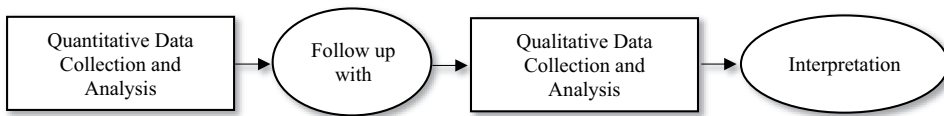


Figure 1. Explanatory sequential mixed methods design.

international graduate students from a LATAM country. The response rate to the survey was 43.87%. The final number of complete responses was 126, and 13 of these students participated in follow-up in-person interviews. All direct quotations from the interviews are cited with pseudonyms and the appropriate line from the interview transcript. The survey and interviews were designed to capture information on demographics, prior academic experiences, language use, coping and learning strategies, and prior experience in the U.S.

Finite population correction

Finite population correction (FPC) is a mathematical procedure to reduce the standard error of the mean given that the sample size n is not assumed as a sample of an infinite population, or at least so large that the effect of withdrawing items during the sampling has a negligible effect (Nicholson, 2014). To apply FPC, the sample size must be a significant factor (and fraction) of the population, usually more than 5% of the true population N . FPC is used to adjust the estimate of standard error, resulting in a narrower confidence interval for the population mean. The equation is adjusted from $\sqrt{\frac{N-n}{N-1}}$ for an infinite population to $\sqrt{\frac{N-n}{N-1}} * \frac{\sigma}{\sqrt{n}}$ where N is the true population size, n is the sample from the population, and σ is the standard deviation of the sample.

In every survey item with quantitative outcomes, the number of respondents was adjusted to the true population of Latin American students per country in the graduate school, giving each a weight in the total sample related to the number of students from that country. The weight of every participant by country is presented in Table 1. For instance, in the case of Colombia, the FPC yielded a true weight of each respondent of 0.61. That is, the results from each Colombian respondent contribute an estimated value of 61% instead of the unadjusted 100%. Because of FPC, the results of the descriptive statistics and analyses may be argued to represent the actual population of Latin American students at the university.

Results

Demographic data

Basic demographic data about the participants included age range (21–49), gender (45% female, 55% male), and departmental affiliation (all colleges at

Table 1. True weight of participants by country.

Country	Respondents	True number of Graduate Students	Weight in the population	Adjusted Weight
Bolivia	0	1	0	NA
Paraguay	1	1	0.01	1.00
Uruguay	1	1	0.01	1.00
Nicaragua	1	1	0.01	1.00
Guatemala	1	1	0.01	1.34
Panama	4	5	0.03	0.60
Chile	2	7	0.02	1.56
Argentina	3	8	0.02	1.19
Costa Rica	4	9	0.03	1.01
Honduras	5	9	0.04	0.80
Peru	2	13	0.02	2.90
Venezuela	5	13	0.04	1.16
Ecuador	4	23	0.03	2.57
Mexico	8	39	0.06	2.18
Brazil	11	48	0.09	1.95
Colombia	72	99	0.57	0.61
Total <i>n</i>	126			

the university). There were 13 countries represented, including all LATAM countries except Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Colombian students, who comprise the majority of the LATAM population in the graduate school, accounted for 56% of responses.

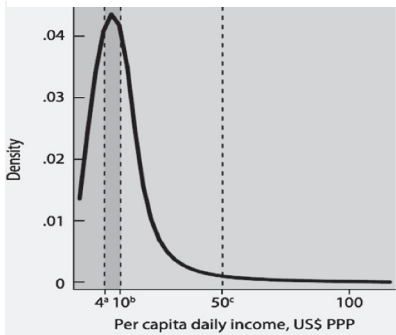
The number of respondents by country is presented in Table 2. Although seemingly unbalanced, in most cases the number of responses was representative of the actual number of students at the university. As described above in the Methods section, FPC was applied to all descriptive statistics.

The socioeconomic profile of LATAM graduate students is varied. As seen in Figure 2b, the largest group reported a middle point on a socioeconomic scale from 1–7 (1 being the lowest), resulting in a normal distribution. However, income in LATAM is not normally distributed (see Figure 2a). According to Ferreira et al. (2013), the median daily income per capita is

Table 2. True count of students and proportion by country.

Country	Number of Students	Number of Participants	Proportion of Respondents
Argentina	8	3	38%
Bolivia	1	0	0%
Brazil	48	11	23%
Chile	7	2	29%
Colombia	99	72	73%
Costa Rica	9	4	44%
Ecuador	23	4	17%
El Salvador	1	0	0%
Guatemala	3	1	33%
Honduras	9	5	56%
Mexico	39	8	21%
Nicaragua	2	1	50%
Panama	5	4	80%
Paraguay	1	1	100%
Peru	13	2	15%
Uruguay	1	1	100%
Venezuela	13	5	38%
Total <i>n</i>	282	126	45%

a. Distribution of Income in Latin America and the Caribbean



b. Socioeconomic Status of Latin American Graduate Students at the University

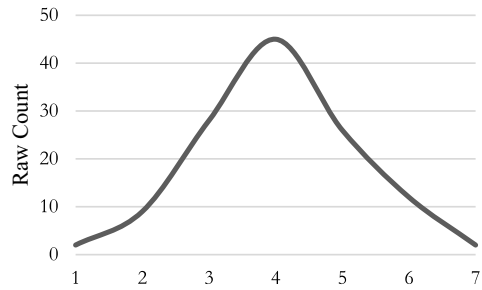


Figure 2. Comparison of distribution of income in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2009 and socioeconomic background of Latin Americans in the graduate school. (Source of chart [a]: Ferreira et al., 2013).

around or below 10 USD, which is a level 1 or 2 on the scale. Furthermore, LATAM ranks as the most unequal region in the world (World Economic Forum, 2016). Therefore, the graduate students at level 4 fall in the upper bound of middle class and may be seen as privileged compared to the greater LATAM population.

English learning experiences in high school

Private institutions in LATAM generally implement English education at an earlier stage and more consistently than public schools. This is due to competitiveness among private institutions, but also to financial, staffing, and accessibility constraints at public schools. Most participants in this study (61%) received a high school diploma from a private institution, and the remaining 39% received their degrees from a public institution. All participants attended high school in their country of origin.

Table 3 shows the participants' type of school (public or private) and whether the school practiced English as a medium of instruction (EMI). As expected, only a small minority of public schools (6%) practiced EMI, though the rate was not high at private schools either (26%). Together, the results show that only 16% of participants attended a private EMI school, and only about 19% attended any type of EMI school.

Table 3. EMI rates by type of high school.

Type of School	No	Yes
Private	74%	26%
Public	94%	6%

As expected, students who attended public non-EMI schools had the lowest average duration of English instruction per week, followed closely by private non-EMI schools (Table 4).

On the other hand, respondents indicated that public EMI schools had a higher average number of hours of instruction of English per week than private EMI schools (9.25 vs. 7.42 hours per week). The key difference in number of hours of English instruction was not due to an institution's status as public or private, but whether the school practiced EMI (though private schools were more likely to practice EMI).

The effect of instruction on English proficiency can be seen in Table 5, in which TOEFL scores by skill are divided into three groups: level 1 for students with 1–6 hours of instruction of English per week, level 2 for those with 6–12 hours of instruction, and level 3 for those with 13+ hours. Subskills are only included for students who took the TOEFL. IELTS scores cannot be broken down by skill, so only total IELTS scores could be converted to TOEFL scale equivalents.

The rightmost column of Table 5 presents total TOEFL scores. Students in group 3 (13+ hours of English instruction per week) reported a higher weighted score than the other two groups by more than 10 points. Nonetheless, when scores are broken down by skill, the picture changes. Students from group 3 reported the most unbalanced scores, as their speaking and writing average scores were lower than those for reading and listening. The difference in the best case (reading vs. speaking) is more than 5 points on the TOEFL scale. In all cases, regardless of weekly hours of instruction in English, listening and reading scores were higher than speaking and writing. As expected, the scores for level 2 students were mostly higher than those for level 1, though level 2 students had marginally lower scores in writing than level 1 students (Figure 3).

Interestingly, the total TOEFL scores from the EMI group were lower than the non-EMI group (81.30 vs. 88.42). This surprising result raises questions

Table 4. Hours of weekly English instruction by type of high school.

	English Language Instruction	
	No	Yes
Private	3.95	7.42
Public	3.08	9.25

Table 5. TOEFL scores by hours of weekly high school instruction.

	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing	Total
Level 1 (1–6 hours)	24.8	25.0	22.3	23.2	86.5
Level 2 (6–12 hours)	26.3	27.0	24.2	22.9	86.2
Level 3 (13+ hours)	26.7	25.3	2.0	18.7	97.5

Scores by skills ($n = 123$); score by total ($n = 116$).

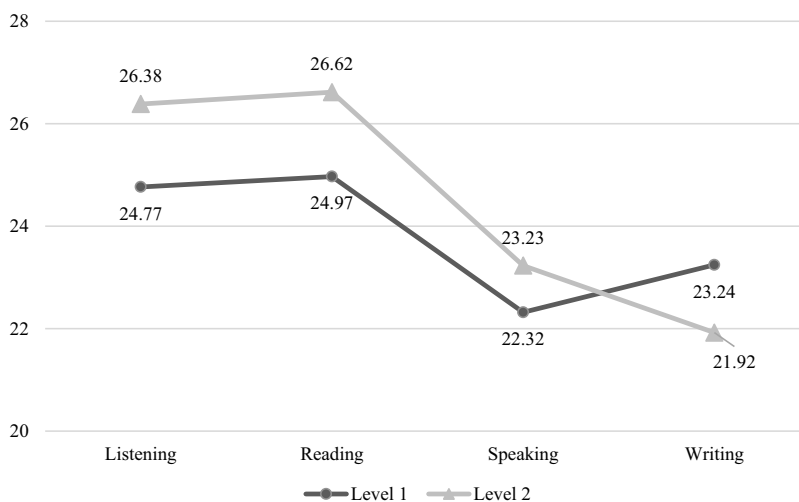


Figure 3. TOEFL scores by individual skills ($n = 123$).

about the quality or pertinence of EMI and makes necessary a detailed analysis that is beyond the scope of this study. The lack of a clear trend regarding number of hours of English instruction per week is also surprising. In fact, the students at level 1, who received the least content instruction in English (1–4 hours per week), had the highest scores, followed next by level 3, the group with the most hours of instruction (10–14 hours per week), and finally followed by the level 2 group, who received 5–9 hours. Together, these data show that high school experiences in English learning among study participants were inconsistent and often unproductive.

English learning experiences in college

Five participants in this study reported going to college in a country different from their country of origin. These five respondents were from Ecuador (2), Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Perú, and they all received a degree from Zamorano University in Honduras. The explanation is that Zamorano University, though located in Honduras, is registered in the U.S. and offers grants to many LATAM countries. Zamorano is an agricultural school, and professors there have long-term academic relationships with the university examined in this study.

On average, respondents who took English language classes as undergraduates had slightly higher TOEFL scores (though not significantly so) than those who did not (88.4 vs. 83.9). The respondents who took English language classes in college were divided into three levels based on the number of semesters of instruction: those in level 1 received 1–4 semesters of instruction, those in level 2 received 5–8, and those in level 3 received 9–10. In other words,

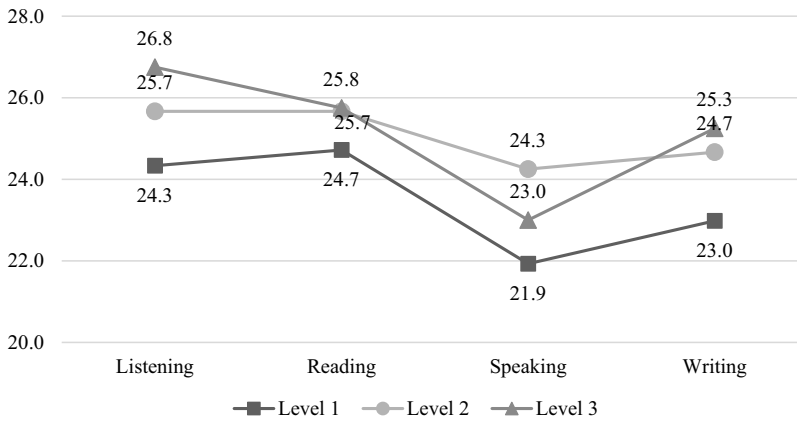


Figure 4. TOEFL scores by skills and hours of English instruction in college ($n = 79$).

the more hours of instruction, the higher the score in all skills except speaking, in which level 2 respondents were one point above level 3 (see [Figure 4](#)). There were also 44 respondents who reported taking no English in college (hence, $n = 79$ in [Figure 4](#)); their TOEFL subsection scores were close to those in level 1, and they had the lowest total proficiency scores. However, regarding total scores, the respondents who took English in college had similar scores to those who did not: 88.4 vs. 83.9 on the TOEFL scale.

Participant attitudes about their English learning experiences

The participants in this study had strong opinions about the quality of their prior English language classes. Most felt that their high school English instruction, even while consistent, did not have a positive effect on their language proficiency scores. The few cases of EMI schools are the exception to this trend. However, EMI and non-EMI groups agreed that language instruction in college helped those with lower skills catch up to their better prepared peers. In the interviews, high school English training was often described as a stage of acquaintance with the foreign language, but not necessarily as a learning stage. For example, one student, who reported about four hours of English instruction per week (average for a non-EMI school, as shown in [Table 4](#) above) expressed that there was little progression from year to year. Instead of learning how to communicate, the student mainly memorized vocabulary:

In high school [English instruction] I think it's not very good. At least where I come from. We had four hours of English a week, but they did not teach us beyond vocabulary. Each year began with the same topics. (Margarita:13)

Two other students expressed the same general problem: repetition of the same basic topics with little progression over time. However, for these students, basic verb conjugation was the focus rather than vocabulary:

Yes, I had English in high school, but it wasn't good enough because the only topic we had during the last three years was "do," "does" and that was the only thing. There is no other additional tool, maybe "to be" and "do and does". (Diomedes:14)

In my High School we did have — I think more or less 4 hours. We were learning the verb "to be" until we graduated. It was not good at all. (Carmen:17)

This theme emerged multiple times in the interviews. Yet another student reported the same focus on basic verb forms and vocabulary rather than higher order language learning that focused on communicative competence:

Most of the English that I learned in high school was in the secondary part and it was just the English structures. How to make present, past, future, progressive; vocabulary and things like that. (Alfonso:18)

A fifth student summed up a common feeling that high school English instruction was ineffective and lacking in innovation:

The public system is just terrible and there is little emphasis on new methodologies in language teaching. (Gabriel:17)

A general theme is that the interviewees saw their high school English language instruction as repetitive and unplanned, with instruction covering only a few topics each year (or even the same topics) without significant progression.

The five statements above reflect a shared dissatisfaction with the general EFL methodology in LATAM high schools. Though the participants were successful in being admitted to a U.S. graduate school (as evidenced by their becoming a participant in this study), rethinking foreign language pedagogy at the secondary level, especially at public schools, may benefit students who are unable to overcome poor language preparation. It is noteworthy that only 39% of the participants in this study attended a public high school, which in LATAM are traditionally ranked below private institutions in national and international academic measures. Whether because of differences in instructional methods in areas such as English teaching, the socioeconomic backgrounds of the students, or some combination of these factors, private school attendance appears to correlate with successful admission into graduate school in the U.S.

In contrast, the participants commonly expressed positive opinions about English instruction in college and reported that this instruction to a major degree helped them meet graduate school requirements:

I took an intensive course at the university and that was a great course. (Vicky:19)

I think that [English language instruction] in the public schools, is not very good. Because I think I didn't learn a lot in my high school. But in the university, I improved, improved a lot. (Federico:22)

These three students did not provide much explanatory detail, but they are emphatic that their university courses were effective. Clearly, language instruction at the undergraduate level has the potential, at least for some LATAM students, to compensate for underpreparation at the secondary level.

Some participants explicitly recognized English language instruction as part of a bigger social issue related to the economic resources available to public high schools and the students who attend them. A participant who attended a private high school and college acknowledged that English proficiency level is conditioned, or at least influenced, by socioeconomic background:

[English proficiency level] has to do with the social background. If you can afford it, then you will have a good level of English and if you cannot, you will not have it. (Florinda:19)

As this participant observed, the success of the graduate students in this study may reflect social and economic advantages over peers who did not share the same opportunities at the secondary and post-secondary level.

Supplementary language instruction

More than half of the respondents whose undergraduate institutions had a language requirement took extra language courses, but only 32% of those without this requirement took such courses. In total, 42% of the survey respondents reported taking English language courses at a private institute or other non-degree-granting institution. The type of non-degree language instruction received by this group is broken down in the Venn diagram in [Figure 5](#). Results show a strong preference for language institutes, which students usually attend in the evening or on Saturdays, with some even starting prior to college, as described in the interviews:

Since I was twelve years old, my aunt paid me an English course on Saturdays from seventh to tenth grade. I went to English every Saturday and I also had an English teacher at school. (Clotilde:3)

My parents enrolled me in an English course — extracurricular stuff. I don't know if you know Colombo-Americano. I went there once a week at the beginning. I think they enrolled me in this since I was 6 years old probably, something like that. I was very very young. (Carmen:4)

So, when I was in my last years of high school I went to English extracurricular classes in the morning, and in the afternoon, I went to school. And I think that for me that was a very good experience. I got the most out of it. I got experience with English. (Diana:2)

These three participants all supplemented their curricular language instruction with private extracurricular courses, which were commonly

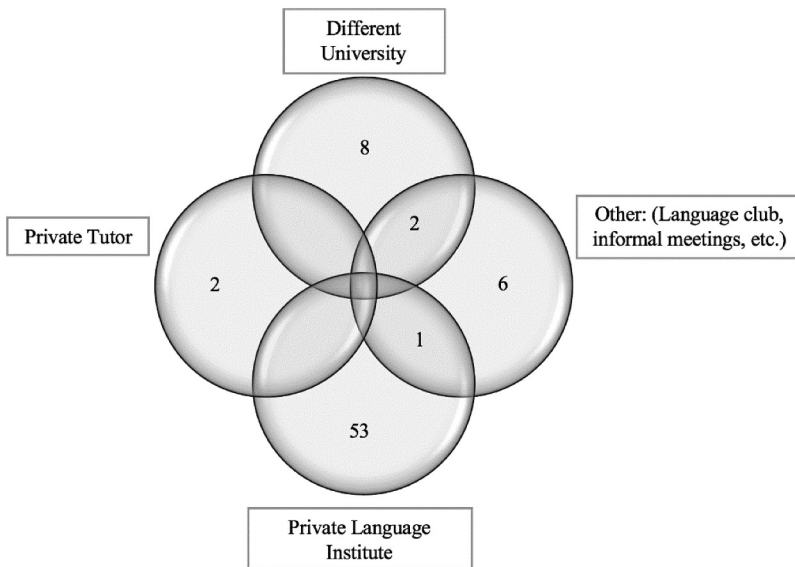


Figure 5. Type of non-degree English training.

paid for by a relative such as an aunt or parents. However, these three participants started at drastically different ages (12, 6, and late high school, respectively), suggesting that even students with the means for supplemental instruction could experience very different levels of language exposure by graduation.

In LATAM, it is common for prestigious private universities to offer language courses to the public, and some respondents attended such language classes despite matriculating from different schools. Under these circumstances, the offering of courses to the public is not necessarily connected to undergraduate language programs, though the programs might share resources, including facilities, pedagogical materials, and instructors. A few students also engaged in informal language practice by joining language clubs or similar groups. As described in the interviews, these meetings sometimes required a fee, and were usually hosted by L1 English speakers learning Spanish. These informal meetings for language interchange could take place in parks, houses, bars, or restaurants (usually in big cities). The least popular option to learn English outside college was private tutoring, which was an expected finding due to the high cost and general lack of qualified professional tutors:

Back in Medellín, she [a friend] invited me. It was like a community from people from abroad who wanted to learn Spanish and local people who wanted to learn English. So, we went out to a bar to drink beer and interact. We talk to them in English for certain time and then we switched, they talked to us in Spanish, and we made the corrections. (Diomedes:11)

In Bogotá, there were a couple of English clubs. There was one called Gringo Tuesdays. I would go there every Tuesday and practice some English with foreigners and sometimes, as it was in a bar, we would dance and go out for dinner and that sort of things. (Jaime:18)

Language learning in informal settings such as bars and restaurants — as opposed to formal settings such as classrooms or offices — has the potential to provide not only academic benefits (in terms of English acquisition), but also opportunities for social integration of L1 and L2 speakers, which might be expected to accrue additional benefits such as acculturation. Research has also shown that lower-pressure social settings may have benefits for language learning (O’Neil et al., 2022).

Travel abroad experiences

Only 37% of the respondents had international experience in an English-speaking country before coming to the U.S. for graduate school. As expected, such experiences were closely related to socioeconomic background: the higher the income, the more likely a student had visited an English-speaking country (Figure 6).

Respondents who had an international experience reported varying motivations, as seen in Figure 7. Twelve out of 13 respondents who reported vacation travel also reported involvement in a short study program. Seven traveled with study as their only objective, and only 2 respondents reported travel to an English-speaking country in order to study English. However, 3 respondents reported travel with the intent of learning or practicing English informally (that is, without formal instruction), and 1 respondent had this intention while on vacation.

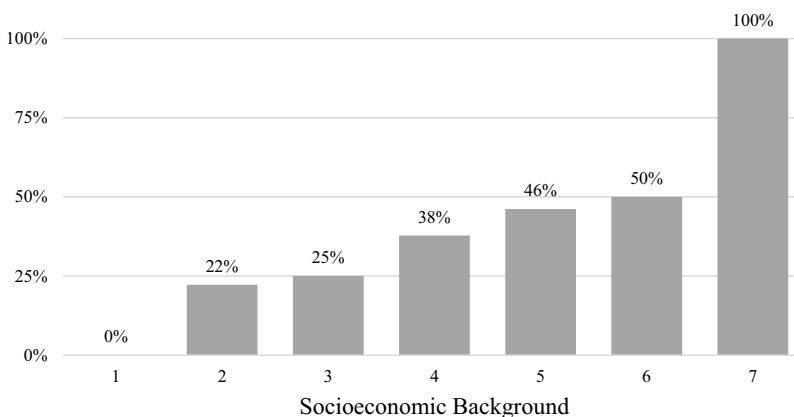


Figure 6. Participants with prior international experience by socioeconomic background.

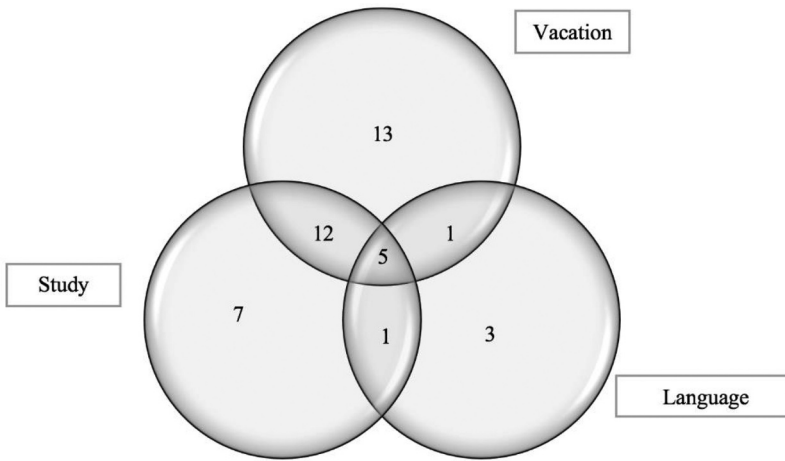


Figure 7. Purpose of the visit to an English-speaking country.

Test preparation courses

A majority of respondents (58%) reported not taking any preparation course for an English proficiency test (i.e., TOEFL or IELTS). As seen in Figure 8, respondents who did not take a test preparation course outperformed those who did take such a course in terms of their average total TOEFL score.

This pattern is similar among those who made one or two attempts to reach the proficiency scores required for admission. The respondents who attained the required admission cut scores on their first attempt (66% of respondents) had higher average scores in all skills compared to those who needed to take the test more than once. The pattern is consistent across skills among those who took the test twice before meeting application requirements. However, as shown in Figure 9, those who took the TOEFL 4+ times outperformed those who took the test exactly 3 times (in all skills except speaking). In general, multiple test takers had lower scores.

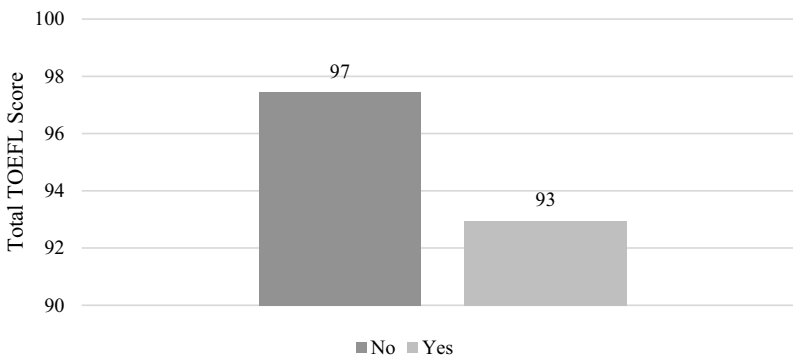


Figure 8. Test preparation course and average total TOEFL scores.

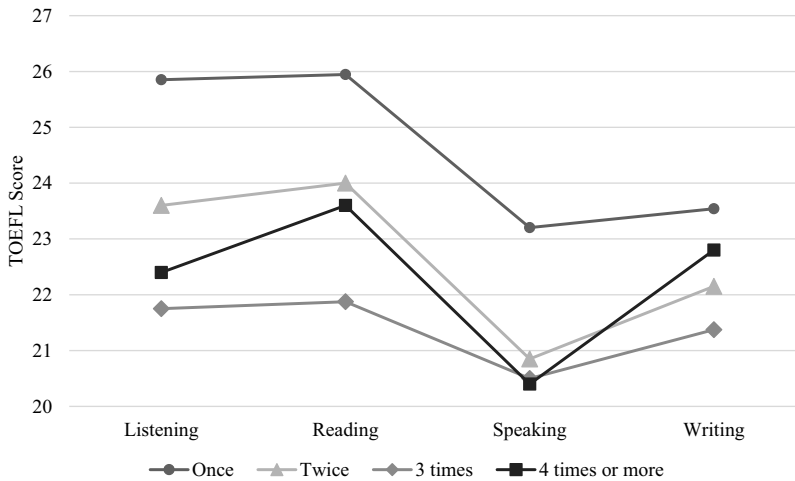


Figure 9. TOEFL attempts by skill subtypes.

The pattern is clear: prospective graduate students with higher English proficiency take TOEFL once to earn the necessary graduate school admission scores; those with lower proficiency take the test more than once. In fact, the lower the score across skills, the more attempts were needed to attain admission cut scores.

Discussion

Baker and Wright (2017) show that the relationship between age and language acquisition is still a controversial issue. On one hand, studies show that early classroom instruction or exposure will lead to higher proficiency; on the other, there is evidence that highly motivated late learners or adults can achieve L1-like competence in a second language. Quality of instruction is a key factor. However, as discussed above, there are many limitations to the quality of instruction in LATAM, including the large number of students per classroom, instructors with little or no training, and a lack of resources. Current government efforts to improve English proficiency rely on time of exposure, and this limitation is reflected in the unfavorable opinions reported by study participants about how English was taught at their high schools. Many stated that English lessons were repetitive and basic. For this reason, it is unsurprising that English proficiency scores did not appear to be strongly influenced by early language instruction, as those lessons alone were insufficient in helping them achieve a level of competence that corresponded with their educational aspirations.

Supplementary and additional English instruction, beginning with instruction as a young adult, is the most common trend among the LATAM graduate students in this study. After high school, the highly motivated and disciplined

learners with economic resources took advantage of the opportunities at hand, including but not limited to English lessons at college or private institutions. As adults, they used the learning strategies they found most effective to enhance their language learning process, and they combined these with opportunities for professional growth. These LATAM English language learners effectively “caught up” during adulthood — to the point of achieving a graduate school proficiency score requirement and becoming competitive with successful language learners from around the world. Though LATAM students who study abroad are exceptional for many reasons — including but not limited to English language training, motivation, discipline, priorities, and expectations — awareness of these students’ experiences may be a motivating factor for prospective graduate students from the same region. Despite EFL courses in school not meeting the national (or international) requirements, these students may still find strategies (similar to the ones used by graduate students) to overcome limitations in English proficiency that may limit their opportunities.

While participants in this study held negative views on language instruction in LATAM high schools, they reported positive views on their undergraduate experiences. Most development in their English proficiency development took place during their undergraduate years through English instruction at universities or private language centers, and students who took English courses in college reported higher proficiency in academic-based tests. Beyond their own discipline and motivation, the most important factors that influenced gains in language proficiency were international/study abroad experiences (whether academic or not), meaningful college English instruction, and self-study. In a sense, the LATAM graduate students were “conditioned” by their undergraduate environment to attain admission eligibility.

As the results showed, the higher the number of semesters of English instruction, the higher the TOEFL iBT scores. Students who did not take English in college had lower scores than groups that took at least one semester. Clearly, the university-level English courses taken by study participants were better at preparing them for the academic English requirements of the TOEFL iBT and IELTS. The reasons why some students did not take English classes in college are diverse: they could have tested out at the beginning of college by meeting the minimum proficiency level; they could have chosen to study English outside their college; or their universities may not have required a minimum proficiency level. Notably, almost half of the respondents’ undergraduate institutions did not have a language requirement.

It may be surprising that respondents who did not take test preparation courses had higher total English proficiency scores than those who took them. However, taking a test preparation course may be interpreted as a strategy to compensate for weaknesses in language skills or test expertise. Likewise, more than half of respondents (52%) with a university language

requirement sought out non-degree language instruction, either at a private language institute, at another university, with a private tutor, or in a language club. Motivations are diverse, but the interviews revealed significant criticism of instructional methods in high school and college courses. We argue that most LATAM graduate students studying abroad in the U.S. are overachievers. Those who were not functionally proficient in English at the time of application (44 of the survey respondents) were persistent enough to eventually reach the English proficiency cut scores — in some cases, after four or more attempts. This determination might explain the extra language training that was sought out even when the training was not required.

We found that the LATAM graduate students examined in this study formed a COP, which entails shared interests, experiences, and common goals (Norton, 2013). This shared identity exists incidentally. That is, though the LATAM graduate students are invested and engaged, their intentionality and even awareness of the COP are not necessary. Their relationship is not cause-effect in a narrow sense (e.g., we have similar goals, hence, we support each other to achieve them). Rather, the formal classification of the COP is used to group and determine experiences that previously helped with graduate school admission. The constructs of the LATAM graduate student COP could be condensed to the following: personal investment in education regardless of socioeconomic background, academically functional English language proficiency despite varying degrees of preparation at the high school level, and overachiever traits. Personal investment as a construct concentrates the complexities of the sociopolitical contexts of LATAM as well as the students' efforts in their undergraduate degrees. Regardless of their background, the LATAM graduate students are part of a community that values learning and sees a graduate degree as an asset in their professional development. This sub-community of learners is by necessity small, as LATAM universities serve less than 10% of the population (Educando, 2021). The value given to education and a degree is not measurable, but it may be assumed that the aspirations and values of the COP are important components of the identity of each individual.

The second trait of the LATAM COP is linguistic functionality in English, which is guaranteed by the admissions process to meet a common minimum proficiency level as assessed by internationally accredited tests. Academic functional proficiency in English is another feature shared by the COP, which is not determined by geographical location but extends across the region and relies mainly on the investment, priorities, and expectations derived from professional identity. It is important to note, though, that the COP as presented here exists informally; members might not actually be aware of their commonalities.

According to Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015), COPs turn individuals into a community with a shared repertoire of resources to solve problems, approach challenges, and undertake initiatives. The common domain of interest, and the one that actually brings together LATAM students from different backgrounds, is the scientific or scholarly pursuit of knowledge. The commitment to become part of a COP of graduate students seeking a master's or Ph.D. sets the group apart from any other community from their region of origin — or any community in the U.S. for that matter, considering the additional variables that are exclusively shared by the LATAM COP. That said, there is room for subdivision within the COP, including academic divisions — by college, school, and department — and social divisions — by interests, relationships, nationality, and socioeconomic background (the latter being perhaps the single most important trait for understanding LATAM social structure, c.f. García de Fanelli & Adrogué, 2021). Each of these divisions, along with their overlapping boundaries, narrows the scope of the COP.

The last trait of the LATAM COP is one related to personality. Namely, we found that most of the members are overachievers. Individuals accepted into graduate school in the U.S. are among a small minority of the graduates of LATAM undergraduate institutions. These individuals are highly motivated and have relatively high English proficiency compared to their peers. Furthermore, all interviewees referenced past experiences that reveal an intrinsic and transversal desire to go above and beyond expectations. The interviewees presented their overachiever qualities in different ways, which included practices, personality traits, and achievements such as volunteering, self-discipline, and academic honors. Additionally, most interviewees stated directly or indirectly that they were at the top of their classes:

I was top of my class, not only in my undergrad program but also in high school and everything before that. So, I think that's a way to say that I was more disciplined than the others and somehow, I take more advantages of all the things that were taught. (Nairo:14)

I was the best student in my class when I graduated, so I guess that made a difference. (Carmen:18)

When I was in college, I had the opportunity to be a teaching assistant, which is uncommon for an undergraduate student. (Vicky:16)

I worked at the university as teaching assistant. I also did research with a Colombian professor. (Martín: 24)

The first two of these four students directly state that they were academic standouts and ranked at the top of their class. The second two indirectly indicate this. As stated in the third comment, it is uncommon in Latin America for undergraduates to serve as teaching assistants and conduct

research with their professors. The fact that these students did so shows that their professors were highly impressed with their academic abilities.

It is not surprising to find that the students accepted to graduate school were some of the best students in their cohorts and colleges, but it is interesting that their academic accomplishments were accompanied by strong motivation and discipline. This discipline could be linked to resourcefulness in taking advantage of learning opportunities beyond the classroom, as can be seen in the following interview excerpts:

I was really determined in accomplishing my career goals. (Nairo:19)

I read a lot and I liked Harry Potter since I was about eight years old. My dream was to read Harry Potter in English. So, I started reading it, looking for words and making my little dictionary. (Marcela:10)

Yes, [I improved my English proficiency] out of curiosity because it was something I liked and not something I had to do. I am stubborn. If I want something, I get there no matter what. That's something that got me to [this university]. (Diomedes:21)

These stress quotations reflect personal “overachiever” traits such as strong determination and even stubbornness in the pursuit of goals, traits which are also reflected in the second student’s somewhat eccentric decision to make her own Harry Potter dictionary as an eight-year-old. Many additional interviewees reported exceptional achievements prior to attending graduate school, such as starting research websites, volunteering at a German library, working as transcriptionist, and volunteering at academic conferences and national parks.

Clearly, many members of the LATAM graduate student COP examined in this article enjoyed a supportive social and academic environment in their home countries that included close relationships with professors and advisors. These relationships helped the students enhance their own social and personal development and take advantage of resources that were available on campus and in the surrounding community.

Conclusion

Though LATAM graduate students studying abroad in the U.S. appear to have an unfavorable view of the formal educational systems in their home countries (at least regarding language instruction), personal motivations and other factors superseded these limitations. For many participants these personal factors included restrictions related to socioeconomic background. Common factors that influenced the acceptance of LATAM graduate students were academic excellence, intermediate/advanced English language proficiency, and academic contacts with professors at the institution. Additionally, many of the members of the COP examined in this article had international experiences in countries where a foreign language was spoken or, more importantly,

an academic experience in the U.S. (e.g., internships and scholar visits). These academic experiences in the U.S. were some of the most important experiences reported in the study, as they established academic connections with professors who played an important role in the admissions process. The results of the present study confirm the outcomes of Gallup, Inc (2014), which found that aspects such as support and enriching experiences during college had a stronger influence on long-term goals of college graduates than aspects related to graduates' academic and workforce preparation. Finally, membership in the LATAM COP, which on one hand was a consequence of the participants successfully being admitted to graduate school in the U.S., should also be viewed as a contributor to success. As previously discussed, social contacts and relationships within a COP may serve as resources to solve problems, approach challenges, and undertake initiatives (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Members' shared investments may also motivate the creation of important new character traits, values, identities, and aspirations (Norton, 2013).

Given that English instruction at LATAM high schools seldom results in functional language proficiency — and, given inequities in LATAM education such as the differences in quality between public and private institutions — we recommend that ministries of Education and Science focus on improving educational quality in terms of teacher selection, training, and facilities. The current approach, which emphasizes coverage and duration of exposure, is insufficient for promoting functional proficiency. Improving quality is especially important in contexts where instruction has not led to increases in English proficiency, despite large-scale participation in the education system. Furthermore, ministries of Education should also include colleges and other HEIs in their bilingualism and multilingualism plans. In particular, these ministries should explore ways to make college-level English instruction more widespread and available. If LATAM countries wish to participate in global interactions using ELF, methods must be found at a formal level to replicate the experiences mentioned in this article. Besides dynamic classroom instruction, undergraduate experiences could include well-structured, semester-long sustainable study abroad experiences with research programs (e.g., 100K Strong in the Americas). Beyond the language component, such programs allow students to establish academic connections with professors and academic advisors who could work with them if they decide to apply for graduate school. Lastly, we recommend that U.S. HEIs seek to understand the factors, such as those reported in this study, that affect the admission of LATAM students into graduate school. By identifying key elements in the academic and cultural influences of international students, these institutions will be better able to support these students and promote diversity among their student populations.

Limitations and further research

The LATAM students examined in this study were all admitted to an R1 university in the U.S. Unfortunately, we do not have data on applicants who did not succeed in being admitted, whether because they failed to meet the required cut scores for English proficiency or for other unknown reasons. Further research is needed to compare the linguistic and cultural experiences of the admitted applicants with those who were not admitted.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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