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Professors' perceptions of repeating courses in the BA in Spanish and Literature of the UIS

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Abstract

This article aims to expand the knowledge about repeating courses in the Spanish Language and Literature Degree program at Universidad Industrial de Santander (UIS, for its initials in Spanish) (a phenomenon not much studied in the university, according to bibliographic tracking conducted prior to this research). Specifically, both full-time and part-time professors' perception of such phenomenon. To this end, a series of surveys and interviews were conducted at the end of 2016. The surveys were answered by 20 professors currently linked to the program, without any distinction; and the interviews were answered by two professors, one full-time and another part-time of each line of emphasis of the program: literature, linguistics, foreign language, and didactics and pedagogical processes. From the analysis of such results, and with the help of a theoretical support on repeating courses, it was discovered how the professors, in a general way, found that although repeating courses in the program was not very high by then, the few students that repeated, had to do it because they did not have a good previous training; they had bad study habits; they were missing a lot of classes, or they did not have a teaching vocation, among other causes. It was concluded that repeating courses is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by diverse causes, and a precedent was set for future studies on university repeating courses in undergraduate and other UIS programs.

Keywords: Repeating courses, professors' perception, university, study habits, dropout.

Introduction

This research work took the phenomenon of university repeating courses as an object of study, and inquired about professors' perception -both full-time and part-time professors- about this phenomenon. Specifically, repeating courses in the four lines of emphasis of the Degree program in Spanish and Literature of the Universidad Industrial de Santander: literature, foreign language -French, specifically-, linguistics, and didactics and pedagogical processes. This program is part of the School of Languages of Universidad Industrial de Santander, and currently, in 2018, it underwent a reform process, at the end of which it was renamed as the Degree program in Literature and Spanish Language. Thus, repeating courses is understood as the fact that students fail the courses and are forced to repeat them the following semester; therefore, this phenomenon has economic, personal, institutional and social implications, which are quite significant, because when students fail the respective courses and, therefore, do not pass to the next levels of training, they decide, among other things, drop out the university (Torres, Acevedo and Gallo, 2015). The studies carried out until the end of 2016 on the problem of repeating courses, both at the level of secondary education and higher education, point to a series of causes in common: bad study habits of students; Inadaptability to self-learning, disinterest in the topics, or lack of

academic preparation, among others (Acevedo, Torres and Jiménez, 2015).

In the specific case of the Universidad Industrial de Santander, according to the bibliographic survey carried out prior to this investigation, it was found that the phenomenon of repeating courses had not been studied until then with scientific rigor. Repeating courses is a problem worthy of attention in any educational establishment, because it is one of the causes of phenomena as serious as school dropouts. This insofar as it affects spheres at personal (self-esteem of students and professors), institutional (decrease in academic performance) and social (inequity and social imbalances) level (González, 2005). Moreover, most of the studies carried out until the end of 2016 [1], period in which this research was carried out, took as a population of analysis students, and left aside the perception of the other participants linked to the phenomenon: the professors.

Due to the repercussions indicated, it is necessary to expand the knowledge we have about the problem of repeating courses, which is closely linked to the academic performance of students. Performance, by the way, is multi-causal, since it constitutes the sum of different factors that influence the person who learns. However, in higher education, that performance is measured with quantitative qualifications that show the degree of "academic success", or what is the same, it is certified by means

of the grades if students reach or not an academic achievement (Garbanzo, 2007). However, this indicator is in many cases unsatisfactory, and is reflected in the loss of subjects, or in academic dropout (Vélez and Roa, 2005).

The perception that professors generate about repeating courses in a specific program of studies is vital for the understanding of this topic. Professors are the main witnesses of this problem, so they build an accurate imaginary about its causes, consequences and main characteristics. The study of teaching perception about repeating courses at university explains, among other things, the incidence of classroom relations in the problem; that is, the representations and social relations that professors and students generate among themselves: a selective categorization (consciously and unconsciously) of the characteristics of the other (Covarrubias and Piña, 2004).

To this end, it was initially chosen a population composed by 30 professors, both full-time and part-time professors, the latter hired at the end of 2016 by the Degree program in Spanish and Literature. A questionnaire was sent to these professors, sent in virtual form, in which they inquired as much about their personal characteristics as about their perception of repeating courses; however, at the end of this process, there were only 20 professors' answers, for a reason that we will explain later. Likewise, a personal interview was conducted with a sample of 8 professors: 4 full-time and 4 part-time professors, each one chosen at random.

In consideration of the initial objectives, a triangulation of information was carried out among the following elements: the results of the qualitative analysis (interviews to which a transcription and a categorization were made), the results of the quantitative analysis (questionnaires to which a statistical analysis was applied); and finally, the theoretical framework on the phenomenon of repeating courses, developed since the beginning of the investigation, and strengthened during its development. This method was chosen because it was considered that it gave some advantages to this study:

When two strategies yield very similar results, this corroborates the findings; but when, on the contrary, these results are not (similar), the triangulation offers an opportunity for a broader perspective to be elaborated regarding the interpretation of the phenomenon in question, because it points out its complexity; and this, in turn, enriches the study and offers the opportunity for new approaches to be carried out (Okuda and Gómez, 2005, p.120).

Now, in terms of analysis, the processes yielded a series of aspects that were repeated in the three ends of the triangle, as well as others that appeared in two of them, or in only one of the extremes; but that, in isolation -that is, within the dynamics of their respective origin: qualitative analysis, quantitative or theoretical framework- they adopted a remarkable relevance both for their recurrence of appearance and their incidence in the teaching perception of repeating courses. Some of these were: "Lack of academic preparation of students (related to the bad habits of study in the university)"; "vocation and lack of motivation on the part of students"; "role of professor support and professor-student relationship"; "influence of work and other responsibilities of students"; "low repeating courses index, in comparison with engineering", and "incidence of repeating courses in professor evaluation".

Materials and methods

This research had an analytical-comparative approach, insofar as it analyzed the responses of both full-time and part-time professors; first, individually, and second, collectively, after the comparison and categorization of those answers. In turn, the research was mixed (qualitative-quantitative) to the extent that it quantified data through variables, in the case of questionnaires; and, in turn, an analysis of narrative records was made, not quantifiable, in the case of interviews (Sampieri, 2010). In this order, the instruments used for such purposes were, on the one hand, a digital questionnaire, designed using the Google Forms tool; and on the other hand, an interview carried out personally with the professors, recorded with the help of mobile phones, and finally transcribed. The questionnaire and the interview dealt with

similar, but not identical, questions. While the questionnaire, of a mixed nature, insofar as it comprised both semi-closed and open questions (Corral, 2010), pointed more towards the general characterization of both professors and their perception of repeating courses; the interview, which was considered semi-structured, in that, although it had some established questions, these were not schematized in an unalterable sequence, but had an open character, and could vary according to the progress of the interview (Vargas Jiménez, 2012), delved into these generalities, which uncovered unexpected variables.

The population of this research was made up by 30 professors currently linked to the Degree program in Spanish and Literature. These professors were then in charge of some courses belonging to the four lines of emphasis of the program: literature, linguistics, foreign language, and didactics and pedagogical processes. For the questionnaire, the sample corresponded to 20 professors of those 30. This was based on an inconvenience that arose during the investigation. Perhaps because the questionnaire was sent at the end of December 2016, that is, during the year-end vacation period, it was very difficult to get the professors to respond immediately. Given the above, it was necessary to go to the director of the School of Languages, so that she mediated between researchers and professors, just as it was necessary to look for the remaining professors, through social networks such as Facebook, or even personally, in the classrooms or in the hallways. However, it was possible to add a total of 20 responses (66.66% of the population). Regarding the interviews, the process was more satisfactory. The sample consisted of 8 professors, divided in the following way: 4 full-time professors and 4 part-time professors, in a concrete way, one full-time and one part-time professor of each line of emphasis of the program: literature, linguistics, didactics and pedagogical processes, and foreign language.

With respect to tabulation, the questionnaire was tabulated with the help of Google Forms. These answers and graphs, in turn, were subjected to a statistical analysis -media, mode, etc.-, since this series of denominators are not indicated with the

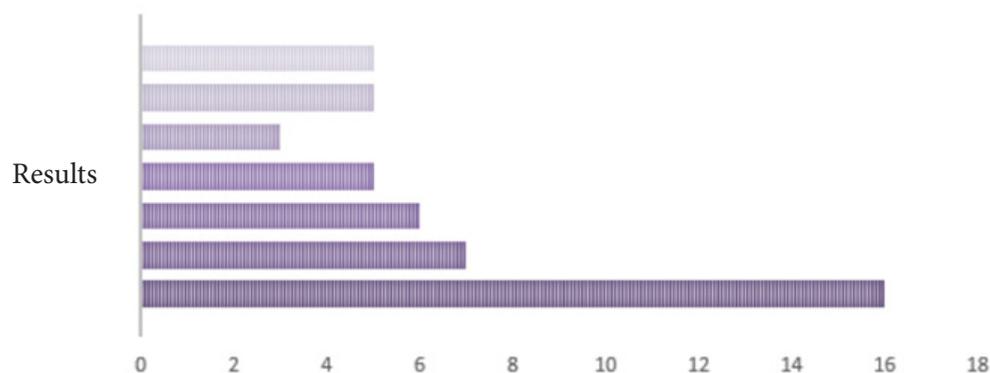
Google Forms tool. The interviews, on the other hand, were analyzed through a categorical matrix. First they were transcribed one by one, taking care to preserve the anonymity of the professors interviewed. Therefore, from now on, when their testimonies are cited, they will say, instead of their real name, only “part-time professor”, or “full-time professor”. Then, each of the transcripts was selected as analysis units, and they were compared with each other. There were underlined, with the help of different colors, the sentences that pointed to similar themes; and finally a categorical matrix was elaborated, which yielded categories such as bad previous training; bad study habits; professor evaluation, and absence, among others that will be referred to later. Finally, both quantitative and qualitative results were triangulated with the help of the theoretical support used for this research.

Results

The objective observations were made from a triangulation, integrated by the following investigative corpus: a) the results of the qualitative test, that is, a series of 8 interviews applied to 4 full-time and 4 part-time professors, of the four lines of emphasis of the Degree program in Spanish and Literature; b) the results of the quantitative test applied to 20 professors then hired by the Degree program in Spanish and Literature; and c) the theoretical framework based on the phenomenon of repeating courses, which was strengthened throughout this investigation.

A first central thematic axis was found: “Lack of academic preparation of students”. In this, the orientation of the professors was perceived as a main cause of repeating courses, since 80% (16 professors) (see graph 1) of them believed that bad study habits were related to the learning process; besides that another 25% (5 professors) mentioned it directly.

Graphic 1. Main causes for repeating courses



Source: self-made

Regarding study habits, Farías (2007) criticizes the position of some professors, because, according to him, students should not be accused of being the only ones to blame for repeating courses, to the extent that there is also a learning process in which the professors observe, think and project their work. However, during the interviews, there were found some statements, such as the following: “There are people who are negligent, sometimes they are not well prepared for a mid-term test, and this is because there is an easygoing culture” (part-time professor); or, “generally students who repeat are those who study the night before the exam” (full-time professor).

Study habits are important in the university work not only of students but of professors, since both form a teaching-learning process that goes hand in hand with the vocation; and that depends, among other things, on the extracurricular preparation of the participants in the classroom; therefore, of repeating courses, one participant cannot be held responsible for the teaching-learning process: “They cannot be understood as manifestations of individual failures, but as signs of the insufficiency of the educational system itself, which compromises the educational subjects in their social relationships” (Villalonga Penna, 2011: 50).

The vocation of students, according to the interviewed professors, also influences the

phenomenon of repeating courses: “They do not study what they like, but what they got” (full-time professor), which, according to them, leads to student failure. In addition, in the quantitative results, a single answer was obtained, out of a total of 20, which indicated that the motivation of students also depends on the pedagogical practice of the professor. The above suggests a shared responsibility, because professors should not refuse to the motivational work that they have in relation to students; but this is a reciprocal relationship that is built from what previously happened (Polanco Hernández, 2005).

In this order, it is understood that the success or failure of students may depend on the vocation when choosing an academic program, since this “has social consequences in terms of the expectations of students and their families, and emotional ones, for the dissonance between the aspirations of young people and their achievements” (Zarate Rueda and Mantilla Pinilla, 2014: 129). And this is noticed in different ways, as happens with absences. In this case, the construction of the professors’ imagination is very similar, since they related it to a “practice already marked in students” (full-time professor), which shows an obstruction to the learning process.

On the other hand, while the interviewed full-time professors did not make any reference about

the economic situation of students, part-time professors, on the contrary, considered that it is a problem that students must work and study at the same time, because this ends up affecting their grades:

I notice in a very marked level the practice of studying and working at the same time; that is also a factor that sometimes hurts me (to see) in students, because they are very good students, they are students with many abilities; but it is very difficult for them to perform (well) academically, when they are working (part-time professor).

These elements are deficiencies in students' teaching process, since they not only depend on an institutional entity, but on a context, on a professor and on themselves, in order to achieve the expected academic goals. Consequently, repeating courses has economic, personal, institutional and social implications, which are quite significant. In this regard, González (2005) states the following:

Personally, it implies a failure condition that affects emotionally for the dissonance with their aspirations, and affects the occupational trajectory of individuals. In the institutional, it implies a decrease in the academic performance of the university, and an unnecessary increase in the number of students. In the social sphere, the dropout contributes to generate inequity and social imbalances, and distorts the objectives that society has given to higher education (González, 2005, p.7).

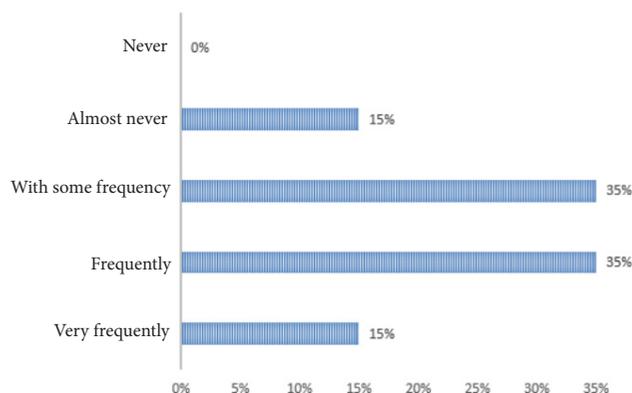
When extracurricular needs appear in students, at any moment of their careers, these can cause a drop in academic performance, which causes social and student imbalances to be generated, which end up being clearly distinguished in the quantitative system of grades.

Although inequalities in students are detailed in the quantitative system of grades, a single evaluation approach cannot be held responsible, since there is also the qualitative part. Academic performance is formed from cognitive articulations, and for this reason, it does not depend on a single element, but on the quantitative-qualitative binary component that professors have to use in order to evaluate

students. Navarro (2013) states that academic performance is a “construct capable of adopting quantitative and qualitative values, through which there is an approach to the evidence and dimension of the profile of skills, knowledge, attitudes and values developed by students in the teaching-learning process “(page 13).

Regarding the above, the quantification, made to evaluate causes an increase in the phenomenon of repeating courses, and professors are aware of this relationship, since 35% of them consider it frequent (see graph 2); and another 35%, more or less frequent.

Graphic 2. Negative frequency of the quantitative system of notes



Source: self-made

This frequency has effects not only in the lives of students, but also in other university environments, whether economic, social or institutional ones. The interviewed professors agree that repeating courses affects professors' evaluation, since students are “passionate”, and evaluate their professors according to how they (students) were evaluated: “Students find that professors' evaluation is a kind of revenge” (full-time professor); “what they are evaluating in professors is their ‘warmth’, their glamour, the catwalk” (part-time professor).

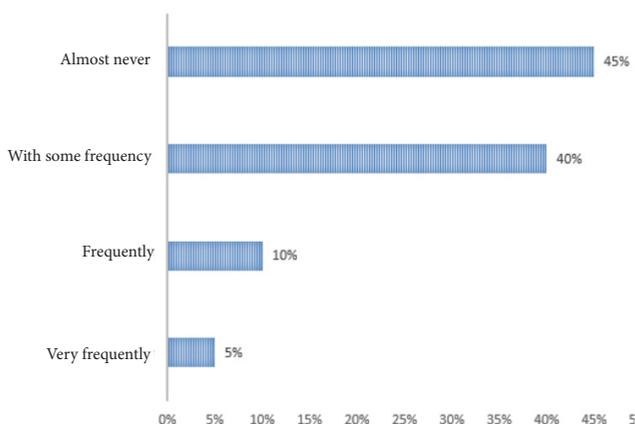
Professors recognize the value given to the autonomy of students, because they are the ones who decide whether or not to accept any help, materialized in tutorials, or in all types of teaching advice. In this regard, a professor said:

Students have to show awareness in their work: there are no preferences, but if, for example, a student is asked to be more aware that he must attend the tutorials, he/she is also asked to be aware of their work during the classes, and they are especially emphasized that the development of a subject is a process.

In this same line, professors must also be willing to set aside, sometimes, the curriculum, and pay more attention to students, because there is a difference of powers between them and students; in some cases, it creates prejudices that the professor has to falsify (Soria Barreto and Zúñiga Jara, 2014). Although the teaching work is part of the teaching-learning process, the institutional entity must provide a wide range of teaching, which, it must be pointed out, was not a point in favor of the Bachelor's Degree program in Spanish and Literature at the end of 2016; there were no considerable alternatives for students -for example, in the literature emphasis line- and, therefore, they were forced to repeat a subject with the same professor, which affected their autonomy and learning process [2]. This was a problem that professors also knew. In this regard, one of them stated:

I prefer that students have many alternatives for professors, that they find at least two each semester, and have the freedom to choose, according to their schedules, what do I know; because finally, the university is a space where persons make decisions in an autonomous way, and they do not simply obey the impositions made by the academic unit (full-time professor).

Graphic 3. Frequency of loss of subjects



Source: self-made

However, although the professors referred to the need to improve the problem of repeating courses, they were also aware that in the BA in Spanish and Literature, the repeating courses index was not so high by then -and in fact, as of 2018, it was not yet-, or at least it was not, if compared with the index of repeating courses in the engineering program of the UIS: “Our school does not have a high rate of repeating courses, as it may happen in the engineering program, in the of calculus subject” (full-time professor). The frequency rate of failing (a subject), according to professors, was not high: 45% (see figure 3) of professors, that is, almost half, considered that students “almost never fail”, and 40% said that students fail more or less frequently.

Conclusions

In this study, the knowledge about the teaching perception of the phenomenon of repeating courses in the Degree program in Spanish and Literature has been extended, and significant contributions were found, such as some generalities in the professors with respect to the problem, both full-time and part-time professors, who conceived that, although repeating courses was not high then in the career, students who fail did so due to causes such as lack of good previous training; bad study habits; repetitive non-attendance, lack of teaching vocation and self-esteem, as well as the time that takes away their work or other responsibilities -the latter is only pointed out by part-time professors-.

The imaginary of professors around the phenomenon of repeating courses is built from their experience with students, since each professor manages different teaching-learning strategies; however, the professors consider university students as autonomous subjects, who have decided, by their own means, to enroll in this career at Universidad Industrial de Santander. Therefore, and above all, when students' vocation is not placed in the career, the process will have obstacles such as bad study habits, which have their origin in study habits prior to entering the university that were never corrected. Both professors and the staff considered this phenomenon as a problem for the institutional,

academic and professional development of all the participants in the classroom.

Discussion

The phenomenon of repeating courses, given its multidimensionality, requires more study and, above all, the approach from other perspectives. The professors' imagination regarding the phenomenon of repeating courses suggests a wide range of possibilities for further research, either to know the point of view of students, in the high repeating courses rates of the engineering program, and a possible solution to this problem; either in the task and the academic inclusion of part-time professors, for a more complete work in the teaching-learning process of the educational community.

This research, on the one hand, contributes to the state of the question, to the extent that, first, it addresses a subject that had not yet been studied in a scientific way in the Bachelor's Degree program in Spanish and Literature from the Universidad Industrial de Santander; and, second, it focuses its attention on an participant that perhaps in other previous investigations -carried out in other educational establishments- had been left aside: the professor. On the other hand, it is clear that students cannot be overlooked in this investigative process. A study that focuses on students' perception of the phenomenon of repeating courses in the BA in Spanish and Literature of the UIS would yield, among other results, the perceptions about the causes and consequences of this problem, but now from the perspective of students -both repeating and non-repeating-, and this would allow comparing such perceptions with the perceptions of professors, and thus establish the extent to which they coincide or distance themselves from each other.

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Footer

[1] Studies such as “Factors associated to repeating courses and delay in graduation in engineering programs of the University of Cartagena, in Colombia” (Acevedo, Torres, Jiménez, 2015), which addresses the issue of repeating courses in programs of higher education, as well as collecting information by questioning directly from students, and designed to find out the causes of repeating courses.

[2] This research was developed at the end of 2016. During 2017 and especially, at the beginning of 2018, the Language School of the UIS has sought to expand the offer of full-time and part-time professors of its various lines of study; in the case that occupies us, of the Degree program in Spanish and Literature, now called Degree program in Literature and Spanish Language. This, of course, has been reflected in a growing positive perception of students in relation to their school.