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Mexican Teachers of English Studying Abroad: Their Perceptions of Their Learning Contexts

Profesores universitarios mexicanos de lengua inglesa en el extranjero: percepciones de sus contextos de aprendizaje

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Abstract

This study examines the perceptions of five English teachers, Mexicans, about their learning environments during their graduate studies in various British universities. The results indicate that the positive influences of their learning contexts were: (a) the quality of instruction, (b) the use of activities to facilitate understanding, and (c) freedom of choice of subjects and study methods. Negative influences reported concerning the learning environment: (a) lack of congruence between teaching and evaluation, (b) inconsistency in teachers' evaluation practices, (c) teachers lack of clarity regarding their expectations and

feedback, and (d) type of academic support received. The results suggest that higher education on a global scale requires teachers with more experience in international education. Future research on student perceptions of learning contexts might address the sociocultural aspects of this.

Key words: Language teachers, higher education, learning experiences, qualitative research.

Resumen

Este estudio examina las percepciones de cinco profesores mexicanos de inglés sobre sus contextos de aprendizaje, durante sus estudios de posgrado en diferentes universidades Británicas. Los resultados indican que las influencias positivas de sus contextos de aprendizaje eran: (a) la calidad de enseñanza, (b) el uso de actividades que facilitaban la comprensión, y (c) la libertad de elección de temas y métodos de estudio. Las influencias negativas del contexto de aprendizaje reportadas fueron: (a) falta de congruencia entre enseñanza y evaluación, (b) inconsistencia en las prácticas de evaluación de los profesores, (c) falta de claridad de los profesores de sus expectativas y retroalimentación, y (d) tipo de apoyo académico recibido. Los resultados sugieren que una educación superior para el mundo global requiere de profesores con más experiencias de educación internacional. Futuras investigaciones sobre las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre sus contextos de aprendizaje pudieran abordar los aspectos socioculturales del mismo.

Palabras clave: Profesores de lenguas, educación superior, experiencias de aprendizaje, investigación cualitativa.

1. Introduction

The new demands for teaching accountability, the nation-wide policies for teacher-improvement, and the scarce number of postgraduate programs for training language teachers in Mexico, gave rise in the past fifteen years to an increase in the number of teachers studying abroad. The Federal Government, through the Program for the Improvement of Faculty (Programa de Mejoramiento del Profesorado: PROMEP) and public higher education institutions, has provided funding to improve university teaching, through scholarships to study abroad, among other things. Many university teachers register in graduate programs of universities in English-speaking countries. According to PROMEP (2008), almost 400 higher-education teachers of all disciplines enrolled in graduate programs in the United States, and 200 started graduate studies in the United Kingdom (UK) in the period between 1998 and 2008. In the field of English Language Teaching, many have studied masters and doctoral degrees in Education, English as a Second Language, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, and Applied Linguistics, in universities of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

The learning and life experiences of the teachers who postpone their teaching activities in their home country for one or several years so as to complete master's and doctoral studies in another country have been rarely investigated. Gutierrez

Estrada (2006), for example, developed a qualitative study to examine the views of four Mexican university teachers taking graduate courses in the United States. Two were studying Linguistics, one was studying Public Health and another one was taking courses in Applied Physics. The participants had worked as instructors at public universities for a period of one to twenty-five years. They had learned English in Mexico, and they had earned PROMEP scholarships. The purpose of the study was to document the participants' experiences and to identify the strategies they used to cope with their linguistic, cultural and social difficulties. The analysis of interview transcripts revealed that the participants noticed how their accent conditioned their opportunities to interact with peers and teachers. The teachers expressed that they felt their accent influenced their teachers' perceptions of their intelligence. They described the strategies of linguistic survival, resistance and appropriation, which they used to negotiate their identities as Mexican academics. The study focused mostly on how the participants' accent impacted their learning. However, information about their perceptions of their new learning context and how it affected their learning would have highlighted issues to consider in designing effective learning environments.

Another case study of the experience of three native Spanish-speaking doctoral students in the United States is the one done by Hernández-Castañeda (2008). The purpose of the study was to create a description of the academic needs of international graduate students. Data sources included interview transcripts, institutional documents, and field diaries. Results indicate that the participants' difficulties affected their depth of knowledge. Among the issues found to impact the participants' academic life were their language difficulties, the quality of the academic counsel they received, their level of integration into the program, and their level of adjustment to the host country. It was through extending their working hours and using the support provided by the social and institutional contexts that they were able to adapt gradually to the academic culture of the United States.

The study presented here has the purpose of continuing research in the field of *student learning in higher education*. Specifically, it sets out to investigate the perceptions of their learning environments, of five Mexican teachers of English while they were taking graduate courses in different universities in England. All five were employed by the same Mexican public university and studied similar programs in terms of duration, structure, teaching quality, and evaluation procedures. The study explores their perceptions of their learning contexts, and of how these contexts contrasted with their previous educational experiences, so as to contribute to the body of knowledge that helps student teachers prepare for their academic and professional lives. Results may help curriculum developers gain more knowledge as to what to take into consideration, and what not to, when designing a course or program in education for language teachers. In addition, the knowledge generated by this study may be helpful to other Mexican students who plan to continue their postgraduate studies in British universities.

The research questions that guided the study were the following:

1. How do the participants perceive their learning contexts in terms of positive and negative effects on their learning?
2. How do the participants' learning experiences during their graduate studies abroad differ from previous learning experiences?

The following section provides a review of the literature concerning the effects of learning context on students' approaches to learning.

I. The Effects of the Learning Context on Approaches to Learning

This study is framed by the *student learning model*, which proposes that the way higher education students learn is influenced not only by their personalities, their previously acquired abilities or their learning styles, but also by other factors of the specific situation in which their learning takes place (Biggs, 1987; Marton and Saljo, 1997; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1982). Contextual or environmental factors determine whether the student takes a *surface*, a *deep* or a *strategic approach* to learning. A *surface approach* to learning is described as an intention to complete the learning task with little personal engagement, working on it as an unwelcome external imposition. This intention is often associated with routine and unreflective memorization and procedural problem solving, with restricted conceptual understanding as the outcome (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Trigwell and Prosser, 1991; Entwistle, McCune, and Walker, 2001). A deep approach to learning, in contrast, is described as an intention to understand, to analyze concepts actively, generally resulting in a deep level of understanding. This approach is related to high-quality learning outcomes (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Trigwell and Prosser, 1991). And finally, because of the pervasive evidence of the influence of evaluation on studying and learning, an additional category was introduced: the *strategic or achievement approach to learning*, in which the student's intention is to achieve the highest possible grades by using well-organized and conscientious study methods, and effective time- management (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Entwistle, McCune and Walker, 2001).

The most crucial contextual factor seems to be the students' *perception* of what he or she is required to do in a course (Ramsden, 1997; Entwistle, 1998). The effects of perceptions can be seen at at least three levels. At the level of the learning task, perceived relevance of the task increases intrinsic motivation and makes a deep approach to learning more likely to occur. Tasks that are perceived as requiring only reproduction, or concerning which the student is extrinsically motivated, increase the probability of a surface approach. The second level at which the effects of the learning context operates is that of the teacher. The attitudes of teachers, their concern for helping students learn, and their abilities to understand the difficulties experienced by students, are likely to foster deep approaches to studying. The final level at which perceptions affect students' learning relates to the forms of evaluation used by the specific departments. Forms of assessment that seem to invite and reward reproductive answers, promote surface approaches to learning (Ramsden, 1979).

Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) found that positive attitudes to studying, a deep approach, intrinsic motivation, and academic progress are all related to good teaching, freedom in learning, and avoidance of overloading. If students perceive the teaching they receive as effective, they are more likely to be interested in the subject matter to which it relates, and to see its relevance to their everyday lives. Evaluation methods perceived to be appropriate, increase the probability that students will take a deep approach to learning. However, perceptions of inappropriate or excessive assessment, together with a curriculum too rigidly structured, encourage extrinsic motivation, engender poor attitudes, and make surface approaches to learning more likely to occur. The quality of the learning outcome is likely to be lower as well.

The framework of the institution, department and courses, affects students' perceptions of writing essays, listening to lectures, reading, solving problems and completing examinations. Students' perceptions, in turn, influence their learning outcomes. Students do not, for example, simply read an article. They read for a purpose, connected with a course of study and in response to the requirements of those who teach the course (Ramsden, 1987).

The first step in finding the learning approaches students take, and the effects of such approaches on their learning, is to uncover their perceptions of the learning context. Most of the studies that investigate university students' perceptions of the learning environment, use quantitative methodologies. Lizzio, Wilson and Simons (2002), for example, used regression analysis and a large cross-disciplinary sample of undergraduate students in Australia. Results indicate that students' perceptions of their learning environment are a stronger predictor of learning outcomes at university than is prior achievement at school.

In another quantitative study, Karaganniopoulou and Christodoulides (2005) investigated the relationship between Greek first and fourth/final-year university students' perceptions of their academic environment, their approaches to study, and their academic outcomes. For first-year students, university grades were not associated with any of the explored variables, but the level of satisfaction was predicted by relationships with tutors and fellows. For the fourth-year students, good teaching predicted achievement both directly and indirectly through the deep approach to studying. Findings indicate that fourth-year students' perceptions of their learning environment were a stronger predictor of academic achievement than was prior academic ability (university entrance examination score).

Both of the studies described above found that students' perceptions of their learning environment predicted learning outcomes. Participants were undergraduate students studying in their home countries, Australia and Greece. The present study differs in three ways. First, it informs us about the ways in which graduate students perceive their learning environment. Second, participants had the opportunity to compare previous learning environments in their home country with that of another country. A third difference is that in the field of higher education, student learning is mostly studied by quantitative methods, and few

studies have employed qualitative methods to examine students' educational experiences. Qualitative methods offer several advantages, including the opportunity to collect data in depth, and to understand more fully the thoughts and feelings of the participants.

In the following section a description of the method, in terms of the participants, design, data collection procedures, and the processes used to secure trustworthiness, will be described.

II. Method

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perceived characteristics of the learning environments of university English-language teachers. The study is informed by the qualitative approach to doing educational research, since "it attempts to understand and explain human and social reality" (Crotty, 2003). In particular, it was aimed at portraying the participants' learning experiences from their own perspectives through the use of a focus groups. In focus-group discussions the participants can recall specific instances of their learning experiences, as well as describe their behaviors and those of others involved in their learning context. In focus groups a moderator creates a permissive environment that encourages participants to share perceptions and points of view, without pressuring them to reach consensus. The role of the moderator is to ask questions, listen, keep the conversation on track, and make sure everyone has a chance to share. Group members influence each other by responding to others' ideas and comments. After the group discussion has been conducted, careful and systematic analysis of the discussions provides clues and insights as to how an opportunity or issue is perceived (Krueger and Cassey, 2000). Morgan (1988) describes the strength of group interviews as "the ability to explore topics and produce useful data with relatively little direct input from the researcher" (p. 21).

2.1 The Participants

A convenience sample was used, since all the participants were easily accessible (Berg, 2001). They were contacted individually by Email, and were invited to take part in the study. They were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and they were given an informed consent form, with the option to withdraw from the study at any time. None of them did so.

Participants were 5 Mexican university teachers with seven to twenty-six years of English-teaching experience. Their ages ranged from 28 to 48 years. Two had lived in English-speaking countries (the United States and Canada) before entering undergraduate studies. They all completed the same undergraduate program in the English Language, offered by the university where they worked at the time the study took place. Also, they all held the Cambridge Certificate for Overseas Teachers of English (COTE).

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The data-collection process took place when the participants had already received most of the input, and had submitted at least three pieces of work for evaluation. They had received feedback from their teachers on their work at least three times. They therefore had sufficient experience in their respective programs of study to discuss their learning environments.

To obtain authentic and in-depth responses on the subject of the negative and positive aspects of their learning context, data were collected and analyzed in a three-step procedure. In the first step, the focus group was conducted by only one of the researchers and the discussion was recorded. The discussion lasted an hour and forty-seven minutes.

The second step consisted of transcribing the information and then analyzing the transcripts, using Kvale's (1996) *meaning condensation* approach. Meaning condensation entails an abridgement of the meaning expressed by the interviewees into shorter formulations. Long statements are compressed into briefer statements in which the main sense of what is being said is rephrased in a few words. Meaning condensation thus involves a reduction of large interview texts into briefer, more succinct formulations. The data were organized in such a way that they permitted the drawing of preliminary conclusions (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Berg, 2008). During the collection of data, definitive conclusions should not be made, and preliminary conclusions should be verified continuously (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The third step consisted of conclusions verification. Two of the participants were contacted via Email sometime after the focus group had met, to clarify or expand on interesting and/or relevant issues they had raised during the focus-group interview. The use of this methodological triangulation of data collection is a powerful way of demonstrating concurrent validity (Campbell and Fiske, cited in Cohen and Manion, 2000).

2.3 Trustworthiness

The aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry is to support the argument that the inquiry's findings are "worth paying attention to" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.290). To address trustworthiness, two techniques were used: *peer debriefing and member check*.

Peer debriefing is the process through which a researcher opens up to a desinterested peer in an analytic session for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that may otherwise remain implicit in the inquirer's mind. The process helps the inquirer to be honest, because his biases are probed, meanings explored and interpretations clarified. The task of the debriefer is to make sure that the investigator is as fully aware of his stance as possible.

For this study, the first author was the inquirer, while the second author acted as peer debriefer. Both worked for the same university as the participants; one was studying a doctoral program in the UK, while the other had already earned a Ph.D. in a United States university. Both the inquirer and the debriefer kept written records of four encounters.

Member check, on the other hand, is the process through which data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of the groups from whom the data were collected "It is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; p. 314). For this study the researcher contacted the participants via Email a number of times. Member checking served to assess the participants' intentionality, seek for additional information, and confirm data.

2.4 Results

The categories that emerged from the information provided by the participants in terms of the perceived positive influences of the learning context were: (a) the quality of teaching, (b) the use of learning tasks which encouraged understanding, and (c) the freedom of choice regarding topics and study methods. The perceived negative influences of the learning context reported by the participants were: (a) the lack of congruence between teaching and evaluation, (b) the inconsistency in the marking practices of the different teachers, (c) the lack of clarity in the teachers' expectations and feedback, and (d) the nature and level of learning support provided.

This section presents a description of the positive and negative influences of the learning environment as perceived by the graduate-students/teachers. The categories are illustrated through extracts of the focus group's discussion transcript.

III. The perceived positive influences of the learning context

a) The quality of teaching

The analysis of students' comments during the focus group discussion shows that they evaluated positively certain elements of their learning contexts, and that they believed those elements to have been positive influences on the quality of their learning. Among those elements, they asserted, was the quality of the teaching provided. They believed that their departments used teaching methods characterized by *variety* and *imagination*. The following extracts from the focus group transcripts serve to illustrate the way they perceived the quality of teaching in the departments where they studied.

I have this tutor who uses a task-based approach. You see that his tasks have a very clear purpose, a very clear aim, and by the end of the task you realize that you

really learn. I think that I learn more doing/experiencing than just reading or listening (Molly).

Some tutors just give lectures but others are more creative. For example, one tutor used loop input. That was very nice because we were learning and doing at the same time (Pat).

b) Encouragement of understanding through the use of engaging tasks

Not only did the participants consider the teaching provided by their departments as a positive influence on the quality of their learning. They also reported being encouraged to tackle academic tasks in ways that develop critical thinking and understanding. Participants contrasted their previous educational experiences in their home country with the experiences they had in the British universities.

Here you are supposed to read, think and reflect on what you are doing, and before, [in her home country] you were given something on which to rely [teachers' notes], but you didn't have to do any critical thinking. Here you are supposed to come up with your own ideas, and use other people's ideas to form your own ideas about ways of doing things (Pat).

In many courses [in her previous experience], we were given a handbook, so you just needed to read your handbook, study from it, answer your take-home exam from the same notes that the tutor gave you. Here we get to read from original sources. So we have access to more details, and more examples, and you also get more references from other authors. You enter this inter-textuality web where you can go to other sources (Molly).

As the quote suggests, students acknowledge the value of using critical thinking, reflection, and evidence of engagement with the literature, when tackling academic tasks. In contrast, in their home country they had to rely on personal experience and the teacher's notes. In other words, they were learning to develop an *understanding* of the subject under study, as opposed to *reproducing* it.

c) Freedom of choice regarding topics and study methods

Freedom of choice in connection with topics and evaluation was also identified as a positive influence on the quality of learning, as the following quotes from the focus group show.

You are given options which imply a critical study of the literature, but also you have to come to your own conclusions about what you have read, and then present them in a written assignment; but you can also give them in an oral presentation, or you can design a task and back it up with evidence (Ady).

In the methodology module, I wanted to write about academic writing, a topic which was not on the question list, and I talked to the tutor about it, and he agreed. He said "OK, just give me an outline about it and we'll talk about it, and then you go on." So it's useful because you learn about what you are interested in (Mary).

The first comment not only shows that the student places emphasis on the freedom they have to decide on the form their understanding of the material may take, but it also illustrates that the student is aware of what the tutors in her department seem to encourage and value. That comment encapsulates three dimensions that are considered desirable for fostering deep learning: thinking critically, generating one's own conclusions, and backing them up with evidence.

The comment made by the second student, on the other hand, exemplifies the idea that students are more likely to adopt a deep approach to learning and develop their understanding of particular topics when they are allowed to study what they are really interested in. This does not mean that the student found less interesting the other topics given. Instead, she perceived the need to obtain a deeper understanding of an area which was perhaps important and relevant in her context. And her tutor seemed to agree with the idea that lack of interest in the material being studied, or failure to perceive relevance in it, is generally associated with surface approaches to learning (Ramsden, 1997).

IV. The Perceived Negative Influences of the Learning Context

a) Lack of congruence between teaching aims and evaluation demands

Ramsden (1997) argues that evaluation requirements are strong influences on the approach to learning a student adopts when tackling an academic task. The analysis of the focus-group's discussion transcripts revealed that some elements of the students' learning environment seemed to hinder students' learning and development. One such element perceived by the participants was the lack of congruence between the teaching aims and the evaluation demands. The following two comments serve to illustrate their points.

We had a very hard time with the language-learning assignment, because all that we covered during the module wasn't very much related to what we were asked to write about in the assignment. So we didn't have any kind of practice—no examples. When we faced these assignments, because it was a kind of task, we didn't have options. It was just analyzing conversations. It was very difficult because we had to do a lot of reading (Molly).

It happened to me in one module. It had to do with developing the four language skills, and we were analyzing, listening, reading, speaking, and writing separately. But in the end, the assignment was to create a syllabus, and we hadn't had the syllabus design module (Ady).

b) Inconsistency in marking practices

Students found subjectivity and inconsistency on the part of the tutors when the tutors were marking pieces of work for evaluation.

What I see is some inconsistency in the way tutors mark [written assignments]. When I wrote something original, the tutor suggested it wasn't necessary. In

another coursee, the tutor expected something more analytical. The number of words required for both assignments was 3,000. I wrote 3,522 for the SLA essay and 3,163 for the assignment on writing (Molly).

The student clearly expressed her dissatisfaction about inconsistencies in marking criteria. She did not take the first comment made by one of her tutors as a criticism. However, she felt that her effort to write an original piece of work was not being rewarded. In the second comment, she shows that she felt she was being penalized for not having included additional issues in her 3,000-word essay. Above all, she felt that tutors did not use the same marking criteria. The following contrasting pieces of feedback were sent by Email by the participant when she was asked to clarify during the member check process. The comments serve to illustrate the participant's perceptions regarding marking criteria.

In the feedback for this assignment [Writing Methodology], my tutor wrote, "It was a very ambitious assignment, in which perhaps you tried to do more than was necessary for a single assignment" (Molly).

In the other assignment [Second Language Acquisition], the teacher wrote: "I would have liked some analysis of the difficulty of comparing two languages, and why it is that some elements of Spanish seem to interfere more with the L2 than others" (Molly).

The student reported not taking the following pieces of feedback seriously, even though they were from different tutors. This was due to her perceptions of inconsistency regarding feedback. The following comment made by the participant during the focus-group discussion clearly shows her position.

I thought that it was going to be very useful to receive feedback before I submitted my second pair of assignments, but now that I know that teachers use their personal, subjective criteria (Molly).

It is easy to infer from this comment that her perceptions regarding the quality of the feedback she received influenced the way in which she tackles essay-writing tasks. This type of feedback, as perceived by the student, did not have a formative effect on her. Instead, she no longer saw feedback as a learning opportunity, or as a tool for improving future work.

c) Lack of clarity of teachers' expectations and feedback

Not only is the lack of consistency in feedback a negative influence on students' learning, but also these students found that teachers' expectations regarding the quality of their work were not made clear. The following comments were made by two of the participants in relation to the first pieces of feedback they received.

One thing I found in my essays, one of the teachers said my interpretation was not right. Like all the analysis was right, but not the way I had interpreted it; but that, they don't teach you how to interpret (Pat).

I didn't know what "criticality" was. It's like, yes, I have to develop criticality, but I don't know what that is. How do I achieve it if I have never seen what that is? I have never been asked to do that in Mexico (Paul).

These two comments made by two different participants suggest that there is a link between students' perceptions of their own situations, and their prior experiences of learning. Both participants seemed to consider the demands of the tasks, or the teacher, reasonable for the level they were studying. However, they perceive the teacher's expectations as high for them, in relation to their previous learning experiences. It is clear that issues of interpretation and criticality, which are valued in Western higher education, are taken for granted by tutors in these departments.

Prosser and Trigwell (1991) warn that a student who enters a learning and teaching context, and perceives it as affording a surface approach, and who has little or no experience of similar situations, is likely to adopt a surface approach. This seems to be true for the first student. Rather than seeing the feedback she received on one of her assignments as an opportunity to improve her future work or her learning, she saw it as an opportunity to take revenge. She mentioned, "By the time we handed in our assignments, we had already filled out the evaluation form for the module. So we evaluated the teachers without knowing how they were going to assess our work." And she thought it was not fair to the students since "We would have evaluated the teacher in a different way if we had known how she was going to mark our assignments" (Pat).

d) Nature and level of support for graduate students

A further issue raised during the focus-group interview was the contrasting levels of support received from tutors in their respective departments. While some students perceived high degrees of support in different forms, others felt they were not given support at all. Instances of the help received by some students in supportive departments ranged from encouragement to Email questions to teachers, to the possibility of asking the teachers to proofread their drafts during tutorial sessions.

On the other hand, one student highlighted not only the lack of group or individual tutorials in her department, but also the discouragement she received regarding peer collaboration and support. The following extracts regarding questions about assignments make it clear how some departments discourage teamwork and peer support, something that other departments regarded as desirable.

They told us, "You shouldn't discuss your questions; you should do them yourself. If you are doing a Master's, you should be able to do them by yourself." Then, in another class, they told us, "You are not supposed to share information. You have your questions; they are for you" (Ady).

Biggs (1999) argues that one of the factors that encourage students to adopt a surface approach is the creation of undue anxiety or low expectations of success through comments such as "Anyone who can't understand this isn't fit to be at university" (p.15).

However, the effects of these contrasting views on support to students are not always easy to predict. For example, one participant in a supportive department reported that her classmates overused tutorial sessions. She said, "Every time I want to take a tutorial, all the places are already booked." The student in a much less supportive department, on the other hand, argued that she could not exchange ideas or discuss possible ways of going about pieces of assessed work, since her tutors might penalize her for "engaging in plagiarism."

The nature and level of support that students should receive in certain departments remained unclear. In the first example, we can see that the student thinks that her peers in her department got more assistance than they should; and that it might hinder the students' development of independence, which is another characteristic valued in Western higher education. In the second example, tutors in the department, as perceived by the student, seemed to disagree with the idea that students can learn from each other. However, she did not report that her development might be hindered by the lack of support from other students and interaction with them.

The two examples above show that issues of student independence and collaboration are very complex. Some people argue that students should be encouraged to engage in peer collaboration in and out of class. But when it comes to evaluation, students do not know exactly what they have to do, or what is expected of them; nor are they familiar with the marking criteria. They are more likely to adopt a strategic approach as a result of the lack of clarity or explicitness of descriptions for evaluating work. The following comment provides a good example of this.

An issue about assessment is that you have to know what your tutor wants in your assignment in order to answer the question, because maybe you have a different interpretation from the one your tutor wants, so you need to ask him, "Do you want me to include this or that?" (Ady).

The things that we do, for example, after class, a few classmates, if we know something that the teacher wants, we share that experience, like "What do you think about this teacher? Does she want it this way or that way?" We also try to, for example, if one of us had a tutorial and the tutor told her something that she wants, we share it (Ady).

The first comment suggests that the aim of the student is to identify what the teacher "wants" so she can try to meet her teacher's demands. One possible explanation is that this student does not seek to please her teachers. The comment only reflects that she has not reached the degree of development desired at postgraduate level; and tutors in that department may not be aware that descriptions of assignment questions may not be clearly understood by students. The second comment reflects the potentially negative consequences that poorly communicated assignment questions may have.

V. Conclusions and Implications

Data show that the participants were satisfied with certain aspects of the learning environment. They valued learning tasks which fostered their understanding and critical thinking. They also appreciated freedom of choice in terms of topics and knowledge-representation modes. Learning environments, however, are complex, and they involve the interplay of many different factors which emerge not only from the students and their teachers, but also from the academic cultures of institutions and departments within these institutions. Results indicated that some participants felt confused with the evaluation practices and the ambiguity of the feedback provided by some of their teachers. In the same line of thought, some felt dissatisfied with the limitations of peer and tutor support.

One possible explanation for the negative influences could be the discrepancy between the participants' previous learning experience in Mexico, and the instructors' previous teaching experience in the UK. There is also the possibility that since some of the students were engaged in an international learning experience for the first time, they may have felt some degree of anxiety and even fear of failure. However, we strongly believe that higher education on a global scale requires teachers with a greater exposure to international education experiences, so as to be able to create appropriate learning contexts for students of all cultural backgrounds.

An implication for departments in Mexican institutions of higher education is that they should design learning tasks that will encourage students to use critical thinking, reflection, and evidence of engagement with the literature, so as to prepare better those who wish to pursue postgraduate degrees in international institutions for the demands of those learning contexts. Similarly, there seems to be an implication for researchers on student learning. We believe that research on students' perceptions of their learning context requires us to focus, not only on the situational context, but also on the sociocultural context of learning.

Previous survey studies have examined the correlation between students' perceptions of their learning context, and their approaches to learning. In this study, however, we used a qualitative method to capture more in-depth information. This allowed a first-time approach to a research territory that, to our knowledge, has not been explored before: graduate students' perceptions of their learning context in a multicultural setting. Qualitative methods enabled the researchers to become the main research instruments. This facilitated the process of collecting data in such a way that participants freely expressed their thoughts and feelings, rather than having to respond to predetermined questions, as they must in the case with surveys.

Finally, we acknowledge that this study involved only female participants, and that male perspectives would have been insightful. Also, this study concentrates only on the participants' perceptions of their learning contexts, and no attempt was made to examine the quality of their learning outcomes or the impact of their

learning on their teaching. We suggest that further research could address these issues.

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