Linguistic students' level in the Spanish course at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional "Francisco Morazán" de Honduras

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Abstract: The 2020 pandemic caused consequences in the dynamics of the educational process of educational systems in general and universities in particular. In the case of Honduras, education was under the modality of Emergency Remote Education; however, it was developed differently in these centers, which, for various reasons, presented different situations and affected the learning development. The research employed a quantitative methodology, a transactional and correlational non-experimental design, and a questionnaire on the language skills of Spanish students, a compulsory course. The instrument showed a low level of grammatical ability (31.2% correct), strategic (39.2% correct), sociolinguistic (34.2% correct), and discursive (44.7% correct). The Pearson coefficient correlated the variables sex, age, high school diploma, and type of school; the most significant correlation was with grammatical ability (r=.057), while there was no correlation with other variables.

Keywords: Communication; teacher competencies; linguistics

Introduction:

In recent years, communicative competence has regained particular importance due to the low results of students evaluated in international tests such as the Program for International Student Assessment (known as PISA) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The program aims to measure the ability of 15-year-old students to use their knowledge and skills in reading, mathematics, and science to meet real-life challenges (PISA, 2023). This competence has been studied in different countries, evidencing its importance and, above all, identifying the level of mastery by students and teachers, and in general, as a generic capacity that individuals must constantly work to develop an adequate level that allows them to communicate effectively and adequately in various contexts, which is why, we briefly list some studies conducted in different locations around the world, in Central America: Guatemala (, in Costa Rica (García, 2011; Fernández, 2010) and in Honduras (Almendares et al., 2015; Dirección de Evaluación y Acreditación de la UPNFM, 2017; Guity and Soriano (2020) as well as, in different regions of Latin America: Mexico (Benavides & Aguirre, 2011; Lozano, Rosales, and Zarate (2013); Venezuela (Castellanos, 2015; Pulido and Muñoz, 2011; Arellano, 2007; Sepulveda, Villalobos, Muñoz and Mota, 2009); Colombia (Corredor, 2011), United States (Joshi, Malatesha and Wijekumar, 2013), Canada (Demchenko, 2016) and then, in other contexts: France (Savignon, 1997), South Africa (Boughey & McKenna, 2016); Spain (Núñez, 2014), Ayllón, Gallego, Gómez and Rodríguez (2017), Gallego, García, Rodríguez and Segovia (2010), Souviron (2013); Ramírez, Rodríguez and Romero and (2014); Norway (Bakieva, González- Such and Jornet, 2013), Karén (2014) and Sweden (Gougoulakis, 2014).

In Honduras, particularly in the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional Francisco Morazán, an educational institution that trains teachers for the different levels of the national education system, the pandemic and endemic showed the teachers that the communicative or linguistic capacities had been affected since the students showed difficulties to communicate adequately. This situation affects not only the students of the Spanish teaching career but also the whole student body trained as teachers. Therefore, the Department of Letters decided to study this phenomenon to have scientific data and, given the results, to look for medium- and long-term improvement alternatives.

Understanding the linguistic skills mentioned above, briefly defined as Grammatical Competence, "is the implicit knowledge that a speaker possesses about his or her language, which allows him or her not only to encode messages that respect the rules of grammar but also to understand them and make judgments about their grammaticality" (Centro Virtual Cervantes, 2023, para.4). Strategic skills are "the activities or strategies employed by the speaker or listener to compensate for verbal or nonverbal errors or failures in communication" (Canale and Swan, 1981, p.58).

Skill or competence, on the other hand, can be defined in this way:

Through discursive competence, a speaker-listener can unite formal knowledge of the language with content and adapt it to a specific situation. In addition, discourse competence includes "(...) the ability to link ideas in both oral and written text, which means the recognition that language exists above the sentence level, that is, the textual level." (Medina, 2006, p.19).

Sociolinguistic competence, which is also extremely important since it focuses on the social use of the language, and which, according to Moreno (2007), can be understood as:

> The particular interest of this component lies in producing utterances by the communicative situation faced by the speaker. It involves the study of language as a social phenomenon since speakers interact in specific contexts, and it becomes imperative that they know the sociocultural aspects of language to achieve accurate communication (p.162).

The data collection, an Ad-hoc instrument consisting of 50 items that were reviewed and adjusted by a group of experts in the area of language and literature; of these 50 items, seven were used to consult some demographic data of the students, the remaining 43, were divided into three parts: the first part, in reading format, 30 items were developed to determine the level of mastery of students. On the other hand, the instrument had two other parts: the second part, in audio format, with six items to measure reading comprehension as part of strategic competence, and the third part, in video format, with seven items, also used to measure reading comprehension. To further study the development of this competence, the methodology proposed using Pearson's Correlation Coefficient to determine whether the educational center, the type of institution from which the UPNFM student graduated, the sex and age of the students participating in the research, as well as whether or not the school and the high school diploma from which he graduated are correlated with his level of communicative competence.

The instrument was shared using a Google Forms form to facilitate the application. Then, a database was created using the SPSS statistical package, version 27, to elaborate the descriptive statistics that made it possible to establish the level of mastery in each of the established linguistic skills.

Materials and Methods

The quantitative approach with a non-experimental transactional and correlational design was selected for the research because the data collected and correlations were established with the variables communicative competence structured by four linguistic skills following Canale and Swan (1980) and Hymes (1971): grammatical, strategic, sociolinguistic and discursive skills. In another order of ideas, by design, correlations were established using Pearson's coefficient with the variables: communicative competence or linguistic skills, sex, age, high school diploma, and type of school from which the student participating in the study graduated, enrolled in the different sections of the Spanish class during the second academic period of the UPNFM.

The methodological process to carry out the study was as follows:

a) Review of the literature on the evaluation of the mastery of language skills in university students in teacher training to locate a validated instrument used in other studies.

b) The non-existence of an already validated instrument that would allow the assessment of the selected linguistic skills and the proposed correlations led the research team to develop the items, which were reviewed and validated by experts in the field, then the necessary adjustments were made to obtain an instrument with 50 items in three formats: for the first part of the instrument in reading format, 30 items remained based on an excerpt from the Spanish novel "El juego del Ángel" by Carlos Ruiz Zafón, each item, distributed as follows: Grammatical competence (7 items), strategic competence (8 items) sociolinguistic competence (8 items) and the discursive (7 items), each item had a question and four answer options, where one was the correct answer and the remaining three, incorrect, this structure was maintained throughout the questionnaire applied.

The second part, in audio format with six items, was intended to measure reading comprehension as part of strategic competence, using the story "La Elfina" by the Honduran writer Pompeyo del Valle, and the third part, in video format with seven items, was also used to measure reading comprehension.

c) To verify the reliability of the elaborated items, Cronbach's Alpha was applied using SPSS software, and the result showed a .829, considering that the items had an excellent reliability range, to measure the variables above appropriately.

d) Then, the questionnaire was shared as a Google Forms form after requesting the collaboration of the teachers responsible for the 11 Spanish sections, achieving the participation of 127 students as a sample to carry out this research. e) After the application of the questionnaire, a database was created using the SPSS version 27 program, obtaining percentages for the 50 items of the instrument, particularly for the 43 items that evaluated the level of mastery in the different linguistic skills that make up the communicative competence, the percentages were divided into hits and misses to average the percentages of hits then and determine the level achieved in each linguistic skill. f) After this process, the respective correlations were made with the selected variables, using Pearson's coefficient: communicative competence or linguistic skills (grammatical, strategic, sociolinguistic, and discursive), age, sex, graduation title of the participant (the National Education System for the Middle or Secondary level offers more than 20 modalities of two- and three-year Baccalaureates) and the type of school where the student graduated: public, private, bilingual and radio training (Honduran Institute of Radio Education, known by its acronym as IHER).

Results

The data processing showed in terms of sociodemographic data of the participants that, in terms of sex, the highest percentage of participation was female with 69.3%, the average age of the students was in the range of 18 to 20 years, representing 40.2%, that is to say, in the Spanish courses a significant variability of ages was found, including students with more than 36 years; in terms of the middle or secondary education degree from which the student graduated, the highest percentage concentrated in the Bachelor's Degree in Sciences and Humanities with 42. 5%, this is a two-year modality that is taught nationwide, with a duration of two years. The percentage difference was located in other modalities of baccalaureate degrees of different natures, but with three years of training, the Spanish section with more participants was the "G" with 16. As for the career in which the participant enrolled, it turned out that of the 14 undergraduate careers offered by the UPNFM, the careers of Technological Education and Physical Education obtained 11.8%; remember that this university trains teachers in different areas of knowledge to work in the national education system.

Regarding the type of school, 69.3% were in public schools, indicating that most participants graduated from public schools and, to a lesser extent, from private, bilingual schools and the radio education system. The last demographic variable was the place of birth, resulting in a percentage of 73.2% of the participants being initially from Francisco Morazán, the capital of Honduras, and the percentage difference was divided among the remaining 17 departments, which administratively make up this Central American nation.

The questionnaire applied to evaluate the level of mastery of language skills had 43 items distributed among the different skills to be studied; to make the distribution visible, Table 1 shows the respective number of items:

Table N°1
Distribution of items by language skills assessed

PART A Reading Format	Ítems
Grammatical Proficiency	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
Strategic Competence	8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 13, 14, 15
Sociolinguistic Competence	16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23
Discourse Competence	24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30
PART B Audio Format (Strategic Competence)	31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36
PART C Video Format (Strategic Competence)	37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43

Note: Elaboration based on the structure of the instrument applied.

Moreover, with the presentation of results, it is a simple scale established based on percentages to determine the level of mastery of language skills: 0 to 49% as low level, 50 to 79% as medium level, and 80 to 100% as high level. The grammatical competence evaluation employing seven items in the reading format showed that the level obtained was low. By adding the percentage of correct answers and then dividing it by seven (7 items) and using the established scale, the detail of the results processed for this skill is shown in table number two:

Table N°2
Students' successes and failures in Grammatical Competence

Item Number	Hit rates	Percentage of errors	Level achieved
1. In the above text "Amigo Martín, las circunstancias han conspirado para que ni uno solo de los paladines que tenemos en nómina figure de cuerpo presente o resulte localizable en un margen de tiempo prudencial se encuentran palabras" *(in the order in which they appear to you in the above text)* the	15%	85%	low

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Volume 07 - Issue 04, 2024
www.ijlrhss.com || PP. 25-32

following grammatical categories:			
The words "*prudencial, folios, rodeó***" are respectively:**	18.1%	52%	low
The word "levantó" has the following verbal accidents	40.2%	81.9%	*low*
The term "lluvia" is a noun that can be categorized as.	34.6%	65.4%	low
	16.5%	83.5%	low
The term "lluvia" is a noun that can be categorized as.	45.7%	54.3%	low
The word "localizable" is a type:			
The terms "A, EN, DE, CON" belong to a type of words	48.8%	51.2%	low
Average	**31.27%**	**68.73**	**low**

Note: Elaboration based on the structure of the instrument applied.

The second skill under study was strategic competence; in the instrument that was applied, eight (8) items were included to measure this skill, following the criteria already established. The data obtained by the participating students are presented, where it can be observed that the general level of this skill was Low; in Table 3, the results processed for each of the items are detailed:

Table N°3
Students' successes and failures in the Strategic Competence

Item number	Hit rates	Percentage of errors	Level achieved
8. The meaning of the word "imminent" is:	64.6%	35.4%	Mid
9. The antonym of the term "paladins" is	46.5%	53.5%	Low
10. In the text: "I spent the next six hours in a trance."	48.8%	51.2%	Low
11. In the fragment, there are a series of words that link the ideas; they are known as:	47.2%	52.8%	Low
12. The level of language that predominates in the text is:	37.8%	62.2%	Low
13. The function of language is expressed in the following text: My friend Martín, circumstances have conspired so that not a single one of the paladins we have on our payroll is present in person or can be located within a reasonable period:	20.5%	79.5%	Low
14. This is the reason why Don Basilio allowed the writer an opportunity to publish in the newspaper:	29.9%	70.1%	Low
15. The word "cerca" could be considered a type of word:	24.4%	75.6%	Low
Average	**39.93%**	**60.07%**	**Low**

Note: Elaboration based on the structure of the instrument applied.

The third skill under study was sociolinguistics; the percentage of correct answers obtained by the students was at a low level, as can be seen in the data presented in Table four:

Table N°4
Students' successes and failures in Sociolinguistic Competence

Item number	Hit rates	Percentage of errors	Level achieved
16. From the text read, it can be deduced that the relationship between the characters is:	11.8%	88.2%	Low
17. In the above narrative, the communicative intent is:	44.1%	55.9%	Low
18. The predominant form of treatment is:	61.4%	38.6%	Mid
19-Any special instructions, Don Basilio? -I asked: —*Sí: no me defraude*, Don Basilio's answer indicates:	38.6%	61.4%	Low
20. To identify the main idea of a text, the following should be done:	34.6%	65.4%	Low
21. One of the secondary ideas in the above excerpt is:	39.4%	60.6%	Low
22. What characterizes the personality of the writer towards Don Basilio?	21.3%	78.7%	Low
23. The comment made by the writer about Don Vidal it can be deduced that this is:	22.8%	77.2%	Low
Average	**34.25%**	**65.75%**	**Low**

Note: Elaboration based on the structure of the instrument applied.

The discursive ability was measured using the items previously elaborated and validated by experts through data processing; the level achieved by the students was Low; the percentages of successes and failures are presented in Table five, which shows the average achieved in each item:

Table N° 5
Students' successes and failures in Discourse Competence

Item number	Hit rates	Percentage of errors	Level achieved
24. In the expression: Bring me a story that I have not read before and, if I have already read it, bring it to me so well written and told that I won't even notice it, the expression highlighted in bold, refers to:	37.8%	62.2%	Low
25. In the expression, I closed my eyes for a moment and conjured up an image, the tacit pronoun to which the expression refers is:	60.6%	39.4%	Mid
26. The tone employed in the sentence "Cuento con cinco folios a doble espacio antes de seis horas, Don Edgar Allan Poe" reveals:	41.7%	58.3%	Low
27. In the sentence: "Si la historia es decente le pagaré diez pesetas. Y si es más que decente y gusta a nuestros lectores" to avoid repeating the word "decente," the following reveals:	50.4%	49.6%	Mid
28. The fragment presented can be classified as:	44.9%	55.1%	Low
29. In the fragment read, the character of Don Basilio has a speech, which could be considered as follows:	48.8%	51.2%	Mid
30. The expression "In the face of impending disaster" refers to:	29.1%	70.9%	Low

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www.ijlrhss.com || PP. 25-32

Average	44.7%	55.3%	Low

Note: Elaboration based on the structure of the instrument applied.

In summary, the general level of the students was obtained by adding the average percentages of each of the linguistic skills evaluated and then dividing it by 4 (which corresponds to the four skills evaluated), resulting in an overall percentage of correct answers of 37.53%, which, considering the scale proposed, corresponds to a low level in the mastery of the linguistic skills.

As for correlations, Pearson's coefficient was used to check whether the variables identified as independent variables, sex, age, high school diploma, and type of school, are correlated with communicative competence as the dependent variable, in this sense, and considering that the instrument was made up of three types of format: reading, audio, and video. The results showed that in the reading format, with the variable sex, only a moderate correlation was found with grammatical competence (r=.057). In contrast, the resulting correlation was negative in the other linguistic skills. No correlation was found between the variable sex and the students' strategic, sociolinguistic, and discursive skills in the study.

The following variable was the age of the participants, which was correlated with the linguistic skills already established; in this case, it was found that in grammatical competence, the result was (r=.165), a weak correlation, while in discursive competence (r=.026) was obtained, which is also a weak correlation. In contrast, no positive correlation was found between strategic and sociolinguistic skills. The high school diploma from which the student graduated constituted the third independent variable; in this case, only in grammatical competence a weak correlation was found (r=.024), while, in the other linguistic skills, the result was a negative correlation. Finally, regarding the correlation between the type of school and the linguistic skills of the instrument, different results were found from those obtained in the previous correlations; in the case of the strategic skill, the result was (r=.093), which represents a solid or high correlation and (r=.077), for the discursive skill, also classified as a strong correlation.

To conclude, the correlation between the type of school and the linguistic skills of the instrument produced different results from those obtained in the previous correlations. In the case of strategic skills, the result was (r=.093), which represents a solid or high correlation, and (r=.077), for discursive skills, which are also classified as solid correlations.

In the audio format, the result of the correlations showed that in the variable high school diploma, the result was (r=.126), a weak correlation, while in the variable type of school from which the student graduated, the result was (r=.059), considered a moderate but low correlation. As for the video format, the only positive correlation was with the variable type of school from which the student graduated, with a result of (r=.050), which implies a moderate correlation. To conclude the study and as part of the specific objectives proposed, an interactive improvement plan was proposed, located on the platform of the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional "Francisco Morazán," which students can access independently, without a time limit, to conclude the different activities proposed to strengthen the different language skills of the students and which can be extended to other students enrolled in the UPNFM.

Discussion

The results obtained in the averages of successes and failures in the evaluation of the different linguistic skills showed that the participating students generally achieved a Low level in terms of mastery of the skills that structure communicative competence. This result evidences what empirically the teachers of the Spanish teaching department of this university had observed before and after the Covid-19 pandemic. However, it seems to indicate that the Emergency Remote Education developed during the pandemic to resume the educational process did not manage to increase the level of mastery of these skills. Still, there is also no evidence that it caused a detriment of these skills since, in previous studies conducted in the country on this topic, Almendares, Rivas, and Sorto (2015) and DEVA (2017) the results also showed a low mastery in these capabilities.

In other international contexts, which sought to measure the level of linguistic skills of university students, the results are unfortunately very similar in the main conclusion was "students showed a lack of knowledge of the language and could affirm that future teachers present deficiencies in the adequacy of the register to the interlocutors they are addressing, as well as in the effective production of written texts, of great importance to facilitate communication, generate knowledge and facilitate student learning" (p.411)

Another study on the mastery of communicative competence analyzed the perception that university students have about their communicative competence at the entrance and exit of their formative process; in this case, in the majority of self-assessed skills, students expressed that, at their entrance, their linguistic skills were low or scarce, while at their exit from the formative process, the percentages improved in some of the self-assessed abilities, however, the percentage differences were not statistically significant. Meanwhile, other

studies reveal situations similar to those described above, pointing out that the level of student performance "in the competencies related to the order of ideas, planning, revision, and correction, the lowest scores were obtained" (p.55).

As can be seen in the study carried out, as well as in others considered as references, the level of mastery of the students is low, so it is necessary to continue investigating the reasons and conditions that determine this level, reviewing the methodology used by teachers to promote these language skills that every professional needs to develop at a high level, and above all, the methodology used by teachers to promote these language skills that every professional needs to develop at a high level, It is also essential to consider the use of information and communication technologies so that students do not perceive two disconnected areas of their lives, the university world and their natural personal, social and professional environment.

It is also suggested to permanently promote awareness among teachers from preschool to university level about the effective learning of language skills, but not mechanically and superficially, but showing that these skills allow the effective communication of ideas, emotions, and feelings and that only to the extent that these are strengthened, individuals can establish clear, relevant and necessary communicative processes for the different areas of their lives. About the correlations made by means of Pearson's coefficient, as already presented in the results section, in general, the data show weak correlations for the items of the reading format with respect to sex, age, middle or high school diploma, and type of school from which the participant graduated, concerning the linguistic skills already mentioned, The exception was in the correlation between sex and grammatical ability, and this situation can be explained by the fact that most of the participants were female, on the one hand, and on the other, perhaps the female participants learned better the aspects related to learning grammar, or their teachers emphasized their teaching, etc. In reality, further studies are needed to confirm these hypotheses so that the concrete reasons for these correlations are scientifically known.

In the items with the audio format, moderate correlations were found concerning the variables high school diploma, as well as in the video format, the only positive correlation was with the type of school in which the participants graduated, finding a moderate correlation; in this sense, the possible cause of the correlation found in these variables could be the number of students who mostly graduated from high school in sciences and humanities, which in its curriculum develops three semesters of the Spanish class, As for the type of school, most of the students graduated from public institutions, that is, schools whose monetary cost is lower than other types of institutions in the country, so it could be that the correlations are explained by the number of participants, and not necessarily by the mastery of linguistic skills. In future studies, researchers are invited to investigate these correlations further to determine the factors or conditions that may determine the positive correlations between these variables and communicative competence.

According to the results obtained, the primary recommendation for the teachers of the Spanish network of the Spanish teaching department of the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional "Francisco Morazán" is that it is essential to reflect on the results obtained because the levels in the different linguistic skills were low overall. So, it is necessary to develop a plan that seeks to strengthen these skills, taking advantage of the fact that all university students must take Spanish classes. It is urgent and pertinent to analyze the class program and propose methodological strategies, perhaps different from those that have been implemented during these years in which the curriculum has been developed under the Competency-based methodology so that the results of this study can be considered as a diagnosis that serves as a starting point to propose significant changes in the program, methodological script and the respective syllabus of the general Spanish class. Considering this recommendation, an online Improvement Plan was created on the platform to strengthen the students' communicative competencies. It is available at
https://evirtual-sl.upnfm.edu.hn/moodle/course/view.php?id=26192.

A second recommendation is for the UPNFM faculty since the learning formative responsibility for the student's language skills should not be considered the exclusive control of the Spanish teachers. However, it should be considered a joint effort, given that it is a higher education center dedicated to teacher training; therefore, it should be considered that teacher training is an integrating task and adequate language management is a generic competence declared in the curricula redesigned in 2009. Therefore, the teachers who work in this institution must join efforts so that the students who are enrolling and who probably studied and passed their secondary education in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic enter this university with less and fewer competencies, not only linguistic but also interpersonal, instrumental and in many other areas, as a university, actions must be taken to strengthen competencies to ensure the quality of future teachers, who will face more significant challenges. The use of language will always be a powerful tool for resolving conflicts, providing clear and timely explanations, exchanging points of view on various topics, etc.

Finally, the recommendation in light of these results is for the students of the Spanish class, in particular, and of other curricular areas, that they should become more aware of their linguistic abilities and strive to improve them, since, as future teachers and independently of the career in which the student is enrolled, they

need their linguistic competencies at a high level, to be able to communicate assertively with their students, explain the contents of their area of knowledge, write clearly the explanations of a task or work, converse adequately and pertinently with their colleagues, in short, all the teaching tasks that an educator must perform in their educational center, necessarily require a high development of their communicative competence.

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