

# STUDENT RETENTION IN THE CONTEXT OF LANGUAGE SCHOOLS

by

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## Abstract

The objective of this study is to develop greater knowledge and understanding that will eventually lead to improvement in student retention in one particular English language teaching institution. College student retention literature was reviewed and the local context was presented. Four cycles of action research were carried out and analyzed inspired by both Grounded Theory and Ethnography. The first cycle consisted of the study of telephone records of students who decided not to continue studying. The second is a series of 10 interviews with teachers with excellent retention results. The third consists of the analysis of lesson observation reports of groups with more dropouts than the average. The fourth and last cycle involves the presentation of the data of the previous cycles to branch managers with history of good retention results, followed by an interview. This content and the comparison (and divergence) between what successful teachers believe leads to good student retention and real lessons with dropout issues served as basis for the emergence of themes. The themes were *support*, *relationship* and *trust and honesty*. Literature in college student retention showed empirical support for all themes and most sub-themes, suggesting the relevance of the findings.

*To my parents and my husband, for all the love, support and encouragement.*

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## 1. Introduction

This dissertation aims at developing knowledge that will eventually lead to improvement in student retention in one particular English language teaching institution. As the college student retention field has abundant literature, this will be reviewed and compared to the literature available in ELT. The local context will be presented, as well as the methodology. Four cycles of action research will be carried out and analyzed inspired by both Grounded Theory and Ethnography. The first cycle consists of the study of telephone records of students who decided not to continue studying. The second is a series of 10 interviews with teachers with excellent retention results. The third consists of the analysis of lesson observation reports of groups with more dropouts than the average. The fourth and last cycle involves the presentation of the data of the previous cycles to Branch Managers with history of good retention results, followed by an interview. From this data three main themes and eleven sub-themes emerged. These themes are discussed in the light of on literature in both college student retention and ELT. A conclusion will be presented, as well as recommendations for future research.

## 2. History of student retention

Although Kowalski (1977) points out that the initial discussion of college student retention began with the foundation of the earliest American colleges, Harvard (1636), William and Mary (1693), and Yale (1701), it only became a major concern in the second half of the 20th century. Prior to the 20th century, American colleges had different purposes. The first American colleges were founded as extensions of their respective churches with the goal of satisfying local demands for pastors and missionaries (Berger and Lyon, 2005). Most of the graduates in the seventeenth century became ministers (Geiger, 1999, cited in Berger and Lyon, 2005, p9). About a century later, around 1850, the average college had no more than 200 students (Berger and Lyon, 2005). As Berger and Lyon (ibid, p. 12) put it, “the first 250 years in higher education [in the USA] focused more on institutional survival than on student persistence and retention”.

American universities expanded dramatically after 1935 due to public initiatives (Berger and Lyon, 2005; Habley et al, 2012). Aiming at helping counter the Great Depression, the US government created the National Youth Administration in 1934 (Lyon, 1969, p. 44). Students whose financial situation was such “as to make impossible (their) attendance at college” (ibid, p. 45) had their college fees subsidized and

were granted jobs at the university. The most common jobs were laboratory, research and library assistants (ibid, p. 53). From February to June 1934, the payroll for approximately 75,000 students represented \$3,334,122. The financial benefits increased significantly the following years (ibid). After the end of World War II, the GI Bill granted 1.1 million war veterans the opportunity to attend university. Harvard alone received over 60,000 applications (Berger and Lyon, 2005). In the late 1950s, as a reaction to the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik, the National Defense Education Act was passed and later in 1965 so was the Higher Education Act. The objective of these acts was to educate the people as a means of protecting the country (Habley et al, 2012, p. 64). They also defined the role the federal government would play in giving financial support to higher education (Berger and Lyon, 2005).

As Berger and Lyon (ibid) point out, individual institutions began to monitor enrollments in the 1950s. Early research mostly reported patterns of student dropouts. Some studies focused on psychological attributes determining persistence. Student retention, however, only became an important concern after the early 1970s when "predictions of a decrease in enrollment of students" (ibid, p. 17) took place. This suggests that financial aspects put pressure on the systematic study of student retention.

At that point, despite being widespread, research in student retention has not been fruitful. Most studies were only descriptive, not analytical, and would describe which students' attributes were linked to a higher probability of dropping out or what characteristics groups of dropouts had in common. Studies did not reveal, however, "the processes leading to departure which give rise to those descriptive factors" (Tinto, 1993, p. 36).

A new era started with the publication of an article entitled "Dropouts from Higher Education: An Interdisciplinary Review and Synthesis" by William Spady in 1970. It was the first article to take account of the role of the institutions in students' decision to stay or leave (Tinto, 2006). Years later, in 1975, Vincent Tinto published the first longitudinal study that involved the students' environment, academic and social systems and student retention over different periods of time (Tinto, 1975). The 70s and 80s were called by some scholars "the age of involvement". Scholars understood that "involvement matters and it matters most during the first critical year of college" (Tinto, 2006, p. 3). As research evolved, studies focused on retention in different institutional settings (residential, non-residential, two and four-years) and on factors related to under-represented students, such as, gender, race, ethnicity, income and orientation (Tinto, 2006). Vincent Tinto's interactionalist theory of college student departure, in which

academic and social integration play a major role in retention, remains prominent until today. In 1997, however, (Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson, 1997) and in 2000 (Braxton and Lien, 2000) suggested that Tinto's ideas needed revision.

Student retention is, nowadays, a big business. A number of consulting firms promote their ability to increase institutional retention rates (Tinto, 2006). The "Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice" is dedicated to this subject and has been published since 1999. Even the House of Commons (UK Parliament, 2001) has expressed their concerns. In very recent publications (Tinto, 2012 and Braxton, 2014) suggest that the debate is still relevant.

## 2.1 Higher education and student retention in my context

An Economist news article (2012) explains the higher education context in Brazil. There are three types of universities in Brazil. The most prestigious universities are the public ones. They are controlled by the federal government or by state governments. Universidade de São Paulo (USP), perhaps the most prominent university in South America, is funded by state taxes. In 2014, the Admissions Department of the university (FUVEST, 2014), published data showing that 172,037 candidates applied for 12,057 undergraduate places at the university. In fact, entry into the Universidade de São Paulo is almost three times as competitive as the University of Oxford (2014), where 17,200 people applied for 3,200 undergraduate places in the same year. Public universities in Brazil charge no tuition fees. Most of them offer benefits, such as free housing for students who live far from the campus and subsidized restaurants. Despite that, due to the high selectivity of these universities, most of the students are richer than the average population in Brazil. A second group of universities is represented by private charitable institutions. Most are run by the Catholic Church. These are also prestigious and somewhat selective, mostly because of their very high tuition costs.

A third group consists of private universities that do not hold the same reputation as the ones mentioned above. Even though the quality of the courses might even be questionable, a diploma from them can double one's starting salary (The Economist, 2012).

Few players dominate the private higher education market in Brazil and some of them are owned by multinational corporations, such as Laureate International Universities. Private universities alone



represented about 1.2 million enrollments in 2010, 4 times as many as the public ones (The Economist, 2012). It is important to mention that a great number of private university students profit from scholarships and low-interest student loans provided by the federal government. Universities receive tax exemption for providing scholarships. In 2005, the first year of the government-funded scholarship program, 112,000 scholarships were given to low-income students (Andrade, 2007). In addition, about 300,000 students were granted low-interest loans in 2012 (ibid).

#### 2.1.1 College student retention in Brazil

Most statistics related to student retention in Brazil come from private universities. More than half of the students in those universities drop out before completing their course (The Economist, 2012). However, Brazil has very little research on student retention (Silva et al, 2007). Published studies are commonly merely descriptive and refer to specific departments in universities. Lima et al (2012) analyzed student retention in the Physics Department of the University of São Paulo. Bueno (1993) studied student retention in the Psychology Department.

Not only do these studies not mention any important work in the field of student retention, but they also struggle with basic concepts such as how to measure student retention. In an interview in 2014 (USP, 2014), Antonio Carlos Hernandez, pro-rector responsible for undergraduate courses in the University of São Paulo (USP), which represented 58,303 students in 249 majors in 2012 (USP, 2012) stated that the university has not comprehended student retention concepts. According to what Hernandez said, he is still trying to understand how students transferring from one course to another can affect the measure of student retention. In conclusion, little is known regarding higher education student persistence in Brazil. Private universities, which might have student retention data possibly treat it as strategic and do not share this information publicly.

#### 2.1.2 Student retention in language institutes in Brazil

Student retention is not a common topic in the ELT scene in Brazil. In the last BRAZ-TESOL (2014) International Conference, among hundreds of presentations, there was only one workshop and one talk which mentioned student retention. Howard's workshop (2014) "Active online student retention (what the teacher must do)" exposed strategies for online teachers to retain students. A talk given by Almeida

(2014) mentioned student satisfaction and retention while describing a mentoring program for newly hired teachers. Moreover, retention does not seem to be a commonly studied issue around the world either. IATEFL's 48th Annual International Conference (IATEFL, 2014) did not mention student retention, persistence or dropouts.

If we assume that student retention is important to language institutes, one possible reason for the lack of studies in the ELT area is that companies are not interested in sharing data that could lead to losing a competitive advantage in the market. There is one article, nevertheless, published in a business journal about student retention at one school in a small city in the countryside. The study (Mazzuco et al, 2012) does not mention quantitative data such as number of students (maybe for the reasons stated above), but concludes that the majority of dropouts are from the elementary level and that the most common reason for not continuing the course is lack of time. The study suggests that student retention can be improved by putting into practice notions of Relationship Marketing such as carrying out a satisfaction survey. No Student Retention scholar was cited in this article.

### 3. A theoretical model of student retention

#### 3.1 Tinto's interactionalist theory

Vincent Tinto, in the fourth chapter of his book *Leaving College* (1993) proposes a theory of individual departure from institutions of higher education as well as a longitudinal model of individual departure. Tinto's theory derives from ideas of two foundational authors. The first one is the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep. In order to provide a way of thinking about the longitudinal process of student persistence in college, Tinto (ibid) worked with concepts stemming from what van Gennep (van Gennep, 1960) calls rites of passage. These concepts are separation, transition and incorporation. Students are moving from one or more communities to college. It involves separation from these communities, transition into the new one and incorporation in the life of college. Difficulties in this process might lead to student departure (Tinto, 1993).

The work of van Gennep, however, does not help us think about the complexity of the largely informal processes of interactions among people on campus that eventually lead to incorporation (ibid). This is the reason why Tinto turns to the work of a second author, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim. Tinto uses Durkheim's study of suicide (1951) as a guide to his thinking. Among four different types of suicide,

the egotistical suicide, which happens when individuals are unable to become integrated and establish membership within communities, represents an analogue for the thinking of institutional departure from higher education (ibid). Malintegration can be due to holding different values from those of other members, which could lead to "intellectual isolation", and/or insufficient connection between members of the community, which could lead to "social isolation" (ibid p.101). This distinction between intellectual (academic) and social (personal) isolation is an important part of Tinto's theory and proposed actions.

In general terms, individual departure emerges from a longitudinal process of interactions between individuals, with his/her attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational experiences, intentions and commitments, and other members of the academic and social system of the institution (Tinto, 1993). Positive or negative experiences shape the probability of departure.

Rewarding interactions between faculty, staff, and students outside the classrooms and offices of the institution may lead directly to enhanced intellectual development and therefore to greater intellectual integration in the academic system of the college. They may also result in greater exposure of students to the multiple dimensions of academic work and therefore indirectly lead to heightened levels of formal performance. By the same token, the absence of student-faculty interactions and/or unrewarding interactions outside the classroom may lead to academic boredom and this to voluntary withdrawal or to lower levels of academic performance which may in turn lead to dismissal. (Tinto, 1993, p.118)

Academic integration can be measured in grade performance and in intellectual development throughout college years (Tinto, 1975). On the one hand, grade performance reflects the idea that the student is being evaluated and judged in relation to the institution's values and objectives (ibid). It represents an extrinsic form of reward that is also the most visible in the academic system. It is the single most important factor that can predict student persistence (ibid). Intellectual development, on the other hand, "represents a more intrinsic form of reward that can be viewed as an integral part of the person's personal and academic development" (ibid, p.104).

Social integration can be via friendship support, interaction with the faculty and staff or even support groups and extracurricular activities. Although excessive social interaction might lead to poor academic

performance and thus to student departure, college dropouts tend to perceive themselves as having less social interaction than college "persisters" (ibid, p.107-8).

The impact of academic and social integration upon learning tends to be asymmetrical and individuals are even more likely to persist when they are integrated both academically and socially. Academic integration, in most cases, seems to be the most important form of involvement regarding student persistence (Tinto, 1998).

### 3.2 Limitations to Tinto's interactionalist theory

Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson (1997, cited by Braxton and Lien, 2000) have suggested that Tinto's Interactionalist Theory needs revision. There are two main reasons for that. The first reason is that although Tinto insists that his model explains student departure within a particular institution (Braxton and Lien, 2000), single-institutional studies do not show clear empirical support for his propositions (ibid). On the other hand, "multi-institutional appraisals provide robust empirical backing for the effect of academic integration" (ibid, p. 22). This may be due to the restricted variance in single-institutional studies (ibid).

The second reason is that "little consensus exists among scholars on the meaning of academic integration" (ibid, p. 13). A study carried out by Pascarella and Chapman (1983) illustrates this fact. The objective of the study was to validate Tinto's model of college withdrawal. The study included 2,326 students in 11 institutions. These institutions could be 4-year residential, 4-year commuter or 2-year commuter institutions. Pascarella and Chapman operationalized the concept of academic integration using a nine-item scale they had defined. One could directly deduct some items in the scale from Tinto's theory, such as "first semester freshman grade-point average" (ibid, p. 91). However, some items, such as "number of unassigned books read for pleasure" and "number of cultural events (e.g., play, concert, lecture) attended" (ibid, p.91) seem to have been drawn more from the experience of the authors than from Tinto's model. This limitation to applying Tinto's concepts is clearly stated by Pascarella and Chapman (1983, p. 100): "the findings may nevertheless reflect our particular operational definitions of the model's salient constructs".

#### 4. The context of the present study

##### 4.1 The ELT market in Brazil

Brazil is a very important ELT market not only because of the World Cup in 2014 and the Olympic Games in 2016. With 203 million inhabitants, Brazil is “a booming economy” which “demands more English speakers” (Education First, 2013, p.1). Nevertheless, its English Proficiency Index is considered low. Among 60 countries, Brazil is the 38th, below countries of comparable growing economies, such as Russia and China (Education First, 2013). With only 2% of the population able to speak English and a growing economy (Actis, 2012), the ELT market is the fourth-largest market in the world, “worth 2 billion pounds per year” (Antonioli, 2013).

This becomes very clear when we analyze the acquisitions in the last 2 years. In 2012 HIG Capital, an American private equity investment firm bought CEL-LEP, a prominent 21-branch school in São Paulo (HIG Capital, 2012). Also in 2012, Actis, an international private equity fund based in the UK confirmed an investment of US\$ 68 million in CNA, the second largest English teaching franchising business in Brazil (Actis, 2012). As of 2012, CNA had 500 schools and sold 400.000 textbook kits per year. Their goal is to double these numbers by 2017 (ibid). The boldest move, however, happened in 2013. The British media and education group Pearson Longman paid US\$ 720 million for Brazil’s largest English teaching franchising business, which serves more than 800.000 students all over the country (Antonioli, 2013). In 2012, there were 6215 branches of more than 70 different language school brands in Brazil (Education First, 2013).

##### 4.2 The local context

The institution in which the study took place is the biggest non-franchise ELT school in Brazil: Associação Cultura Inglesa São Paulo (Cultura Inglesa, 2014). Most branches are located within the São Paulo state. Despite its size, Cultura Inglesa is not the typical language school in Brazil. As a nonprofit organization, part of the mission of the institution is the dissemination of the British Culture, as well as many social projects such as, teaching English to public school teachers.

Although the branches differ radically in size, administrative procedures, teacher training and courses are standardized and supervised by the headquarters. Administrative and teaching staff are periodically

assessed based on a number of key performance indicators (KPIs) which include number of students, number of dropouts, term-to-term retention rates, student satisfaction rate, among many others. These KPIs are used to compare branches at a given time and over a period. The benchmarking processes are not only important for the business itself, but also for this research.

#### 4.2.1 Retention and directly related factors

Although there are different ways of measuring retention at universities and colleges (both 2-year and 4-year), within a given institution, student retention means completing the full length of the course. A dropout is a student who decided to quit without completing the course. At the institution and maybe most language institutes around the world, there is no specific point when one can say that a student has finished the course. Completing a course means the student has reached their desired level. The courses offered range from CEFR A1 level to CEFR C2 level. Even after CEFR C2 level, there are post-proficiency courses focused on specific needs such as Grammar, Academic Writing or Conversation.

In general, the concept of retention is the number of students in one term who continue to the next term. However, different aspects of retention are used, such as the ones mentioned below:

1. **Institutional retention** is the total number of students of the institution who continue studying from one semester another.
2. **Branch retention** is specific of one branch and is used for benchmarking purposes.
3. **Level retention** is the retention of one specific level, institution-wide. In general, the younger the students, the higher the retention.
4. **Teacher retention** is an indicator of the student retention of each teacher. This indicator takes into account that different levels have different expected retention rates. If one given teacher has eight different groups, the aim is to re-enroll more than the institutional average in each group. The more groups are above average, the higher this teacher's retention rate is.

5. **Dropout rate** indicates the percentage of students who quit before the end of the term. A dropout will not influence retention if he or she enrolls for the next term. Empirical data, however, shows that the higher the dropout rate, the lower the retention.

#### 4.2.2 Factors indirectly related to student retention

The factors mentioned under this title are ones, such as, student satisfaction, that common sense would suggest that influence student retention, but to which we do not have supportive empirical evidence. This being said, Scheiner and Nelson (2014) in a study that involved more than 30,000 students in 60 different institutions have found that student satisfaction is indeed a predictor of student persistence. Satisfaction of the students can increase the level of persistence to 67%. The problem is, in a much smaller environment, such as one specific branch, it is not uncommon for teachers to have high retention and low student satisfaction rates or vice-versa. Even though, student satisfaction is a very important performance indicator for both teachers and branches. These factors are outlined below:

1. **Institutional and branch student satisfaction** are measured and used for benchmarking purposes.
2. **Student satisfaction** is an individual measure of each teacher's students' satisfaction.
3. **Unannounced lesson observation** serves as both quality control and a teacher development tool and is expected to predict student persistence of teachers.

#### 4.3 What we know about student retention in our context

No systematic student retention study has taken place in the institution recently. However, teachers and managers are commonly required to devise action plans in order to improve results. Actions to improve retention are based in a series of empirical assumptions. They are listed below.

- a. Expected retention of adult students is a lot lower than young learners or teenagers.

- b. Significantly improving the retention of a branch takes a long time. Changes greater than 2 percentage points are not common.
- c. Significantly improving the retention of a teacher is not as uncommon. Teachers with bad results go through a mentoring program.
- d. Even though dropouts do not directly influence retention rates (as explained in 4.2.1), the higher the number of dropouts, the lower the retention.

#### 4.4 Different contexts

Even though the contexts of American college persistence studies are far from uniform, none of them is similar to language institutes in Brazil. Vincent Tinto (personal communication, April 22 2014) understands that there is little reason to believe that concepts such as social and intellectual community, institutional and educational commitment do not play an important role in language institutions. He points out that only research will demonstrate if that is the case. As mentioned in the introduction, the objective of this study is, however, to gather and organize data and compare a language institute to American colleges in order to develop a knowledge basis to inspire effective action.

#### 5. Methodology

The main purpose of this study is to shed light on specific problems within one specific organization. The objective is that cycles of Action Research will help increase student retention by acquiring learning that can add depth, detail and meaning to quantitative data that are already available at the institution, which is described in parts 4.2 and 4.3. Action research, as Patton (2002, p.180) puts it, “can yield specific insights and findings that change practice”. In addition, participants have the opportunity to learn to think more systematically about what they are doing (ibid).

Qualitative approaches’ boundaries are often blurred (Holloway and Todres, 2003) and theoretical frameworks carry a number of assumptions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thus, it is important that the researcher epistemological assumptions are made explicit. The procedures that will be used for the analysis, such as familiarizing with the data, generating codes and searching for emerging themes used to organize data resemble those of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2008). The data generated will be analyzed through thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). A full commitment to



Grounded Theory, however, is not possible since a theory of student retention is not likely to emerge in such a short amount of time.

We understand that “any human group of people interacting together for a period of time will evolve a culture” (Patton, 2002, p. 81). The study of the culture of the institution and the patterns and beliefs related to student retention will be carried out inspired by Ethnographic Inquiry. Moreover, the aim of this study is to organize a coherent story around “research participants’ positions in society and the varied meanings they give to their location, relationships with others and their behavior” (Holloway and Todres, 2003, p. 354). It means that Ethnography will be used as descriptive, rather than critical (TESOL, 2014).

With the objective of enhancing the validity and quality of the study (Norris, 2007), it is important to mention that Action Research cannot be objective nor neutral (ibid). Analyzing the data requires the researcher’s judgment (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In addition, apart from being the researcher, my role and position in the institution is of the manager of one of the branches.

This piece of action research has four cycles. The first cycle involved the analysis of logs of telephone calls. Teachers and administrative staff call students who did not enroll prior to the beginning of a term. The reasons stated by 592 students for not continuing were coded. The second cycle is based on the analysis of semi-structured interviews. Ten teachers who had the best student retention in one specific branch had their interviews transcribed and analyzed. The third cycle consists of 15 lesson observations of groups where more than 10% of the students had dropped out. The lesson observation reports were analyzed and coded. The fourth and last cycle was a brief written interview with two Branch Managers who are responsible for the operation of the branches with the highest historical series of retention rates in the institution.

## 6. Action research cycles and initial coding

The first cycle consists of a broader telephone log analysis. It involves a large quantity of students and teachers. The second cycle was intended to be more detailed and qualitative. Both cycles are exploratory of what we could call the culture of the institution and served as a basis for the third cycle, where actions started to take place. The fourth cycle focuses on what can inspire future actions. We will explain

coding procedures and present some code-level results. Figure 6.1 below shows a graphic representation of the cycles.

## Action Research Cycles

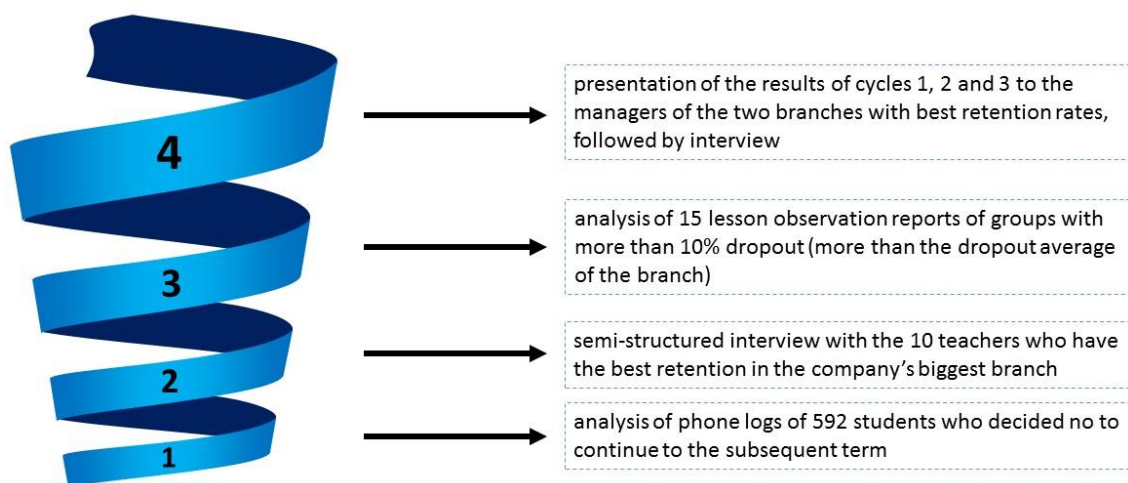


Figure 6.1

### 6.1 First cycle – telephone logs

Roughly, in a year, regular classes last for 8 months. Teachers have 2 months of paid vacation. On the other 60 days teachers are given support tasks such as performing placement tests, invigilating and marking tests. The most important task, however, is enrolling students for the next term. About half of the students enroll automatically. The other half needs to be contacted.

As teachers start their vacation on different dates, a contact log needs to be kept so that the administrative staff and other teachers know the status of each student. The enrollment period officially ends 6 weeks after the beginning of the subsequent term. Phone logs of the 592 students from one branch who did not continue were analyzed and coded using NVIVO 10, a qualitative data analysis computer software. I chose this branch because of two reasons. It is the biggest branch, which means a higher volume of data accessible. In addition, it was where I worked at the time. These phone logs were written from December 2012 to March 2013. Table 6.1.1 shows one example of one of those phone logs,

translated into English. Each phone log can carry more than one reason. The first student in table 6.1.1, for example, states two different reasons. The family lives far from the school and the student does not feel motivated enough because the placement test, when she started studying at the institution, did not meet her expectations.

Examples of Telephone Logs

Group	Student	Age	1st contact	2nd contact	3rd contact	4th contact	Log
I2 A Tue/Thu 14:00 - 15:40	Student #1	14yo	Teacher #1 17/12	Teacher #1 28/jan	Teacher #1 31/jan	Teacher #2 14.02 / As- sistant Manager 26/2	Father will contact the school in Jan 2013. He's aware about the group could be full by then. Talked to the mother and she explained they live too far and it's not been easy to take her to school. When she had her placement test the level was below her expectations and she lost motivation. (17/12) // Coordination will revise the placement test. Call back in February. (28/1) // Mother informed that the student will not continue. Different groups and branches were offered and also a test to skip a level. None accepted. (14/2) // Father complained it's the fifth time we call them. The student is current enrolled at another school. (26/2).
CPE2 B Sat 08:20 - 12:00	Student #2	19yo	Staff Admin #1 21/12	Teacher #1 04/02	Teacher #3 04/02	Teacher #4 06/02 / Staff Ad- min #2 15/2 and 12/3	Student said she will start university in 2013 and is not sure she will continue the course due to financial problems. Will call back to make sure she is able to enroll before the group gets full. Call back before 14/2. (21/12) // Tried to contact the student unsuccessfully on 4/2 and 6/2. // Will not continue because of college. (15/2) // Student is overloaded with college stuff. (12/3).

Table 6.1.1

Table 6.1.2 shows the top ten most mentioned reasons for not continuing the course. As the numbers of students involved is so high, I decided to use the number of times a code was mentioned as a measure of relevance. A code is “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63) regarding the phenomenon. 161 students mentioned *clash with other courses* as a reason. This represented 29.6% of all reasons mentioned. The second most common reason was *lack of time*, which represented 15.3%. There are, however, similarities between these two reasons. One could say that not being able to continue the course because of other courses, such as college, soccer practice or French lessons also means that the student will not have time to study English. These two reasons together add up to 44.9%.

Among the common reasons for not enrolling in the subsequent term, *moved to another city or region* (8.5%), *financial problems* (7.5%), *student travels too often* (7.4%) and *home or work too far from school* (3.5%) are reasons that, when mentioned, it is considerably a lot more difficult to persuade the student otherwise. These represent 26.9% of the reasons mentioned.

Reasons for not continuing the course

REASON	TIMES MENTIONED	%
Clash with other courses	161	29.6%
Lack of time	83	15.3%
Moved to another city or region	46	8.5%
Financial problems	41	7.5%
Student travels too often	40	7.4%
Lack of interest	19	3.5%
Home or work too far from school	19	3.5%
Prefers private Lessons	17	3.1%
Reached desired level	15	2.8%
Didn't like the course	11	2.0%

Table 6.1.2

## 6.2 Second cycle – interviews with teachers

Ten teachers with the best retention in the branch agreed to the interview. The interviews took place in March 2013. I chose this branch again because it is the one with the highest number of teachers (45) and it was where I worked at the time. As explained in 4.2.1, teacher retention takes into account the average retention for each specific level. A teacher who has mainly adult groups, for instance, can have good retention results when retaining 70% of the total number of students. Teachers specialized in young learners would have to retain more than 90% of their total number of students to have good retention results.

Interviews were semi-structured. I had planned five questions in advance, but I asked other questions, according to the content shared in the interviews. The questions were the following:

1. You've been very successful in terms of retention. Why do you think so?
2. In your opinion, how can retention rates be improved?
3. What factors do you think might lead students not to continue their courses?
4. What characteristics of your teaching might have led to good retention rates?

5. Do you use any follow-up techniques, such as calling students, for example? Do you think it helps?

After recording interviews, I transcribed them to an appropriate level of detail and then checked with the recordings for accuracy. Interviews were carried out in English. The data was coded using NVIVO 10. Here, instead of using the numbers of times mentioned, I used the number of different independent sources for the same idea as a measure of relevance. Codes that were common to 4 or more teachers will be presented in this section (table 6.2.1).

Summary of the codes from the interviews with teachers

Code	Number of teachers who mentioned this theme...	Effect
Phoning students	9	Positive
Good rapport	8	Positive
Personalized service	8	Positive
Financial problems	6	Negative
Support	6	Positive
Trust and honesty	5	Positive
Good environment	5	Positive
Focus on students' needs	5	Positive
Student has perception of learning	4	Positive
Teacher is friendly	4	Positive
Lessons have focus on speaking	4	Positive
Lack of student intrinsic motivation	4	Negative

Table 6.2.1

It is important to note that, although 9 out of 10 teachers mentioned *phoning students* as a factor that positively affects retention, they might have been influenced by the phrasing of the fifth question and by my position as Assistant Manager at the time. It is common for most teachers not to like phoning students. I believe teachers would have seen themselves in an awkward situation had they stated that phoning students is not important. Table 6.2.2 shows at least one sample of each code. I made sure the samples presented were from different interviewees. There are samples from 9 different teachers. More samples will be presented in section 7 when presenting the themes.

### Examples of each code from the interviews with teachers

Code	# teachers who mentioned	Effect	Sample	Interviewee
Phoning students	9	Positive	I think it might, yeah. Every effort you put. I'm not sure if I'm good at calling people, but, whenever you call them, they kind of feel "Oh, they didn't forget about me". "I am important". They tend to give it a go, give it another chance and come back, try a little bit harder. But I think some people are better than me at that. They call all the time. They can talk people into doing anything. My work is in class, but I do call them, even though I'm not good at doing that, I might have reversed one or two dropouts by doing that.	I#1
Good rapport	8	Positive	And I try to bond with them, from day one. On the first day of class I know everybody's names. And if I see them outside the classroom, I know who they are. So, to me it's really important.	I#2
Personalized service	8	Positive	So, I think getting to know the students more is essential. Although we're becoming very much a world of Internet and becoming anonymous, they want this individual, they need this individual touch. I think they like the idea that we're there, knowing what they want to do and... and every time... if you sort of bring up, like, two months later you say "aaah, yes, I remember you like that film" and they "wow! Aaaah, ok, the teacher does listen to us". They'll be more ready to speak more.	I#3
Support	6	Positive	I know, but, for example, in Adult Track, students have a lot of difficulty dealing with the material. The E-Workbook, and CD-ROM, and E-Campus, and the study guide. They get a little lost. Once I started guiding them more, closely, they felt better, I felt better, and it was more successful. Maybe that...	I#2
Financial problems	5	Negative	Financial is one of them, if they lose their jobs or if they have to take another course because it's important for the company where they work, so they're going to cut their English course.	I#4
Trust and honesty	5	Positive	But I think this sort of atmosphere... ahn... makes them feel comfortable enough to come to me and talk about whatever they're feeling about the course, or if they are thinking about quitting. I'm always honest with them, you know, so... if I think... if they ask me "Do you think I'll be able to cope with studying this, this and then doing a Masters?" I'll be honest and say "No, I don't think you will." So, I'm honest with them.	I#5
Good environment	5	Positive	If this is OK for the student, and the environment is good, the student will learn, not only the motivated ones, they will learn. And they will come back. Because they come back because of the environment.	I#6
Focus on students' needs	5	Positive	That's a tough one. Well maybe if we cater for... if we continue catering for students' needs during the lesson planning and the lesson delivery as well. I guess keep on doing what we are doing but trying to improve a little bit.	I#4
Student has perception of learning	4	Positive	Well, I think, primarily, when they do not feel that the course is somehow changing their lives, you know. Not only by learning, but by giving them at least food for thought, you know. Like, "what am I doing here?". Their perception of their own learning. Even if they don't dedicate themselves, but they come, they see the teacher forcing them or raising their awareness, so they start asking themselves "Well, maybe, maybe I should stay here, because even though I don't dedicate myself, I have the support I need."	I#5
Teacher is friendly	4	Positive	If you're not friendly with them, you don't create a good relation with them. It's difficult to deal with them. So, I think if you are friendly, they trust you, they can rely on you, and then they respond to what you're asking.	I#7
Lessons have focus on speaking	4	Positive	Well, I believe that it is taking a very holistic approach to the lesson. Sitting down and looking at what is the whole lesson about and making a conversation about that thing. And all of the skills that I pull in are supplementary, reinforcing, working on listening skills or reading skills, but all around the capacity or the ability to be able to talk about, to be able to speak about a certain thing that's going on in that unit.	I#8
Lack of student intrinsic motivation	4	Negative	Because sometimes many people are there because they're obliged to. They need to. Not because they want to.	I#9

Table 6.2.2

### 6.3 Third cycle – lesson observation reports

This third cycle is the one where action itself started to get more effective. I was transferred from the branch where cycles 1 and 2 were carried out, where I had the position of Assistant Manager, to another branch, where I was promoted to the position of Branch Manager. This branch is the seventh largest one of the institution, with approximately 30 teachers. Retention has always been an issue at that branch. From all performance indicators, the most concerning one was certainly the number of dropouts. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> term of 2013, this branch had the second highest dropout rate in the institution. Almost 10% of the students quit before completing the term. This represented more than 300 students and a very significant financial loss.

Lesson observations are standard procedure. Managers should observe every teacher once a year. The objective of these observations is to ensure the lessons deliver the products according to that which the administrative staff had sold the students. For instance, the sales force sells courses focused on speaking. The manager, then, acts as quality control by observing lessons. In the first term of 2014, however, I observed every teacher, sometimes more than once. Yet, dropout rates were higher than 9%. The criterion for choosing groups was simply convenience. I would observe teachers whenever I could spare the time from my hectic routine.

In the second term of 2014, I tried a different strategy. I observed each teacher with a group with more than 10% dropout rate, which included 15 groups of a variety of levels and age groups. After observations, also as standard procedure, I would produce a report. This time, I used a question to guide both observation and report: *what in the lesson would explain the high number of dropouts?* These observations were especially rich and important for the ethnographic description of the themes because they represented “prolonged engagement in the natural setting” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 131). I read the reports some time later and started the coding process. Table 6.3.1 below shows one sample of each code present in three or more lessons. These codes, when analyzed and compared with the information gathered in cycles 1 and 2, were crucial to define the themes that will be presented in part 7.

### Examples of codes from lesson observation reports

Code	Times mentioned in the reports	Sample	Teacher Observed
Teacher did not link the topic to Ss' realities	11	What was the relevance of the exercise to your students? In what real situation in a teen's life would the use the structure that you wanted to teach? Why would students this age want to learn about tap water being wasted? The situations that you chose felt disconnected to the their lives and maybe that was the reason they were unfocused.	O#1
Objective of the lesson was not clear	9	I thought your lesson brought interesting content and that you have very good rapport with your students. I decided to observe this lesson because of the number of dropouts. The idea is to find something that could explain and prevent future dropouts. Ten minutes before the end of the lesson I was wondering what students had learned. Although by the very end there was clear evidence of learning, this evidence was restricted to some expressions. I kept thinking "the content is very interesting, but what is the purpose of the lesson and of each task?" I feel that the sense of progress by the end of the lesson could be improved. This would be consistent with the number of dropouts and also with the results of the last satisfaction survey. What do you think?	O#2
Names of most students were not mentioned	5	Among the 14 students that were in the classroom, I heard 3 names: Marcela, Clayton, Luke. Using students' names more often would help fostering group cohesiveness. It would be very important if your students knew the name of one another. Do you think they do? How could that happen, if the teacher himself does not use their names very often?	O#3
Lack of challenge	5	After that, you asked them to practice the following structure: "I used to <u>watch soap operas</u> but I haven't <u>watched one</u> in ten years." I liked that students had the opportunity to practice this grammar point a lot, but after a while my feeling was that the point was not challenging enough and explanations were a bit too much focused on you and the lesson became a bit too teacher-centered.	O#3
Very limited STT	4	It was 7:14 when you started eliciting content from the previous lessons. Don't you think people might think "Oh, if I arrive a bit late it's going to be OK because I won't miss anything important". These 14 first minutes could've been brilliant if you had boarded and expanded incidental language. Interactions could also have maximized Student Talking Time if they were speaking in pairs or trios.	O#4
Teacher centeredness	3	Instructions were clear and so were the lesson objectives. However, the lesson was too teacher centered, though I know that student centeredness is even more challenging when teaching elementary levels. When you wrapped up the speaking task and decided to write on the board the contribution of every student in a predictable order, most students unfocused. Some started texting and some started chatting.	O#5

Table 6.3.1



#### 6.4 Fourth cycle – interviews with managers

The fourth cycle brought up, on the one hand, content that confirmed the emerging themes and, on the other hand, one important question. In this cycle, the code-level results shown in sessions 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3 were presented to the managers of the two branches with the best results in student retention in the last years. The first interview yielded insightful information. Focusing on the teachers, rather than the students, she believes that the key to success in student retention lies in keeping a positive environment of trust and honesty, offering support and focusing on teachers' needs. In other words, what teachers with good retention believe regarding their students matches what this one manager believes regarding her teachers. It is important to mention that both branches have very low teacher turnover.

The second interview raised an interesting question related to the first cycle. "I would question whether the justifications for not enrolling are really representing the reasons why students are not continuing." This suggests that maybe the reasons *clash with other courses* and *lack of time* might be hiding other reasons students are maybe not comfortable in expressing.

#### 7. Themes and Analysis

In order to form a thematic map, codes were put together and analyzed. It is important to make clear that I do not subscribe to the view that themes emerge or are simply discovered. According to Braun and Clarke (2008), that would imply in a passive role of the researcher in the process of analysis. I identified patterns and themes, selecting which are of interest and will present them in this section.

The thematic map presented in figure 7.1 represents a description of practices and beliefs within the culture of the institution that are related to student retention. The main themes are *support*, *relationship* and *trust and honesty*. *Support* is the most complex of the three and along with *relationship* has abundant supportive samples of data. Both themes share the sub-theme of *personalized service*. Each part of this sub-theme is illustrated by a paradigmatic sentence related to each main theme. *Trust and honesty* is a lot more subtle than the other two themes, but certainly not less important. Each theme and sub-theme will be explained, illustrated with data samples, analyzed and put in context with both ELT and College Retention literature. The samples from the interviews (cycle 2) are identified with the letter "I" before the number of the teacher interviewed. Samples from lesson

observations are identified with the letter “O” before the number of the teacher observed. None of the teachers interviewed were observed, as they belong to different branches.

## Thematic Map

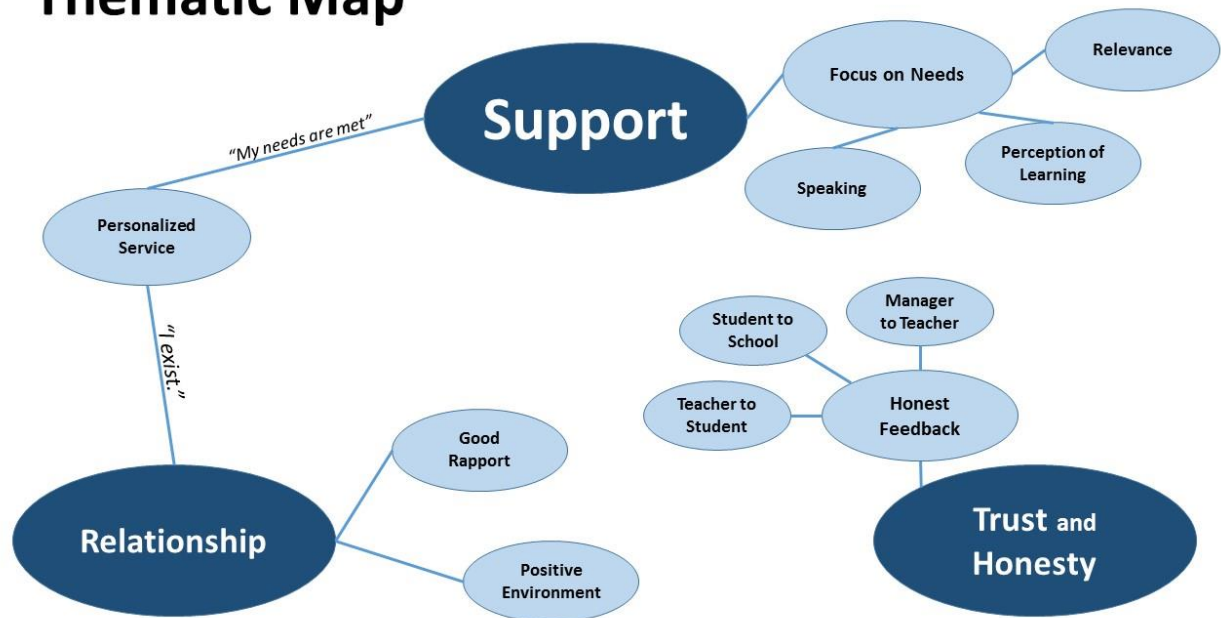


Figure 7.1.

### 7.1 Support – samples

Support can come in a variety of ways and is generically related to student retention. When teachers support their students, they stay, despite other factors.

Maybe things are going too fast and students are just lost, and if the teacher doesn't take action immediately like I do, and try to help them, then they just leave. (...) They feel like they're left, you know. (I#10)

Teachers mention support as being not only academic. Sometimes it is about dealing with different textbook media or even emotional support.

(...) students have a lot of difficulty dealing with the material. The E-Workbook, and CD-ROM, and E-Campus, and the study guide. They get a little lost. Once I started guiding them more, closely, they felt better, I felt better, and it was more successful. (I#2)

(...) I make sure all students, they have a place in their class, especially teenagers. If I see a student that might... it's likely to be bullied for some reason (...) situations like... they could be singled out for, I tend to give them a bit more of attention. (...) I ask them to speak out loud, so the people kind of value them. (...) Even though the students don't talk to them, there's the teacher who could, you know, embrace them (...) So these students, they tend to stay. (I#1)

Sometimes *support* means spending time outside the classroom with students, such as expressed in the two samples below. The second sample makes reference to supplemental instruction using a word in Portuguese ("reforço").

If it's something concerning learning and teaching (...) as I said, give them a guide, offer them some help, like, coming here to the multimedia and meet them (I#7)

But in some cases they could be... it's has gone through the system here... still not at the level of the class that they're in. And the teacher has to recognize that and give reforço (I#8)

Some of the samples link the idea of support to the idea of personalized service, often related to the concern about the needs of the students, such as, for example, a student who missed a lesson.

if they miss a class, (...) I send the messages. Like, if they have a composition and they're like, copying like crazy, I say don't worry. I go home the next day, I make a PDF file. And I send them the PDF with everything. So, attention. That's the number 1 thing. (I#10)

They feel like they're paying for a course with 20 people in the room but at the same time they can feel like it's almost private because if they send a message I respond immediately. If they skipped one day and there's a Power Point or something, I send them the next day. (I#10)

The samples below illustrate students' needs specifically relating meeting learning needs to retention. The ability to speak is specifically linked to what a student needs and/or wants.

Oh, well, as I've said, I would say that if you know your student, if you know how he is and his needs and the way he is, I think that this helps a lot. (I#9)

(...) trying to reach them the way they learn. You know, if they are visual kinesthetic... these things really work. (I#9)

Well maybe if we cater for... if we continue catering for students' needs during the lesson planning and the lesson delivery as well. (I#4)

I think that's what students most want. That's what they see as their most... their... that's the target, I think. That's what they're really going after, the ability to speak. And I think that they become happier clients if they're being able to produce. (I#8)

Maybe they have an idea that at intermediate level they would be able to do, to speak in a certain way. And then they can't, they feel demotivated and they drop out. (I#2)

Perception of learning is important. However, even if the students do learn, it seems like the teacher helping the students perceive their own learning is linked to retention.

If they feel they haven't learned anything. If at the end of the semester they kinda look back and think... "oh, well, what did I learn" and very often they have, they just don't see it. Sometimes in the classroom we have good students and sometimes the weaker ones start comparing themselves to that stronger student. And sometimes we have to make them see that... "wow, what you did was fantastic". The strong student is the strong student. "But look at how you've evolved". I think we have to be very careful so that the weaker students see that they did evolve. (I#3)

Because sometimes they don't know what progress is. And I think it's the role of the teacher to show the progress and to make it real to the students. (I#6)

The sample below ties together *perception of learning* and *relevance* as important to student retention. The support of the teacher is required for the student to feel he or she is learning and what they are doing is relevant.

Well, I think, primarily, when they do not feel that the course is somehow changing their lives, you know. Not only by learning, but by giving them at least food for thought, you know. Like, “what am I doing here?”. Their perception of their own learning. Even if they don’t dedicate themselves, but they come, they see the teacher forcing them or raising their awareness, so they start asking themselves “Well, maybe, maybe I should stay here, because even though I don’t dedicate myself, I have the support I need”. (I#5)

The samples above came from interviews with teachers. The premise is that if those teachers have good retention, then their beliefs and practice may lead to good student retention. Lack of *focus on needs*, *perception of learning*, *speaking*, *relevance* and *personalized service* is related to dropouts, according to the samples below from lesson observation reports.

The issues that might have influenced the dropouts, on the other hand, are the following:

1. Student talking time (STT) is **really** limited.
2. Objectives of the tasks are not clear and tasks seemed disconnected. After this lesson what would students reply if I asked them “What did you get out of this lesson?”
3. Feedback given was very little and not systematized. (O#4)

You had mentioned some time before that the man in the video you had shown before was in Law School and that negotiation is important for him. As one of your students, I would’ve asked myself “why is it important to me?”. Moreover, why were the students being taught phrasal verbs and what did it have to do with negotiation? When students leave the classroom, what would they say they got out of the lesson? I think the way the activities were sequenced and the lack of sense of purpose might have led to the dropouts you had in this group. (O#6)

In other parts of the institutional culture, support is also important. One of the Branch Managers interviewed considers support as key for success when it comes to student retention.

Being a part of the team, a role model and an advisor, making yourself present and reliable so as teachers and staff can share their issues with students and feel comfortable to rely on you. Dealing with financial aspects, for example, can be puzzling for teachers: show them how they can help their students considering company policies (Branch Manager Interview #1)

## 7.2 Support – literature and discussion

The role of support is unquestionable when it comes to student retention. Vincent Tinto, in his most recent book (2012) states that “nothing is more important to student retention than academic support” (ibid, p. 25). There is a whole chapter dedicated to support in the book, where Tinto mentions dozens of studies connecting academic, social and financial support to student retention, including pertinent case studies (ibid). One of them (Song, 2006), analyzes the outcome of intensive ESL instruction in learning communities at Kingsborough Community College, in Brooklyn, New York. The longitudinal study of 385 ESL students showed that participation in content-based (as opposed to non-content-based) ESL instruction was linked to better proficiency-test pass rates, graduation and retention rates, as well as the overall GPA. ESL lessons that led to better college retention rates were directly linked to the content of other subjects, such as, for example, General Psychology. This supports the choice of *relevance* as part of the thematic map of the present study, although it also posits a challenge. In the context of a language institute groups can be so diverse that finding one relevant theme would be rather difficult. On the one hand, teenage groups in the afternoon may be rather uniform. On the other hand, ages of students of upper-intermediate groups on Saturdays, for example, can range from 13 to 60 years old.

About *relevance* and *speaking*, within the ELT field, although very little has been studied about student retention (part 2.1.2), the importance of speaking and the role of output is widely accepted as important to learning (Talandis and Stout, 2015; Zhang and Head, 2010). Zhang and Head (2010) suggest relevant content in order to deal with speaking reticence in Asian students. Therefore, sub-themes of *speaking* and *relevance* seem to be in line with the current developments in ELT. Relevance seems to play a role in learning centers at universities as well. Generic support that is not connected to the context of the classroom is typically not effective as it leaves students ill equipped to apply the support to the demands of the course (Tinto, 2012).

Regarding supplemental instruction, mentioned in one of the samples in session 7.1.1, a study by Terrion and Daoust (2012) at the University of Ottawa has shown that it can increase both academic and social integration, which has the potential to positively influence student retention. Sargent et al (2013) created a short, cost-effective online tutorial aimed at helping weaker students of a course of Elementary Statistics. Their report showed that at-risk students were especially responsive to the tutorials. Low achievers who took the course had better grades. Although the study did not show a direct

impact on retention, we could infer that it would be positive since grade performance strongly affects retention in general (Tinto, 1993). E-Campus, an online tool used at our institution was also mentioned in the samples. Every student has access to this platform where he or she can find thousands of exercises. It is very useful to help students who missed lessons and students who need extra practice.

Many studies show that addressing the needs of minority, such as, for example, Latin or African-American students, have increased their success (Tinto, 1993). An ethnographic minority-related study (Herrera et al, 2012) is an example of a retention program that was successful because it addressed specific needs of specific students. In addition, Reyes (2012) has reported a successful mentoring program aiming at meeting the needs of first year students at the University of Texas Pan American. Focusing on the needs of students seems to be part of our institutional culture. Nonetheless, those studies suggest that language institutes could profit from a more systematic study of the needs of the students.

Tampke (2013) documented the development of an early alert system that served as a retention tool at the University of North Texas. The system used an 18-item scale to determine which students are at risk. Examples of items are difficulty with reading and disruptive behavior. This tool is based on the assumption that the earlier support is offered, the more effective it is in terms of retention (ibid). In the first year of college, Tinto says (2012, p. 25), “student retention is still very responsive to institutional intervention.” In my local language institute context, we do know that different age groups are more difficult to retain, but we do not know at what level students are more responsive to institutional intervention. This would certainly be one recommendation for future research.

Vincent Tinto calls our attention to an aspect of student *support* that is important in order to obtain good retention results. “Social cognitive theory”, he says, “argues that individuals’ interpretation of their performance alters their sense of self-efficacy and, in turn, their future performance” (Tinto, 2012, p. 27). This may explain why *support* is most effective in first-year students. At the same time, when applying this concept to the language institute equivalent of the first-year student, which would be the first-term elementary adult, many students already carry a strong feeling of “self-inefficacy” when they mention they had started English lessons several times in their lives, but never reached intermediate level. One way of dealing with this issue is certainly investing in *relationship* with students, what leads us to the next broad theme of the present study.

### 7.3 Relationship – samples

The idea that good *relationship* is key to retention is widespread within the samples of the institutional culture. *Relationship* is not necessarily directly related to learning, but rather creating conditions and an environment that would be conducive to learning. *Relationship* refers to something that comes before any other learner need. It's about being recognized as a person.

And, whatever they tell me about themselves, I remember and use it in class. I think they may kinda feel "well, this is not only an English class, I'm an actual person here." (I#3)

This personalized kind of service that we offer, although it's time-consuming, it shows that we care. As a consumer, that's what I want. I would go back to a class where the teacher shows some kind of interest. He or she noticed that I wasn't there. (I#6)

And I try to bond with them, from day one. On the first day of class I know everybody's names. And if I see them outside the classroom, I know who they are. So, to me it's really important. (...)And I try to see who they are, to treat them as people, not as a student. (...)I know what they like. I try to comment on something they have told me. Like, "ah, I went to this interview", "oh, how was it? Did you do it well?" This helps me a lot. And whenever I have a problem in the classroom and this doesn't happen, I feel really bad. Because this is what I think I can do best. And if I can't do this, I feel frustrated. (I#2)

Sometimes it goes even further.

I remember in the end, the real difficult one, XXXXX, he was notorious in the branch, and in the end he came up to me and said "teacher", and I said "yes", "you're the only teacher at the Cultura who've ever liked me". And I realized students want to feel liked. It's very curious, that was when I realized, really, how the students want to be liked. How they really want to be liked. 'Cause he was this really difficult student. (I#3)



It feels unreasonable to expect teachers to develop such a personal relationship with every student. They do agree, however, that developing good rapport is important and that it takes effort.

Maybe if they don't like the teacher, even adults. We know that if we don't have the rapport, then I don't think things work well. (I#9)

I think getting to know the students more is essential. Although we're becoming very much a world of Internet and becoming anonymous, they want this individual, they need this individual touch. I think they like the idea that we're there, knowing what they want to do and... and every time... if you sort of bring up, like, two months later you say "aaah, yes, I remember you like that film" and they "wow! Aaaah, ok, the teacher does listen to us." They'll be more ready to speak more. (I#3)

I spend a lot of time working on rapport and how to connect to the students. My first class is usually... I spend a lot of time in getting them to know each other. (I#1)

Keeping a positive environment is seen as important to retention and as a professional attitude.

If this is OK for the student, and the environment is good, the student will learn, not only the motivated ones, they will learn. And they will come back. Because they come back because of the environment. (I#6)

I'm never in a bad mood. And you see, I can be sick or whatever, I'm never, like, just grumpy and complaining about life. I think they like that. They see us as professionals too. (I#10)

And I really like what I do. This semester two students told me that. I like the way you teach because you show you love it. So, that's what I think. (...) they're paying for a course that the professional is genuinely happy to be there, happy to have their company (I#10)

At least one lesson observation report mentioned relationship issues as a possible cause of dropouts.

While you answered questions coming from the small groups, some of the other groups were not doing anything. Some students were texting. When trying to get student's attention, you said "Guys, shhhh.....". Please don't shush students, it feels patronizing. This might be a drop out factor. (O#7)

From a manager's point of view, a positive environment among the staff is important.

Creating a positive and collaborative professional environment where teachers and staff can share good practices and work as a team (...) establish a partnership between teachers, staff and manager in order to achieve goals (Branch Manager Interview #1)

#### 7.4 – Relationship – literature and discussion

It seems like there has not been enough attention to the *relationship* theme in the field of English Language Teaching (Senior, 1997). Rosemary Senior stated, back in 1997, that although there are studies that examine group processes from a pedagogic perspective, little attention has been paid to the social aspects of groups. About seven years later, Thomas Farrell expresses a similar idea in the same journal (Farrell, 2015). "Relationship-building", he says, "has not received the attention It deserves from researchers in the field of TESOL where teacher-student relationships of various types are a central component in successful teaching and learning" (ibid, p. 26). Regarding that theme, a case study of an English class for LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) learners in Japan (Moore, 2014) offers a very interesting account. Ashley Moore (ibid) interviewed class participants and used applied thematic analysis to examine their experiences. One of the broader themes presented is also *relationship*. "The relationships that the participants had developed while participating in the OPEN program were frequently put forward as one of the main reasons why they enjoyed coming to the classes." (ibid, p. 11). The author mentions one particular student who did not miss any classes in a 6-year period due to the relationships he had developed. This seems to be in consonance with the institutional culture presented in the samples related to the broader theme of *relationship* in the present study.

Braxton et al (2014, p. 39) recommend "imperatives" for institutional policy that include "a respect for each student as an individual should manifest itself in the day-to-day interactions". Aypay et al (2013) carried out a student retention qualitative study in higher education in Turkey. Students voiced issues such as (ibid, p. 105) "the faculty did not see students... I got lost in the department" and "some faculty members who were OK in class would not even say hi or respond to our salutations out-of-class". These relationships issues were, according to the authors, related to student dropouts. By the same token, Lillis (2012) has shown that informal faculty interactions with students and mentors who had higher levels of

emotional intelligence had a significant impact in lowering dropout intentions. Similarly, Ghanizadeh and Moafian (2010) indicate that teachers with higher emotional intelligence tend to be more successful, although their measure of success does not include student retention.

The studies mentioned above suggest that characteristics that led to good results in student retention and reducing the number of dropouts are present in the speech of teachers and managers of the language institute where this present study takes place. In addition, they support the choice of themes and sub-themes of *relationship, good rapport, positive environment* and *personalized service*.

### 7.5 Trust and Honesty – samples

Samples of *trust and honesty* are not very abundant. They come, however, from a diversity of sources. Six of them come from interviews with different teachers. The other two come from the two interviews with branch managers. The most common issue is feedback from teacher to student.

I think they need to listen not only the good feedback, but also what they need to improve. But I think so, I think they feel like they're not only receiving "very good!", you know, "I'm being catered for, even for my difficulties". (I#4)

Not in a fake way. If you say all the time "very good, very good" it sounds fake, but showing him "that's great, that's gonna help you" or "wow, what you've said just now, when you go through a job interview, this really is gonna help you." (I#3)

But I think this sort of atmosphere... ahn... makes them feel comfortable enough to come to me and talk about whatever they're feeling about the course, or if they are thinking about quitting. I'm always honest with them, you know, so... if I think... if they ask me "Do you think I'll be able to cope with studying this, this and then doing a Masters?" I'll be honest and say "No, I don't think you will." So, I'm honest with them. (I#5)

Friendliness and trust come together and they can ensure participation.

So, I think if you are friendly, they trust you, they can rely on you, and then they respond to what you're asking. (I#7)

Reliability is related to student retention, according to the account of this teacher.

if the student relies on the teacher, he or she will come back. (I#6)

Honest feedback from manager to teachers and a relationship based on trust (although also on high expectations) are key to good student retention according to this Branch Manager.

Remembering that 'no one rises to low expectations', so it is important to make objectives clear and to show teachers and staff how you trust that they will achieve them; focus on strengths as much as on weaknesses (Branch Manager Interview #1)

These two samples below, however, indicate there might be more to the data collected in the first cycle, when most students expressed they would not continue studying due to lack of time or clash with other courses.

If they're good students, but they don't adapt, they tend to leave, they tend to complain about something else (I#1)

I would question whether the justifications for not enrolling are really representing the reasons why students are dropping out. But that does not help much in short term. (Branch Manager Interview #2)

## 7.6 – Trust and Honesty – literature and discussion

*Trust and Honesty*, as a theme, does not offer as many samples as the other themes. However, even though the content about *trust and honesty* is not so plentiful, a representative number of teachers spontaneously stated they believe in its importance for student retention. The very last samples in part 7.3.1, nonetheless, call our attention to something important that might be somehow hidden in the data. Dean and Whyte (1958) believe that interviews are of great value not because of the immediate data that can be drawn from them. Interviews are social situations and how these situations can influence the expressions of sentiments and the reporting of events needs to be taken into account (ibid). The questions that should guide the researcher, according to the authors, are “What do the

informant's statements reveal about his feelings and perceptions and what inferences can be made from them about the actual environment or events he has experienced?" (ibid, p. 38). Bearing that in mind, it seems like students are not very comfortable explaining their decisions to stop studying at the institution and teachers are not focusing on that. Why would that be, though?

We can learn significantly from unsuccessful situations related to, for example, *support or relationships*, but it all depends on feedback, be it from teacher to student, student to teacher, or manager to teacher. Feedback is central to supporting cognitive and professional development (Archer, 2010). It is challenging, since the provider "must acknowledge the psychosocial needs for the recipient while ensuring feedback is both honest and accurate" (ibid, p. 102). An atmosphere of *trust and honesty* is prevalent as recommendations for teacher trainers and mentors (Underhill, 1992; Arnold, 2006; Stillwell, 2009). Personal and professional development requires a climate where there is "honesty and respect in and between people, mutual support based on understanding and trust, and hence a greater degree of psychological security" (Underhill, 1992, p. 79). Regarding students, Maurice Antier (1976, p. 5) says "if they [students] are to believe what we [teachers] say, we must enjoy their full trust and confidence and actions speak louder than words".

In other words, no teacher, manager or student would probably say that *trust, honesty and feedback* are not important. Yet, we have studied 592 telephone records from one semester (most students received from 2 to 4 different calls) and it yielded very little information that could help us understand why students decided not to continue studying. One manager questions the reasons those students expressed and one teacher suggests students sometimes are not truthful when stating reasons for dropping out.

From the perspective of the student, research shows that people tend refrain from telling the truth for politeness purposes (Murphy et al, 2007) and to avoid confrontations and awkward social situations (Epstein et al, 1996; Vincent et al, 2007). In addition, from the perspective of the teachers, a certain mismatch between teacher intentions and the students' interpretations is expected (Kumaravadivelu, 1991). In fact, "the narrower the gap between teacher intention and learner interpretation, the greater are the chances of achieving desired learning outcome" (ibid, p. 98). Similarly, literature in higher education shows that although teachers believe they give feedback regularly, students do not always recognize it (Archer, 2010).

What we can infer about the data is that there is a chance students who do not wish to continue are not telling us why. There is a mismatch between students, teachers and maybe even managers. As of now, however, it leaves us with more questions than answers.

## 8. Conclusion

The objective of this study is to develop greater knowledge and understanding about student retention in one particular institution, with hopes this knowledge can help raise retention levels in the future. The literature review of college student retention and the comparison to what is available in TEFL/TESL literature revealed that we can profit from a systematic study of student retention within our field.

The premise of this study is that, after exploratory inquiry (cycle 1), interviews with teachers (cycle 2) who have good retention results would reveal beliefs and behaviors that could lead to better student retention. The third cycle contrasted these ideal beliefs and behaviors to observations of real lessons in groups with more dropouts than the average. The results from first, second and third cycles were exposed to two managers with history of excellent retention results, followed by an interview. This content and the comparison (and divergence) between what successful teachers believe leads to good student retention and real lessons with dropout issues served as basis for the emergence of themes.

The first and second main themes identified in the data were: support and relationship. *Support* came along with sub-themes: focus on needs, relevance, speaking, perception of learning and personalized service. The latter is a sub-theme shared with the second main theme, *relationship*. Along with *relationship* comes good rapport and positive environment. Literature in college student retention showed empirical support for all sub-themes except for speaking, which is specific to ELT. This assures the relevance of the findings. A third theme emerged: trust and honesty, along with the sub-themes honest feedback (teacher to student, student to school and manager to teacher). Literature in both higher education and ELT suggest this theme is related to personal and professional development.

In conclusion, the present study has identified a group of themes that not only are recognized within the institutional culture as conducive to good results in student retention, but also validated by empirical studies in higher education. Since the literature in TEFL/TESL offers so little regarding student retention, these themes might be an interesting starting point for future research.

As for suggestions for future research, the tradition of more than 40 years in college student retention, exposed in part 2, might offer interesting and useful ideas. Despite the criticism received, descriptive studies of dropouts, including the psychological characteristics of these students might be a good starting point. A longitudinal study that includes the students' environment, academic and social systems over different periods of time, such as the one Vincent Tinto published in 1975, albeit in a different setting, would yield very important information. Studies from what was called "the age of involvement", in the 70s and the 80s led scholars to conclude that "involvement matters and it matters most during the first critical year of college" (Tinto, 2006, p. 3). Replicating these studies might help us identify when the institutional intervention (as discussed in part 7.2) would be more effective regarding, for example, applying what we already know in terms of *support* and *relationship*. Finally, studying factors related to under-represented students, such as maybe gender, ethnicity, income and orientation is undoubtedly of relevance.

Nonetheless, questions for future research that stem specifically from this present study are:

1. How can the knowledge of the themes *support*, *relationship* and *trust and honesty* inspire effective action?
2. How can we increase the efficacy of *support* to students?
3. What is the optimal level of closeness regarding the relationship between teachers and students as to increase student retention?
4. How can we understand better that factors related to *trust and honesty* that are at play and can influence student retention?
5. How can what we know improve the students' sense of self-efficacy?

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