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# THE EVALUATION OF VIRTUAL TUTORING IN AN ENGLISH DEGREE BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19

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**Abstract**: This research presents results of the evaluation of virtual tutoring before and during COVID-19 at the higher level. The objective of this research is to document the points of view of the tutors and tutees of the Bachelor's program in English virtual mode through a SWOT study to evaluate the tutoring program in the Bachelor's Degree in English (LI) virtual modality. The research questions are: How are virtual tutoring being delivered?, What are the strengths of virtual tutoring?, and What are the weaknesses of virtual tutoring?, Has virtual tutoring improved during the COVID-19 pandemic? A mixed methodology was contemplated. In the qualitative part, the current situation of virtual tutoring is described and interpreted, and the points of view of tutors, tutees and the coordination of Tutoring are reflected. In addition, the quantitative information was obtained through the application of questionnaires applied with Google forms and data analyzed with the SSPSS program. The opinion of ten virtual tutors before the pandemic and 7 virtual tutors during the pandemic, and 27 students with an initial, intermediate, and final school trajectory, and two tutors within the tutoring coordination (PAT) at the School of Languages were considered. The research considers two moments, the first before the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019 and the second during the pandemic considers the entire year of 2020 and the first half of 2021. Finally, reflections and suggestions are presented for the improvement of virtual tutoring.

**Keywords:** virtual tutoring, higher level, Mexico, evaluation, COVID-19.

## INTRODUCTION

Tutoring, also defined as tutoring or mentoring in English, is an activity that is not recent, neither in Mexico nor in the rest of the world, as stipulated (Romo, 2011). Academic tutoring is an activity that involves the monitoring and accompaniment that the tutor gives to the student during their school career and that supports the student in their integral development, including the affective, intellectual and social development of the student, including institutional work for the reduction of school dropout The ANUIES (2002) defines tutoring as a process of accompaniment during the training of students, which is specified through personalized attention to a student or a small group of students, by competent academics trained for this function, supported by conceptually in theories of learning more than in those of teaching.

Tutoring has been increasing its modalities, functions, and roles over time. The modalities include the following: face-to-face, virtual, focused, group, academic, and personal. Among the basic functions of the tutor according to (Garcia, B. et al. 2016) are knowing the characteristics of the tutored, identifying the form of admission and the admission scores obtained, providing group and/or personal guidance in the different types and modalities of tutoring, monitoring the academic performance of students, and directing them to take academic counseling to improve their school performance.

The universities also refer that the tutoring has very precise objectives such as thesis supervision, direction of social service projects, coordination of professional practices and resolution of doubts and learning problems of the students during any course. Over time, the role of the tutor became more relevant at the PNPC postgraduate level because it strengthens the improvement of educational quality by providing support and advice during the development of the student's thesis project. All the above to help students stimulate their thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving capabilities and processes, Fresán and Romo (2011:38).

The tutor must develop different types of skills such as training, pedagogical, communication, socializing, and technological skills. The training skills are aimed at favoring mastery of the theoretical and methodological corpus of the discipline or the profession of the teacher-tutor. Pedagogical competencies contemplate the appropriate use of didactic strategies that favor the construction of knowledge, autonomy and responsibility.

Communication skills are essential because the tutor must maintain good communication and rapprochement with the tutor by developing horizontal communication through the use of email, interviews, movies, power point presentations, meet, zoom, or through any social network. However, it is important that tutors remember that they have limitations and that they do not have the training of a psychologist, so they must be prudent and wise in channeling the student in a timely manner if required.

Last but not least, the technological skills that increase in importance from the COVID-19 pandemic because most of the tutorial sessions had to be changed to online tutorials and where the teacher had to resort to technological tools to teaching classes and tutorial sessions. However, it was possible to perceive that face-to-face tutorials vary from online tutorials for various reasons, such as that the tutorials can be synchronous or asynchronous depending on the needs of the accessibility times of the students and the mode of delivery will depend on the context of the course. place and people involved in the tutoring.

According to Sesento (2019), "the role of the tutor in virtual environments is essential to develop and enhance student learning." With this perspective, virtual tutoring is a current challenge for universities that offer online educational programs since this modality is relatively new, less than twenty years old in Mexico. In such a way that online tutoring supports the student to find a balance in her activities as an integral and critical human being. It also promotes the development of student autonomy, helps them learn to organize their time and make appropriate decisions that help them in their professional, personal, and spiritual development. For virtual tutoring to transcend, it is necessary to establish the profile of the virtual tutor and provide him with training and constant updating that allows him to promote effective academic and socio-emotional mediation in virtual environments. For this reason, it is recommended that the virtual tutoring program be given the same relevance as the face-to-face tutoring program where it is institutional. So, it is necessary for the virtual tutoring to have content manuals, procedures and confirmation of sessions.

## RATIONALE

The Autonomous University of Chiapas (UNACH), the highest house of studies in the state, has as its raison d'être the integral formation of its students through tutoring; For this reason, the Institutional Tutoring Plan is developed, which is proposed in the Educational and Academic Model of UNACH as a strategy to avoid desertion and academic lag of students through the accompaniment of a tutor who informs them, supports them, it guides the student both in his university academic work and in his personal development.

The Autonomous University of Chiapas relies on the Institutional Tutoring Program (PIT) and the Tutorial Action Plan (PAT) to provide and share information about institutional regulations (Organic Law and student regulations), the corresponding study plan, the different administrative procedures, access to support services, complementary programs to professional

training, offer of extracurricular activities, scholarships, mobility and academic exchange, technological resources to support your academic activity (libraries, databases, computer centers, etc..) and provides sports, artistic and cultural guidance, among others. As shown in the following graph taken from the teacher training course called "Tutoring in Higher Education" in the year 2021.

The UNACH Institutional Tutoring Program (PIT) and the General Tutoring Regulations describe the theoretical and methodological foundations incorporated into the six proposed subprograms: Introduction to the university and the educational program, attention to diversity and comprehensive training of the university student, development of citizen, professional and work skills, professionalization of the teacher-tutor, monitoring and evaluation of the tutorial action and school trajectories. The PIT follows a diversified and flexible model that contemplates three moments of operation: awareness and dissemination, development and evaluation, and monitoring through various delivery modalities such as distance, individual, small group, class group, focus group, peer group, etc.

The following scheme exemplifies the regulations and action plan of the Institutional Tutoring Program. The regulations are established in the PIT (DC-113-08-01) and in the General Regulations (RG-113-08-01), specifying the type of modalities taught at UNACH (distance, individual, small group, class group, focus group, among equals) and those responsible for the tutoring process depending on their function DFIE, PIT, PAT, CAPS, tutors.

In addition, it discloses the subprograms of the PIT that are: a) induction to the university and the educational program, b) attention to diversity and comprehensive training of the university student, c) development of civic, professional and labor skills, d) professionalization of the teacher-tutor, e) monitoring and evaluation of the tutorial action, f) school trajectories. Adding to the importance of this, it shows the moments of the tutoring program that include (awareness and dissemination, development, evaluation and monitoring and school trajectories). With the above, it is intended to contribute to the improvement of educational programs, student care services and the comprehensive training of students. In such a way that the tutoring process is successful, and it is recommended to contemplate the professionalization of the teacher-tutor where the tutor participates in a reflective way about his or her tutorial practice and systematize experiences within a tutorial collaborative work. Finally, it is advisable to follow up and proceed to an evaluation of the tutorial action program on a continuous basis to contribute to the improvement of the tutorial system at UNACH.

Main Characteristics of the UNACH tutoring modalities, Gutu Gloria (2021)

### GENERAL OBJECTIVE:

Evaluate the Virtual Tutoring Program of the Bachelor's Degree in English online modality of the School of Languages, UNACH.

### METHODOLOGY

The research follows a methodology with a mixed phenomenological approach, being qualitative and quantitative. For the qualitative part, the current situation of virtual tutoring is being described and interpreted, and for the quantitative part the information is statistically analyzed to have a better understanding of virtual tutoring phenomenon. The investigation considers two moments, the first contemplates the data collection in 2019 (before COVID-19) and the second period includes the year 2020 and the first half of 2021 (during COVID-19).
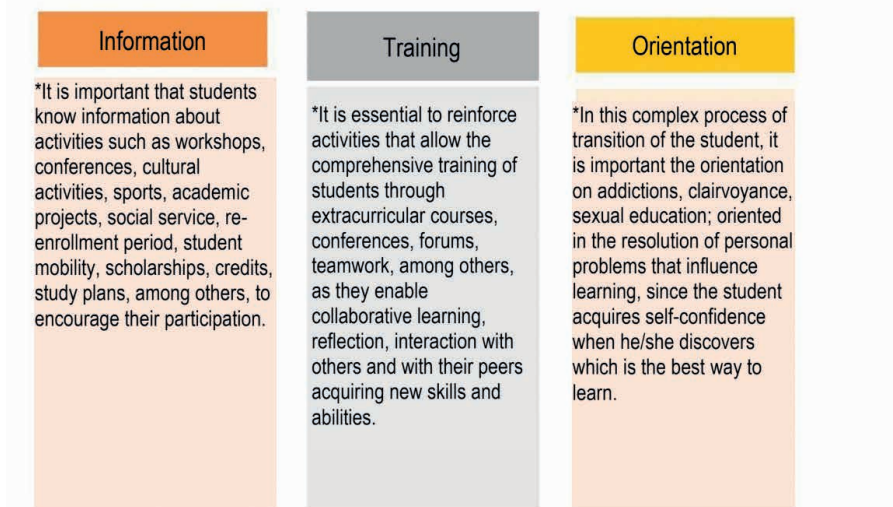
Figure 1. Tutoring in Higher Education

Source: Course Material: Tutoring in Higher Education, UNACH, 2021.
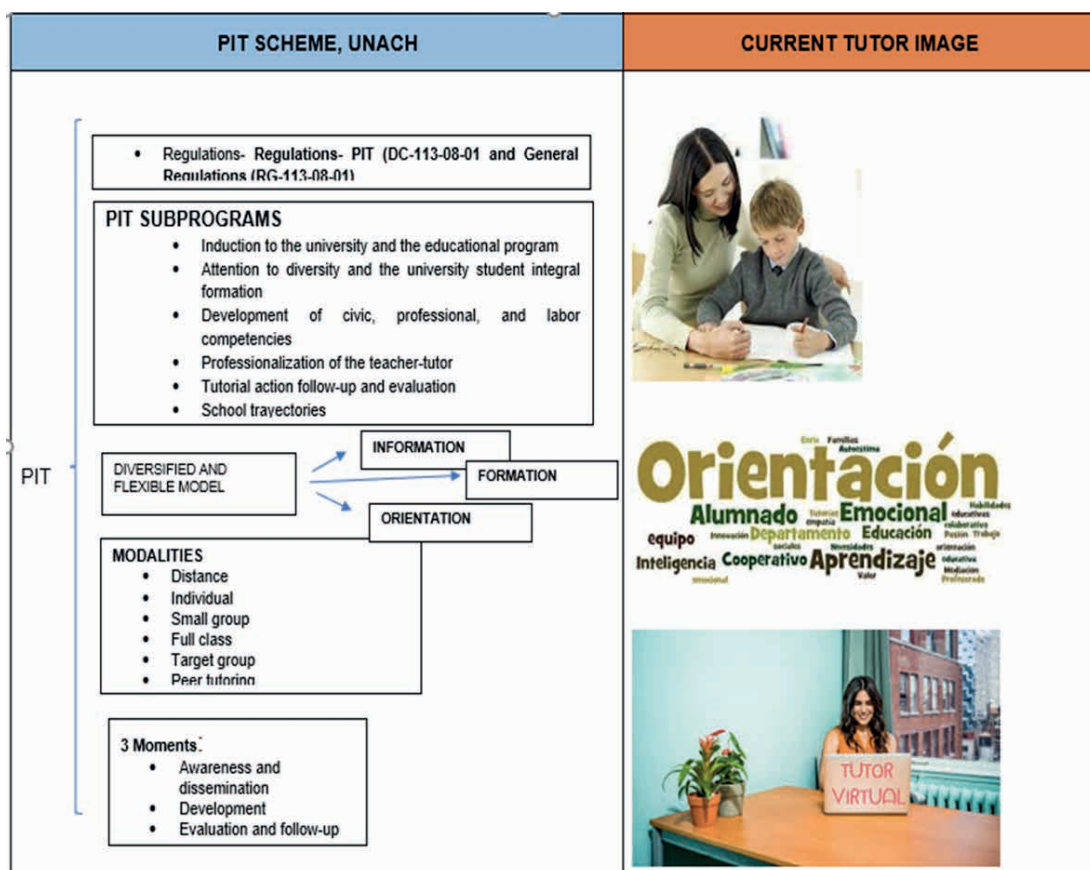


Figure 2. PTI Schematic - UNACH
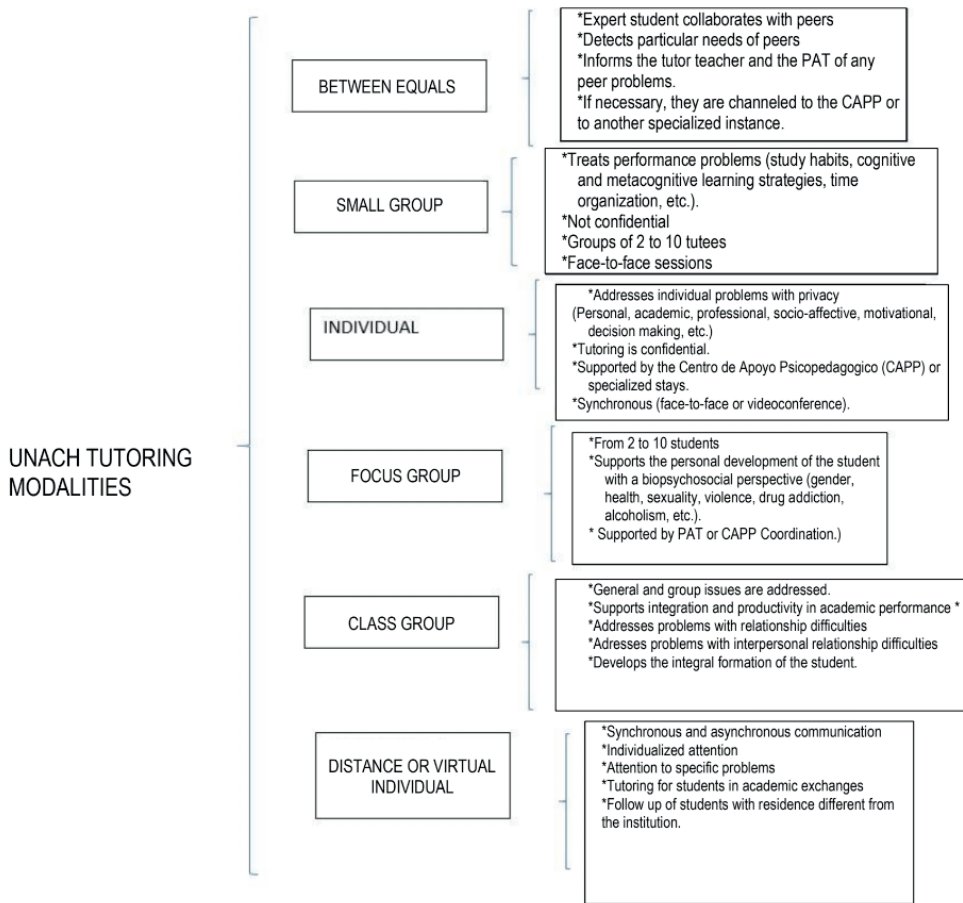
Source: Own Dra. Gloria Gutu (2021)

Figure 3. UNACH Tutoring Modalities
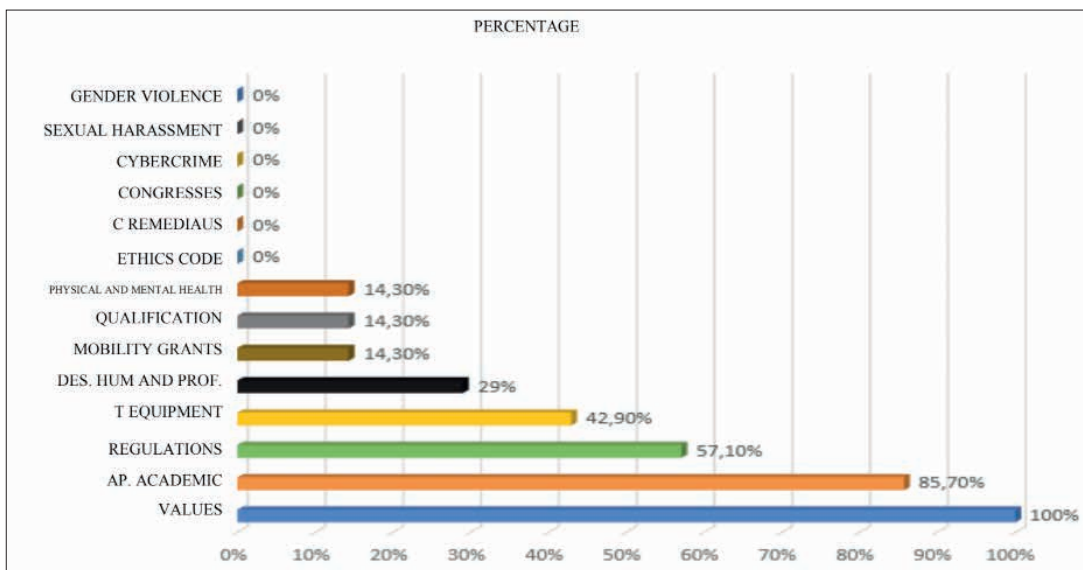
Source: Own elaboration Gloria Gutu (2021)



Figure 4. Content Covered in Tutoring Sessions

Consequently, the opinions or points of view of the tutors, tutees and the School of Languages Ba in English tutorial coordination. The data collection of the first period in 2019, included questionnaires and interviews to 10 virtual teachers-tutors, including the two coordinators. In this first moment, the opinion of the students was not included.

The second period, during the COVID-19 pandemic, corresponding to 2020-2021, includes the opinion of 7 virtual tutors and 27 students of the Ba in English virtual modality, who were strategically selected according their initial, intermediate, and final school trajectory. Both tutors and tutees answered Google forms questionnaires with questions related to the delivery of virtual tutoring before and during the pandemic. For the evaluation of the information, interpretation, and triangulation, the SPSS program together with the opinions of the participants and the SWOT tool were used. With the SWOT tool, strengths, weaknesses, obstacles, and areas of opportunity were identified for the improvement of the virtual tutoring program in the Ba.

The participants involved in this research during the second stage 2020-2021 are seven teacher-tutors and two teachers who have worked in the tutorial coordination. The nine teachers and the 27 students were selected for the survey application according whether they were teaching in the first year (1st or 2nd semester), in the second year (3rd or 4th semester) or in the third year (5th and 6th semester) resulting in three teachers from each academic year. An interview with the coordinator of the Language School Tutorial Action program was considered in conjunction with another teacher-tutor expert who had previously served as the coordinator of the Language School.

## RESULTS

During the second part of the research, it was found that 86% of the virtual tutors of the Virtual Degree in English are over 40 years of age, which implies that they were not born within the technological era and they are likely to have deficiencies in the use of technological tools. In addition, the tutoring sessions and training courses before 2020 were mainly for face-to-face tutoring and not virtual tutoring, reported by the on-line tutor C (January, 2021) commented "The tutoring courses and training have been for face-to-face tutoring and not for virtual tutoring." In such a way that it was found that there was greater difficulty in performing the academic tutoring and virtual accompaniment tutoring sessions during January-June 2020 semester due to lack of tutors' experience in academic and accompaniment tutoring. On the other hand, the teachers reported that during the semesters of August-December 2020 and January-June 2021 they were able to give on-line academic and accompaniment tutoring session with greater confidence and efficiency than in 2019 and early 2020. On the other hand, students also stated that they had never had any interaction with their teachers, tutors and classmates until in 2019 they began to use WhatsApp, but it was not until the second half of 2020 that they were able to meet via meet or zoom and maintain communication. closer since they began to interact, consult doubts, expose concerns in a personal way in addition to the academic part.

Among the topics that were addressed during the tutorials, it was found that both the tutored students and the tutors reported a lack of attention to issues of gender violence, sexual harassment, cybercrime, lack of knowledge of the code of ethics and lack of information for the attendance at conferences. In fact, this was reflected in the controversial case of the student doctor Mariana, who died as a victim

of sexual harassment at the beginning of the year 2021. Another aspect that is little covered is mental health with 14.3%, this shows the little support psychopedagogical for the attention students of the virtual degree. Therefore, it is important to look for psycho-pedagogical support alternatives for virtual students and not only for face-to-face students, as shown in the attached table.

Another reported aspect is that the number of tutoring sessions that were carried out from August-December 2020 and January-June 2021 semesters increased thanks to the fact that teachers began to use applications and technological tools that they did not know before, such as Google Meet and zoom which made the tutoring sessions more humanized. In other words, the use of technological tools such as Google meet and zoom allowed greater communication and rapprochement with virtual students and tutors. Secondly, an increase in weekly tutorial sessions was reported during the August-December 2020 and January-June 2021 semesters because the School of Languages regulated and institutionalized the amount of tutoring sessions that full-time teachers must cover to three hours of academic tutoring sessions per week and three hours of accompaniment tutoring sessions per week. This strategy aims to combat school dropout, given that during the pandemic many students abandoned their studies either for health reasons such as the death of a close relative or for economic reasons where they had to go to work as a result of the economic crisis derived from the COVID-19 pandemic. Making tutoring practice mandatory and having the students confirm those sessions was a wise decision it gives students support and follow up on academic issues, particularly at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic when students felt isolated. However, in subsequent research it will be interesting to analyze the level of quality of the tutoring sessions to see the level of impact on the reduction of school dropout in the English degree, virtual modality.

On the other hand, the School of Languages implemented the Tutorial Sessions for the first time in 2019 and that in 2021 it was implemented again as a very appropriate strategy to follow up on the attention to the demands and needs of the students of the entire UNACH by the case of gender violence and sexual harassment of the doctor Mariana N at the School of Languages, Campus Tapachula.

The pedagogical dialogue was used in all the Schools and Faculties of the UNACH during the year 2021, which was a very successful strategy derived from the school narratives, again for the attention of the student demands for the case of Mariana N during the student strike during the February -April 2021 period.

The pedagogical dialogue, both in tutorial sessions and in school dialogues, are forms of social participation that include different school actors such as managers, teachers, tutors, advisors, students, and administrators to include inclusive themes that contribute to university development. Hence the importance of systematizing the dialogues to promote social participation and continuous reflection that support educational innovation, educational quality and tutorials, attention to various problems such as gender violence or cyber bullying, internalization and from various fields such as teaching practice, curricular design, projects focused on improving educational quality and management support for the development of the community or society.

> "School narratives are those that recover the experiences triggered from interactions established by teachers, students, parents and inhabitants of a locality, who come into contact through a relationship established in the curriculum." (Espinosa, 2017:10).

The answers to the second and third research questions help to identify the strengths and weaknesses of on-line tutoring in the Ba in English are shown by means of table 1. BA in English On-line Tutoring SWOT Analysis.

The evaluation of the online tutoring program provided some insight of how the tutoring program is performed and ways to improve it. The SWOT analysis evidenced the weakness of the online tutoring program and the areas of opportunity to work on. For this proposal, some areas of concern to be improved are training of both tutors and tutees, topics to be covered, timing, and normativity.

First, training tutors on achieving different competences is essential. Tutors should be trained to develop different competences such as the pedagogical, technological, communicative, cognitive, socioemotional, and intercultural. As it was found in this research, tutors have not been trained in online tutoring, interculturality or technological tools before 2020. Moreover, the new virtual reality in the world stimulated the use of some technological and educational tools such as Zoom and Meet. As it was reported by 65% of the tutors, they mentioned a need to be trained in new educational apps and platforms. Some educational tools are forums, Teams, Canva, Kahoot, Flipgrid, English ESL worksheets among others, in this way teachers can teach more didactic classes. Therefore, providing a good tutor training will ensure a better tutoring quality. Furthermore, the platform tutoring's key should be activated in the https://www.educa-t.unach.mx/login/index.php platform and help tutors create virtual scenarios for synchronous and asynchronous interaction.

The pedagogical and cognitive competences should also be developed. Although the pedagogical and the cognitive competences were developed during the bachelor's degree formation, tutors still need to be aware and master the content, roles and normativity related to online tutoring which can be reached with training. Besides, tutors should foment the building of knowledge, reflection, and metacognition.

In relation to the intercultural competence, tutors should foment respect to different cultures and own heritage, inclusion, diversity, social consciousness, in ecological and social aspects. This competence includes the developing of cultural identity which is important to be developed because Tapachula is a multicultural bordering city with a high migrant fluctuation and Chiapas has several ethnic communities who still preserve their mother tongue and in some cases those languages are disappearing.

It is necessary for tutors to develop communicative competence because it will generate a more human environment so students and teachers can feel more comfortable when entering and confirming their sessions. Among the aspects related to this competence is the fact that tutors should write and speak congruently and clearly with a friendly tone of voice, and they should be committed to their tutoring sessions and to provide follow up sessions in case their tutees need it. Another thing to consider is that the on-line tutoring welcoming should be separated from the face-to-face tutoring's. It must be developed for virtual scenarios through ICT in which students can participate and get to know each other at some point of the course.

The development for the social and emotional learning competence is very important nowadays because it helps teachers and students achieved an integral formation. For that, developing social and emotional competence supports well-being through a healthy life through the five core competences

| Weaknesses | Threats |
|---|---|
| • Lack of commitment and sense of belonging on the part of the students. | · The virtual tutoring is not fulfilling the objective of accompaniment as support for teaching and as a tool against dropping out and falling behind in school. |
| • Lack of training in virtual tutoring. | · Students feel alone during their entire on-line BA program. |
| • More importance has been given to face-to-face than virtual tutoring. | |
| • Lack of time on the part of the students because they work and are busy people. | **Opportunities** |
| • There is not a formal virtual tutorial manual with contents and ways of working. | • Enable the tutorial button on the platform and use new technologies to create virtual environments that favor the rapprochement between tutors and mentees where there is synchronous interaction, including perhaps face to face. |
| • Full-time teachers do not obtain their tutoring certificates because students do not confirm the tutoring sessions. | • Create awareness in both tutors and mentees about the importance and impact of virtual tutoring. |
| • The platform is not friendly, and the tutorial button is disabled. | • Enable the possibility of sending audios during tutorials to create a more humane and closer environment. |
| • Lack of training and awareness of tutors and tutees about the importance of tutoring. | • Create a protocol for the delivery of virtual tutorials. |
| • There is no student referral program for serious problems. | • The coordinator of virtual tutorials must be different from that of face-to-face tutoring. |
| • By not having face-to-face contact or synchronous online meetings with the students, the human part is lost and it is difficult to support students on personal issues. | • The welcome of virtual tutorials must be separated from the welcome of face-to-face tutoring and must be created in virtual environments through ICTs where students can participate. |
| • More importance has been given to face-to-face tutoring and virtual tutoring has been neglected. | • Include tutoring as a creditable or non-creditable elective to force students to participate. |
| • Tutors make use of only four tools, emails, platform messages, what's up and nicelet platform. | • Create a virtual tutor work team to create the virtual tutor user manual. |
| • Webinars are only face to face. | • Train tutors so that they can use a greater number of technological tools such as forums, Skype, zoom, Google meet, vídeos, WhatsApp, and mobile applications for the learning of English to enrich virtual tutorials |
| • Tutoring sessions do not achive all the three aspects of informing, orienting and training students. | • Find ways for virtual students to have a type of representation in Consejo Técnico or Consejo Universitario at the UNACH, in this way their voices will be heard. |
| • On-line students do not have any kind of representation in Consejo Técnico or Consejo Universitario at the UNACH, so their voices cannot be heard. | • Having continuous dialogues will help administrators and the principal of the school to understand students, teachers and school needs and work together in favor of meeting them and improving the school. |
| **Strengths** | • Tutoring session should include the development of Social and Emotional Competences. |
| · Support space available for students where they can express their experiences and problems. | |
| · There is a technician who supports the resolution of problems that arise within the platform. | |
| · Serves as an approach to the institution and speed in solving problems presented by the student. | |
| · An informal manual was prepared to confirm the tutoring sessions for virtual teachers and students. | |
| · Through readings or videos, students are motivated to continue their career. | |
| · Online tutors are approachable for academic issues when a student is not achieving the appropriate performance or when the student believes he or she was not graded correctly. Therefore, the tutor helps mediate or serves as a linkage between the students and the authorities. | |
| · Online tutors also serve online students as a linkage between the school service department when they must meet different school procedures. | |
| · The directives made the tutoring practice mandatory for full time teachers and half-time teachers (three hours per week for accompaniment and three for academic) | |
| · For the teachers to get their tutoring document, students must confirm those tutoring session every teaching semester. | |

Table 1. BA in English On-line Tutoring SWOT Analysis

which are self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, social awareness, and self-management (López, 2017). Among the benefits are the control of stress, anxiety, depression, and it potentializes the ability to be happy, have a good sense of humor and develop resistance to frustration.

## CONTENT OF TOPICS

In relation to the content of topics to be covered, the topics should provide information, formation, and orientation according to the Academic and Educational Model of the UNACH (2018-2020). First, the information provided to online students during tutoring sessions should be according to their needs and wants in relation to the students' age and school trajectory. Second, the formation aspect includes the topic coverage which will help them to develop the students' integral formation. Third, the orientation aspect should be evidenced with the tutors' role as guide, support and link between students and the university.

The information and the orientation aspects resulted acceptable according to the students' and tutors' opinions, nevertheless, the formation aspect was not fully developed. For this reason, some recommendations are proposed. First, to continue with having both academic and accompaniment tutoring. Second the topics to be covered should include gender, sex violence, cyberbullying, UNACH Ethic code and remedial courses during tutoring sessions to educate students and prevent future problems that may affect dropout.

## TIMING AND AVAILABILITY

The amount of time for a tutoring session was a point of discussion in this research since tutees are usually busy due to their work. Teachers and students reported a very low online tutoring attendance, particularly reported during synchronous sessions. The results show that there is a controversy on the adequate amount of time for the online tutoring sessions. For one thing, students declared a preference for asynchronous sessions, even though, they find synchronous sessions useful. Therefore, two proposals were suggested to end this controversy.

The first recommendation is to work in collaboration of tutors and students to determine the appropriate range of time for online tutoring sessions. The next recommendation is related to the availability of online tutoring content sessions. It is recommended that webinars should be synchronous in case the online student can attend it or asynchronous with the help of recorded webinars or forums so students can keep their own pace and do not miss the content of important topics which will help them develop their integral formation. In relation to online tutoring sessions, synchronous sessions are recommended, but the tutors' and students' time is usually hard to match. In case this happens, tutors should develop a way to face this problem through collaborative decisions.

## NORMATIVITY

Although the PAT program has a well-developed normativity, online tutors reported to not have a well-developed manual for online tutoring sessions. Consequently, it is recommended to have a team of online tutors to create an online tutor manual for content, time, availability, and procedures. Collaborative work will ensure a better handbook and better tutoring results. Besides, it is also recommended the tutoring sessions should be placed as an accredited or non-accredited optional subject, this will make students participate more to get their credits needed to pass their semesters. One more recommendation is to include the welcome

program as an online activity separate from the face-to-face welcome activity. Finally, it is recommended that online students should have knowledge related to the Acting Protocol in case they suffer an abuse during their school trajectory.

## CONCLUSIONS

Finally, the public university under study UNACH has a solid institutional program that has served as a support for teaching that helps to avoid desertion and student lag. This university has a well-structured tutoring program for the Bachelor's Degree in English Teaching, which follows in some way the protocol for UNACH face to face tutoring programs. This research proved that the online tutoring program for the BA in English had some improvements during COVID-19 pandemic than prior to it. From the SWOT analysis, we can conclude that there are more weaknesses than strengths, therefore it is important to attend the recommendations proposed such as training teachers and students in the use of technological tools and the development of effective communication strategies, a need to work collaboratively in the online tutoring manual, a need to work collaboratively both teachers and students to determine the appropriate online tutoring time and availability for webinars and topics related to academic and accompaniment tutoring, and the need for online students to have a voice and representation at the UNACH. Finally, we must be aware about the problem that exists in on-line tutoring. As a result, we recommend giving online tutoring the same importance as in-person tutoring so that it accomplishes to have a more human nature, and in which the student acquires a sense of belonging to the institution and really prevents school dropouts.

Other aspects considered for online tutoring improvement are: the on-line tutoring coordinator must be different from the in-person tutoring, and the button for the https://www.educa-t.unach.mx/login/index.php platform must enable the tutoring button where the tutoring manual and the session confirmation manual should be presented; constant training and awareness of students and tutors on the importance and use of the different technological and communication tools that support the accompaniment and the reduction of school dropout. It is also important to develop collaborative work with virtual tutors for the creation of content manuals, procedures, and confirmation of sessions and mainly to create virtual tutoring environments for online tutoring sessions and the welcome program.

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