

## Representaciones sociales del aprendizaje del inglés en estudiantes de enfermería

### *Social Representations of English Language Learning in Nursing Students*

### *Representações sociais da aprendizagem de inglês em estudantes de enfermagem*

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### Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo fue determinar el núcleo central y el sistema periférico de las representaciones sociales del aprendizaje del inglés en estudiantes universitarios de enfermería del estado de Sinaloa, México. Se adoptó un enfoque mixto y se utilizó la técnica de redes semánticas naturales para el enfoque estructural de las representaciones sociales y el enfoque procesual para las entrevistas a profundidad hasta llegar a la saturación teórica. Se determinó que el núcleo central del aprendizaje del idioma inglés recae en los conceptos de *comunicación*, *oportunidades*, *comprensión* y *conocimiento*. En tanto que las representaciones sociales sobre el aprendizaje del inglés en profesionales de enfermería se sustentan en los conceptos de *comunicación* y *oportunidades*. En la parte procesual, se determinaron tres categorías teóricas: 1) “Estilos de aprendizaje del idioma inglés”, 2) “Globalización, inglés y oportunidades laborales” y 3) “Oportunidades del aprendizaje del idioma inglés”. Aunque los estudiantes de enfermería reconocen la importancia de adquirir la competencia del idioma inglés para su desarrollo tanto en la esfera personal como en la profesional, aún hay un largo camino para consolidar esta competencia en las instituciones públicas mexicanas de educación superior.

**Palabras clave:** aprendizaje del inglés, estudiantes de enfermería, representación social.



## Abstract

The objective of this work was to determine the central nucleus and the peripheral system of the social representations of learning English in nursing students in Sinaloa, Mexico. A mixed approach was adopted, and the technique of natural semantic networks was used for the structural approach of social representations and the procedural approach for in-depth interviews until theoretical saturation was reached. It was determined that the central core of learning the English language lies in the concepts of *communication*, *opportunities*, *understanding* and *knowledge*. While the social representations about learning English in nursing professionals are based on the concepts of *communication* and *opportunities*. In the procedural part, three theoretical categories were determined: 1) “English language learning styles”, 2) “Globalization, English and job opportunities” and 3) “English language learning opportunities”. Although nursing students recognize the importance of acquiring English language skills for their development in both the personal and professional spheres, there is still a long way to go to consolidate this skill in Mexican public institutions of higher education.

**Keywords:** English learning, nursing students, social representation.

## Resumo

O objetivo deste trabalho é determinar o núcleo central e o sistema periférico das representações sociais do aprendiz de inglês nos estudantes de enfermagem de Sinaloa, México. Adotou-se uma abordagem mista e utilizou-se a técnica de redes semânticas naturais para a abordagem estrutural das representações sociais e a abordagem processual para entrevistas em profundidade até a saturação teórica. Foi determinado que o núcleo central da aprendizagem da língua inglesa está nos conceitos de *comunicação*, *oportunidades*, *compreensão* e *conhecimento*. Enquanto as representações sociais sobre a aprendizagem do inglês em profissionais de enfermagem são baseadas nos conceitos de *comunicação* e *oportunidades*. Na parte processual, foram determinadas três categorias teóricas: 1) “Estilos de aprendizagem da língua inglesa”, 2) “Globalização, inglês e oportunidades de trabalho” e 3) “Oportunidades de aprendizagem da língua inglesa”. Embora os estudantes de enfermagem reconheçam a importância da aquisição de habilidades da língua inglesa para seu desenvolvimento tanto na esfera pessoal quanto profissional, ainda há um longo caminho

a percorrer para consolidar essa habilidade nas instituições públicas mexicanas de ensino superior.

**Palavras-chave:** aprendizagem de inglês, estudantes de enfermagem, representação social.

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## Introduction

The training of human resources in nursing in Sinaloa dates back to 1934, with the foundation of the Faculty of Nursing of the Autonomous University of Sinaloa (UAS), which, from its beginnings until the 2007-2008 school year, offered the educational program of nurse technician. As of the 2004-2005 school year, the first Nursing degree program came into operation. It should be noted that in neither of these two educational programs was it considered to include the unit for learning foreign languages or English.

Later, in the 2007-2008 school year, the first Nursing undergraduate study plan approved by the three nursing academic units of the UAS came into operation. In this curriculum, for the first time, two English learning units are integrated. In the fifth semester, English I is integrated. The unit of competence of this subject would be established as follows: perform readings related to the area of health, in order to achieve skills in listening, oral expression, reading and writing in the English language, based on the practices of real situations. In the sixth semester, English II is integrated and it is determined that the unit of competence of this learning unit is: performs readings related to health, in order to promote the skills of listening, oral expression, reading and writing in the language. English, based on the practices of real situations and knows the relevance of the competence of a second language, which allows access to updated information and facilitates professional mobility in the Mexican territory and at the same time internationally.

In the 2014-2015 school year, the reform and updating of the study plan for the Bachelor's degree in Nursing came into operation. On this occasion, three English language learning units were included. In the second semester, the "Basic English" learning unit was included, whose competence was established as follows: recognize basic grammatical issues of the English language to favor the development of basic reading and communication skills. In the third semester, the learning unit "Basic communication in English" was included, where it was established as a competence: it establishes basic communication in English to recognize needs in patients of nursing services with respect, alterity and empathy. In the

fourth semester, finally, "Reading comprehension strategies in English" was included as a subject and its competence was declared in the following terms: understand the relevant information of texts in the English language to obtain updated information in information sources of scientific character, adhering to the citation of the source and respecting the authorship.

In the 2021-2022 school year, the most recent update to the Bachelor of Nursing curriculum went into effect. In this update, the absence of English learning units stands out. However, all students are required to present an English language certification as a qualification requirement, which they can take in the same nursing academic unit or in the UAS language center.

The English language is a professional competence that enriches the cultural and scientific training of any professional. In Mexico, and in particular in the state of Sinaloa, the vast majority of professionals lack this competence. That is why this research considers it highly relevant to know the social constructs of undergraduate Nursing students through representation and their individual and collective significance.

The educational model of the UAS is focused on learning based on the humanistic and constructivist paradigm from which the teacher is viewed as a facilitator of knowledge and where the student practices self-regulated learning. The foregoing implies that the student is directly responsible for their academic training and is trained, not only for a particular profession, but that their training is integral to carrying out a professional and personal life with a humanistic social perspective (UAS, 2017).

There are two emblematic processes when dealing with social representations: anchoring and objectification. Through objectification, the object of representation is solidified, that is, social representation is objectified when that generalized abstract idea in a social group is concretized. Objectification centers the representation of reality in a concept structured in an image and a meaning agreed upon by society (Moscovici, 1979). The anchor, for its part, complements the object of representation, which is new, allows it to adhere to an already existing scheme and forms part of its use in everyday life, that is, it takes on a useful and practical meaning. Both objectification and anchoring allow the represented object to be consolidated in the dialectical framework of the social group to which it belongs. At the same time, it allows narrating, describing, explaining, finding a precise meaning to what did not have it before (Moscovici, 1979).

The objective is to determine the central nucleus and the peripheral system of the social representations of English language learning in nursing university students.

Social representations are built based on the social imaginary of a particular group or society. These are revealed in language or in the coding and categorization of social behavior. Reality as a social construction of representation is impregnated in the individual and collective (Sáenz, Maldonado y Figueroa, 2016).

Social representations allow us to give meaning to common sense social thought, which society depersonalizes and gives it a new identity for the construction of meanings of a given society and given subjects. This type of thought or representation turns scientific knowledge into a new meaning that society builds and rebuilds, gives it meaning and transforms it according to its culture (Wolfgang and Nicky, 2011).

In addition, the subject that it represents does so from its customs, imaginaries and values predetermined by the social group to which it belongs. Social representation also allows us the social construction of reality from the social, economic, educational and geographical context where the subjects are (Ibáñez, 2001).

Social representations are defined as the common sense knowledge that social subjects share and that give it meaning and meaning, that is, it is knowledge that is common and familiar to all subjects that belong to the same group and that has been internalized. . The foregoing applies to the social thought that is impregnated in societies, gives meaning and consistency to their system of beliefs and representation (De-Graft, 2012).

Social representations are ways of perceiving the events of everyday life, they are the appropriation of common knowledge that gives meaning to individual and collective social thought. This type of knowledge is agreed upon and put into practice by all social subjects. It is practical knowledge in which the entire community participates (Jodelet, 2010).

In this sense, social representation is a social construction of the community and that permeates the individuals that compose it or that build it, thus giving identity to its social imaginary (Garay, 2021).

What is understood as reality in everyday life is an intersubjective representation of shared meanings. Communication and social interaction start from the coding and categorization system that each society carries out on an object of social thought. The value system and its cultural reference framework are implicit as mediation systems in the representation (Ibáñez, 1988).

Higher education institutions in Mexico and in Latin America tend more and more to a policy of internationalization. From this perspective, English is key for students to be able to carry out anything from an academic exchange for six months to academic research stays at universities in the United States. Mastering this language is a cross-cutting skill for all professions, but particularly in health professions, since these are covered by the North American Free Trade Agreement. In other words, professionals in the health area can carry out professional mobility through these countries (Valdés, González, Díaz, Verdayes and Díaz, 2010).

The English language is considered as the language that offers the greatest opportunities for professional development. Nursing professionals who are fluent in this language and who present a certification in the United States or Canada will be able to practice nursing, since their communication skills in English will allow them to have a therapeutic nurse-patient relationship of quality and human warmth (Quezada , Finalet, Recino and Fleites, 2015).

The competence of the English language is increasingly necessary in the training of students. The largest production of scientific and technological research is published in English. Students can access all this knowledge through specialized platforms whose main language is English. (Fernández y Fernández, 2012).

## **Methods and techniques of investigation**

The methodological approach used is quantitative-qualitative (Creswell, 2005; Mertens, 2005; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003; Williams, Unrau and Grinnell, 2005). Studies with mixed approaches complement each other and deepen their findings and conclusions depending on the object of study proposed (Mertens, 2005). The statement of the problem and the research question are answered with much more data using a quantitative and qualitative approach (Hernández, Fernández and Baptista, 2014).

The instrument used was the natural semantic network technique for the quantitative approach. In this way, each subject determines the main concepts of their representation and assigns them a value on a scale of one to five, where one is the most important and five is the least important (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1984).



Semantic networks are a way of accessing the structure of social representations. Semantic networks also help us to identify the central nucleus of the representation, as well as its peripheral system (Figuroa, González and Solís 1981).

The association of words consisted of providing a word or sentence that served as a trigger, in this case it was learning the English language and learning the English language for nursing professionals; thus, the participating students from the different groups of the Nursing degree were asked to express five words that they spontaneously associate with those terms, and then categorize them in order of importance. It should be specified that the word that was placed number one was the most important and the one that was assigned number five, the least important.

To access the content of a representation, from the qualitative approach, an in-depth interview was carried out. Thus, discursive material was collected until reaching theoretical saturation to continue with the content analysis. (Jodelet, 2010).

### **Characterization of the subjects**

For the quantitative section, the participating subjects were students in the fourth semester of the Nursing degree. The application of the instrument consisted of 68 natural semantic networks that were used to determine the social representations of English language learning and another 68 natural semantic networks to determine the social representations of English language learning in nursing professionals. For each case, the instrument was answered by students of both sexes from groups 401, 402, 403 and 404, whose age is between 19 and 22 years. In total, 136 natural semantic networks were applied. It is important to point out that the same students answered the generating questions both to determine the social representations in the learning of the English language in general and to determine the social representations of the learning of the English language in Nursing professionals. After their selection, the students signed the informed consent letter (see tables 1 and 2) and showed their willingness to respond and structure the semantic network.

For the procedural technique, that is, for the qualitative paradigm, eight in-depth interviews were carried out. As study subjects, students were between 19 and 22 years old, of which four are women and four men, and were in the fourth semester of the Nursing degree, according to the principle of theoretical saturation and the analysis of content according to Bardin (1986).

Great importance was attached to the informed consent of the study subjects and their autonomy. Likewise, the research respected the ethical principles manifested in the Nuremberg Code, the Belmont Report, the Declaration of Helsinki and the ethical principles.

**Tabla 1.** List of students surveyed to whom the instrument of semantic networks of social representations of English language learning was applied

Programa educativo	Estudiantes		Total
	Fem	Masc	
Grupo 401	15	02	17
Grupo 402	15	02	17
Grupo 403	15	02	17
Grupo 404	15	02	17
Total	68		68

Fuente: Elaboración propia

**Tabla 2.** List of students surveyed to whom the instrument of semantic networks of social representations of learning the English language in nursing professionals was applied

Programa educativo	Estudiantes		Total
	Fem	Masc	
Grupo 401	15	02	17
Grupo 402	15	02	17
Grupo 403	15	02	17
Grupo 404	15	02	17
Total	68		68

Fuente: Elaboración propia

## Results

When making the final count of the defining words or different concepts, the value J was determined and this result shows the semantic bonanza of the network, that is, the number of occasions in which the word was repeated in the different semantic networks of each one of the students who participated (see table 3 and 4). Later, the operations were carried out to obtain the value m, which indicates the semantic weight, and this is obtained



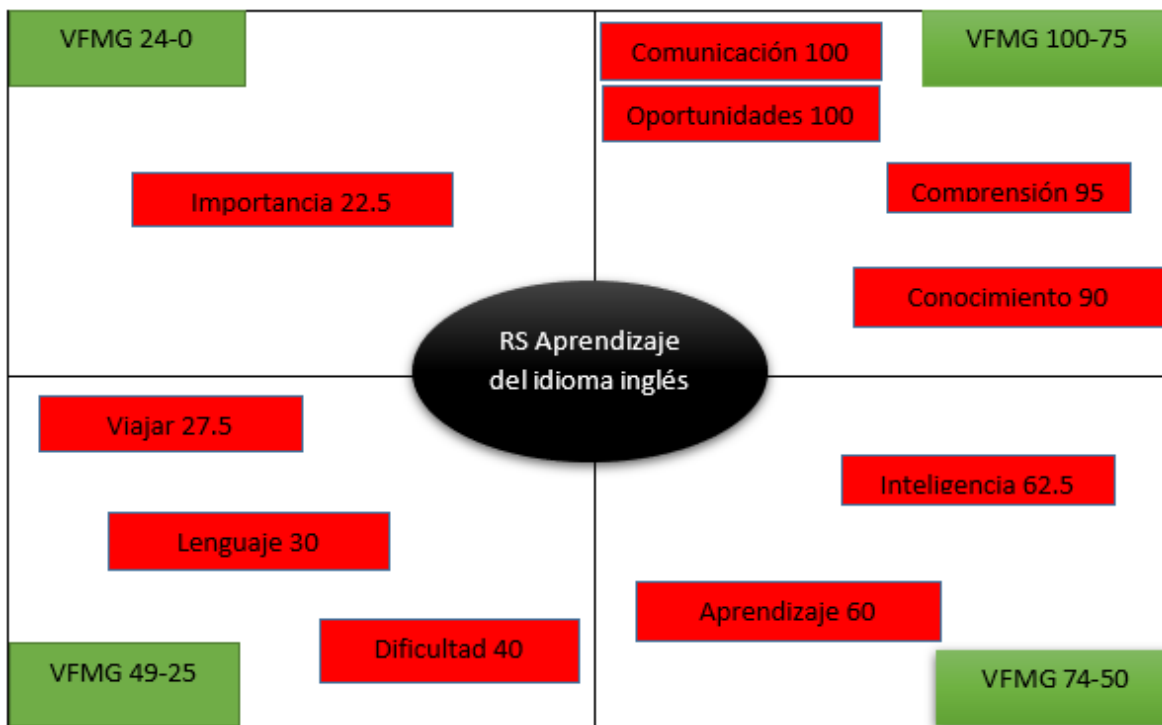
by individually multiplying the frequency of appearance ( $F_a$ ) of each defining word by the semantic value (VS), which is provided according to the assigned hierarchy level, finally, the resulting values of all the applied questionnaires are added (Mireles, 2014; Valdez, 1998).

**Tabla 3.** Central distribution and semantic weight of the peripheral system of the social representations of English language learning (figure 1)

Distribución central de la red	Peso semántico del sistema periférico
1) Comunicación	100
2) Oportunidades	100
3) Comprensión	95
4) Conocimiento	90
5) Inteligencia	62.5
6) Aprendizaje	60
7) Dificultad	40
8) Lenguaje	30
9) Viajar	27.5
10) Importancia	22.5

Fuente: Elaboración propia

**Figure 1.** Central distribution and semantic weight of the peripheral system of the social representations of English language learning



**Fuente:** Elaboración propia

It is important to clarify that the semantic weight or m value is obtained by multiplying the frequency of appearance of each word or concept by the semantic value that is given according to the hierarchy assigned by each person who answers the instrument. The value of the frequency of the semantic weight of the group (VFMG) allows observing the semantic distance between the words of the network, which shows the closeness and distance of the words with respect to the trigger phrase and is determined by assigning 100% to the value more high and from a rule of three the remaining values are obtained. The interpretation of each semantic category is carried out as the hands of a clock advance, all of which allows revealing and understanding the meaning of the semantic network of social representation.

The network of representation (figure 1), which is presented in the construction of the central nucleus of the social representations of learning the English language, can be found in two central concepts: communication and opportunities. Both concepts with a semantic weight of 100. Thus, nursing students agree that communication in English profiles nursing professionals for better opportunities in the labor and professional field. Following are the concepts of comprehension, with a semantic weight of 95, and knowledge, with a semantic distance of 90. This pair completes the central core.

The concept of intelligence, with a semantic weight of 62.5, and the concept of learning, with a semantic weight of 60, appear in the middle part of the representation and interestingly establish that those students who develop proficiency in a second language, in this case English, are considered as having metacognitive capacities.

The central nucleus is the center of representation, that is, it is the central idea that represents the community and the common social construction in the historical and collective memory. In addition, it is the most consolidated representation and tends to remain intact throughout the group (Guevara, 2005).

The peripheral system is made up of the concepts of difficulty, with a semantic weight of 40, the concept of language, with a semantic weight of 30, the concept of travel, with 27.5, and lastly, the concept of importance, with a semantic weight of 22.5.

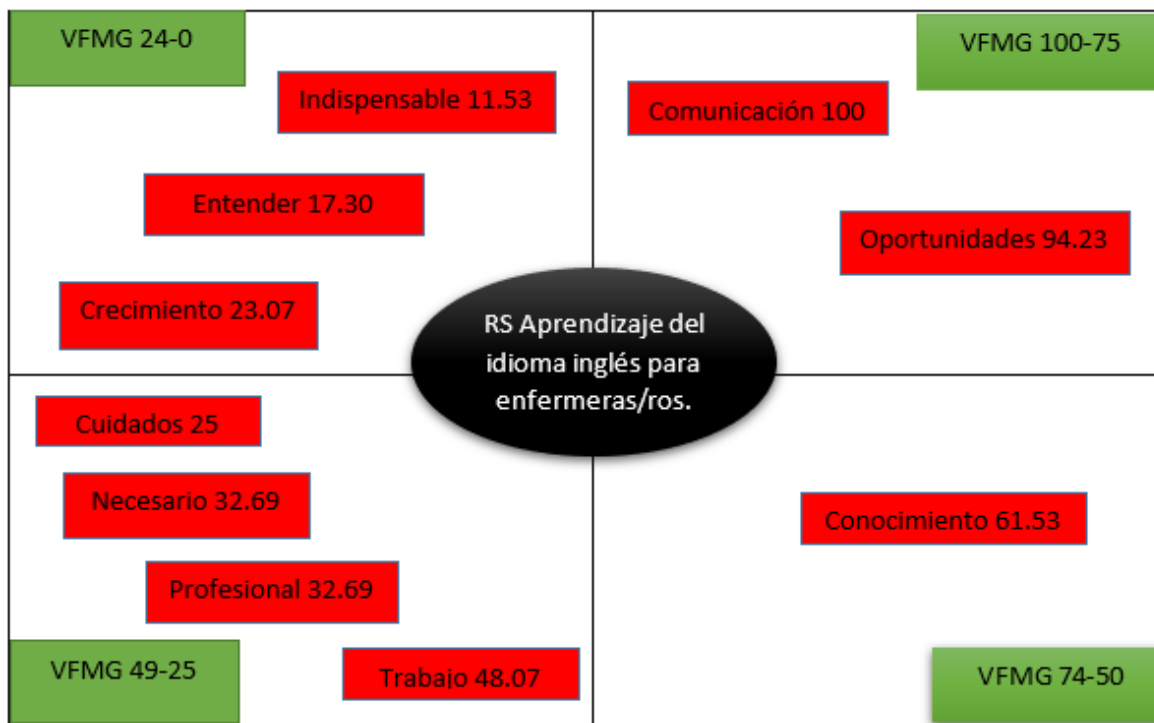
Around the central core appears the peripheral system of representation. This serves to give meaning to the representation and guide the interpretation, at the same time that it is a fragile and changing system. That is, the peripheral system tends to change easily from the system of social representation; even more, it is a system of collective representation that can succumb to the change of social perception and representation (Abric, 2001).

**Table 4.** Central distribution and semantic weight of the peripheral system of social representations of English language learning in nursing professionals (figure 2)

Distribución central de la red	Peso semántico del sistema periférico
1) Comunicación	100
2) Oportunidades	94.23
3) Conocimiento	61.53
4) Trabajo	48.7
5) Profesional	32.69
6) Necesario	32.69
7) Cuidados	25
8) Crecimiento	23.07
9) Entender	17.30
10) Indispensable	11.53

Fuente: Elaboración propia

**Figure 2.** Central core of the network and semantic distance of the peripheral system of social representations of English language learning for nurses



**Fuente:** Elaboración propia

The networks of associations (figure 2), which are presented in the configuration of the central nucleus of the social representations of learning the English language for nurses, can be found in two central concepts: communication, with a semantic distance of 100, and opportunities, with a semantic distance of 94.23. It should be noted that these two concepts can be found in the central core of both categories in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Knowledge, with a semantic weight of 61.53, is placed very close to the central nucleus. And the concepts of work, with a semantic weight of 48.07, professional, with a semantic weight of 32.69, the concept of necessary, with a semantic weight of 32.69, and care, with a semantic weight of 25, make up the intermediate system of the representation. With this representational system, we can observe that the command of English in nursing students is not considered as a competence that necessarily brings with it a better job opportunity in the context of Sinaloa.

Social representation is structured with the concept or concepts that have the most values and that make up the central nucleus. This is made up of fixed characteristics that are shared by most group members. The peripheral system protects the central nucleus from

social change and, therefore, the representational system is maintained and restructured based on the peripheral elements (Abric, 2001).

The peripheral system is made up of the concepts of growth, with a semantic weight of 23.07, the concept of understanding, with a semantic weight of 17.30, and finally the concept of indispensable, with a semantic weight of 11.53.

The peripheral system is usually not very resistant to change because the social group constantly finds new information that alters its representational system. Therefore, the more vulnerable the peripheral system, the greater the risk of changing the central core of the representation (Banchs, 2000).

The data resulting from the processual perspective of social representations emerged from interviews based on the principle of theoretical saturation, through individual in-depth interviews and participant observation, thanks to the dialogue established between Nursing students and the researchers. Each of the interviews was assigned a name according to the sex of the interviewee to protect the identity of the study subjects. After collecting the data and analyzing the information, it was possible to identify the meanings grouped into three categories: 1) "English language learning styles", 2) "Globalization, English and job opportunities" and 3) "Opportunities for learning the English language".

### **Category 1: "English language learning styles"**

- "You definitely learn better by listening to songs in English, but you also have to complete with videos and writing exercises to reinforce the language" (Pedro).
- "I consider myself a very visual person. I learn mainly with videos or by watching series like Grey's Anatomy, because it is closely related to our profession" (Alejandra).
- "Illustrations help me a lot to learn English, with that you already have an idea of what is being talked about. Watching movies without subtitles also works a lot for me" (José).
- "I need to be interacting and practicing with the oral method. That keeps my attention a lot. I feel that it is the best way to learn" (Gloria).

Students focused on learning and metacognition need innovative teachers who diversify their ways of entering the referential framework of students learning, this in order to improve their school performance.

A teacher in charge of his learning unit must take into account the different learning styles of his students so that students can develop skills that allow them to incorporate these communication skills and can access programs in their training that include academic mobility, not only in national territory, but also outside the country, such as the United States and Canada.

Learning styles are the mediators in the learning process of students and this is characterized by the functional invariants of higher psychological processes. (Alonso, Gallego y Honey, 2007).

### **Category 2: “Globalization, English and job opportunities”**

- “Of course, yes, mainly because of the quality of life offered by a first world country, the economy is more fluid, I would leave without thinking about it” (Pedro).
- “I would love to work in the United States or Canada, I wouldn't mind going alone, but it's something that I actually see as far away because I don't speak English well” (Alejandra).
- “Yes, I would go, they are more advanced countries, there are more job opportunities, their health system is modern and there are better opportunities to learn new things” (José).
- “As a nurse, mastering another language such as English would be a step up to work in a company or in an administrative position, it would be a plus that would give me more opportunities” (Gloria).

Although Nursing students recognize the importance of acquiring the competence of the English language for their development both personally and professionally, there is still a long way to go to consolidate this competence through higher education organizations in our country. Communication in English is a global competence that all health sciences professionals must consider for their scientific and technological development.

The new competency profile of nursing professionals contemplates the English language, which will allow them greater professional development, not only in their countries



of origin, but they will also be able to carry out professional mobility in countries such as the United States and Canada. (López *et al.*, 2013).

### Category 3: “English Language Learning Opportunities”

- “Carrying out master's studies, since they require a percentage of English, is very important to be able to prepare ourselves more. It seems to me that it also helps us to qualify for the race” (Pedro).
- “Being able to communicate with foreign patients and being able to provide quality care” (Alejandra).
- “Perform student mobility, or be able to read articles in English, since it is the language of business and science” (José).
- “Language gives you another perspective on how we think, I feel that it opens up our ability to analyze and understand other things” (Gloria).

Competence in the English language will allow nursing professionals to access new and better job opportunities, not only in our country, but also abroad, particularly in the countries that make up the new Free Trade Agreement between Mexico, the United States and Canada (T-MEC).

Consolidating the teaching-learning of a second language is a requirement for the training and graduation of the student. Likewise, introduce exams that allow diagnosis, as well as implement certification methods when students achieve the level that is required within the educational programs and support programs for students who have not accredited it. (UAS, 2017).

## Discussion

The proficiency of a second language in the undergraduate curriculum provides new opportunities for both academic and professional nursing professionals. In this sense, Camacho, Barquero, Mariscal and Merino (2013) recognize the importance of incorporating English language learning into the training of nurses so that graduates have greater opportunities in the different areas of action (care, teaching, administrative and research). It should also be noted that students with these skills have greater opportunities for international mobility to encourage free movement and the acquisition of educational experiences that foster linkage and research skills. The foregoing coincides with our results, since students



recognize that the English language provides them with greater job opportunities and the possibility of working in countries such as the United States and Canada.

Taking these findings into account, the university must implement a special and flexible program on learning English, since it will allow professional development with greater job opportunities and access to scientific nursing knowledge, since the greater production of articles published in indexed journals It is precisely in this language.

Velazco (2016) concluded that performing exercises with playful learning strategies favors the acquisition of knowledge of the English language and facilitates learning. The teacher of the English learning unit must implement strategies such as games, film analysis, memories and physical activities. The inclusion of these activities favors the learning of a second language and encourages the acquisition of new learning by articulating higher psychological or cognitive processes. These results also coincide with our research, since teachers must diversify their educational strategies taking into account the different learning styles and promote the learning of the English language taking into account the different cognitive channels through which students learn.

In the process of learning English, it is also necessary for students to practice their dialogues according to the different care techniques in the different areas of nursing. In this way, the person is placed at the center of comprehensive care and thereby establishes a therapeutic nurse-subject of care relationship.

## Conclusions

The two triggering questions threw communication and opportunities as central concepts of representation. They not only stand out as central concepts, but also as the anchor or rooting of the social thought of Nursing students. In other words, the English language is evaluated as a communicative competence that allows nursing professionals to aspire to a better job and better opportunities for professional development.

Although Nursing students recognize the importance of acquiring English language skills for their personal and professional development, there is still a long way to go to consolidate this skill in public higher education institutions in our country. Therefore, it is important to develop new lines of research in social representations about learning the English language to generate scientific knowledge and social development of the nursing

profession, since due to their importance these health professionals can aspire to professional mobility in the nursing profession. T-MEC framework.

### Future lines of research

In this study of the social representations of learning the English language, two new lines of research of great interest for the field of nursing education were identified: 1) analysis of the plans and undergraduate study programs of different Mexican and Latin American universities on the presence of English in the curricular structure and the competences that are declared in the study plan around the learning of the English language and 2) review the profile of the teachers who teach the English language learning unit and analyze the different strategies of learning that they use to facilitate learning.

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