THE SIMULATION OF FAMILY INTERVIEWS IN THE TRAINING OF TEACHERS AND COUNSELLORS

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Abstract. Competence in oral communication is essential to carry out the functions of teacher-tutors and counsellors, especially for counselling and information for audiences with diverse educational profiles. In this line, the Faculty of Education of the University of León has carried out a training action in the Degree in Primary Education and in the University Master's Degree in Educational Guidance with the aim of developing and evaluating the mastery of oral communication through the simulation of family interviews. In this study, a survey was carried out among the students of the two selected degrees with the aim of analysing the most developed competences through the simulation of interviews, and identifying the strengths and weaknesses in the development of the same in order to establish proposals for improvement. The main conclusions of the study are that the guidance interview simulation is a very satisfactory activity for the students because it allows them to place themselves in a real professional context as teacher-tutors and counsellors. In addition to increasing their competence in oral communication, students have improved their interpersonal relationship skills, their empathy and their ability to make decisions in new situations.

Keywords: teacher training, oral communication, simulation, guidance interview.

LA SIMULACIÓN DE ENTREVISTAS FAMILIARES EN LA FORMACIÓN DE MAESTROS Y ORIENTADORES

Resumen. La competencia en comunicación oral es fundamental para ejercer las funciones de los maestros-tutores y orientadores, especialmente, para el asesoramiento y la información a destinatarios con perfiles diversos educativos. En esta línea, en la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad de León se ha realizado una acción formativa en el Grado en Educación Primaria y en el Máster Universitario en Orientación Educativa con el fin de desarrollar y evaluar el domino de la comunicación oral a través de la simulación de entrevistas a familiares. En este estudio se ha realizado una encuesta a los estudiantes de los dos títulos seleccionados con el objetivo de analizar las competencias más desarrolladas a través de la simulación de

entrevistas, e identificar las fortalezas y las debilidades en el desarrollo de la misma con el fin de establecer propuestas de mejora. Las principales conclusiones del estudio se concretan en que la simulación de entrevista tutorial es una actividad muy satisfactoria para los estudiantes porque les permite situarse en un contexto profesional real como maestros-tutores y orientadores. Además de incrementar su competencia en comunicación oral, los estudiantes han mejorado sus habilidades de relación interpersonales, su empatía y su capacidad de tomar decisiones ante nuevas situaciones.

Palabras clave: formación del profesorado, comunicación oral, simulación, entrevista tutorial.

Introduction

The importance of oral communication in education professionals

The figures of the teacher-tutor and the counsellor are two of the professionals who have a great impact on the educational system. Both professional profiles must attend to an inclusive education and take responsibility for the students, serving as a guide and reference for them, as well as a coordinator between the main agents involved in the educational action: families, students, and teachers. Among the functions performed by these professionals are to guide, advise, and inform the agents involved of everything that concerns them in relation to personal development, the relationship in the group, teaching activities, and the academic performance of each student (Berzosa Grande et al., 2009; Grañeras Pastrana, and Parras Laguna, 2009; Sobrado Fernández et al, 2012; Cano González, 2013). This function of communication and transmission of individualized information is carried out through interviews, both in the case of individualized tutorials conducted by the teacher-tutor, as well as in the diagnostic, feedback, and follow-up interviews conducted by the counsellors. These interviews involve, in addition to the transmission of information, active listening, empathy, and decision making. Therefore, the interview is key when gathering information about a particular student to provide a solution to a problematic behaviour or to help in any process that requires decision-making. Moreover, it is one of the usual strategies of these professionals to communicate, negotiate, participate, collaborate, reflect, evaluate, etc. (Hernández Rivero & Mederos Santana, 2018; Vieira & Ferreira, 2018). There is no doubt, therefore, that within teacher training and the exercise of their work, oral expression, communication, as well as the transmission of ideas are key aspects that should be contemplated in their initial and ongoing formative development (González-Moreira et al. , 2018).

One way of working on this type of interview in the classroom is through simulation. This is a teaching-learning technique used for different disciplines, health, law, economics, education, etc., which requires the active and group participation of students in which each of them has to assume a different role in a given situation (Rao & Stupans, 2012; Rodríguez-Miñambres et al., 2019; Tabak & Lebron, 2017). Simulation places students in situations in which, depending on their role, they must act differently and be aware of how other people feel obtaining very positive results (Castillo-Arcos & Maas-Góngora, 2017; Castro Vásquez, 2017; Acharya et al., 2018; Font Ribas & Caballol Angelats, 2018; González Losada & Triviño García, 2018). The simulation methodology through immersion in real scenarios facilitates the acquisition of specialized knowledge in a given discipline while allowing the development of professional skills, mainly, interacting, communicating, leading, negotiating, or working in teams (García-Carbonell et al., 2012; Angelini et al., 2015; Salminen-Tuomaala & Koskela, 2020).

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In the context of adaptation to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), universities have had to assume the responsibility of training their students in competences with the aim of efficiently developing their future professional activity (Rodríguez-Esteban and Vieira, 2009; Bolívar Cruz et al., 2013; Higuera Aguirre et al., 2018). To this end, the design of the curricula leading to university degrees has revolved around the acquisition of competences by students as established by Royal Decree 1393/2007 regulating the Organisation of Official University Education in Spain (Ministry of Education and Science, 2007). This regulation states that the report for the verification of official degrees must specify the generic and specific competences that students must acquire during their studies and which are required to award the degree, bearing in mind that these competences must be assessable.

One of the great achievements of this reform has been the concern for quality and innovation in university teaching. Thus, most universities have carried out actions in order to encourage the introduction of innovative educational strategies linked to the training of university students in generic or transversal competences, such as teamwork, oral communication, creativity, among others, which go beyond the specific to each area (Cazcarro Castellano and Martínez Caraballo, 2011; Eizagirre et al., 2017; Gramaglia et al., 2018). Spanish universities have had freedom in the design of curricula, which means that in the training of education degrees (teaching degrees, master's degrees in teacher training, etc.) there are differences in the importance given both in subjects and in dedication to training in generic or cross-cutting competences. For example, in the case of oral communication, in the study carried out by Santamarina Sancho and Núñez Delgado (2018) for the Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education, it is found that there are significant differences in the content of the subjects and in the time devoted to working on this competence among Spanish universities.

On the other hand, recent studies question the "discourse" of competency training that is decontextualized in concrete situations. Specifically, in relation to oral communication in competence training, Hora et al. (2019) confirm that it depends on cultural, political, and situational factors that are differentiated for different professions. Therefore, for example, in teacher training, oral communication must be linked to real situations that determine the roles and cultural models in its use.

In this scenario, on the one hand, of the autonomy of universities in the design of degrees and, on the other hand, of the necessary contextualization of generic or transversal competences to specific situations typical of different professions, the results of an experience of teaching innovation through the simulation of interviews in the Faculty of Education of the Universidad de León are presented below with the aim of promoting oral communication in future teachers and counsellors.

Contextualisation of the training action for improving oral communication

The Universidad de León has defined a series of priority competences common to all university degrees. Among these competences is oral expression, understood as *knowing how to express oneself clearly in conversations or debates, adapting the style of language to the interlocutor and using specific and relevant vocabulary*. As discussed in the previous section, this competence is closely related to the functions that teachers-tutors and counsellors must carry out in their professional practice (Ceballos, 2006; López-Mayor and Cascales-Martínez, 2019; Martín and Solé, 2011; Sáinz Gutiérrez et al., 2011). This is also reflected in the teaching guides of the subjects involved in this study of the Bachelor's Degrees in Primary Education and the Master's Degree in Educational Guidance, as well as other related subjects; for example, interpersonal

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relationship skills: ability to relate adequately with others, and that students can transmit information, ideas, problems, and solutions to both specialized and non-specialized audiences.

However, this competence is worked on in a very specific way and there is little evidence of whether or not students are achieving mastery of it (Álvarez Teruel et al., 2011; Balaguer Fàbregas et al., 2015).

In the Faculty of Education of this university, a teaching innovation project was launched with the aim of incorporating specific training actions to develop oral expression in future teachers and counsellors (knowing how to express oneself clearly in conversations or debates, adapting the style of language to the interlocutor, and using specific and relevant vocabulary). In this study, the results of the training action based on the simulation of interviews with families are presented. Specifically, it has been carried out in two subjects: Tutoring and Guidance of the Degree in Primary Education (second year, first semester) and Guidance to Families of Students with Specific Educational Support Needs of the Master's Degree in Educational Guidance (second semester).

The procedure to introduce this training action is composed of different phases: 1) Needs analysis through *brainstorming* and discussion groups; 2) Design of the action; 3) Implementation (including the selection of simulation cases); 4) Evaluation of the achievement of results; 5) Improvement proposals; and 6) Redefinition of materials.

In the first phase, in the two subjects involved, an analysis of the training needs of the students on the importance of oral expression as future tutors or counsellors was carried out using the *brainstorming* technique and discussion groups. Information gathered in previous courses has been collected and a report on the training needs in oral expression has been made. The main conclusions of the *brainstorming* and discussion groups have reflected the need to train teachers and counsellors in four dimensions. Specifically, in the attitude that the interviewer must show (empathy, patience, understanding, assertiveness, leadership, positivity, etc.), in the planning of the family interview process (previous necessary information, approach of the objectives, and purpose of the interview), the available instruments and their use and, finally, the coordination with different educational agents, including the students, their families, and the teaching staff.

This information has been used for the second phase in which the design of the action has been carried out:

(1) Selection of cases. Orientations for the SWOT analysis for the assessment of family orientation needs. As examples of the cases presented to the students, there are diverse situations that involve communication with the families with which both tutors (problems of attention, acquisition of study habits at home, behaviour, delivery of grades, etc.) and counsellors (interview for requesting a psycho-pedagogical evaluation, return of results of the psycho-pedagogical evaluation, problems of absenteeism, etc.) are encountered.

(2) Guidelines for the elaboration of the interview script adapted to a possible real case (preparation, opening, development, termination, and commitment phases) and for the recording and interpretation of the results.

(3) Elaboration of a rubric for the evaluation of the achievement of the learning outcomes linked to the performance of the interview adapted to each subject, as well as the record sheets of the observers of the simulation.

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Subsequently, the training action was implemented with the students by means of simulated interviews with the students adopting the role of counsellor/teacher/tutor and family/student respectively. The rest of the students have adopted the role of observers and have evaluated the development of the interview. The simulations have been carried out in the Psychopedagogical Office of the Faculty of Education (it has a spy mirror) and have been recorded on video with their consent with the aim that students receive adequate *feedback* from the interview and serve as material for future students of these subjects.

The main objective of this study is to evaluate and improve the training action aimed at future teachers and counsellors based on the simulation of interviews with family members. This general objective is specified in two specific objectives that correspond to the last three phases of the training process described (evaluation of the achievement of results, proposals for improvement, and redefinition of materials):

(1) Know the opinion of the students about which have been the most developed competences with the simulation activity carried out, and the strengths and weaknesses in the development of this activity in order to make proposals for improvement.

(2) Propose improvements that allow to redefine the design, implementation, and evaluation of the training actions and the associated materials.

Method

A survey methodology has been followed in order to evaluate the simulation activity by the students and to obtain information that allows the teaching staff to adjust processes and materials. The data collection technique has been a questionnaire developed using Google Forms, consisting of fifteen closed questions of estimation to assess each of the fifteen competencies common to all degrees specified and prioritized by the Universidad de León. These competences are:

C1. Written expression: knowing how to express oneself clearly in writing, adapting the style of language to the interlocutor, and using specific and relevant vocabulary.

C2. Oral expression: knowing how to express oneself clearly in conversations or debates, adapting the style of language to the interlocutor, and using specific and relevant vocabulary.

C3. Interpersonal relationship skills: ability to relate appropriately with others.

C4. Teamwork: Ability to commit to a team, habit of collaboration, and work solving conflicts that may arise.

C5. Leadership: ability to lead work groups, meetings, supervise people, etc.

C6. Decision making and problem solving: problem localization, identifying causes and alternative solutions, selection and evaluation of the most suitable one.

C7. Critical thinking: ability to analyze, synthesize, and draw conclusions from an article (whether opinion or scientific).

C8. Everyday reasoning: ability to look for counter-arguments to one's own opinion (theoretical framework, ideology, values, social conflicts, etc.).

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C9. Creativity: capacity for innovation, initiative, promotion of ideas, and inventiveness.

C10. Ability to reflect on their own work.

C11. Documentation skills: consultation of relevant databases in the professional field, consultation of specific journals, "expert" Internet browsing, etc.

C12. Analysis and synthesis skills: breaking down complex situations into parts for analysis and bringing together disaggregated information to analyse it as a whole.

C13. Management: ability to manage time and resources: develop plans, prioritize activities, identify critical ones, set deadlines, and meet them.

C14. Adaptation to new situations.

C15. Ability to learn.

Respondents were asked to indicate which competencies they had improved with the activity of simulating a family interview, choosing a maximum of five competencies. Therefore, the level of measurement in the questionnaire of the 15 variables corresponding to the competencies is nominal (dichotomous) in which the presence or absence (1-0) of each competency among the five most valued in the development of the simulation is recorded. The content validity of this questionnaire is based on the fact that the selection of competences comes from the previous work of experts who at the Universidad de León agreed to include these fifteen transversal competences in all degrees and were subsequently endorsed in the respective governing bodies and commissions responsible for the development of the curricula (Universidad de León, 2017). An open question on proposals for improvement of the simulation activity was added, in which respondents pointed out those weak aspects of it, as well as alternatives for improvement. A content analysis has been carried out considering the process of the activity: previous, realization, and subsequent phase.

After the analysis of the data extracted from the questionnaire by means of frequencies and content analysis, the following materials have been reviewed and adapted: Evaluation rubric for the interview simulation and Observation sheet for the interview simulation.

The invited sample consisted of 117 students from the subjects of Tutoring and Guidance (Degree in Primary Education) and Guidance for Families of Students with Specific Educational Support Needs (Master's Degree in Educational Guidance). The final sample consisted of 69 students who participated voluntarily by completing the evaluation questionnaire (n=59, 55% of those enrolled in the Degree course and n=10, 91% of those enrolled in the Master's course).

Results

Competencies developed with the family interview simulation

Based on the objective of training students of the Degree in Primary Education and the Master's Degree in Educational Guidance in oral expression, the following results have been obtained once the simulation of the interview with families as a key action in the training development of teachers-tutors and counsellors has been carried out.

Figure 1 shows in percentages the competences most developed with this activity according to the Bachelor's and Master's degree students participating in the sample. The

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students of both degrees consider that they mainly develop the competence of oral expression (C2), the main objective of the proposal presented, as well as interpersonal relationship skills (C3), decision making and problem solving (C6), adaptation to new situations (C14), and critical thinking (C7). In the case of the Master's students, these last two competences have been worked on more according to the students due to the fact that the subject matter of the cases presented for the counsellors and the number of participants in the activity (two students per interview) entails the development of skills closely related to the communication of delicate situations for the families and, therefore, of attitudes of closeness, empathy, and understanding on behalf of the counselling professional in a more outstanding way than in the case of the situations presented for the tutors.

On the other hand, the Bachelor's Degree students point out, compared to the Master's Degree students, the promotion of the teamwork competence (C4). However, this data can be influenced by the number of people who participated in each interview. While in the Bachelor's Degree the groups were made up of three and four people, in the Master's Degree, the interviews were carried out in pairs. At an intermediate level are competences related to creativity (C9), everyday reasoning (C8), and the ability to reflect on one's own work (C10).

Among the competences that, according to the students, are less developed with the family interview simulation activity are documentation skills (C11), written expression (C1), and leadership competence (C5). In the case of Master's degree students, none of these competences has been valued, although leadership has been pointed out in 6.8% of undergraduate students.
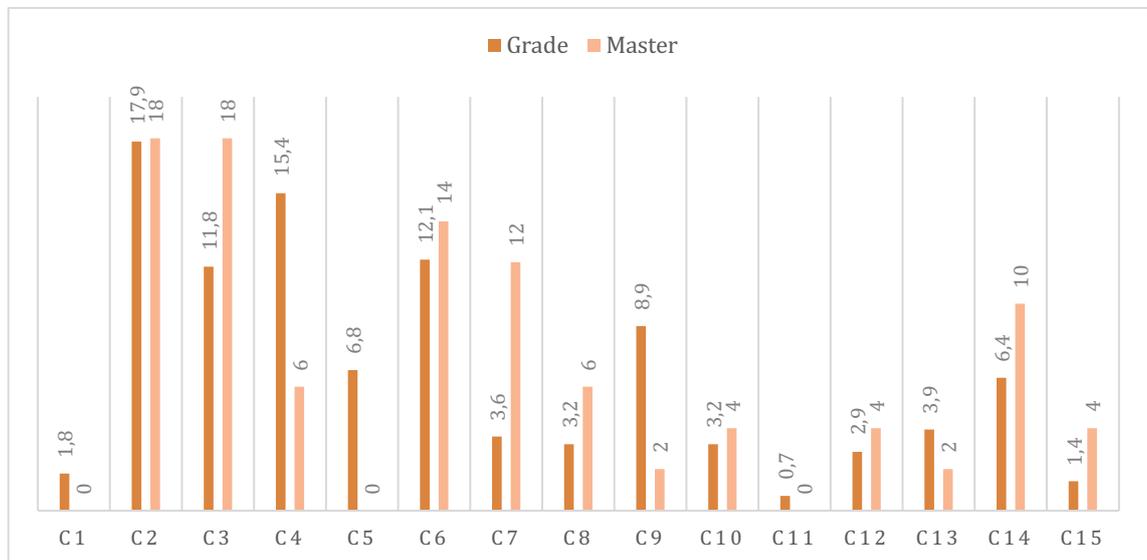

Figure 1. Competences developed with the simulation of interviews with families by future tutors and counsellors. Own elaboration.

Strengths of the Family Interview Simulation

Within the evaluation of the training action, the students pointed out the main strengths of the interview. In general, they considered that the activity has a good approach, as well as being a good method of meaningful learning, as it has allowed them to approach the reality of the future professional in a simulated context but very close to

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reality, especially for the cases raised and the place of realization in the Psychopedagogical Office. They point out that it is *a very helpful activity for the students as it allows them to represent, in a certain way, the role they will have to develop in the future as professionals*, reducing the feeling of uncertainty and embarrassment when facing these situations.

The variety of cases, the variety of situation,s and the definition of roles, which made it possible to vary the subject matter of each simulation, the different participating agents, as well as the problems and the decision making process of the simulation, are also noteworthy: *doing it in groups is interesting since it is possible to see different models.*

Both Bachelor's and Master's degree students value very positively the practical content in the development of the subjects and even highlight that it is with this type of content (and not theoretical) that they learn more to develop competences. From their perspective, simulation is a methodology that is different from what is usual in the degrees and that provides practical experience. Descriptively, the respondents described this activity as *original, fun, complete, entertaining, educational, useful, necessary, enriching, and interesting*.

In summary, the students consider that it *has been a good way to visualize how we are going to face our role as tutors in the future* and that it has been a first adaptation and contact with the situations of collaboration between family-school.

Proposals for improvement of the training action

Within the evaluation, proposals for improvement were also included with the aim of redefining the design of these training actions. In total, eighteen proposals for improvement were identified. The rest of the respondents considered that the simulation is adequate in its approach and would not change any aspect (*adequate as it is, no need to improve and modify it, suitable, we liked the experience, everything has been done correctly, recommendable, well designed*). These proposals for improvement (n=18) were classified according to the time of the activity: before it was carried out, during its development, and afterwards (Figure 2).
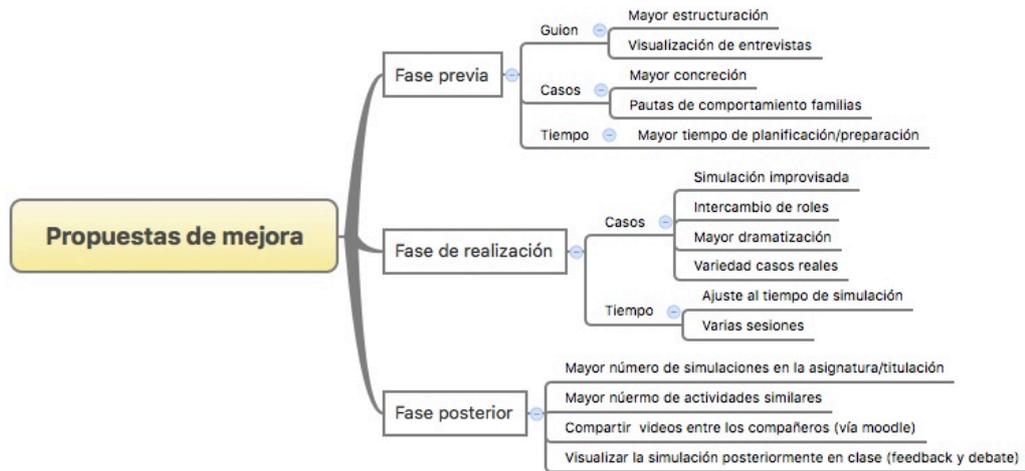
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Figure 2. Proposals for improving the simulation of the family interview. Own elaboration.

In relation to the moment prior to conducting the interview, the students highlighted the need to improve a) the script, b) the cases, and c) the time dedicated both to conducting the interview and to explaining the evaluation rubric. In this sense, it was suggested a greater specification of some elements of the rubric that have been adapted following the suggestions of the students. In this sense, the rubric addresses both the preparation phase of the script (identification data and content organized according to the phases of the interview), and the phase of carrying out the simulation (attitude, verbal communication, and non-verbal communication). In the preparation phase, they point out as important aspects to have more time for planning and preparation, as well as to visualize interviews as examples. In this sense, as it was the first year of implementation of the action, there was no visual material available to show examples of them. In subsequent years, it is intended that the material recorded in this course can be shown to future students. In relation to the cases raised, the improvement is aimed at making them more concrete and providing behavioural guidelines to those students who develop the role of parents*, since, in the future, surely, some parents will not accept so easily the recommendations and guidelines of action of the tutors as it happened in the role-playing.*

In the phase of carrying out the simulation, some of the proposals are again related to the time and duration of the simulation. In some cases, the students exceeded the established time, so they had to adjust to the time of realization due to the possible distraction of the rest of the students. Another proposal was to *divide the interviews into several sessions (less than an hour each) to avoid repetition and to promote attention and listening.* The students also propose alternatives in the development of the simulation, specifically they propose to assign situations and roles at the time of the simulation in such a *way that it is necessary to improvise and look for solutions without previous preparation* and to exchange the roles of each person in the simulation. Both aspects entail not having a previous script for the interview and possible biases due to having observed the behaviour and decision making of the previous participants. Regarding the role of the observers, it has also been suggested that more time should be devoted to explaining the observation, as well as clarifications in the observation sheet, breaking

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down several items in the phases of the interview (opening, development, and closing) that have been included in the new adapted version. Other aspects that could be improved include more dramatization and analyzing a greater variety of real cases.

Finally, the following suggestions were made in the post-interview phase:

(1) Carry out a greater number of simulation activities during the course and in other subjects of the degree.

(2) Sharing videos in moodle among peers (not only among group members). This aspect is limited by the refusal of authorization by some students to share the material for teaching purposes.

(3) Visualize the simulation later in class so that students get *feedback* and a debate is held between the proposed cases: *it would have been nice to be able to see them in class and correct the mistakes, to make a kind of debate with the work to be improved.*

Discussion and conclusions

Simulation through *role-playing*, specifically a family interview, is an instrument in the training of future teachers that directly promotes the generic competence of oral expression and that obtains good results in degrees related to the field of education. In addition to this competence, the results obtained show that this activity also promotes other competences such as interpersonal relationship skills, decision making, and problem solving. This is confirmed by the importance given to the competencies that teachers should have in their initial training for their work in the ANECA White Paper (National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation, 2004).

It should be noted that the interview simulation is a proposal rarely used in the university environment in education degrees and that it has been received by the students with very positive attitudes. This is reflected in their comments, as they indicate that this activity allows them to *put themselves in the shoes* of teachers-tutors and counsellors when faced with a variety of situations that usually occur in schools. Likewise, by acting as observers, students have the opportunity to see different real situations and how they can react and respond in the right way by learning in a cooperative way.

As aspects of improvement to be taken into account in the application of this methodology, students point out that the preparation of this activity requires more time and the need to share the videos among peers, since this visualization can allow self-evaluation, co-evaluation, and hetero-evaluation, i.e. the student's own evaluation, that of peers among themselves, and that of teachers on students (Cazcarro Castellano & Martínez Caraballo, 2011).

Likewise, it has been observed that the application of simulation techniques in contexts close to the reality of work, as is the case of the simulation of an interview to assess learning outcomes achieved by students, leads to an improvement in the degree and the training of future graduates. Moreover, as reflected in the introduction to this study, it is an activity with great potential for transferability to other degrees, especially because oral expression is considered one of the priority skills to be developed in university students.

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