

# Language skills in university students studying early childhood education. Systematic review

*Competencias lingüísticas en los estudiantes universitarios de educación inicial. Revisión sistemática*

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## Abstract

The study aims to systematically analyze empirical and theoretical studies addressing language skills in early childhood education students. Guided by the PRISMA methodology, structured searches were conducted in the main academic databases and institutional repositories, applying inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure methodological rigor. The flowchart processing indicates that thirty articles published between 2010 and 2024 were selected for final analysis. The findings reveal that language skills, particularly phonological, grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, and discursive dimensions, are conditioned by sociocultural contexts, family practices, classroom interactions, and the quality of educational support. A persistent gap was identified between the expected levels of competence in future early childhood educators and their actual performance, especially in academic discourse and foreign language competence. The review also identifies consistent associations between language skills and better performance in reading, writing, comprehension, executive function, and critical thinking. In addition, high-quality teacher-student interactions, narrative practices, and guided literacy activities significantly improve vocabulary development and communication skills. Overall, language skills are essential not only for academic performance but also for career readiness, as they underpin effective pedagogical communication, early literacy stimulation, and the creation of enriching language environments for children.

**Keywords:** language skills, early childhood education, higher education.

## Resumen

El estudio tiene como objetivo analizar sistemáticamente los estudios empíricos y teóricos que abordan las competencias lingüísticas en estudiantes de Educación Inicial. Guiado por la metodología PRISMA, se realizaron búsquedas estructuradas en las principales bases de datos académicas y en repositorios institucionales, aplicando criterios de inclusión y exclusión para garantizar el rigor metodológico. El procesamiento del flujograma indica que treinta artículos publicados entre 2010 y 2024 fueron seleccionados para el análisis final. Los hallazgos revelan que las competencias lingüísticas, particularmente las dimensiones fonológicas, gramaticales, semánticas, pragmáticas y discursivas, están condicionadas por los contextos socioculturales, las prácticas familiares, las interacciones en el aula y la calidad del apoyo educativo. Se identificó una brecha persistente entre los niveles de competencia esperados en los futuros educadores de la primera infancia y su desempeño real, especialmente en el discurso académico y en la competencia en lenguas extranjeras. La revisión también identifica asociaciones consistentes entre las habilidades lingüísticas y un mejor desempeño en lectura, escritura, comprensión, función ejecutiva y pensamiento crítico. Además, las interacciones docente-estudiante de alta calidad, las prácticas narrativas y las actividades guiadas de lectoescritura mejoran significativamente el desarrollo del vocabulario y las habilidades comunicativas. En términos generales, las competencias lingüísticas son esenciales no solo para el rendimiento académico, sino también para la preparación profesional, ya que sustentan una comunicación pedagógica eficaz, la estimulación temprana de la lectoescritura y la creación de entornos lingüísticos enriquecedores para los niños.

**Palabras clave:** competencias lingüísticas, educación inicial, educación superior.

## Introduction

Beyond academic activities, the development of linguistic competence plays a significant role in shaping personal and professional life. It influences university students' ability to communicate effectively, empathize with others, and navigate the complexities of interpersonal relationships (Shuxratovna, 2024). Moreover, according to Xakimova (2024), this competence is regarded as a skill linked to the ability to comprehend and produce language, encompassing various dimensions such as phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Each of these dimensions contributes to sustaining academic success, social interaction, and personal growth.

In this context, the current study examines the linguistic competencies of higher education students specializing in early childhood education. These future educators must possess the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for effective teaching in diverse and multilingual environments that promote oral language, emergent literacy, and communicative development in children. This premise is supported by recent literature, including works by Riad et al. (2023) and Yang et al. (2021), which highlight that educators' linguistic knowledge and interaction skills are fundamental components shaping linguistic trajectories in educational preparation.

Despite the acknowledged importance of this competence for future educators and its extensive exploration in academic research (Shuxratovna, 2024), studies evaluating linguistic knowledge, classroom practices, or teachers' communicative competence in training contexts (Gràcia et al., 2020; Pérez et al., 2022; Phillips et al., 2020) show findings scattered across different populations, methodological approaches, designs, and outcomes. This fragmented evidence complicates the extraction of general conclusions regarding the state of the field. In essence, there exists a fragmentation in systematic reviews synthesizing evidence on the factors, characteristics, and benefits these competencies contribute to learning and the professional preparation of students.

Addressing this gap is crucial, given that early childhood educators play a vital role in shaping linguistic environments. Communicative competence—which encompasses vocabulary use, oral discourse organization, and academic writing—directly influences the quality of interactions (Farrow et al., 2025), the effectiveness of teaching strategies (Burke et al., 2022), and the opportunities children have to develop fundamental linguistic skills (Yang et al., 2021). In this regard, inadequate or uneven linguistic preparation among future educators can lead to early difficulties and long-term disadvantages in children's literacy trajectories and academic achievements.

The theoretical framework of this review is grounded in models of communicative competence, particularly the framework established by Canale and Swain (1980), which defines linguistic competence as a combination of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic skills. Furthermore, the expansions proposed by Bachman (1990) emphasize that linguistic performance requires not only knowledge but also the ability to apply it flexibly in various contexts (Pérez et al., 2022; Scherzinger & Brahm, 2023). These models guide research in teacher education by framing this competence as an integrated set of essential skills for instructional communication, academic literacy, and effective discourse in the classroom.

Previous studies have measured educators' knowledge regarding language development and vocabulary using psychometrically valid scales, revealing that the associations between teachers' knowledge and classroom practices are complex and not always robust (Phillips et al., 2020). Additionally, a meta-analysis focusing on language and literacy professional development for early childhood educators indicated some improvements in the structural and process quality of educational practices. However, it reported no consistent enhancements in educators' knowledge or clear effects on children's outcomes across all measures (Markussen et al., 2017). Regarding teacher education, reviews have documented challenges and variability in the development of communicative competence among student teachers (I. García et al., 2020; Gràcia et al., 2020), although these studies often encompass broad ranges of teacher training and do not specifically address early childhood education.

This systematic review is situated within the context of higher education institutions training early childhood education professionals, where linguistic competence is not only pedagogical but also sociocultural. The objective is to systematically analyze empirical and theoretical studies addressing linguistic competencies in early childhood education students. To this end, the following questions will guide the research objectives:

1. What factors influence the development of linguistic competencies?
2. What are the characteristics and trends of these linguistic competencies?
3. What benefits do these linguistic competencies provide for learning and future professional practice?

## Methodology

This research adopted the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) method as a rigorous strategy for selecting, evaluating, and synthesizing relevant academic articles on linguistic competencies. The purpose was to ensure a comprehensive and structured analysis that guaranteed both the quality and relevance of the studies. This process allowed for the collection of data organized in standardized tables, a detailed analysis of the selected research, and the presentation of a final report in accordance with the guidelines established by PRISMA. According to Page et al. (2021), its proper use allows for the replication and updating of reviews, leveraging previous work and avoiding the need for unnecessary studies.

The systematic design of the study incorporated structured information search strategies, including the selection of recognized academic databases and university repositories (Table 1), as well as the use of descriptors such as linguistic competencies, students, university, early childhood/preschool education, and higher education, combined with Boolean operators (AND/OR).

**Table 1**

*Identification of sources*

<b>Academic databases</b>	Scielo, Scopus, Google Scholar, Frontiers, Dspace, Dialnet, others
<b>University repositories and others</b>	Gale Literature, Frontiers in Psychology, Alicia, La Referencia, UPSE repository (Universidad Estatal Península de Santa Elena – Ecuador)

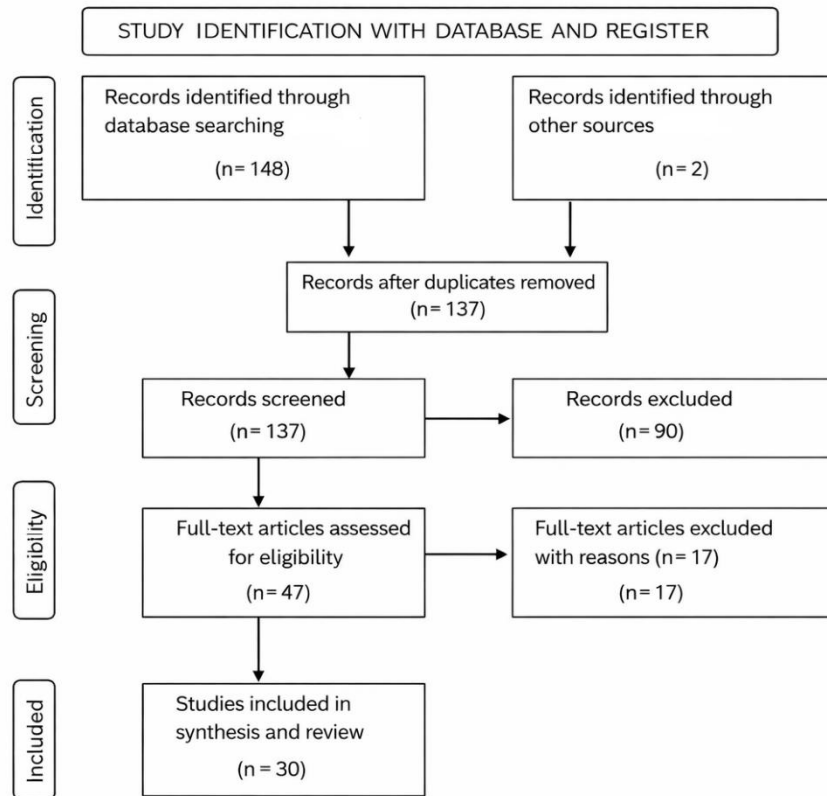
This process identified 148 articles, of which 137 were selected for detailed review based on title and abstract. A subsequent reading of the full text allowed for the application of inclusion criteria as a final filter (Table 2), resulting in 30 records that specifically addressed linguistic competencies (Figure 1).

**Table 2**

*Inclusion and exclusion criteria established for the selection of the final sample*

<b>Inclusion Criteria</b>	Articles published in databases: Scielo, Scopus, Exlibris, Mendeley, and ProQuest. Articles written in English and Spanish, published from 2010–2024. Works dedicated to linguistic competencies in university students of early childhood education.
<b>Exclusion Criteria</b>	Works not directed at linguistic competencies. Works whose objective is not a systematic review or analysis.

**Table 3**  
Flowchart of identification and selection of articles



## Results

Table 4 presents the final sample of selected studies that address linguistic competencies in students training to become teachers in early childhood education.

**Table 4**  
Final sample selected

No.	Database	Quantity	Language
1	SCIELO	4	Spanish
2	DSPACE	2	Spanish
3	FRONTIERS	4	English
4	GLOOGLE SCHOLAR	2	English
5	UNAM, UNIR	5	Spanish
6	REDINED, DOAJ	3	Spanish
7	DIALNET, OTROS	8	English
8	RESEARCHGATE	2	Spanish
Total		30	

Note: Prepared by Mónica Tomalá Chavarría with references from databases

Table 5 shows that among the 30 publications analyzed, dimensions corresponding to phonology, grammar, semantics, pragmatics, and discourse were identified.

**Table 5**  
*Dimensions and number of publications.*

Dimensions	No. of publications	%
1. PHONOLOGICAL DIMENSION	4	13%
2. GRAMMATICAL DIMENSION	10	33%
3. SEMANTIC DIMENSION	5	17%
4. PRAGMATIC DIMENSION	7	23%
5. DISCURSIVE DIMENSION	4	13%
Total	30	100%

*Note: Prepared by Mónica Tomalá Chavarría with references from databases*

In the systematic analysis of empirical and theoretical studies addressing linguistic competencies in early childhood education students, the following findings were identified:

**Table 6**  
*What factors influence linguistic competencies in university students of early childhood education?*

SELECTED ARTICLE AUTHORS	ARTICLE TITLE	RESPONSES TO RESEARCH QUESTION
Jiménez Barreto, Deicy	Development of linguistic competencies	This article highlights how personalized teaching strategies and sociocultural context enhance the development of linguistic competencies. It emphasizes the importance of guided practice in reading and writing to improve these competencies (Jiménez, 2016).
Orosco Toribio & Eduardo Gottardo	Learning styles and academic performance in students at a Peruvian national university	The authors underscore the role of project-based teacher training as key to strengthening critical reading and writing skills in future teachers (Orosco et al., 2023).
<a href="#">Bravo Mancero, Patricia Cecilia</a> Ecuador	Socio-cultural and pedagogical factors and their impact on literacy learning in students	The researchers explore how sociocultural context and teaching strategies affect linguistic competencies in basic and higher education programs (Bravo & Chacaguasay, 2022).
De Arriba García Clara	Linguistic mediation in language teaching	The authors analyze how classroom interaction, based on debates and workshops, fosters skills such as argumentation and oral expression (De Arriba & Cantero, 2004).
Finders, Wilson, and Duncan	Linguistic environments in early childhood education: considerations for research and practice	The research suggests that linguistic skills are fundamental to a range of cognitive, behavioral, and socio-emotional outcomes. It is therefore essential to provide experiences that promote language acquisition in early learning environments (Finders et al., 2023).
Rasmus Riad, Mara Westling Allodi, Eva Siljehag, Sven Bölte	Linguistic skills and well-being in early childhood education and care: a cross-sectional exploration in a Swedish context	Linguistic skills play a vital role in academic performance and support the acquisition of reading and writing. Linguistic abilities also enable students to interact with others and develop social skills (Riad et al., 2023).

Pace, A., Luo, R., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M	The role of socio-economic status and family environment in early language development	This article examines how the socio-economic environment and family practices influence linguistic competencies (Pace et al., 2017a).
Ning Yang, Jiuqian Shi, Jinjin Lu, Yi Huang	Language development in early childhood: the quality of teacher-child interaction and children's receptive vocabulary competence	Classroom management and instructional support are positive predictors of linguistic development. It also suggests the importance of professional training strategies for teachers to enhance linguistic competencies in early education (Yang et al., 2021).
Brown Sherry, Carmen	Language and Literacy Development in the Early Years	This article highlights the role of phonological awareness, alphabet understanding, and interactive reading activities in developing linguistic skills (Brown, 2014).
Pace, <a href="#">Amy</a>	The role of socio-economic status and family environment in early language development	Examines how the socio-economic environment and family practices influence students' linguistic competencies (Pace et al., 2017b).

Table 6 emphasizes that linguistic competencies are influenced by sociocultural conditions, family practices, and classroom interactions. Some studies even highlight the role of socio-economic status and the linguistic environment of the home in early language development. However, guided practice, structured debates, and workshops strengthen oral expression, argumentation, and literacy skills. Additionally, the quality of teacher-student interaction, classroom management, and pedagogical support are significant predictors of vocabulary and linguistic development. Specifically, linguistic competencies develop through a combination of personal, familial, and pedagogical factors.

**Table 7**

*What are the characteristics and trends of linguistic competencies in university students of early childhood education?*

SELECTED ARTICLE AUTHORS	ARTICLE TITLE	RESPONSES TO RESEARCH QUESTION
Mendoza Ramos	Implementation of Linguistic Policies in the University Context	It highlights that students need skills such as identifying key information and using contextual clues to comprehend texts in foreign languages. These competencies are fundamental in university programs to strengthen professional learning (Mendoza, 2020).
Gil Galván, María del Rosario; Martín Espinosa, Inmaculada	How do university students in education evaluate their mastery of linguistic competencies in a foreign language?	This article analyzes linguistic competencies in students of Education Sciences, noting that, although many have motivation to learn languages, their actual acquisition levels are low (A2), contrasting with the officially required level (B1) (Gil & Martín, 2021).
Arnáez Muga Pablo	Language Teaching from the Teacher's Perspective	This article argues that academic discourse is a key tool for developing linguistic competencies in teacher trainees. It emphasizes the importance of academic vocabulary and structured writing in initial training (Arnáez, 2013).

Romero Alvaro, Ericka Lady	Linguistic Competencies in English, Learning Theories, and Educational Innovation in Foreign Language Acquisition in Higher Education	This study addresses the connection between linguistic competencies and academic performance, emphasizing that skills such as critical reading and writing directly influence university outcomes (Romero, 2024).
<a href="#">Valverde Gavilanes</a> Ángel Patricio	Collaborative Strategies to Strengthen Moral Values in Basic General Education	This article presents studies on collaborative learning in small groups, fostering the comprehensive development of linguistic competencies through interaction and teamwork (Valverde & Valverde, 2019).
Espinoza Pastén Laura Marjorie	Relationship Between the Development of Linguistic Skills and Learning	This study conducted in Sweden explores how linguistic skills in early childhood education relate to students' well-being (Espinoza, 2017).
Cáceres Zúñiga María Francisca	Receptive Vocabulary in Preschool Students	This article analyzes how the quality of interactions between teachers and students in the classroom influences the development of receptive vocabulary in early childhood education students. It concludes that emotional support, classroom management, and specific pedagogical strategies are key to enhancing linguistic competencies (Cáceres et al., 2018).
Portilla A. Y., Almanza V., Castillo A. D. & Restrepo G.	The Development of Narrative Skills in Children: A Systematic Literature Review	This study focuses on how narrative strategies and vocabulary in multilingual contexts impact linguistic development, showing significant improvement in students who receive quality stimuli in both their native language and an additional language (Portilla et al., 2021).
Abellán Roselló, Laura	Relationship Between Language Development and Executive Functions	A pilot study identified that robust linguistic skills correlate with better performance in tasks requiring cognitive control and working memory, essential for early learning (Abellán, 2022).

The trends identified in Table 7 indicate that university students experience gaps between expected and actual linguistic competencies, especially in foreign languages. Academic discourse and structured writing are highlighted as essential components of teacher training.

Furthermore, studies link linguistic competencies to cognitive processes such as reading comprehension and critical thinking. High-quality teacher-student interactions positively influence receptive vocabulary and overall linguistic development.

**Table 8**

*What benefits do linguistic competencies provide in the learning of university students in early childhood education?*

SELECTED ARTICLE AUTHORS	ARTICLE TITLE	RESPONSES TO RESEARCH QUESTION
Gilbert Josué	Essential Linguistic Skills	This article emphasizes that effective communication enhances social interaction, reduces conflict, and promotes critical thinking and problem-solving. In the educational realm, linguistic skills are essential for understanding lessons, actively

		participating in discussions, and clearly expressing ideas (Gilbert, 2022).
Molina Gutiérrez Teresa de Jesús. et al	Beliefs and Linguistic Competencies in Latin American University Students: Are They Complementary or Contradictory?	This study analyzes language proficiency and writing skills in university students from various Latin American countries. It concludes that linguistic competencies improve writing, reading, and comprehension, which are fundamental for their development in early childhood education programs (Molina et al., 2018).
Reyzábal, Ma. Victoria.	Communicative and Linguistic Competencies: Key to Educational Quality	This article highlights how linguistic competencies facilitate the effective transmission of knowledge and improve classroom interaction. This is particularly important in programs like early childhood education, where communication is fundamental to pedagogical development (Reyzábal, 2016).
Velásquez de Suárez <a href="#">Marta Judith</a>	Importance of Researching Critical Thinking and Its Development in Higher Education	This study explores the relationship between language and the development of critical thinking in university students. It concludes that linguistic competencies promote better comprehension of academic texts and enhance analytical and synthetic abilities (Velásquez et al., 2010).
Rasmus Riad, Mara Westling Allodi, Eva Siljehag, Sven Bölte	Linguistic Skills and Well-being in Early Childhood Education and Care: A Cross-Sectional Exploration in Sweden	The study found that factors such as emotional support, classroom management, and instructional support have positive effects on language acquisition, fostering early literacy (Riad et al., 2023).
Espinosa Linda M.	Challenges and Benefits of Early Bilingualism in the Context of the United States	Recent research shows that students exposed to two languages during their early years, experience significant cognitive and linguistic improvements, including greater brain plasticity and enhanced language processing skills (Espinosa, 2015).
Yang Ning, Jiuqian Shi, Jinjin Lu, Yi Huang	Language Development in Early Childhood: Quality of Teacher-Child Interaction and Children's Receptive Vocabulary Competence	Longitudinal studies suggest that high-quality learning experiences in preschool not only foster linguistic development but also improve social and cognitive skills (Yang et al., 2021).
Bisquerra, Rafael	Emotional Education and Well-being: Towards Scientifically Funded Practice	This study found that emotional support and effective pedagogical strategies are key to robust linguistic learning (Bisquerra & Chao, 2021).
García G, Lucina	Bilingualism in Indigenous Education	Bilingualism fosters advanced metalinguistic skills and facilitates the learning of a third language at later stages (García, 2021).
Uccelli, P., & Páez, M.	The Relationship Between Narrative and Language Development	Narratives strengthen reading comprehension and the ability to connect ideas, which are essential for academic success (Uccelli, 2017).

Apara Abumohor, D.	Impact of Educational Institutions on Linguistic and Socio-Emotional Development in Preschool Age	This study shows that students attending well-structured educational environments develop stronger linguistic competencies, particularly in vocabulary and grammar (Apara & Valenzuela, 2020).
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Table 8 details that strong linguistic competencies benefit students at academic, social, and cognitive levels, as effective communication skills enhance lesson comprehension, active participation, and clarity in both written and oral expression. Furthermore, language proficiency improves social interaction, conflict resolution, and emotional well-being. Additionally, it underscores that linguistic skills are linked to better critical thinking, facilitating the analysis and synthesis of academic texts.

## Discussion

Regarding the systematic review of linguistic competencies in university students of early childhood education, the works of Bravo and Chacaguasay (2022) and De Arriba and Cantero (2004) offer complementary perspectives on the development of these competencies in educational contexts. Bravo and Chacaguasay (2022) emphasize that personalized teaching strategies, adapted to the sociocultural context of students, are fundamental for enhancing their linguistic skills. Guided practice in reading and writing emerges as a key tool for solidifying these competencies. On the other hand, De Arriba and Cantero (2004) underscore the importance of active interaction in the classroom, especially through debates and workshops, as means to develop argumentation and oral expression skills.

The integration of both perspectives suggests that a balanced approach, combining structured and personalized practice with dynamic classroom interaction, can be particularly effective in strengthening linguistic competencies. This holistic approach addresses the individual needs of students as well as the communicative demands of the academic and professional environment.

The studies by Arnáez (2013) and Gil and Martín (2021) highlight key aspects regarding the development of linguistic competencies in education. Gil and Martín (2021) reveal a notable discrepancy between the actual linguistic competency levels of education students (predominantly A2) and the official standards required (B1), pointing to a gap between teaching methods and current academic demands. Conversely, Arnáez (2013) emphasizes the relevance of academic discourse as an essential tool for the linguistic training of future educators. From this perspective, the acquisition of specialized vocabulary and structured writing skills constitutes a fundamental pillar for strengthening linguistic competencies in the university context.

The works of Molina et al. (2018) and Velásquez et al. (2010) converge in highlighting the relevance of linguistic competencies as a central axis in the training of university students, particularly in programs like early childhood education. Molina et al. (2018) stress that these competencies are essential not only for interacting in academic, community, and professional contexts but also for strengthening fundamental skills such as reading, writing, and comprehension, pillars for the professional development of future educators. Velásquez et al. (2010), on the other hand, analyze the connection between linguistic competencies and critical thinking, emphasizing that a solid command of language enhances the comprehension of academic texts and fosters analytical and synthesis capabilities, which are indispensable in teacher training.

Both perspectives highlight the interdependence between language and higher cognitive skills, suggesting that strengthening linguistic competencies not only improves students' communicative abilities but also enriches their critical thinking, integrating essential skills for their professional and social performance. This comprehensive approach is key in higher education to effectively prepare future educators.

## Conclusions

The development of linguistic competencies in early childhood education students is influenced by key interrelated factors, such as the family environment and early linguistic stimuli. Access to books, educational games, and educational technologies strengthens skills in comprehension and linguistic expression. Furthermore, the role of the university teacher is crucial, as it enhances both oral expression and academic writing in the comprehensive training of future educational professionals.

The analyzed studies highlight various characteristics and trends in linguistic competencies. One of the most significant trends is the improvement in the ability to express ideas coherently and effectively, evidenced in academic writing and oral argumentation. Among the characteristics of these competencies are the logical structuring and transmission of ideas in academic and professional contexts, as well as the increasing use of digital

technologies and active methodologies that promote communicative interaction in dynamic environments, adapting to current educational demands.

Regarding the benefits of linguistic competencies, it is noted that these allow students to more efficiently address the demands of the university curriculum and to develop reflective and analytical thinking. Additionally, they strengthen their preparation for teaching, as they facilitate effective communication with children, families, and colleagues. Finally, linguistic competencies also promote the holistic development of students, enhancing not only their cognitive learning but also their interpersonal skills.

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