

When Languages Create Emotional Distance: Language Preferences of EFL Students at
Universidad Industrial de Santander

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Abstract

Title: When Languages Create Emotional Distance: Language Preferences of EFL Students at Universidad Industrial de Santander*

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Keywords: emotional distancing, linguistic preference, language choice, English, Spanish, emotional expression.

Description:

The purpose of this study is to identify the linguistic preferences of fifth- and sixth-semester students in the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Language Teaching with an Emphasis in English at the Universidad Industrial de Santander when faced with low and high emotional intensity situations. This investigation had the participation of 13 students (five from fifth semester and eight from sixth semester), which fulfilled three different data collection instruments. Firstly, a questionnaire conformed by 10 multiple option questions applied through Google Forms, which had open spaces for partakers to justify their answers. Secondly, two sessions of focus group (one per semester) that were recorded and transcribed. Lastly, a life-history survey applied through Google Forms as well, in which participants wrote about their life experiences with Emotional Distancing. The results of this study evidenced that participants did not have a particular linguistic preference regarding the emotionality of a situation, rather, it was concluded that the language choice depended on their personal experiences and perceptions. However, the participants' contributions evidenced that they considered that there was indeed a difference between expressing themselves in their foreign language (English) and their native language (Spanish), as they perceived the foreign language to be less emotional in comparison to the native language. This study contributes greatly to the field of linguistics by studying the concept of Emotional Distancing and emotional expression through the use of different languages.

* Bachelor Thesis

** Facultad de Ciencias Humanas. Escuela de Idiomas. Director Silvia Andrea Tarazona

Resumen

Título: Cuando Los Idiomas Crean Distancia Emocional: Preferencias Lingüísticas de los Estudiantes de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera en la Universidad Industrial de Santander*

Autores: Luis David Lizcano Carreño, Lina María Luengas Jerez, and Camila Andrea Reyes Florez**

Palabras Clave: distancia emocional, preferencia lingüística, elección de idioma, Inglés, Español, expresión emocional.

Descripción:

El propósito de este estudio es identificar las preferencias lingüísticas de los estudiantes de quinto y sexto semestre de la Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras con Énfasis en Inglés de la Universidad Industrial de Santander ante situaciones de baja y alta intensidad emocional. Esta investigación contó con la participación de 13 estudiantes (cinco de quinto semestre y ocho de sexto semestre), los cuales diligenciaron tres diferentes instrumentos de recolección de datos. El primero de ellos fue un cuestionario conformado por 10 preguntas de opción múltiple aplicado a través de Google Forms, el cual contaba con espacios de respuesta abierta para que los participantes justificaran sus respuestas. En segundo lugar, se realizaron dos sesiones de grupo focal (una por semestre) las cuales fueron grabadas y transcritas. Finalmente, se elaboró una encuesta de historia de vida aplicada de igual manera a través de Google Forms, en donde los participantes contribuyeron con sus propias experiencias relacionadas con la Distancia Emocional. Los resultados de este estudio evidenciaron que los participantes no tenían una preferencia lingüística particular respecto a la emocionalidad de una situación, más bien, se concluyó que la elección del idioma dependía de sus experiencias y percepciones personales. Sin embargo, a través de los aportes de los participantes se evidenció que estos consideraban que sí existía una diferencia entre expresarse en su lengua extranjera (inglés) y en su lengua materna (español), ya que percibían que la lengua extranjera era menos emocional en comparación con la lengua materna. Este estudio contribuye en gran medida al campo de la lingüística al estudiar el concepto de la Distancia Emocional y la expresión emocional a través del uso de diferentes lenguas.

* Trabajo de Grado

** Facultad de Ciencias Humanas. Escuela de Idiomas. Director Silvia Andrea Tarazona

Introduction

Learning a foreign language has become increasingly common in today's globalized world, with English being the most widely chosen option. Moeller and Catalano (2015) define a foreign language as the one that is not spoken in the surrounding society and is mostly learned in an academic setting. Typically, language learning in these educational contexts lacks the emotional richness and spontaneity found in their mother tongue, which can give the rise to a phenomenon known as Emotional Distancing. This refers to the emotional disconnection often experienced between a speaker's native language and a foreign one, with the latter generally perceived as more structural and emotionally neutral (Costa et al., 2014). This project aims to identify the linguistic preferences of 13 fifth- and sixth-semester students in the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Language Teaching with an Emphasis in English at Universidad Industrial de Santander when faced with low and high emotional intensity situations. Considering the size of the sample, this investigation does not intend to generalize findings, but to offer valuable insight into the dynamics of language preference and emotional expression.

The concept of Emotional Distancing is unknown to most bilingual people, therefore, understanding the implications of this linguistic phenomenon might be helpful in gaining a comprehension of how language may affect emotional and communicative processes. Taking this into consideration, the present study seeks to characterize participants' language usage preference based on different emotional contexts. Moreover, it intends to describe their language preferences when expressing themselves in their native or foreign language, and to determine the extent in which partakers are aware of the phenomenon. To achieve these objectives, three research instruments were implemented: a survey, a history life questionnaire, and two focus groups, which were triangulated to ensure the reliability.

1. Justification

Emotional distancing is a linguistic phenomenon characterized by the affective difference generated by using two distinct languages. This situation can happen in low emotional contexts (such as a casual meeting with friends) or high emotional contexts (such as talking about a sensitive topic for the individual). Emotional distancing involves maintaining a disconnection between oneself and a highly emotionally charged situation (Azevedo et al., 2022). According to Blanco et al. (2021), "there are differences in how we react to verbal emotional stimuli depending on whether they are in our native language or a foreign language" (p. 202).¹ This process aims to regulate emotions and prevent them from dominating or influencing objective judgment, allowing the observation and analysis of a situation from a more authoritative and rational perspective.

The idea of researching this phenomenon arose from the personal experiences and social interactions of the researchers leading the study. Furthermore, this topic is relatively new and underexplored, prompting the researchers to contribute with a meaningful study to this field of linguistic research, considering that no specific studies had been conducted on this subject in Santander. For instance, the studies conducted by Bakić and Škifić (2017) and Gray (2022), even though insightful and useful to understand the phenomenon of emotional distancing, do not encompass the specific objectives and population as the present study (refer to section 4 "State of the Art" to further expand on previous investigations regarding emotional distancing as a linguistic phenomenon).

This research is a mixed method study that aims to compare the linguistic preferences of fifth- and sixth-semester students of the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Language Teaching with an Emphasis in English at the Universidad Industrial de Santander in situations with

¹ Own translation (from Spanish to English).

high and low emotionality. Additionally, the investigation intends to assess students' awareness of this linguistic phenomenon, as a way to understand the influence of emotional distancing in everyday life. To achieve this, a questionnaire, a life history survey, and two focus group sessions were conducted to identify in which situations students prefer to use either their native language (Spanish) or their foreign language (English) to express themselves. Furthermore, the study seeks to examine how this linguistic preference may vary according to the emotional intensity of the situation (as evidenced in the study conducted by Azevedo et al., 2022). Through this study, the researchers aim to contribute to the theoretical understanding of linguistic preference among bilingual students in different emotionally charged situations. Consequently, the investigation addresses the following research question: What is the linguistic preference of fifth- and sixth-semester students of the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Language Teaching with an Emphasis in English at the Universidad Industrial de Santander when responding to situations with low and high emotional intensity?

2. Hypotheses

- Students in their fifth and sixth semesters of the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Language Teaching with an Emphasis in English at the Universidad Industrial de Santander prefer to use Spanish in situations of high emotional intensity and English in situations of low emotional intensity.
- These students perceive a difference between expressing emotions in English and Spanish.
- The students do not exhibit a distinct linguistic preference for either Spanish or English in situations with varying levels of emotional intensity.

3. Objectives

3.1 General Objective

- To identify the linguistic preferences of fifth- and sixth-semester students in the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Language Teaching with an Emphasis in English at the Universidad Industrial de Santander when faced with low and high emotional intensity situations.

3.2 Specific Objectives

- To characterize students' language usage preference based on different emotional contexts.
- To describe students' language preferences when expressing themselves in their native or foreign language.
- To determine the extent in which students are aware of the Emotional Distancing phenomenon.

4. State of the Art

Several authors have examined the influence of emotions on the linguistic preferences of bilingual speakers when expressing themselves in situations with varying emotional intensity. For instance, using a non-probabilistic sampling method, Mavrou and Alonso (2018) sought to analyze the perceptions of 34 bilingual and multilingual speakers regarding emotions and their preferred language for emotional expression. This study, conducted at the Antonio de Nebrija University in Spain, involved administering a questionnaire titled "The Bilingualism and Emotion Questionnaire" to collect biographical and linguistic background information from the participants and their preferred language for expressing specific emotions. The results indicated that the native language is generally considered to carry more

emotional load. However, this effect may be influenced by context, language use, and personal experiences.

Similarly, Gray (2022) conducted a study to understand his students' linguistic reality by analyzing their language preferences and the contexts in which one language prevails over another. This research was conducted with 30 students, aged 14 to 18, in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class in Athens, Georgia, USA. A Likert scale survey (1-5) was administered, which included demographic questions and various everyday contexts to examine which language the students preferred to use in each scenario. In addition, an open-ended question was included to explore how students applied their metalinguistic ideas and to determine whether the results aligned with their genuine beliefs about language selection. The data analysis concluded that students preferred using a specific language in communicative contexts. This choice was influenced by the person they were addressing and the real-life situation they found themselves in. For example, in formal settings such as school, students favored using English, whereas Spanish was the preferred language in informal settings with less social distance.

Additionally, the study by Bakić and Škifić (2017) investigated whether participants preferred using their second language to express emotions and thoughts and to what extent. This was done through an open-ended questionnaire administered to 10 anonymous participants in Croatia, which included questions on each respondent's linguistic background and the research's central theme. The analysis revealed that the choice between the native language and the second language depends mainly on the personal preference of each participant when expressing more intimate emotions connected to their identity. However, 8 out of the 10 participants stated that their native language provided a stronger emotional connection and greater ease in expressing feelings, which may also relate to the native language being their dominant language.

Similarly, Gao et al. (2019) explored emotional differences elicited by language by presenting bilingual Chinese-English speakers with self-referential statements of praise and criticism in both their native language (Chinese) and foreign language (English). This study, conducted at the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, involved 50 students aged 19 to 27. The methodology required participants to rate their affective and cognitive reactions to the praise and criticism, indicating how satisfying the comments were and how accurately they reflected their attributes. The results showed that, although criticisms were more unpleasant than praise in both languages, the level of discomfort decreased when English was used instead of Chinese. Additionally, no cognitive evaluation differences were found between the languages. These findings provide insights into how emotional communication can be facilitated across different languages.

Lastly, Mavrou and Dewaele (2020) explored how 174 Spanish language users, both native and foreign, aged 18 to 28, perceive emotionality and pleasantness. Of all the participants, 79 had Spanish as their L1, while 95 had it as their L2, and they belonged to various universities in Spain and the United Kingdom. Their perceptions were studied through audiovisual and visual material designed to induce mixed emotions, to understand whether cultural background and emotional intelligence traits were linked to emotional perception. Participants were asked to rate the audiovisual material on a seven-point semantic differential scale concerning two dimensions: emotionality and pleasantness. It was found that users of Spanish as a foreign language tended to assign higher values to emotionality and pleasantness than those who used it as their first language. This suggests that they may be more aware of the emotional distancing effect related to foreign languages. Moreover, the cultural differences among participants demonstrated that cultural backgrounds can influence how emotionality and pleasantness are perceived. This indicates that cultural factors should be considered when exploring the perception and expression of emotions.

5. Theoretical Framework

To comprehend the phenomenon of Emotional Distance through linguistic preference among students with a Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Language Teaching with an Emphasis in English at the Universidad Industrial de Santander, it is crucial to examine four main concepts. Firstly, emotional distancing, considering that it is the linguistic phenomenon that is intended to be studied in the linguistic preferences of fifth- and sixth-semester students from the Foreign Languages program. Secondly, foreign language effect (FLE), since, as stated by Cipolletti et al. (2016), foreign languages carry a different emotional level than native languages. Thirdly, emotional distancing in expressing emotions, considering that using and practicing a foreign language can influence how feelings are described in this language. Lastly, emotional distancing in linguistic preference, as bilingual individuals may prioritize their native or foreign language according to the context they are currently involved in. The subsequent sections will provide a detailed exploration of each of these concepts.

5.1 Emotional Distancing

Emotional Distancing, also referred to as Affective Distancing, is a psychological process in which an individual deliberately disconnects from an emotionally intense situation (Azevedo et al., 2022). The purpose of this detachment is to regulate emotions, preventing them from overwhelming or impairing objective judgment, thereby enabling a more authoritative and rational perspective on the situation. Emotional Distancing can also be considered a “*coping mechanism*” (Kim et al., 2020), a strategy that helps establish emotional boundaries and manage internal and external unpleasant situations. Affective Distance permits individuals to manage their feelings, objectively keep judgments, and acquire a practical perspective in highly emotional situations.

The concept of Affective Distancing has also been extended to foreign language learning. Research by Morawetz et al. (2017) found that bilingual individuals exposed to negative stimuli in their second language (L2) exhibited weaker emotional reactions than when the same stimuli were presented in their native language. This phenomenon is crucial to consider in the context of foreign language learning, as it underscores the intricate connection between language and emotions. It suggests that people may experience a degree of emotional detachment when communicating in their foreign language, which could influence their behavior and communication style. This insight can help explain why expressing emotions or thinking in a foreign language may feel different, particularly in emotionally charged situations.

5.2 Foreign Language Effect (FLE)

The Foreign-Language Effect (FLE) refers to the phenomenon in which bilingual individuals demonstrate different cognitive and emotional behaviors when speaking a foreign language compared to their native tongue. Ciolletti et al. (2016) noted that foreign languages are associated with emotional distance, as they are less connected to the emotional system than native languages. One significant factor highlighting this emotional difference is the distinct contexts in which native and foreign languages are acquired. Native languages are generally learned in emotionally rich environments during childhood, a developmental period in which feelings play a central role (Ivaz et al., 2016). In contrast, foreign languages are typically learned in educational settings that emphasize 'rational processes and cognitive engagement' (Shin & Kim, 2017). Consequently, the opportunity to form emotional connections with foreign languages is reduced, as these educational contexts often maintain a more emotionally neutral atmosphere.

Another explanation for FLE is the increased cognitive effort required to process a foreign language. Cipolletti et al. (2016) suggest that thinking in a non-native language promotes more systematic processing, which may reduce the cognitive resources available for emotional processing. Moreover, the brain's capacity to switch between languages plays a role in linguistic flexibility and emotional regulation. Individuals implement cognitive control mechanisms during language switching to inhibit the non-target language and activate the appropriate linguistic system. These exact mechanisms may also extend to emotion regulation, allowing the brain to manage emotional responses while switching between languages (Lai & O'Brien, 2020).

5.3 Emotional Distancing and Emotional Expression

The Foreign-Language Effect (FLE) has also been shown to influence emotional processing and expression. Iacozza et al. (2017) propose that the contextual-learning hypothesis, which suggests that learning involves interpreting new information through a personal worldview, highlights the role of personal experiences in shaping emotional processing. The relationship between emotional processing and learning is significant because it connects verbal and emotional information. Consequently, an individual's familiarity with a particular language can diminish the intensity of their emotional reactions. Given the different contexts in which a foreign language (FL) and a native language (NL) are acquired, it is likely that expressions in a foreign language are marked by a greater degree of emotional distance. This finding has been supported by studies involving bilingual individuals, who report experiencing varying emotional effects depending on the language used, with the foreign language typically eliciting a more distant emotional response.

Additionally, bilinguals prefer expressing emotions and engaging in emotional conversations in their L1, particularly with positive feelings and emotionally charged phrases

such as "I love you" (Belcher & Connor, 2001). This supports the theory of Emotional Distancing, which asserts that the NL is more emotionally resonant due to its acquisition in a more personal and affective context. Moreover, Hadjichristidis et al. (2019) found that when individuals speak a foreign language, their intuitive system is less attuned to discerning moral distinctions between good and evil. For example, when discussing embarrassing topics, people tend to engage in more extended conversations in the FL and are less hesitant to use swear words. These findings suggest that using a foreign language can alter the sensitivity and responsiveness of the intuitive system, impacting how individuals recognize and express specific emotions or ideas.

5.4 Emotional Distancing and Linguistic Preference

Research on bilingual speakers has revealed that the context and the communicative situation influence language choice. Gray (2022) found that bilingual Hispanic students tend to use English, their foreign language, in formal settings such as academic environments. Conversely, in informal situations or when interacting with people they feel close to, they prefer to use their native language, Spanish. This can be linked to the concept of emotional distancing, which suggests that a foreign language is often associated with neutrality and formality, given its primary connection to educational contexts, while the native language offers a sense of comfort (Gray, 2022).

Similarly, a study by Bakić and Škifić (2017) revealed that participants saw their native language (L1) as carrying more substantial emotional significance. To illustrate this, many participants indicated that their native language was the only one in which they could say "I love you" sincerely. This phenomenon also applies to other emotions, such as anger. These results align with findings by Hadjichristidis et al. (2019), who concluded that using a

second language can modify emotional responses, impacting how individuals perceive and express emotions or specific thoughts.

5.5 Code-switching and Code-mixing

In the current globalized world, communication no longer happens within only one language nor mode, as it can be addressed through multimodal perspectives as well, such as linguistic, aural, visual, or spatial. It is common for bilingual individuals to use two or even more languages during the same piece of speech, and to understand these processes many linguistic experts have proposed an explanation through the phenomena of code-mixing and code-switching. On the one hand, Hudson (1996) claims that code-mixing is the practice of combining two different languages in the same sentence to represent ambiguity about which code is more appropriate to apply in a specific situation. Therefore, to achieve more optimal communication, the speaker will combine multiple languages. On the other hand, Kim (2006) defines code-switching as the alternation between two languages in the same speech, utterance, or element. To clarify both concepts, the two following examples are presented. The phrase “Vamos a *hangear* con las muchachas” would be a case of code-mixing, as the word *hangear* (commonly used in Puerto Rico) comes from the English expression *hang out* and the combination of two languages (English and Spanish) is evidenced. Regarding code-switching, the sentence “Ay chica, ese *outfit is super cute!*” would be a proper example, as the phrase which was initially in Spanish were added complete words in English, switching between the two languages.

Moreover, there may be underlying motivations for bilinguals when they switch or mix between languages. Grosjean (1982) claims that certain factors can lead to a code-mixing scenario, for instance, the person they are speaking to, the environment, the message, their attitudes and emotions, among others. He also identifies several reasons for code-switching,

such as when bilinguals cannot find suitable words or expressions or when there is no accurate translation. Additionally, Ritchie and Bhatia (2012) explain that bilinguals make language choices based on several features, including the participants' contexts, the topic being discussed, and the time and place where the interactions occur. As these two concepts are commonly found in the oral speech of bilingual individuals, considering them can provide insight into the interplay between two languages and how they can influence the expression of emotions through emotional distancing.

5.6 Translanguaging

Building on the analysis of Code-switching and Code-mixing previously presented, this section introduces translanguaging as a contemporary and fundamental framework for understanding bilingual language practices. While code-switching and code-mixing have traditionally been used to describe how bilinguals alternate or combine two linguistic codes, translanguaging offers a reconceptualization by challenging the assumption that languages operate as different systems.

Taking that into account, García and Wei (2013) claim that translanguaging reflects how bilingual minds actually work. Instead of maintaining strict boundaries between languages, speakers draw on a single linguistic repertoire shaped by personal experiences and social interactions. From this perspective individuals employ an integrated set of linguistic resources that cannot be neatly divided into separate structures. Moreover, a key contribution of the translanguaging lies in its critical and political dimension. From this standpoint, language choice is not entirely utilitarian. The preference for one linguistic code over the other one may be due to institutional expectations, societal pressures, or a desire to conform with dominant norms (Wei, 2021).

Additionally, according to Canagarajah (2011), translanguaging can also serve as a means of resistance, enabling speakers to negotiate identity and meaning in situations where their language practices are restricted. Therefore, it acknowledges the social and political context of bilinguals' language use and emphasizes their agency. This concept is particularly relevant for comprehending the connection among bilingualism and emotional distancing, which constitutes a central focus on this study. It portrays the idea that emotional expression can be understood as the result of the adaptable implementation of an integrated linguistic portfolio rather than through isolated languages (Ossa & Proctor, 2021). The application of a particular linguistic resource may serve to create emotional detachment, regulate affect, or manage interpersonal relationships.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Methods

For the purposes of this project, a mixed-method approach is proposed since according to Şahin and Ozturk (2019) it combines quantitative and qualitative techniques to address research questions beyond the scope of a single approach. Bryman (2016, as cited in Ghanad, 2023) defines quantitative research as the approach that relies on data collection and data analysis to quantify the data and generalize findings from a sample of a study from varied perspectives. Besides, qualitative research “is a type of research that explores and provides deeper insights into real-world problems [...] gathers participants' experiences, perceptions, and behavior” (Tenny et al., 2022, para. 1). Therefore, while quantitative research focuses on objective and numerical data, qualitative research is based on subjective aspects to understand motives and reasons.

In addition, a deductive reasoning approach is implemented, which as stated by Bhandari (2022), deductive reasoning involves drawing particular findings through

inferences, formulating hypotheses based on theories, testing those hypotheses using inferential statistics, and drawing conclusions. This investigation aims to analyze the linguistic preference of bilingual individuals regarding low and high emotional situations in a naturalistic and interactional environment, as well as their knowledge about this linguistic phenomenon called emotional distancing. For this reason, mixed-method research was considered the most appropriate type of study since it gives validity and empirical support to the present investigation. Furthermore, considering the previous information, *Grounded Theory* was also adopted as a qualitative analytical framework to allow categories and patterns to emerge inductively from the data.

Originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (2017), it proposes that theory should be generated by methodical examination of empirical data rather than being imposed beforehand. In the present study, Grounded Theory guided the data analysis through the use of systematic coding procedures. Following Charmaz (2006), coding was understood as the pivotal link between data collection and theory construction. Accordingly, the color coding strategy employed in this investigation aligns with the initial and focused coding phase proposed within the theory. During the initial coding phase, colors were used to identify recurring linguistic behaviours and emotional patterns in participants' discourse while remaining open to multiple analytical directions. Subsequently, focused coding enables the refinement and grouping of the most salient codes, facilitating the identification of meaningful categories related to emotional distancing and linguistic preference.

In this regard, within the **English Use and Preference** category, the subcategories *Academic and Professional Settings* and *Detachment* were assigned the colors light blue and dark blue, respectively. Meanwhile, within the **Spanish Use and Preference** category, the subcategories *Making Clarifications* and *Closeness* were coded using the colors red and

purple, respectively. Finally, within the **Dual Language Use** category, several subcategories were identified: *Cursing*, coded in yellow; *Expressing Emotions*, coded in orange; *Life Outside Academics*, coded in green; and *Personal Experiences*, coded in purple (see Table 1). These categories will be further explained in the 7.4 Data Analysis Procedure section.

Thus, color coding functioned not merely as an organizational tool, but as an analytical strategy consistent with Grounded Theory principles, allowing categories to emerge directly from partakers' linguistic practices and emotional experiences.

Table 1

Categories obtained through color coding for data analysis procedure

English Use and Preference	Spanish Use and Preference	Dual Language Use
Academic Settings/Workforce	Making Clarifications	Cursing
Detachment	Closeness	Expressing Emotions
		Life Outside Academics
		Personal Experiences

Note. The table shows a summary of the categorization of the data through the use of color coding.

6.2 Population and Sampling Strategies

The population selected for this study were the students from the fifth and sixth semesters of the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Language Teaching with an Emphasis in English at the Universidad Industrial de Santander. López (2004) states that the population is “the set of people or objects about which one wishes to know something in an investigation” (p. 69). Taking the above information into account, this specific population was chosen because it met the requirements of the study, such as being bilingual and having an advanced

level in their foreign language (English). It is also important to note that, since these students are part of the field of language studies and are expected to become language professionals, they may approach language not only in terms of grammatical structure and pronunciation but also from a more emotionally oriented perspective. The participants were 13 in total, the sixth semester students being two males and six females and the fifth semester students being two males and three females, with a background of studying English for at least two years.

The objective of this study is to analyze the preference between the foreign language (English) and the native language (Spanish) in situations with different emotional loads; therefore, the variables to be taken into account are English and Spanish. According to Hernández et al. (2014), “a variable is a property that can fluctuate and whose variation is susceptible to measurement or observation” (p. 105). Considering that these variables (English and Spanish) do not have a numerical or quantitative value, they are considered nominal data. According to IBM (2023), nominal data are divided into categories (in this case, Spanish and English) which have no order or hierarchy, they simply reflect differences in the variables. Moreover, a non-probability sampling method was selected for this study since, according to Hernández (2021), it is not based on probability calculations, making it unsuitable for generalizing the results. More specifically, it was determined to use the non-probability sampling convenience technique, as it fulfilled the requirements for the study. As outlined by Otzen and Manterola (2017), this method “allows the selection of those accessible cases that accept to be included. This is based on the convenient accessibility and proximity of the subjects for the researcher” (p. 230).

6.3 Data Collection Instruments

The data collection instruments for this research were a closed questionnaire implemented on February 20th of 2025, a life history autobiographical note written on

February 24th of 2025, and two focus group (FG) sessions applied on February 27th of 2025. The focus group was selected as a tool for this study since, as Jackson et al. (2007) stated, “the primary advantage for the researcher in conducting focus groups is the ability to observe a large amount of interaction among multiple participants on one or more topics in a limited amount of time” (p. 25). Moreover, this instrument was applied in two sessions, where the participants were asked multiple questions about a specific topic. The researchers remained impartial to ensure that the conversation only prevailed among the participants. During the first session, sixth semester students participated and answered certain questions related to their linguistic preferences, their experiences with emotional distancing, and their personal concept of emotional distancing. Additionally, there were follow-up questions formulated by the investigators according to the information provided by the participants during every session, in order to obtain in depth further information. The same procedure was applied with the fifth semester students through the second focus session. These sessions were recorded, transcribed, and then categorized, using FG1 (focus group 1) for the first session and FG2 (focus group 2) for the second one, following the tenets of Grounded Theory.

Furthermore, the second instrument used for this investigation was a questionnaire that contained multiple-choice questions with open-ended justifications, since open-ended questions provide richer qualitative insights by allowing respondents to elaborate in their own words (Bhandari, 2021). The purpose of implementing this instrument was to determine the participants’ awareness of the phenomenon of emotional distancing and the life experiences that may be related to or influenced by it. Additionally, the questionnaire was previously piloted with an expert in the topic who was not part of the selected sample, as a way to know if the questions were correctly structured and understandable.

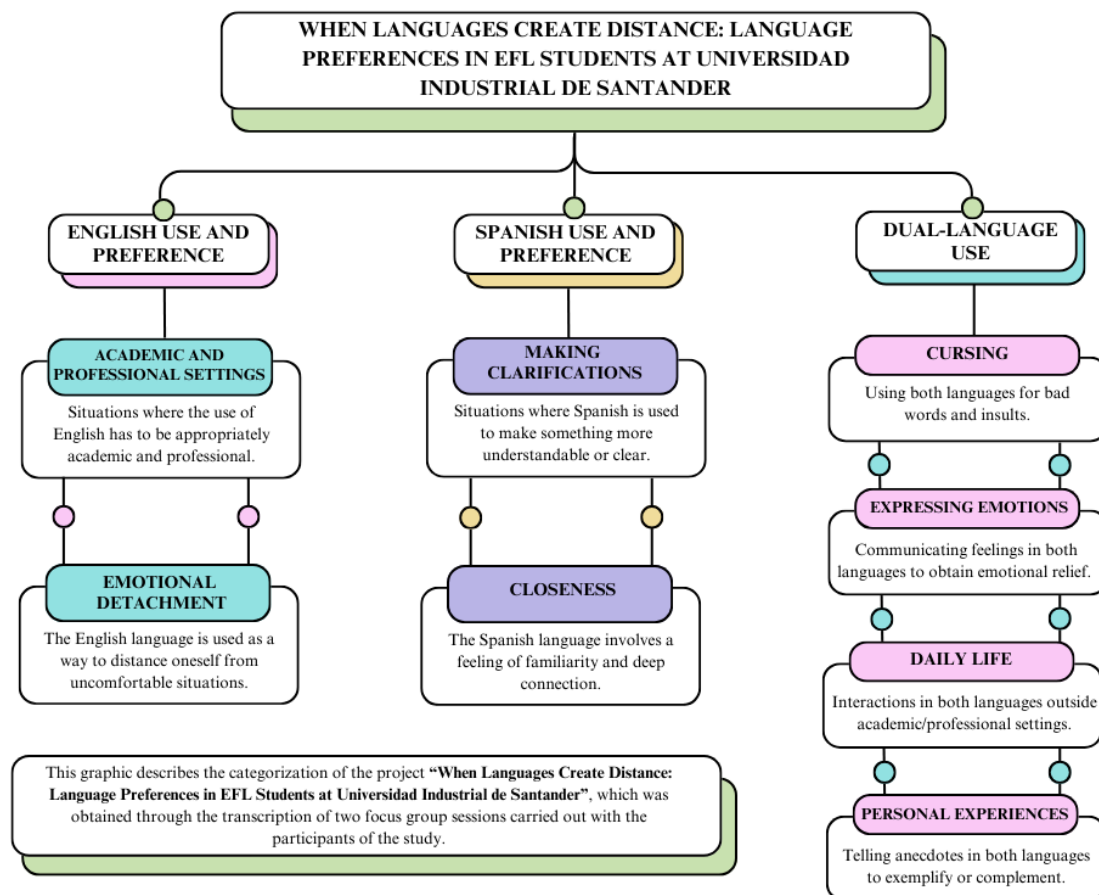
In addition, the third data collection instrument used in this research was a life history survey. It was applied on February 24th of 2025 through Google Forms, as it was easier to analyze written products in a digital format and a word-limit could be established. In this instrument, participants were asked to write a personal story in which they had experienced the phenomenon of Emotional Distancing, and they were provided some prompts to use as inspiration for their stories, such as “sharing a good moment with a family member or friend”, “talking about a sensitive topic”, “gossiping”, among others. The life history aimed to gather information about participants’ experiences and backgrounds regarding language usage when talking about their anecdotes. According to Atroholic (2023), the life history method collects personal narratives from individuals describing their experiences and offers insights into their attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and emotions. For the data analysis of this research tool, relevant extracts were collected from the stories to identify situations in which the participants used English or Spanish to express specific emotions. All the previously mentioned tools were of great importance to provide an in-depth understanding of the sample and contribute to comprehending the phenomenon of emotional distancing.

6.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The purpose of this study was to analyze the linguistic preferences of fifth and sixth semester students from the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Language Teaching with an Emphasis in English at Universidad Industrial de Santander. For this purpose, two focus group sessions (one with fifth semester students and the other with sixth semester students) were transcribed to identify emerging data categories. From the transcription and careful analysis of these focus group sessions, three main categories were identified: English Use and Preference, Spanish Use and Preference, and Dual-Language Use.

Figure 1

Categorization of the data obtained through the focus group sessions



Note. The conceptual graphic shows a summary of the categorization of the data obtained through the focus group sessions, which will be further explained in this section.

The first category English Use and Preference involves two codes; the first one being Academic and Professional Settings, which refers to the use of English in situations where being academically appropriate and professional is ultimately needed. Similarly, the second code Emotional Detachment refers to the use of English as a way to distance oneself from a situation or feeling that might result in discomfort for the speaker. Furthermore, the second category Spanish Use and Preference involves two different codes as well. The first one is Making Clarifications, in which Spanish is used with the purpose of making something more

understandable or clear for the listener by using their native language. Moreover, the second code Closeness expresses the feeling of familiarity and deep emotional connection that comes from using Spanish as a way to express opinions and emotions. Lastly, the third and final category of this analysis is Dual-Language Use, in which four codes were identified. This specific category involves the use of both English and Spanish for the same purpose, depending on the personal preference of the participants of this study. The codes belonging to this category are Cursing, Expressing Emotions, Daily Life, and Personal Experiences.

The first code Cursing makes reference to the use of bad words and insults as emotional expressions, while the second code Expressing Emotions involves communicating one's feelings to others or to oneself (through journaling) to obtain emotional relief. The third code Daily Life is used to classify the interactions that the participants have outside academic and professional settings and, finally, the fourth code Personal Experiences brings together various anecdotes and stories told by the participants as a way to exemplify or complement their responses during the focus group. After the extensive process of examination and categorization of the two focus group sessions, the analysis of the questionnaire responses (which was conducted using Google Forms and consisted primarily of multiple-choice questions with a space for respondents to justify their selected answers) was carried out under the same system of categories, as it was the life history instrument as well.

In addition, it is important to clarify that some extracts of participants' contributions were taken from the three data collection instruments to exemplify and provide further support to the data analysis section. For this reason, participants are identified with a specific number and data instrument (for example, participant 1 from the FG1) to highlight their involvement in the study. Finally, the content analysis of the data collection instruments was crucial for interpreting the participants' experiences regarding the linguistic phenomenon of emotional distancing and its relationship with emotional expression. Moreover, the

triangulation of the focus groups, questionnaire, and life history data provided a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, which led to the contribution of this study to the field of Emotional Distancing.

6.5 Research Ethics

Previous to the application of any data collection instruments, all the participants were informed of the purpose of the study and the information that would be collected from their answers through a signed consent form. The partakers were also aware that their participation in this research was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any moment. Besides, it was explained to all the people involved that all the data collected in this study, including voice recordings, names, and any identifying information, would be used only for academic and research purposes. For this reason, every participant signed a consent form, which is attached in the annexes section of the present document (Annex A). It should be considered that, as stated by Manandhar and Joshi (2020), “informed consent is not only a form that the participants sign, but also a process in which the participant has an understanding of the research and its risks.” (p. 90). It is worth remembering that consent is an essential element of research ethics that should be included in every investigation process, as the data used for any study was obtained due to the participants’ willingness and collaboration.

7. Findings and Discussion

In this section, the information collected by the three data collection instruments described in the previous section (see 7.3 Data Collection Instruments) will be compared with existing literature. In addition, figures from the questionnaire depicting the participants’ sociodemographic information and their awareness regarding the concept of Emotional Distancing will be represented during this segment, as well as their perception about expressing emotions in Spanish and English and their linguistic preference when discussing

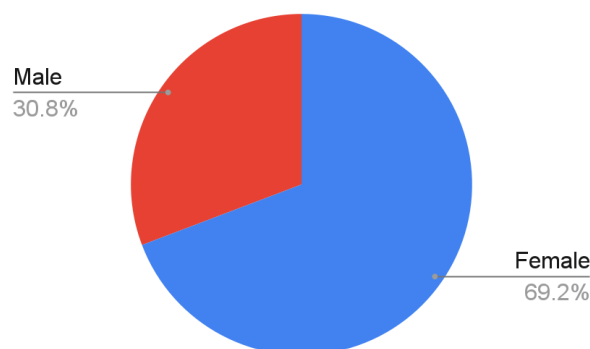
sensitive topics. Lastly, it is important to note that the categories drawn from the process of data analysis will be examined through the triangulation method for in-depth comprehension of the data, after the information from the figures has been displayed.

7.1 Sociodemographic Information

A total of 13 participants were involved in this project and their contributions were evidenced in all three data collection instruments. According to the questionnaire applied, 69.2% of the sample (9 participants) identified as female, while 30.8% (4 participants) identified as male, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Percentage of respondents according to their gender identity



Note. This figure represents the gender identity of the participants of this study.

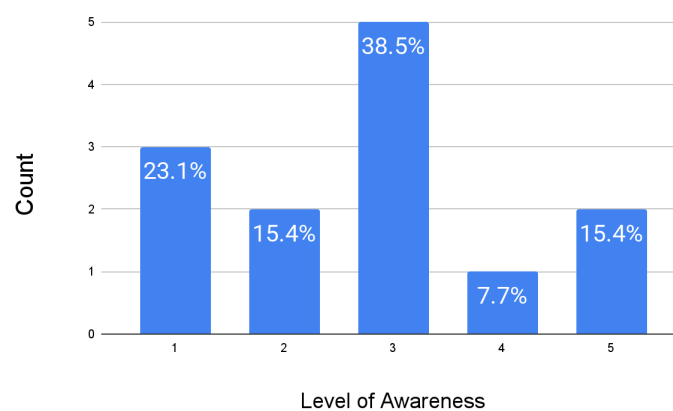
7.2 Awareness of Emotional Distancing

Through the questionnaire, participants were asked about their level of awareness regarding the existence of the linguistic phenomenon of Emotional Distancing, and they responded using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (no awareness) to 5 (complete awareness). As shown in Figure 3, the results were as follows: 23.1% selected level 1, indicating they had no knowledge of the phenomenon. The 15.4% chose level 2, suggesting a low level of

awareness. The largest group, 38.5%, selected level 3, reflecting a moderate understanding. Meanwhile, 7.7% reported a high level of awareness by selecting level 4. Lastly, 15.4% indicated full awareness of the phenomenon by selecting level 5.

Figure 3

Percentage of awareness that participants have about the existence of the linguistic phenomenon of Emotional Distancing



Note. This figure displays participants' level of awareness regarding Emotional Distancing.

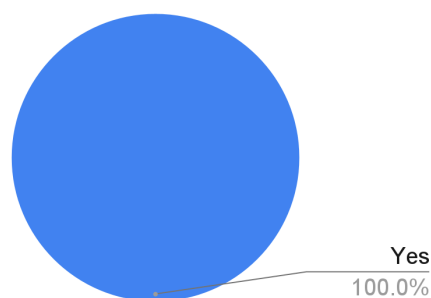
7.3 Perception of Expressing Emotions in Spanish and English

When partakers were asked whether they perceived a difference between expressing themselves in their native language (Spanish) versus their foreign language (English), 100% of the participants answered affirmatively (observe Figure 4). Among the justifications provided by the respondents, there is a clear perception of the differences between expressing themselves in Spanish and English. According to them, their native language is strongly associated with emotional depth, confidence, and greater linguistic precision, making it the preferred medium for conveying complex or sensitive ideas. In contrast, English is often perceived as more emotionally distant, which allows participants to articulate their thoughts

more freely or with less emotional involvement when discussing difficult or highly emotionally charged topics.

Figure 4

Percentage of people who consider that there is a difference in emotional expression between their native language and their foreign language.



Note. This figure illustrates participants' perception regarding the emotional difference when expressing emotions in both their native and foreign language.

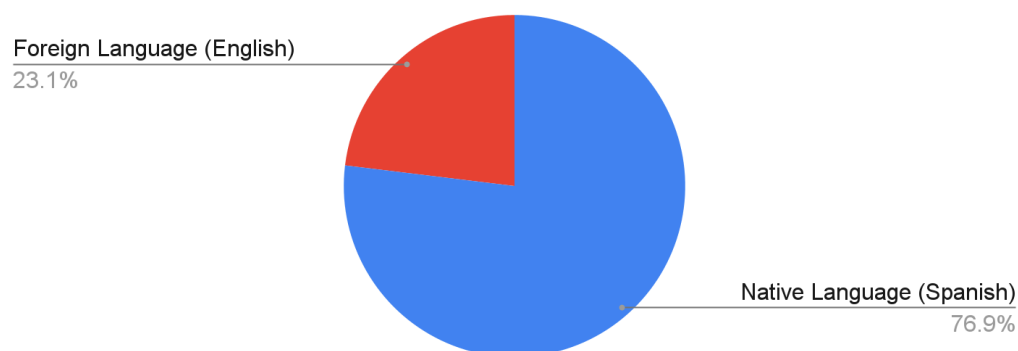
7.4 Linguistic Preference Regarding Sensitive Topics

Figure 5 illustrates the participants' responses when asked which language they preferred for discussing sensitive or controversial topics. The data shows a clear tendency towards their native language (Spanish), with 76.9% of participants expressing a preference for it. In contrast, only 23.1% indicated a preference for using English in such situations. The reasons provided by those who preferred Spanish largely relate to greater lexical and cultural familiarity, particularly with technical terms and expressions necessary for engaging in different specific discussions. Several participants mentioned that using their native language allowed them to communicate their ideas more confidently and precisely, and that expressing complex or sensitive opinions in English made them feel limited or less capable. Additionally, emotional closeness and comfort were significant factors, as Spanish was seen

as the language of their identity and natural self-expression. Conversely, those who preferred English explained that it helped them maintain emotional distance, allowing them to be more objective when discussing difficult topics. One participant also noted that English felt more formal, making it more suitable for serious or contentious conversations.

Figure 5

Percentage of people who prefer English or Spanish to express their opinion when talking about sensitive/debatable topics



Note. This figure describes participants' linguistic preference when discussing sensitive/debatable topics.

7.5 English Use and Preference

In this category, the codes Academic and Professional Settings and Emotional Detachment are represented.

7.5.1 Academic and Professional Settings

It was found that the participants of this study preferred using English in academic and professional settings, as they associated this language with a sense of formality and the use of a higher register. This happened especially in places where speaking English is

considered the norm, such as their university classes (since they are students of an English program) and their places of work. This is exemplified by participants' contributions in the questionnaire applied, as stated by participant 5 "For academic purposes, I would speak in English, because the subject is supposed to be in that language". Participant 13 also expressed, "English is more professional and I feel I express myself better when speaking in English in classroom settings". Similarly, during the FG1 session, participant 1 expressed feeling more comfortable speaking in English in academic settings, while participant 2 claimed to use English in working scenarios, as they preferred finding jobs where the use of English is predominant.

A possible reasoning behind this process was mentioned by participant 3 in the FG2 session, as they considered that the preference for English in these scenarios came from the fact that they learned English as a foreign language. Therefore, they had the perspective of this language as a more formal and structural tongue, which does not allow much emotional attachment. This perception may relate to the way foreign languages are typically acquired and used. English as a foreign language is often learned in academic environments and it is used primarily in structured or occasional contexts, such as in school or during travel. For this reason, bilingual individuals might not develop the emotional depth associated with a first language in their foreign language. According to Caldwell-Harris and Dinn (2016), emotional meaning in language develops through repeated use of it in emotionally significant situations, suggesting that when a language is not tied to personal and emotionally rich experiences, it may be perceived as more distant or impersonal.

7.5.2 Emotional Detachment

The participants showed a predominance in using English as a way to process their feelings more comfortably, either because they consider their feelings to be too

overwhelming or they feel a great sense of vulnerability when doing this same process in their native language. As an example, in the FG2 session participant 2 stated “It is like a way to set a barrier, like you do not have to be as close to the topic as to speak Spanish. If you want, you can use English, French, or whatever and you are going to feel somehow better”. Likewise, during the application of the questionnaire, participant 7 claimed “Sometimes it is easier to express more sensible things in a language that does not feel too close to home”. Thus, considering the previous responses, English functions as a defense mechanism to avoid vulnerability or negativity. In an investigation conducted by Ortigosa-Beltrán et al. (2023) it was demonstrated how the use of a foreign language can work as a psychological or emotional barrier, when the participants of their study exhibited a reduced emotional reactivity recalling traumatic experiences when using their foreign language. In addition, this behavior can also be evidenced in the present study through the life history instrument. Participant 5 explained that it was easier for them to express themselves in their foreign language while journaling, as they found Spanish to be “too vulnerable”, seemingly using English as a way to talk about their feelings without emotional strain.

7.6 Spanish Use and Preference

In this category, the codes Making Clarifications and Closeness are described.

7.6.1 Making Clarifications

The participants demonstrated a tendency to use Spanish when they needed a concept, idea, or opinion to be completely clear and understood by the receiver, without the possibility of being mistaken. Considering that the participants’ first language is Spanish, it can be evidenced that they are aware of the greater proficiency they have in this language and how their intentions would probably not be misinterpreted if they communicate them in Spanish. This behavior could be supported during the questionnaire application, as participant 2

declared “When I speak in Spanish (like right now) I feel that I can be more clear and precise with what I am saying, and I even feel at peace knowing that I have more vocabulary”.² In the same data collection instrument, participant 5 also expressed “There are some words that are very technical that I probably do not know in my second language, so it would be easier to do it in Spanish,” which exhibits the confidence and awareness of their capacities in each language. This strategic use of their first language aligns with the view of Krashen and Terrell (1983; as cited in Hitotuzi, 2006), who argue that learners may rely on their native language to compensate for limitations in their interlanguage, particularly when they need to initiate or clarify meaning in communication.

7.6.2 Closeness

The results highlight the perspective of Spanish as an emotional language used for displays of affection, communication with family and friends, and expression of personal feelings. Spanish is participants’ native language, therefore, there is also a feeling of comfort and familiarity coming from it, which developed during the key moments of their childhood. During the focus group sessions, when asked which of the two languages (English or Spanish) they felt was closer to them or that represented them better, the majority of participants expressed a preference for the Spanish tongue. For instance, participant 5 in the FG1 session explained that, considering Spanish is their mother tongue and they grew up with it, it was easier for them to communicate using this language or using it for assignments that they found difficult, as it was easier to get understood.

Related to that, the questionnaire and life history instruments were essential to understand participants’ perspectives, as they contributed to the study with their personal experiences. Participant 13 in the questionnaire stated to “feel more like my true self” when

² Own translation (from Spanish to English).

using Spanish, while participant 12 from the life history wrote about their experience during a cultural exchange in a country where Spanish is not the official language. They were taking care of two children to teach them English and the participant became attached to them; for this reason, even if the purpose was for them to communicate in English, the participant felt like saying “I love you” to the kids was not enough to make them feel how much they loved them, as it would have been saying it in Spanish or the children’s native language. In addition, participant 8 from the life history claimed to use “congratulations”³ (as a way to praise someone for their achievements) when they did not have a close relationship with the person. However, when it came to their family members, romantic partner, and close friends (people they hold dear), they would use Spanish for the same purpose. A study by Bakić and Škifić (2017) demonstrated that the language chosen for expressing feelings or managing personal thoughts often depends on the emotional contexts in which each language was acquired. Therefore, emotional expression is often tied to the first language, which many participants of their study associated with sincerity, closeness, and emotional depth. A similar case could be appreciated through the data obtained in the present study, considering the use of the native language (Spanish) for displaying affective feelings.

7.7 Dual Language Use

In this category, the codes Cursing, Expressing Emotions, Daily Life, and Personal Experiences are displayed. Contrary to the previous two categories, this one has elements from both Spanish and English, which are clarified during the development of the analysis of each code.

7.7.1 Cursing

³ The participant originally used the word *félicitations*.

In this specific aspect, participants showed a preference for using both languages. On the one hand, certain participants (1 and 2) from the FG1 session stated that they avoid cursing in Spanish since the insult could sound “too aggressive”. Participant 1 even affirmed that they would never be heard saying a bad word in Spanish, but they would occasionally use bad words in English. On the other hand, the majority of the remaining participants (in both FG sessions) claimed that Spanish is the language they mostly use for cursing due to various reasons. Firstly, participant 1 from the FG2 session claimed that in Spanish they had a larger *repertoire* of bad words that they could use in contrast to English. Secondly, participant 2 from the FG2 session as well affirmed that in Spanish they could “multiply, add, subtract, divide [...] be as creative as you want because for me, that language does not have an actual limit for insulting”. To provide further context, in Colombian Spanish it is common to use mathematical expressions as a way to aggravate an insult and make it more offensive. As an example, the word *hijue***** can be transformed to *triple hijue*****⁴, which in this context would make it even more derogatory than the first word alone.

Additionally, information supporting the use of English for cursing was also extracted from the questionnaire applied. Participant 12 stated that many jokes in Spanish included cuss words, which they considered inappropriate in multiple settings (implying an awareness of switching languages according to the context). This behavior aligns with the results provided by Caldwell-Harris and Dinn (2016), in which multilingual individuals rated the emotionality of cuss words in different languages and those in the native language were considered the strongest ones. Lastly, from the life history instrument it was observed that strong emotions

⁴ The word *hijue***** can be translated as motherf****. *Triple hijue***** would be “three times mother****”.

Due to the academic nature of the present study, which is greatly respected, it was decided to write these harsh expressions with asterisks (*).

such as rage can elicit the use of the native language (Spanish) for cursing. Participant 9 wrote about an experience they had when playing online video games, where an annoying player was insulting them and they decided to do the same but in Spanish, as it was easier for them to express this feeling in it. All the experiences and perspectives from the participants explored different aspects regarding the use of two languages for the same purpose, and were considered insightful to understand the reasoning behind this process.

7.7.2 Expressing Emotions

In this section, participants provided information about how they process their feelings and how different contexts can affect the language they use to communicate them. It was found that English was commonly used when their feelings were overwhelming or sensitive, seemingly using the foreign language to protect or detach themselves from the complicated nature of their feelings. From the FG1 session, participant 3 stated, “When I talk about my feelings, I feel more comfortable talking about it in English because it feels more detached. Like if I talk about it in Spanish, it feels too real, too personal”. Similarly, participant 3 from the FG2 session mentioned keeping a diary in their notes app, where they used to write in English since doing it in Spanish made them prone to cry. This statement was supported by participant 2 from the same session, as they affirmed that talking about their feelings in Spanish made it more emotional. Other situations where English was used for emotional expression were introduced by two participants (1 and 11) through the life history instrument. Participant 1 mentioned an argument they had with their previous romantic partner, where they kept finding the words to explain their feelings in English, but not in Spanish. Moreover, participant 11 wrote about a birthday message they sent to someone they loved romantically, where they used both languages to say “I love you”, as a way to emphasize how much they loved that person.

Furthermore, Spanish was indeed considered important for the expression of emotions, considering it is the native language of the participants of this study. During the FG1 session, participant 1 claimed to use Spanish when they needed to say something genuinely important. Also, participant 3 affirmed that when expressing their emotions in Spanish, “you are you [...], it is like myself, my real self”, implying the importance of their native language for their identity and self-perception. Pavlenko (2006; as cited in Gismundi, 2024) supports the idea that language choice can shape one’s sense of self, as represented in the present study. In a survey of more than 1,000 multilingual individuals, 65% reported experiencing shifts in identity, emotional expression, and perspective depending on the language they are using, often influenced by their level of fluency and cultural context.

Besides, in the FG2 session, participant 4 stated that using English was less emotionally expressive. As an example, they provided the situation of communicating love to others verbally since in English they could only say “I love you”, without a distinction between friends, family, or a romantic partner. This situation may refer to the lack of the phrase *te quiero* in English, which is commonly used as an expression of affection that is still not as deeply emotional as saying *te amo* (I love you). Finally, various participants also highlighted the importance of the Spanish language for emotional expression in the questionnaire. Among the opinions they shared, it could be noticed how Spanish was a synonym of freedom (as they could communicate without caring about being misinterpreted), home and familiarity, and linguistic richness (possibly referring to the use of *te quiero* and *te amo* as verbal displays of affection).

7.7.3 Daily Life

It was found that participants used both English and Spanish depending on the context, the topic of the conversation, and the person they were talking to. In familial

contexts, participants generally used Spanish to communicate with their relatives. As stated by participant 5 in the FG1 session, Spanish is their mother tongue, therefore, they use it every day in their homes and in their free time in school when interacting with friends. Considering that in their context English is a foreign language, Spanish is the language of interaction when communicating with others, as people in Colombian society are not expected to speak English in their daily lives. For this reason, it is expected for participants to widely use Spanish every day. Moreover, participant 1 from the FG2 provided insight into another possible reasoning behind the use of Spanish in their daily lives. They affirmed that, as Spanish is their mother tongue, they have experienced most of their lives in this language. This statement confirms that the use of Spanish for this purpose is natural for them.

Additionally, participant 7 from the life history emphasized using Spanish when gossiping, as it “allows you to feel more comfortable with local words, *dichos e insultos*⁵”, which brought into perspective the importance of the native language when discussing topics of interest. This viewpoint is explored by the investigation directed by Acuña (2017), in which participants used to switch to their L1 (Galician⁶) while gossiping when they wanted to express something derogatory or emotionally charged, a process that allowed them to speak more freely.

Furthermore, the use of English still takes great importance in participants’ lives. As students of an English teaching program, who often work part-time jobs related to their majors, communicating in English happens as constantly as communicating in Spanish. This perspective can be evidenced through the contribution of participant 5 in the questionnaire, as they expressed that they could easily talk with a friend about their opinions, feelings, ideas, in English, as it did not require a complex use of words. Similarly, participant 5 in the

⁵ *Dichos e insultos* can be translated to “sayings and insults”.

⁶ A dialect spoken in the Spanish autonomous region of Galicia.

questionnaire also claimed that for them both languages were “okay” to use, but when communicating with another bilingual person, they would choose to speak in English as they are both fluent in the language.

7.7.4 Personal Experiences

This category includes all the different encounters in which participants experienced Emotional Distancing through the use of both their native and foreign languages (anecdotes). These contributions were taken as a separated category, as it was deemed necessary to indicate specific patterns that were found appealing for the purpose of this study. From the FG1 session, the participants’ stories focused mainly on the expression of emotions and situations where they took advantage of the ability to speak two languages to exhibit those feelings. Participant 3 told their experience during a cultural exchange that they made in the United States, in which they felt great joy every time they wanted to curse and no one could understand them because they did so in Spanish. For them, cursing in Spanish was the proper way to express how he felt at the moment and what characterized them the most. In addition, the same participant expressed that they felt more comfortable saying “I love you” rather than *te quiero* or *te amo* when talking to another person and trying to express their feelings, possibly due to the emotional strength that the native language carries.

This situation was similar to participant 6’s, in which they detailed how one of their friends told them *te amo* as a farewell after an online meeting and they nervously reciprocated by saying “I love you”, as it was something unexpected for them. The participant clarified that they indeed loved their friend, but they were unable to say it in Spanish as it was a sudden display of affection. Through the life history instrument, participant 2’s story also demonstrated the stronger emotionality of the native language. They wrote about how they had a romantic relationship with someone for one month and their

partner decided to call them *el amor de mi vida*, which left the participant feeling astonished and trying to search for a reason for saying such a strong declaration after only one month of relationship. With this experience, it was possible to understand the different perspectives that may arise when discussing such a personal matter as journaling and the expression of emotions.

Lastly, participant 2 from FG2 stated how they used their foreign language when talking about things that they did not like or things they did not feel comfortable about. Additionally, English was also used as a way to keep conversations private from others, especially if these people are not speakers of this language. Participant 4 from the life history instrument mentioned how they talked in English about their feelings with their friends while on a call. The purpose of this action was to avoid their relatives' intrusiveness or prying, as the participant did not want to be questioned about their emotions. All the aforementioned experiences provided valuable insight into understanding how the interplay between two languages plays a key role in bilingual individuals' lives. Referring specifically to the present investigation, participants' stories can demonstrate how emotional distancing can be a factor that motivates using one language above another in different situations, contributing greatly to the purpose of this research.

8. Conclusions

This investigation aimed to identify the linguistic preferences of students from fifth and sixth semester in the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Language Teaching with an emphasis in English at the Universidad Industrial de Santander when faced with low and high emotional intensity situations. From the data analysis, it can be concluded that the first hypothesis was not achieved, since they did not show a specific linguistic preference for either Spanish or English in situations of high and low emotional intensity. This was

evidenced in the instruments applied, in which the participants either directly or indirectly manifested that there was not a specific linguistic preference through the discussion of their specific situations or experiences. For instance, when referring to cursing, it was initially expected that participants would prefer to curse in Spanish, as previous studies have documented a tendency for people to swear in their native language (Caldwell-Harris & Dinn, 2016). However, the findings revealed that some participants actually preferred to curse in English. Regardless of the language chosen, the presence of Emotional Distancing was evident, since those who opted for English explained that swearing in their foreign language felt less intense or personal, highlighting a sense of emotional detachment from the words used.

Moreover, it was also noticed that the second hypothesis was fulfilled, as students perceived a difference between expressing emotions in English and Spanish. The native language was generally associated with a greater emotionality, making it the preferred language when discussing sensitive topics with more confidence and linguistic precision. In contrast, the foreign language was distinguished as the one with lower emotionality, which enabled participants to express themselves more freely and detach themselves from specific contexts. Through participants' contributions, it could be concluded that expressing their emotions in Spanish made them feel more vulnerable and exposed. Additionally, the native language was found to be related with students' self-perception and authenticity, as they claimed to feel as "their real self" when communicating in Spanish, as supported by a study conducted by Pavlenko (2006; as cited in Gismundi, 2024).

Furthermore, it was demonstrated that the third hypothesis was met, considering that participants did not have a linguistic preference for either Spanish or English in situations with varying levels of emotionality, as the language that they chose to use in specific

situations relied on their personal perspective, context, and the previous experiences that they have had with it. As an example, journaling is a process that is understood as being highly personal and emotional. However, it was found that two participants of the present study used different languages for this same purpose. One participant preferred to use Spanish, as they considered it was more appropriate for them to use their native language, while the other one preferred the use of English, as they considered their feelings to be exceptionally emotional to be written in Spanish. This behavior demonstrates that language choice might not be particularly influenced by emotionality (even if it is a great factor), but rather by personal perception and experience.

Besides, it was revealed that the majority of participants (38.5%) have a moderate level of awareness regarding the phenomenon of Emotional Distancing. A possible reason for this is that students might have inferred what the phenomenon is about by the description of the study provided by the investigators, but still, they were not exposed to a formal meaning of it. They might have a general understanding of the interplay generated by the use of two different languages, as they understand that there is a difference between expressing themselves in both languages. However, they are not necessarily familiar with the concept of Emotional Distancing, nor have they deeply reflected on the underlying reasons for the existence of this linguistic phenomenon. Additionally, it was observed that 76,9% of participants considered that their native language permitted confident and precise communication regarding sensitive matters. This is because, according to the participants, Spanish is the language in which they have significant lexical and cultural familiarity, particularly regarding technical terms or expressions used in debatable contexts.

In conclusion, the present study contributes to the field of Emotional Distancing and their relationship with emotional expression in both the native and the foreign language. Through this study, different situations in which participants made use of different languages

according to their personal perception and previous experiences were showcased, demonstrating how languages can be used by bilingual and multilingual individuals according to a specific context or purpose. In addition, the concept of Emotional Distancing and emotional expression through language is still a largely unexplored field, therefore, innovative studies represent a great advantage when it comes to further understanding the influence of emotionality and languages in the expression of emotions.

9. Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted with the participation of students from a bilingual program that already had a well-established level in their foreign language (English), ranging from upper intermediate to advanced levels. For this reason, it would be appealing to explore the phenomenon of Emotional Distancing in populations who have a low level of proficiency, as it could provide a new perspective and possible different usages of the language in emotional contexts. Moreover, this study consisted of participants whose mother tongue is Spanish exclusively, leaving behind the possibility of investigating the phenomenon of Emotional Distancing with different languages as participants' native language. Similarly, the foreign language used by the participants of this study was English, excluding the opportunity of researching if the phenomenon of Emotional Distancing is also possible with other foreign languages. Finally, another possible limitation found in this study was the reduced sample of participants. Considering the type of instruments used and the fact that the present research uses a mixed-method approach, it was deemed appropriate to keep a small sample, as the data collected from the participants was more specific, linguistically rich, and simple to categorize. Still, the possibility of researching the concept of Emotional Distancing with a bigger sample is a promising opportunity to further expand the field of linguistic emotionality and expression, as this study did not explore this prospect.

10. Further Research Possibilities

For future investigations, it would be exceptional to explore different languages from the ones studied in the present research (English and Spanish) considering that, in this case, Spanish was the participants' native language and English was their foreign language. Furthermore, the present study investigated the concept of Emotional Distancing in specific contexts that were considered to have either a high or low level of emotionality. Subsequently, future research works could inspect the possibility of proposing different contexts that do not necessarily have predetermined levels of emotionality. Lastly, in this investigation, the concept of Emotional Distancing was not related to its possible implications in education. Taking into account that the participants of this study are pre-service teachers, it would be engaging to examine how the awareness of Emotional Distancing can influence how teachers and students express themselves inside the classroom, and how these interactions are understood by the educators. The aforementioned opportunities aim to inspire the readers of this work to contribute to the field of linguistics and its possible relationship with Emotional Distancing and emotional expression, as well as to uncover possible future investigations that might result from the accomplishment of this study.

11. Acknowledgements

We want to acknowledge the support provided by our thesis advisor Silvia Tarazona. Without her guidance, this project would not have been possible. In addition, we want to thank the different professors that instructed us during the previous semesters in the various research-related subjects that we took as part of our program's pensum. We have been studying the concept of Emotional Distancing for a long time, and the previous investigations that we developed under our professors' leadership were incredibly valuable to accomplish our thesis research. Similarly, we want to highlight the collaboration of multiple professors

that, even if they were not direct contributors of this study, still allowed us to take moments from their classes to engage their students into participating in our data collection processes. We want to bring to attention the incredible work of all these professors that supported us through this whole process of investigation, and that gave us the opportunity to further develop a research topic that was not precisely common or well-known. As pre-service teachers ourselves, it is important for us to recognize the role that our educators had during the making of the present investigation.

We also want to thank our participants for their collaboration in this study. As fellow students, they understood the significance of their contributions in each data collection instrument and provided important, genuine information, as it was evidenced in the analysis section. Furthermore, we want to express our gratitude to our families and friends, who indirectly provided us support to continue working towards our goal of completing our thesis research. Their genuine interest in our project and their willingness to understand it were a great motivation to keep going forward. From the investigator Camila Reyes, she would like to thank the South Korean boy group *Bangtan Sonyeondan* (also known as BTS), as their music and fan-directed content were truly significant to motivate her to complete this research project.

Finally, as a group, we want to thank ourselves for our hard work and dedication. Each one of us played a key role in the development of this research and we recognize that our support towards each other was fundamental for the accomplishment of this study. We are truly proud of our work and we hope that it can be as interesting for the readers as it was for us as investigators. This research project is not only the result of a conjoined effort and a long process, but also the representation of our last contribution to the Universidad Industrial de Santander, which allowed us to pursue education and become ethical and responsible

professionals. To all the people that we previously mentioned, to our university, our sincere acknowledgement.

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Appendix A

Consent Form

Universidad Industrial de Santander - Facultad de Ciencias Humanas Escuela de Idiomas - Lic. en Lenguas Extranjeras con énfasis en Inglés Trabajo de Grado
CONSENT FORM

Investigadores: Lina Luengas, Camila Reyes y Luis David Lizcano.

Teléfonos de Contacto: XXXXXXXXXXX, XXXXXXXXXXX y XXXXXXXXXXX

Correos Electrónicos de Contacto: xxxxxxxx@correo.uis.edu.co, xxxxxxxx@correo.uis.edu.co y xxxxxxxx@correo.uis.edu.co

Este documento informa sobre el tratamiento de datos personales y la recolección de material audiovisual para el proyecto de investigación "Cuando los Idiomas Crean Distancia: Diferencias Emocionales en las Preferencias Lingüísticas de los Estudiantes ELT en la UIS". No se dará información referente a este fenómeno lingüístico debido a que puede crear preconcepciones en los participantes. La información personal proporcionada y el material audiovisual recolectado (fotografías, grabaciones de video y/o audio) serán utilizados para analizar las preferencias lingüísticas de los estudiantes de 5º y 6º semestre de la Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras de la Universidad Industrial de Santander. Se garantiza la protección de los datos según la Ley 1581 de 2012, de manera que usted tiene derecho a conocer, modificar, eliminar sus datos, y revocar su consentimiento en cualquier momento.

Para resolver dudas, puede comunicarse a los correos electrónicos o a los números de teléfono que se encuentran al inicio de este consentimiento informado.

Yo, _____, identificado con C.C. _____, el día _____ autorizo de manera libre, expresa, voluntaria y debidamente informada el tratamiento de mis datos personales y la recolección de material audiovisual (fotografías, videos, grabaciones de audio), de acuerdo con las finalidades aquí descritas, cuyo propósito es netamente académico e investigativo.

Firma del participante: _____

Teléfono de contacto del participante: _____

Correo electrónico del participante: _____

Appendix B

Questionnaire Format

19/8/26, 18:03

Emotional Differences in ELT Students' Language Preferences at UIS

Emotional Differences in ELT Students' Language Preferences at UIS

The present study aims to investigate the linguistic preferences between their native language and their foreign language (English) of fifth and sixth semester students of the Foreign Languages Education with an emphasis in English program at Universidad Industrial de Santander. The answers provided in this questionnaire will remain *anonymous* and *confidential*, and they will only be used for academic purposes related to the development of a thesis project, according to the *Ley 1581 del 2012 de Protección de Datos Personales*. Answering the following questionnaire will take an estimated time of 10 minutes. If any questions, please refer to the researchers in charge of the study or communicate your doubts to the following e-mail addresses:

- XXXXXXXX@correo.uis.edu.co
- XXXXXXXX@correo.uis.edu.co
- XXXXXXXX@correo.uis.edu.co

Thank you for your participation!

* Indica que la pregunta es obligatoria

1. Do you authorize the collection of your personal data for educational research purposes? *

Marca solo un óvalo.

☐ Yes

☐ No

Demographic Information

Answer the following questions according to your demographic data. Please, provide *sincere* responses.

19/8/26, 18:03

Emotional Differences in ELT Students' Language Preferences at UIS

2. 1. What is your gender identity? *

Marca solo un óvalo.

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Prefer not to say it

3. 2. Were you aware of the existence of a linguistic phenomenon called "Emotional Distancing" before this study? *

Marca solo un óvalo.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Completely sure

4. 3. Do you consider that there is a difference between expressing yourself in your **native language** (Spanish) in comparison to your **foreign language** (English)? *

Marca solo un óvalo.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

5. Justify your answer *

19/8/26, 18:03

Emotional Differences in ELT Students' Language Preferences at UIS

6. 4. In which language would you prefer to express your opinion when talking about **sensitive/debatable** circumstances? e.g. Abortion, Feminism, Religion. *

Marca solo un óvalo.

- ☐ Native Language (Spanish)
- ☐ Foreign Language (English)

7. Justify your answer *

Hypothetical Situation 1

Below, you will find two hypothetical situations in which you need to choose *which language* would you use to respond. Both situations are related to interpersonal relationships and in each case someone expresses their feelings towards you (either romantically or as a friend).

8. 5. You are in a stable romantic relationship with a bilingual person who speaks both English and Spanish. You usually use a combination of the two languages to communicate. This person expresses their **romantic** feelings to you and you want to reciprocate those feelings of romantic **love**. Which language would you choose for this purpose? *

Marca solo un óvalo.

- ☐ English
- ☐ Spanish

9. Justify your answer *

19/8/26, 18:03

Emotional Differences in ELT Students' Language Preferences at UIS

10. 6. A week ago, you met a new person and you have just become **friends**. This person speaks both English and Spanish, and expresses their feelings of **friendly** love towards you. You decide to reciprocate those feelings of love between friends. Which language would you choose for this purpose? *

Marca solo un óvalo.

☐ English

☐ Spanish

11. Justify your answer *

Hypothetical Situation 2

Below, you will find a series of scenarios settled in a *bilingual* classroom, where the teacher and the students may speak both English and Spanish during the class. Please note that this class is also *taught in both languages*. Therefore, choose your language of preference according to the situation.

12. 7. The teacher says something funny during the class. You know a joke related to what he mentioned and you want to **tell the joke to the whole class**. Which of the two languages would you choose for this purpose? *

Marca solo un óvalo.

☐ English

☐ Spanish

13. Justify your answer *

19/8/26, 18:03

Emotional Differences in ELT Students' Language Preferences at UIS

14. 8. You are talking to a classmate without paying attention to the boring class. The teacher, noticing your lack of attention, asks you to share your opinion on the topic he's currently teaching. You don't want to participate because you feel he **doesn't like you**. Which of the two languages would you choose to answer to the teacher? *

Marca solo un óvalo.

☐ English

☐ Spanish

15. Justify your answer *

16. 9. The teacher creates random groups to work with your classmates in an activity that you have to submit at the end of the class. Unfortunately, you have to work on the activity with a person whom you've **had past conflicts that were never resolved**. The situation makes you feel uncomfortable and unsure on how to start the conversation with them. Which language would you use to speak to this classmate? *

Marca solo un óvalo.

☐ English

☐ Spanish

17. Justify your answer *

Hypothetical Situation 3

Below, you will find a scenario related to the personal preferences of two bilingual individuals when watching a movie.

19/8/26, 18:03

Emotional Differences in ELT Students' Language Preferences at UIS

18. 10. You are about to watch a movie with a friend. You are both bilingual and the movie is originally in English, but there's also a Spanish-dubbed version available. Your friend asks you which version do you prefer to watch. Would you choose to watch the movie in its original language (English) or in the dubbed version (Spanish)? *

Marca solo un óvalo.

☐ English

☐ Spanish

19. Justify your answer *

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Google Formularios

Appendix C

Life History Format

19/8/26, 18:30

Emotional Differences in ELT Students' Language Preferences at UIS

Emotional Differences in ELT Students' Language Preferences at UIS

The present study aims to investigate the linguistic preferences between their native language and their foreign language (English) of fifth and sixth semester students of the Foreign Languages Education with an emphasis in English program at Universidad Industrial de Santander. The answers provided in this single-question survey will remain *anonymous* and *confidential*, and they will only be used for academic purposes related to the development of a thesis project, according to the *Ley 1581 del 2012 de Protección de Datos Personales*. Answering the following single-question survey will take an estimated time of 10 minutes. If any questions, please refer to the researchers in charge of the study or communicate your doubts to the following e-mail addresses:

- XXXXXXXX@correo.uis.edu.co
- XXXXXXXX@correo.uis.edu.co
- XXXXXXXX@correo.uis.edu.co

Thank you for your participation!

* Indica que la pregunta es obligatoria

1. Do you authorize the collection of your personal data for educational research purposes? *

Marca solo un óvalo.

☐ Yes

☐ No

19/8/26, 18:30

Emotional Differences in ELT Students' Language Preferences at UIS

LIFE STORY

In this section, you will be asked to recall a **personal story** (anecdote) in which you experienced the phenomenon of Emotional Distancing through the language. Please keep in mind that the word limit is **250 words**. Some prompts you can use as inspiration are the following:

- Sharing a good moment with a family member or friend.
- Talking about a sensitive topic.
- Gossiping with another person in public.
- Traveling to an English speaking country.
- Traveling to another country where Spanish is also spoken.

2. Remember, you can talk about any situation **different** from the previous examples, ^{*} as they only serve the purpose of helping you to understand the task.

Google no creó ni aprobó este contenido.

Google Formularios

Appendix D

Focus Group Questions

1. In what personal situations do you prefer to express yourself in your foreign language or in your native language? Examples: when arguing, when fighting, when talking about your feelings, etc.
2. Why do you think that there's a difference between expressing yourself in your foreign language and in your native language?
3. In your own words, according to your previous knowledge and what you have learned through this study, what is Emotional Distancing?