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Artículo de investigación

Students' perceptions towards learning English online: An exploratory study at a Language Centre of an Ecuadorian University

Percepciones de los estudiantes sobre el aprendizaje del inglés en línea: Un estudio exploratorio en un centro de idiomas de una Universidad Ecuatoriana

Percepção dos estudantes sobre o aprendizado de inglês na linha: Um estudo explorador no Centro de Idiomas de uma universidade ecológica

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Resumen

La enseñanza de idiomas en línea representa una tendencia importante y creciente en la educación superior, particularmente en inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL). Para satisfacer la demanda de los estudiantes de este tipo de educación, las Instituciones de Educación Superior deben evolucionar y ofrecer una metodología diferente que contenga un fuerte componente de Tecnología de la Información y las Comunicaciones (TIC) para preparar a los estudiantes para un mundo más competitivo. Este estudio tiene como objetivo capturar el nivel de satisfacción de los estudiantes con los cursos en línea de inglés como idioma extranjero. Se administró un cuestionario con ocho ítems a los estudiantes que asistieron a su último curso de EFL en línea. La administración de este cuestionario se realizó mediante formularios de Google y se centró en dos áreas: metodología en línea y desarrollo de habilidades lingüísticas. Los datos recopilados revelaron que los estudiantes del último nivel de su enseñanza de inglés consideraron la metodología y las actividades en línea como promedio y, como resultado, no han adquirido efectivamente las habilidades del idioma inglés esperadas. Se concluyó que para preparar cursos de EFL en línea eficaces, debe haber una sinergia entre contenido, metodología, estrategia y recursos.

Palabras clave: Satisfacción de los alumnos; aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras en línea; inglés.

Abstract

Online language instruction represents an important and growing trend in higher education, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In order to meet the students' demand for this type of education, Higher Education Institutions need to evolve and offer a different methodology which contains a strong Information and Communications Technology (ICT) component in order to prepare students for a more competitive world. This study aims to capture the students' level of satisfaction with the English as a Foreign Language online courses. A questionnaire with eight items was administered to students attending their last online EFL course. The administration of this questionnaire was done using google forms and it focused on two areas: online methodology and language skills development. Data collected revealed that students of the last level of their English tuition considered the methodology and the online activities as average and as result they have not effectively acquired the expected English language skills. It was concluded that in order

to prepare effective EFL online courses, there should be a synergy among content, methodology, strategy and resources.

Keywords: students' satisfaction; online foreign language learning; English.

Resumo

O ensino de idiomas on-line representa uma tendência importante e crescente no ensino superior, principalmente no inglês como língua estrangeira (EFL). Para atender à demanda dos estudantes por esse tipo de ensino, as Instituições de Ensino Superior devem evoluir e oferecer uma metodologia diferente que contenha um forte componente da Tecnologia da Informação e Comunicação (TIC) para preparar os alunos para um mundo mais competitivo. Este estudo objetiva captar o nível de satisfação do aluno com os cursos on-line em inglês como língua estrangeira. Um questionário de oito itens foi aplicado aos alunos que participaram do último curso online de EFL. A administração deste questionário foi realizada usando formulários do Google e focada em duas áreas: metodologia on-line e desenvolvimento de habilidades linguísticas. Os dados coletados revelaram que os alunos do último nível de ensino de inglês consideravam a metodologia e as atividades online como médias e, como resultado, não adquiriram efetivamente as habilidades esperadas no idioma inglês. Concluiu-se que, para preparar cursos eficazes de EFL online, deve haver uma sinergia entre conteúdo, metodologia, estratégia e recursos.

Palavras-chave: Satisfação do aluno; aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras online; Inglês.

Introducción

Research in the area of online language teaching and learning is now established as a significant venue for enquiry (White, 2014). This, due to the growing demand of this type of instruction as a result of the advantages that it has. In tandem with this demand, new formats of online education have continuously appeared, hand in hand, with the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) development. Online education has become the preferred option for those who, due to time and place of residence, cannot attend face-to-face classes on a regular basis (Qayyum & Zawacki-Richter, 2018). Furthermore, this group of students have a different profile compared to the general students who attend face-to-face-education. For instance, a student who opts to study in an online mode is, generally, someone who has already started working and, in some cases, have their own families and see in this type of education an opportunity to improve their lives.

In response to the increasing demand of online education, a vast number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Ecuador offer online undergraduate and lifelong learning programs. These programs should, according to Zawacki-Richter et al (2015), integrate digital media in an online environment. Though this is not always the case, most HEIs strive to design quality online programs using their own resources or outsourcing the design courses. HEIs which decide to go for the latter rely on the expertise of external companies, for instance, Quality Matters (QM).

Online-course quality becomes a fundamental factor to provide meaningful learning experiences to students, Martin, Ndoye and Wilkins (2016) highlight the role of meeting quality standards and mention that online courses that follow these standards are believed to be comparable to face-to-face courses of the same subject matters and can, therefore, guarantee comparable educational outcomes.

Though, majority of Ecuadorian HEIs have focused on the development of their online undergraduate programs, online language teaching has not been given the importance that it deserves. For instance, the offer of online foreign languages courses is limited despite a general growing demand for this type of courses. A demand which has recently increased among university students as the result of the legal requisite of having a B1 level in a foreign language for graduation (Consejo de Educación Superior, 2019).

The use of information and communications technology (ICT) in online language courses

Nowadays, ICT use in education has a different connotation, it is not seen as a merely use of internet to search for academic information or to access educational software in classrooms or at home. Instead, ICT facilitates the creation of online learning environments with a wide range of technological sources at hand. A study carried out by Raba (2016) revealed that university students have high attitude towards online learning and their attitude scores did not differ significantly with their personal variables such as, gender. He concluded that online learning is offering a good opportunity for higher education to a great number of students who want to pursue their education by overcoming the spatial, economical, and social barriers. This study accentuates the advantages of online education, particularly its inclusive orientation.

The 21st century ICT tools have provided university instructors with a wide range of resources that can facilitate student learning. The use of these tools has resulted in a growing popularity in recent years, especially at the undergraduate level (Ahmadi, 2018). In the case of online language teaching, Hockly (2015) presents the term “online language learning” to refer to distance language learning that takes place fully online, via the internet, with no face-to-face component, within both formal language courses and more informal learning contexts. Additionally, Pratibha (2017) and Kizil (2017) affirmed that the use of computers for online language learning does not only make learning pervasive but also it encourages self-regulated learning and increases students' motivation and language competence better than traditional study.

In principle, apart from the mode of delivering the academic content, there should not be major differences between face-to-face and online education. Moreover, in terms of achieving students' learning outcomes. In this regards, several researches compared the effectiveness of online language courses with face-to-face courses. For instance, Pollard (2015) found that in order to improve motivation and autonomous learning, the use of a web 2.0 portal in ELT had positive effects on Korean English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. In the same vein, Zabadi and Al-Alawi (2016) and Ekmekçi (2015) also explored students' attitude towards online learning and concluded that students generally have positive attitude towards this mode of education.

Online education is not a rigid education, students do not have to physically attend to their EFL classrooms for a specific number of hours per day and be tied to a fixed schedule. In other words, this mode of education is flexible, Knox (2017) emphasizes this flexibility and adds that online education promotes teachers' responsibility. Responsibility which need to be manifested mainly in the way that teachers plan and deliver their content. Opposite to the advantages, previously mentioned, Erarslan & Zehir Topkaya (2017) found that students did not give importance to the online course since they did not think an online course is beneficial to them and they prefer face-to-face formal education rather than online. Therefore, the role of the teachers is of vital importance for the success of any online program, particularly EFL programs.

Course description for online EFL learning format at the language centre

The English as a foreign language curriculum for online programs at the Language Centre comprises eight levels of instruction. Once students successfully approve the eight levels of EFL, they obtain the Diploma of Language Sufficiency. In terms of language proficiency, the first level corresponds to an elementary level of English whereas the eighth to an upper-intermediate level. The aim of these courses is to provide students with the necessary competencies in English Language to effectively communicate in an oral and written form in professional and academic settings. EFL teachers teaching in on-campus and online modes use a course pack as the primary teaching resource. The course pack comprises a student's textbook and audio CD pack entitled "The Big Picture" published by Richmond.

Apart from this textbook, teachers working on the EFL online programs use reading texts, figures, presentations, audio recordings, video recordings, web sites, quizzes, tests and exam tasks. All online EFL classes are carefully planned in advance. Teachers design recorded Power Point presentation. The objective of these kind of instructional materials is to provide the student a sense of a real session with a teacher. For EFL teaching in particular, this is essential because the student can see the text and hear the teacher's pronunciation at the same time. Besides, when the teachers go through the slides, their narrations address students directly. In this way, the power point presentations help develop the students' listening comprehension.

When working with the coursebooks, the online students are precisely directed to the corresponding pages, with very detailed instructions and explanations. Students can develop the activities at their own pace. They can also pause the narrations to complete the task from the coursebook; unlike students in the traditional classroom, who have to follow a specific average pace of the group. Contrary to face-to-face students, online students can revisit the slides/narration as many times as they need. Thus, they have more time for listening to the lectures and activities.

The Power Point slides, and recorded narrations are followed by explanations of grammar, vocabulary, learning and problem-solving strategies, homework tasks and mini-project assignments in a pdf. format. There are additional files with the answer keys and suggested answers. However, if the students need or want, they can always check their answers with the teacher, via e-mail. Synchronous and asynchronous methods are used. Synchronous methods include chat and video conferencing. Among the asynchronous methods used are e-mail and forum.

Due to the nature of online learning which lacks face-to-face interaction, developing the speaking component becomes problematic. An alternative solution for this has been to provide learning options to assess one particular mode of oral communication. Using the given presentation model, online students speak about specific topics and record it as an audio or video file. This is the obligatory form of oral communication and presentation. These oral presentations recorded by online learning students are usually posted at the forum. This can help both students to become aware of public speaking in English and invite other students to provide feedback, thus promoting communication.

Table 1. Description of EFL online learning format at the Language Centre

| Teaching/Learning Task | Online Learning |
|---|--|
| Presentation of contents and instructions | Recorded teacher's presentation, slides, chat, video conferencing, forums and narrated recordings. Written material Teacher anticipates the possible questions and provides instructions accordingly |
| Listening comprehension | Recorded presentations and instructions by the teacher. Audio coursebook tests at the platform. |
| Homework and writing assignments | Written tasks are based on topics from textbook. Very detailed answered key, suggested/model answers. Feedback and explanations upon students' request |
| Oral presentation | Audio, video clip submitted to the platform |
| Dialogue practice | Students open audio conference |
| Materials | Books, worksheets, videos, selected readings sent via platform. Written feedback is provided. |
| Evaluation | Tests and exams done in a set and limited time and submit it via the platform to the teacher. |

Methodology

The methodology used for this study was a survey design which aimed to capture the students' level of satisfaction with the EFL online courses. In order to do so, a questionnaire with 8 items was constructed and administered online using google forms. Regarding the subjects considered for this study, all students studying their last level of English were considered. Generally, students who are studying in the last level of their English tuition have spent at least 1.5 years studying in the language centre of the university. Hence, they are familiar with the methodology and the organization of the online EFL courses.

Once the students' emails were provided, a link to answer the online questionnaire were sent to 200 students (total population) whose ages ranged from 18-21 years old. After the students received the link of the questionnaire, they had two weeks to answer it. When the allotted time finished, the online questionnaire was closed and there was a survey return of 50% (100).

The questionnaire focused on two areas: a) online methodology and b) language skills development. First, The online methodology had four items which referred to: 1) the way of how teachers presented the language content on their online EFL courses (organization, clarity, coherence), 2) the methodology that the teachers used during the duration of the EFL course (clear explanations, tutorials, proper communication with the students), 3) the online activities (the type of online activities that the teachers design and upload on the virtual class), and 4) the teaching resources (the different online materials and ICT tools used by the teachers). Second, the language skills development had four items that referred to the students' perceptions regarding to the extent of the acquisition of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Each of these items were measured using a Likert scale with the following scale: Excellent, very good, good, bad and very bad. Before the online administration, the questionnaire was administered to a small group of students for piloting and pertinent changes.

In order to present the results in a more understandable way, numeric values were given to each of the scales in the Likert scale, namely: Excellent (4), very good (3), good (2), bad (1) and very bad (0) and the mean was computed for each item.

Results and Discussion

As it was mentioned before, 200 students were invited to answer the questionnaire. This number represented the entire population of students attending the last level of an EFL online course in this university. Out of these 200 students, 100 did actually responded the questionnaire, thus, the results presented below on Table 2 and 3 correspond to the perceptions of the 50% of the total population of students.

Table 2. Students' perceptions of methodology used in the online EFL courses

| <i>Variables</i> | <i>Results (Maximum value: 4)</i> |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Course content presentation</i> | 2.4 |
| <i>Teacher's methodology</i> | 2.4 |
| <i>Online activities</i> | 2.4 |
| <i>Teaching resources</i> | 2.3 |

* Total number of respondents: 100

Table 2 shows that, in general, students consider the methodology that teachers use in the online EFL courses as an average methodology. For instance, the mean values in course content presentation, teacher's methodology and online activities is 2.4 and teacher resources 2.3. Taking into account that the maximum value is 4, values of 2.4 and 2.3 are not that near of excellence. This seems to be problematic since education should aim excellence in the methodology and strategies in order to achieve successful results among students, and in this case and effective acquisition of English language competences.

Another factor that may have influenced the results in this area is the type of students who usually choose this mode of education. As mentioned earlier, students who choose online learning particularly in higher education, are people who combine their job or family related responsibilities with their studies. Thus, they have to juggle between their job or family responsibilities with the demands of the course.

It is important to mention that although the four areas presented on Table 2 are related, the first three manifest a stronger connection. For instance, the course presentation needs to be displayed in

an organized and controlled way. Teachers need to consider that students access the online platforms at different times during the day; therefore, how teachers organize the content facilitates students understanding and increase their motivation to work on their online courses. Course presentation is complemented with the way of how teachers plan and deliver the online instruction (methodology). Online activities, on the other hand, need to be pertinent to the methodology, since it is that through these activities that the methodology is materialized. According to Bali, S. & Liu, M. C. (2018), methodology and instructional materials hold the power to either engage or demotivate students. This is especially true for online courses, which rely on a thoughtful and complete collection of activities that students will access and explore as they proceed in a course. Therefore, these elements should be carefully planned, selected, organized, refined, and used in a course for the maximum effect.

Data also shows that the teaching resources mean is not much different than the other areas. Therefore, the principle of synergy among content, methodology, strategy and resources is corroborated through this data. Teachers need to promote a positive synergy among these four elements regardless the mode of instruction either online or face-to-face.

Regarding how students perceived their English development, Table 3 shows the following results.

Table 3. Students' perceptions regarding language skills development

| <i>Language skills</i> | <i>Results (Maximum value: 4)</i> |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Reading</i> | 2.5 |
| <i>Writing</i> | 2.3 |
| <i>Listening</i> | 2.2 |
| <i>Speaking</i> | 2 |

* Total number of respondents: 100

Table 3 shows that, in general, respondents do not perceive that they have effectively acquired the English language skills. It is important to highlight that the questionnaire was administered to students who were finishing their English tuition. Thus, these results manifest that the effectiveness

of the course was not exemplar. Meaning that, though, students learned something, the learning outcomes designed for this course were not met.

According to the data, reading was the skill that respondents considered the most developed among the other three. This is somehow expected, given the organization of the EFL online course in this HEI. As it was previously explained, the instructional materials used in this course are more oriented to reading, for instance a textbook, pdf readers, etc. Writing is the second most developed skill, the reason that these two skills are more developed than the other two may have to do with the individual nature of online learning. Students work at their own pace and interaction in real-time with their peers or teachers is limited. Speaking particularly needs to be developed through interactions with other people. These interactions do not necessarily have to be face-to-face. Hence, the role of the teacher is essential when planning online activities. The results presented on Table 2 and 3 clearly show a connection between the quality of instruction with the language skills development. This means that the acquisition of language skills develops in as much as the quality of the online course have.

Conclusions

The findings of the study provided information about students' satisfaction regarding English online courses at a university level. The analysis of the questionnaire revealed that the majority of the students found online methodology as well as activities as average. This means that the students are not quite satisfied with what is being offered. Additionally, the data yielded by this study show evidence that online courses for these university students do not meet their needs and expectations since they considered that their language skills have not been effectively developed. In such cases, amendment of the planning including teacher methodology should be the first action since it plays the major role in the success of online learning. The results from this study also shed some clues to Ecuadorian universities that offer online language courses concerning the components that need to be implemented to enhance online teaching and learning in the 21st century. It is these researchers' hope that the investigation will continue to search for what factors impact online readiness and students' preferences for online language courses. The opportunities of online education continue to expand, so the understanding of students' attitudes must also increase accordingly.

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