Research, Society and Development, v. 11, n. 17, e155111738974, 2022
(CC BY 4.0) | ISSN 2525-3409 | DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.33448/rsd-v11i17.38974

Students` perspectives on learning English online: Positive or Negative?

Perspectivas dos alunos sobre o aprendizado de inglês online: positivo ou negativo?

Perspectivas de los estudiantes sobre aprender inglès en lìnea: ¿Positivo o negative?

Received: 12/05/2022 | Revised: 12/19/2022 | Accepted: 12/20/2022 | Published: 12/23/2022

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Abstract
This study aimed to elicit students' perspectives on learning English online at Quevedo Technical University. The researchers examined their modality preference, technological issues, and the positives and negatives of this mode. Also, explored students' assumptions regarding best knowledge and retention. The researchers employed a quantitative and qualitative methodology. They distributed a questionnaire to collect data among students of the seventh-level of English course. The participants were asked to fill out a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire and four open-ended questions to support students' answers in the first part. The questionnaire also included an additional unnumbed item to know the learners´ perception about what mode retains the most and best knowledge. The findings showed a preference for online learning besides technical problems such as the internet. Learners find now more positive things to learn from home remotely than negative ones. Saving time, and money, reviewing classes on their own time, and flexibility are the most positive aspects of online learning.
Keywords: Perspectives; English; Online learning; Positive; Negative.

Resumo
Este estudo teve como objetivo identificar as perspectivas dos alunos sobre a aprendizagem online na Universidade Técnica de Quevedo. Os pesquisadores examinaram sua preferência de modalidade, questões tecnológicas e os pontos positivos e negativos desse modo. Além disso, explorou as suposições dos alunos sobre melhor conhecimento e retenção. Os pesquisadores empregaram uma metodologia quantitativa e qualitativa. Eles distribuíram um questionário para coletar dados entre os alunos do sétimo nível do curso de inglês. Os participantes foram convidados a preencher um questionário de escala Likert de 5 pontos e quatro perguntas abertas para apoiar as respostas dos alunos na primeira parte. O questionário também incluiu um item adicional não entorpecido para saber a percepção dos alunos sobre qual modo retém mais e melhor conhecimento. Os achados mostraram uma preferência pelo aprendizado online além de problemas técnicos como a internet. Os alunos encontram agora coisas mais positivas para aprender remotamente em casa do que negativas. Economizar tempo e dinheiro, revisar as aulas em seu próprio tempo e flexibilidade são os aspectos mais positivos do aprendizado on-line
Palavras-chave: Perspectivas; Inglês; Aprendizagem online; Positivo; Negativo.

Resumen
El objetivo de este estudio es conocer las perspectivas de los estudiantes sobre el aprendizaje de Inglés en línea en la Universidad Técnica de Quevedo. Los investigadores examinaron su preferencia por la modalidad, las cuestiones tecnológicas y los aspectos positivos y negativos de esta modalidad. También se exploraron los supuestos de los estudiantes en relación con los mejores conocimientos y la retención. Los investigadores emplearon una metodología cuantitativa y cualitativa. Distribuyeron un cuestionario para recoger datos entre los alumnos del curso de inglés de séptimo nivel. Se pidió a los participantes que rellenaran un cuestionario con una escala de Likert de 5 puntos y cuatro preguntas abiertas para apoyar las respuestas de los estudiantes en la primera parte. El cuestionario también incluía un ítem adicional sin respuesta para conocer la percepción de los alumnos sobre qué modalidad retiene más y mejor los conocimientos. Los resultados mostraron una preferencia por el aprendizaje en línea, aparte de los problemas técnicos de Internet. Los alumnos encuentran ahora más cosas positivas para aprender desde casa que negativas. El ahorro de

tiempo y dinero, el repaso de las clases en su propio tiempo y la flexibilidad son los aspectos más positivos del aprendizaje en línea.
Palabras clave: Perspectivas; Inglés; Aprendizaje en línea; Positivo; Negativo.

1. Introduction

A growing demand exists for online teaching programs because of their implementation during COVID-19 (Salto, 2020). During the emergency, a significant number of educational institutions around the world transferred education to an online scenario (Mahyoob, 2020). Some countries could immediately switch to an online mode because they were prepared to face a demanding challenge with technology. However, many schools or universities in Latin America still needed online education; therefore, many institutions held time to design and launch their policies, train teachers, and implement platforms to enhance quality. As a result, English programs in some Ecuadorian universities remained in an online setting.

Some Ecuadorian universities already had online English programs before the pandemic outbreak, but for others, it was a decision to remain online. At Universidad Técnica Estatal de Quevedo, students took their English levels face-to-face. However, now they receive English classes fully online since the pandemic with the use of Zoom, or Teens to reach a B1 level in a foreign language for graduation (CES, 2019). Therefore, the objective of this research is to identify the students` perspectives on learning English online.

2. Literature Review

In a compilation of thirty research on online learning, Mayer (2018) said that as students were likely to be more exposed to online learning in formal and informal contexts, the design of online learning remained a fundamental practical and theoretical challenge. Even before the pandemic, more institutions were moving to online instruction, resulting in an increasing urgency to design blended and online courses that promote learner engagement in science practice (Jaber et al., 2018). In 2018, Gonzales and St. Louis (2018) analyzed that online learning was driving the growth of online educational institutions that offer diplomas in various fields, from universities to newly founded academies.

Many years ago, Prensky (2001) denoted learners as native speakers of technical languages. They were and are fundamentally different from those of the past. As the internet has made online learning possible, there have been increases in demand for this modality (Castro et al., 2019), and during the COVID-19, switching online to teaching and learning seems to have been the only stratagem for education besides the unpredictable challenges that many teachers and learners encountered along the process (Okyar, 2022; Mahyoob, 2020), however, teachers demonstrated that they could develop social and culturally responsive EFL material in emergencies that led positive learning of competences (Huertas-Abril et al., 2021). Thus, shifting face-to-face classes to online learning, particularly for English classes, was an effective way to do in the emergency, emphasizing that online learning platforms in the learning process are effective media for learning anywhere, sharing, and saving paper for assignments as well (Rifiyanti, 2020). In a study in China, Zou et al. (2021) found that teachers and students were generally satisfied with online teaching during the crisis.

Although digital transformation is not a new phenomenon in higher educational institutions (Abad et al., 2020), the student's academic performance is mainly impacted by the lack of technology, including the internet (Abdullah & Kauser, 2020). Mahyoob (2020) also mentioned that many EFL learners faced significant challenges with technical issues related to internet connection, accessing classes, downloading resources, or taking online exams on mobile phones. Regarding language communication concerns, learners strived to interact effectively with teachers during virtual courses. Alturise (2020) mentioned that technical support is necessary for reliable online learning. However, from another perspective, some students found the online modality convenient in terms of schedule, particularly for those with multiple responsibilities and busy lives

(Castro et al., 2019), moreover that students can feel more motivated in class which makes them understand the material quickly, and contribute the readiness in classes (Saifuddin, 2018).

Today, learners and teachers are experiencing great opportunities to become acquainted with and interact with educational technology tools such as mobile learning, computer-based learning, and web-based learning. Challenges are reduced (Byun & Slavin, 2020), and even Shih et al. (2008) predicted online learning as a future trend a long time ago. According to Portillo and Lopez (2021), the future of learning requires carefully generating the new roles teachers must play in Online and blended learning. An international perspective in both teacher professional development and Faculties of Education will help build resilient education systems for the long term. However, despite the relevance of always being aware of a local perspective, education systems and educators face (and will have to deal with) global challenges. Tamayo and Cajas (2020) shared ideas related to components that are missing in online teaching to enhance English learning in Ecuadorian Higher institutions that offer this modality. The teacher must consider that learners have access to online material at different times; therefore, the organization of the content can facilitate students' understanding and increase motivation.

3. Methodology

This paper employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The study was conducted during the first term of the academic year 2022-2023 at Universidad Técnica Estatal de Quevedo. The researchers constructed a questionnaire with 27 items (including demographic information) and circulated it via Google forms. Regarding the participants for this study, all students taking the VII English level (eight levels are mandatory) among all faculties were considered. The students from this level took two face-to-face classes before the pandemic. Hence, they are familiar with both approaches.

Three teachers were contacted and shared the survey form with 400 students (total population). The questionnaire was transmitted through a link on Google form containing an introduction, objective, and further information. All the collected data was anonymous. The students had three weeks to provide the information. In the end, 200 students responded and filled in the online questionnaire voluntarily (50%). Table 1 displays demographic information of participants.

Table 1 - Demographic information about participants.

N° Item	***Variable***	***Reference***	***Count***	***Percentage***
1	Age	21 or under	30	15%
		22-25	139	69.5%
		26-30	19	9.5%
		31 or more	12	6%
		Total	200	100%
2	Gender	Female	121	60.5
		Male	77	38.5%
		Other	2	1%
		Total	200	100%

Source: Authors.

The questionnaire combined a 5-point Likert scale and open-ended questions. The Likert-scale questionnaire encompassed 20 items which referred to 1) online learning, their interaction, difficulties, and recommendation, and 2) face-to-face classes preference, participation, and recommendation (Zboun & Farrah, 2021). This study used a numeric value in the Likert scale to get a better understanding of the results, namely: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), and

strongly agree (5), and the mean was computed for each item. The open-ended questionnaire had four items that referred to an explanation or reasons for online or face-to-face learning recommendation, technological problems, and the positives and negatives of online learning. The Google form included additional unnumbed items to know the learners´ perception about most and best learning retention (online or face-face classes).

4. Results and Discussion

The mean and standard deviation (SDs) were calculated for 20 Likert scale items. In the first stage, the study revealed that students kept a neutral position regarding face-to-face perceptions. Table 2 shows that participants neither agree nor disagree with face-to-face classes.

Table 2 - Students´ perception of preference, participation, and recommendation for face-to-face classes.

N°	***Statement***	***Mean***	***SD***
1	I prefer traditional (face-to-face) classes	3.0	1.32
2	I participate more in face-to-face classes	3.1	1.2
3	I would recommend face-to-face classes.	3.3	1.8

Note: if the mean is less than 3.40, this means that participants were neutral. Source: Authors.

Table 2 demonstrates that most students rated neutral, referring to their preference, participation, and recommendation on taking the English level face-to-face (M=3.1). However, the choice and recommendations for online instruction show a significant difference (see Table 3).

Table 3 - The mean and SDs of the items the students agreed upon their perceptions regarding online classes.

N°	***Statement***	***Mean***	***SD***
3	I prefer online classes.	3.9	1.2
6	I participate more in online classes.	3.7	1.1
7	I feel relaxed in online classes.	3.8	1.1
9	I can work independently in online classes.	3.9	1.0
11	The online classes help me follow and review the course easily.	3.9	1.0
14	I do not find difficulty in using zoom, Teens, or other apps.	4.0	1.1
15	Online classes are easy to reach.	3.9	1.0
16	Online classes satisfy my learning needs.	3.8	1.1
17	Online classes make me more competitive.	3.9	2.3
18	The students learn and get the same learning from online and face-to-face classes.	3.7	1.1
19	I would recommend online learning.	4.0	2.3

Note: if the mean is less than 4.20, this means that participants agreed. Source: Authors.

Regarding Online instruction, students show a different perspective than face-to-face. Table 3 shows a preference for this modality. Most students *agreed* they are more participative (M=3.7) in classes and feel more relaxed (M=3.8). Therefore,

they feel more competent (M=3.9). Also, it is easy for them to use programs or applications like Zoom or Teens (M=4), and they can review the classes easily (M=3.9) later and work independently (M=3.9). Learners believe they can get the same learning in both modalities, online and face-to-face (M=3.7), but most prefer studying online (M=3.9); thus, they recommend it.

Moreover, there are five items rated *neutral*, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 - The mean and SDs of the items rated neutral regarding online classes

N°	***Statement***	***Mean***	***SD***
4	Interaction with teachers in online classes is less than interaction in face-to-face courses.	3.1	1.3
5	I spend less time and effort in online classes.	3.0	1.3
8	I feel stressed if I make mistakes in online classes.	3.0	1.2
10	In online classes, I take the risk of answering without the teacher's instruction	3.4	1.2
12	It is very difficult to study through online classes for students.	2.8	1.2

Note: if the mean is less than 3.40, this means that participants were neutral. Source: Authors.

Table 4 illustrates that students neither agreed nor disagreed on some items like interaction with a teacher in online instruction is less in online instruction than face-to-face, spending time and effort, feeling stressed, making mistakes in classes, taking risks in-class participation, and having difficulties studying. So, they do not believe learning online has a negative impact or more benefits than studying face-to-face. Finally, most students disagree on only one item, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 - The mean and SDs of the items rated with disagree regarding online classes.

N°	***Statement***	***Mean***	***SD***
13	It is frustrating to do tasks via online.	2.6	1.3

Note: if the mean is less than 2.60, this means that participants were neutral. Source: Authors.

Table 5 shows that learners *disagree* on feeling frustrated to do tasks online (M=2.6).

The results of the open-ended questions

To get a deeper understanding of their preference for online learners among the 60% of the participants, the researchers asked why they would recommend this modality. They agreed that online learning saves time and money (Zboun & Farrah, 2021). S157 said, "I save money and time for my studies." Some students mentioned feeling more motivated and relaxed. Also, S73, S48, and S186 agreed it is easy to learn and review class. Some mentioned other factors, such as strengthening research and increasing class participation. Only one student mentioned his recommendation based on teacher methodology. S17 said, "In virtual classes, one takes notes better, and the teacher explains very well because if we do not understand, he explains again, and that is how we learn." On another different aspect, one student mentioned that his preference is based on feeling safe at home learning online.

When the students were asked about the technical issues they face in online learning, they mentioned three significant problems: internet connection, use of technological devices such as computers, cameras or microphones, and electricity. 39% of students refer to poor or slow connectivity and absence issues. S81 said, "Sometimes the internet tends to go out, there are

problems with the computer, or we simply cannot access the class because the machine is slow." Mahyoob (2020) discovered that learners confront difficulties with online learning when they come from rural areas where a majority cannot access the internet and encounter other technical issues such as accessing classes or downloading course materials.

Related to problems with technological equipment, a few students showed issues with their devices, cameras, or microphones. S127 said," The deficiency of technical equipment such as an updated computer with good storage." Ashemi (2021) discovered that one of the most challenging issues in online learning is the need for technological devices and unstable internet connection. Only one participant expressed having difficulties using the Platform Zoom on his device. However, 47% of participants mentioned not having problems. Abdullah and Kauser (2022) demonstrated that the lack of technology, such as the Internet, largely hampers student academic performance.

The participants shared some impressions regarding the positive and negative aspects of online learning which are listed in Table 6.

Table 6 - Positives and negatives of Online Learning.

Positives	***Negatives***
Saving money and time	Little participation when the teacher asks questions
Review class latter	Get more distractions
Comfort to study from home	Students never get to know the teacher face-to-face
More free time and flexibility	Lack of knowledge of the use of media
More technological tools for students	Short time (2 hours a week)
Adaptable to students	
More practical to learn everywhere	
The teacher can send links for further revision	
Classes are more dynamic	
Facilitates research	
Accessible material and resources	
Good interaction between the instructor and students	
Convenient for those who work	
Accessible classes	
Less stress	
Keeps the safety and integrity of students	

Source: Authors.

Table 6 shows that the positive aspects exceed the negative ones. Most participants agree on saving time and money studying from the comfort of their homes. S65 said, "The positive aspect is that it allows us to save money and time. The negative aspect is that not all students are trained to know how to use the media in class, and its use is complicated for them". The second most mentioned advantage had the opportunity to review classes. S114 highlighted that students could learn in classes, and if they did not understand correctly, they could see the recorded session (Zboun & Farrah, 2021). Additionally, some learners agreed that online modality allows them to spend time on other duties. S127 and 177 explained the availability of time and accessibility to study and send tasks to the system since many times due to personal occupations and a negative aspect is that online learning is less.

Despite the many advantages, a group of students manifested issues such as in this study's previous questions: computers or internet access 24/7. Another significant issue was the time of class. S163 said, "Online classes last only two hours, and it is not adequate for learning" On another hand, students get many distractions at home and interferences like noise. These results illustrated a change in students' perspectives on online learning during Covid-19. Zboun and Farrah (2021) discovered that during the pandemic, students assumed more negatives than positives in online learning.

Finally, Figure 1 shows the results of a last-open-ended question. Here, the researchers asked participants which modality retains the most and the best knowledge.

Figure 1 - Retention and knowledge.

Source: Authors.

According to figure 1, 121 out of 200 choose online learning (60%). So, the results show that most students are aligned with the online modality, the same who indicated a preference before answering the previous questions in the Likert scale.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated university students' perceptions of English classes online after switching to this remote mode during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings revealed that those students who experienced face-to-face before the pandemic classes do not feel quite motivated to come back to this modality and show a strong preference to keep learning English online since they feel relaxed and can work with independence reviewing material on their own time. Analysis shows evidence that most learners spend the same time and effort in class, interaction with the teacher, and experience participation issues like making mistakes or feeling stressed in both online and physical scenarios. This study confirms unstable internet connection as a significant problem regarding technological matters, but it does not reflect a majority compared to previous studies (Mahyoob, 2020; Abdullah & Kauser, 2022). However, the qualitative analysis provided significant implications to assume that most learners prefer studying remotely due to many advantages such as saving time, and money, accessibility, and adaptability to student circumstances.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the implications regarding the online performance of learners. Therefore, for future research we suggest studies on measuring the performance in specific skills in English learning to know whether students' preference match with other features in online teaching. Furthermore, involving other areas such as teacher`s strategies, or assessment could provide meaningful results about English learning and teaching improvement.

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