Forced to study a second language online. The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on EFL students due to the abrupt change to online learning

Obligados a estudiar una segunda lengua en línea. El impacto de la pandemia COVID-19 en los estudiantes de EFL debido al cambio brusco al aprendizaje en línea

María Gracia Flores Flores, Antonio Lenin Argudo Garzón

ABSTRACT

The whole world witnessed changes triggered by the sudden COVID-19 pandemic, which caused serious disruptions in economic, social, and cultural dynamics everywhere. Higher education has also undeniably suffered from the challenges, and many college students worldwide have turned away from formal education and lost touch. One of the most significant changes has been in how the educational process has been delivered, moving from traditional on-site education to online education. This qualitative study examined EFL students at the Language Center of the Catholic University of Cuenca in Ecuador. This study aimed to explore students' perceptions of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it aimed to analyze students' perceptions regarding the tools used for online learning and the effectiveness of learning a second language online under forced learning conditions. To this end, a survey and questionnaire were used to collect data on the acceptance of online learning by students who had already experienced online learning mode. It also identified the factors that facilitated online learning and the challenges. The study's results provided information about the advantages and disadvantages of online education and recommendations for the continuity of EFL online learning.

Keywords: Online learning; COVID-19; EFL students.

María Gracia Flores Flores
Universidad Católica de Cuenca – Ecuador. maria.flores@ucacue.edu.ec
Antonio Lenin Argudo Garzón
Universidad Católica de Cuenca – Ecuador. alargudog@ucacue.edu.ec

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RESUMEN

El mundo entero fue testigo de los cambios provocados por la repentina pandemia de Covid 19, que causó graves trastornos en la dinámica económica, social y cultural en todas partes. Es innegable que la enseñanza superior también ha sufrido las consecuencias, y muchos estudiantes universitarios de todo el mundo se han alejado de la educación formal y han perdido el contacto con ella. Uno de los cambios más significativos se ha producido en la forma de impartir el proceso educativo, pasando de la educación tradicional presencial a la educación en línea. Este estudio cualitativo examinó a los estudiantes de lengua inglesa del Centro de Idiomas de la Universidad Católica de Cuenca en Ecuador. Este estudio pretendió explorar las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre el aprendizaje en línea durante la pandemia de COVID-19. Específicamente, se buscó analizar las percepciones de los estudiantes con respecto a las herramientas utilizadas para el aprendizaje en línea y la efectividad de aprender un segundo idioma en línea bajo condiciones de aprendizaje forzado. Para ello, se utilizaron una encuesta y un cuestionario para recopilar datos sobre la aceptación del aprendizaje en línea por parte de los estudiantes que ya habían experimentado la modalidad de aprendizaje en línea. También se identificaron los factores que facilitaban el aprendizaje en línea y los retos. Los resultados del estudio proporcionaron información sobre las ventajas e inconvenientes de la enseñanza en línea y recomendaciones para la continuidad del aprendizaje en línea de inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje en línea; COVID-19; Estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera.

1. Introduction

Online learning or e-learning refers to using digital teaching tools so students can learn anywhere, anytime. Distance learning, already a topic of interest among higher education administrators and faculty, took on new significance during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 when face-to-face classes worldwide abruptly shifted online (Clary et al., 2022). Online learning also includes training, sharing knowledge, and motivating students to share learning experiences or solutions with friends (Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2020). However, online education was somewhat different in this case because students did not choose to learn English online according to a fixed schedule. Instead, they were forced to do so because of the COVID-19 pandemic that has reshaped the entire educational process online, especially ELE (English Language Education), which has moved to e-learning in most universities worldwide (Mayhoob, 2020). The survey results on EFL college students at Talibah University in Saudi Arabia were negative because the transition from face-to-face to online learning was so abrupt. EFL students indicated that the courses were less fun and less enjoyable. This enormous change in education worldwide, which no one expected, shook the education system to its core. Several studies have examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on universities in developed countries. Still, not enough studies have been done on the impact of online learning on universities in developing countries (Yildirim, Bostanci, Yildirim, & Erdogan, 2021). This study aims to analyze the perceptions of online learning tools and the effectiveness of learning a second language online under forced learning conditions on EFL students from the Language Center at the Catholic University of Cuenca in Ecuador.

1.1 Theoretical framework

Several theories have evolved for the online learning environment. For example, the "community of inquiry" model developed by Garrison Anderson and Archer (2000) is based on the concept of three distinct "presences": the cognitive, the social, and the teaching that is involved in the learning experience. Of note is that "presence" is a social phenomenon that manifests in student and instructor interactions. The "community of inquiry" has become one of the most popular models for online and blended courses designed to interact highly with students and faculty through discussion boards, blogs, wikis, and videoconferencing (Picciano, 2017).

The online collaborative learning theory presented by Linda Harasim also focuses on collaborative learning, knowledge building, and the use of the Internet to reshape formal, non-formal, and informal education for the knowledge age. When talking about online learning, there are differences in the way it is done. For example, it can be asynchronous, meaning that teaching and learning do not co-occur. In contrast, synchronous learning refers to teaching and learning simultaneously, or a combination of both, conducted via technologies such as the Internet (Sun & Chen, 2020). These forms of education were introduced in the 1980s when the Western Behavior Sciences Institute launched its first online program in 1982 (Sun & Chen, 2020). With the rapid development of Internet connectivity, advanced technology, and a huge market worldwide, not only were courses offered, but many universities and colleges also began to offer entire degree programs. This has opened many opportunities for learners who want to participate, such as new technical skills, better time management, flexibility, self-paced learning, a broader and global perspective, and more. However, when financial, environmental, or health crises occur, this type of learning becomes mandatory, not optional. It has been reported that the demand for online courses increases in times of crisis, but the reasons are not favorable. One of the main reasons is the lack of good jobs in times of crisis. Companies kept their more competitive and capable employees, leading many to continue their education to improve, advance, and keep their jobs (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Another case scenario is students who have started face-to-face classes and suddenly switched to online learning due to the abovementioned crises. Other problems arise in these cases, such as teacher preparation for this form of instruction, additional costs for high-speed Internet, no campus atmosphere to create social interaction, students need to be self-motivated in times of uncertainty, and more.

1.2 State of the art

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many courses that were supposed to be face-to-face courses were converted to online courses. This change was the best solution so that education did not entirely fall by the wayside (Tabiri et al., 2022). Agreed that online education should be used in schools because of its flexibility, convenience, and personalized learning opportunities (Evisen et al., 2020). Has shown that young people are open to new ways of learning, and many are choosing

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online courses and education as part of lifelong learning, fulfilling the need or desire to advance in a field of work at the same time (Sagir et al., 2021). Although many envisioned the near future of education with more online participation, no one expected a change as sudden as 2020, when nearly all education stakeholders worldwide were forced to adapt teaching and learning to online ways (Evisen, Akyilmaz, & Torun, 2020). Panev's findings showed that the most critical challenges could be access issues, followed by social, academic, and general issues; in particular, students were not prepared for a full online experience and found it challenging to access course materials (Panev, 2021). Nevertheless, students with previous online learning experiences had more positive attitudes toward online courses. They would most likely take more online courses in the future, while students with little or no background in distance education scored highest when asked about their concerns related to the concept (Cabi & Kalelioglu, 2019). A study presented by Clary et al. (2022) showed that personal and environmental factors played a role in students' evaluation and decision on whether to continue distance education. Other concerns, such as the lack of real English language practice with teachers and classmates, were issues indicated by EFL college students in a survey conducted by (Arab World). Emotions are essential for students to control their learning state and influence learning outcomes (Wu et al., 2021). The youth of the 21st century spend too much time in front of all kinds of screens. If the educational process is also online, the time exposed to screens is even longer, negatively affecting students' and teachers' psychological health and social development (Panev, 2021). For online instruction to be successful, a clear communication channel must be established between teachers and students, as well as between the students themselves (Fuentes & Silva, 2020). It is recommended to familiarize students and teachers alike with online learning platforms to improve their adoption and show them how to use them effectively for teaching practice in the face of such challenges in the education system, and to adapt pedagogy accordingly to achieve more effective knowledge transfer (Almutawa et al., 2021). In teaching practice, motivation must be considered essential to creating and implementing an online learning course (Meşe & Sevilen, 2021). Educators working online should be familiar with specific competencies. Educators should be able to use technology, design and deliver courses, moderate, organize and conduct asynchronous and synchronous discussions, and establish ground rules. This will help incorporate a successful teaching and learning style into an online classroom.

2. Methods

A case study research design from qualitative research methodology was chosen for this study because a specific case was studied in its real context. Authorization from the language center authorities was required to begin the survey. Once permission was granted, ten students not participating in the study were asked to complete the survey for a pilot test. After the pilot test was completed, the adapted survey was sent to the students participating in the study. At the begin-

ning of the survey was a consent form informing students about the research and how their data would be handled. Thirty-one students agreed to participate in the study. The students in Google forms completed the survey. The first part of the survey contained closed-ended questions, and the second part included open-ended questions. The collected data were analyzed together because the open-ended questions provided a better understanding and clear examples to compare with the closed-ended questions. Some of the students' comments are included in the discussion. In this study, a qualitative research methodology was conducted. A survey with opened-ended and closed-ended questions was used to provide flexibility to the respondents, and the data was easily interpreted. This study aimed to analyze and investigate EFL students' perceptions of the tools used for online learning during the pandemic and the effectiveness of learning a second language online under forced learning conditions.

The participants were 31 EFL university students of the Language Center of the Catholic University of Cuenca with a language level of A2 or higher. The participants were between 18 and 28 years old and native Spanish speakers from urban and rural areas.

3. Results

This part presents the results related to the research questions on students' experiences of using online learning applications due to COVID-19 to improve language skills. The discussion is explained by interpreting the results in the tables elaborated with the survey results through multiple-choice and open-ended questions.

Table 1 shows that when asked if the learning materials provided online by the instructor helped them better understand the course material, most students responded "strongly agree" 54.8% and "agree" 29%. Nevertheless, only 16% "strongly agree" and 22.6% "agree" that online learning has increased effectiveness. Similarly, only 22% of students strongly agree, and 9.7% agreed with the statement that communication between instructors and learners has improved. These gaps could mean that students had positive experiences using online learning during the pandemic because it can help them practice their language skills and acquire L2 while not having face-to-face classroom meetings. The high percentage of students denying an increase in learning effectiveness could also be related to the fact that the Internet connection wasn't stable and suitable for adequate understanding, as shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Questions

No.	Questions	SA	A	SD	D
1	The learning materials posted by my teacher in the platforms for online learning help me to improve my understanding about the learning material.	54.8%	29%	3.2%	12.8%
2	The use of online learning increases the effectiveness of learning.	16.1%	22.6%	9.7%	51.6%
3	Online learning facilitates interaction, and communication between teacher and students	22.6%	9.7%	12.9%	54.8%

Table 2 shows that 41.9% of respondents agreed and 29% strongly agreed with the statement that online learning saves effort and time. These statements are related to question 2, as the majority of respondents (58.1%) disagree with the statement that it is difficult to use online learning applications. However, the statement in question 3 regarding slow internet speed during the pandemic is negatively related to questions 2 and 3 from Table 1. The fact that more than 50% of students had difficulty connecting to the internet is an important issue that may be related to the effectiveness and full understanding of instruction in a class and also to better communicate with the teacher.

Table 2. Questions on students' experiences

No.	Questions	SA	A	SD	D
1	The use of online learning saves effort and time	29%	41.9%	3.20%	25.8%
2	It's difficult to use online learning applications	0%	41.9%	0%	58.1%
3	Online learning is difficult because of the slow speed internet I had.	19.4%	51.6%	6.5%	22.6%

Following is the analysis of the open-ended questions on improving four taught English skills. The first question is about reading. Students were asked if they found reading more interesting and how their experience was during class. Twenty of the thirty-one students answered positively. Students indicated that the platforms they used were easy to understand and that they had become familiar with them before the lockdown. Others mentioned that they could concentrate better while reading and could easily check the meaning if they didn't understand something. Students who didn't feel improvement expressed that their environment wasn't optimal for their learning and preferred face-to-face instruction. Some student responses were:

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Si, porque habernos familiarizado con las plataformas facilitaba la lectura comprensiva.

Yes, because having familiarized ourselves with the platforms made reading comprehension easier.

Si, porque el tiempo en línea recibido nos hizo más responsables ya que nosotros teníamos que escuchar toda la clase sin distracciones para poder resolver las tareas.
Yes, because the virtual receiving time made us more responsible since we had to listen to the whole class without distractions in order to solve the assignments.

Si, porque yo podía ver con más claridad si cometía un error.

Yes, because I could see if I made a mistake more clearly.

Si, porque en línea nosotros podíamos elegir más fuentes, así que la lectura era más adecuada para aprender.

Yes, because online we could choose more sources, so reading was more suitable to learn.

Si, porque yo podia concentrarme mas.

Yes, because I was able to concentrate more.

However, when students were asked if they improved their speaking during online learning, most responses were negative, nineteen out of thirty-one. Some answers referred to the fact that their internet connection didn't allow them to do so, and even though they were online, they didn't feel comfortable enough to speak.

No, en línea yo me distraía fácilmente y no prestaba atención.

No, online I was easily distracted and did not pay attention.

No, porque a veces la velocidad del internet no me permitía leer apropiadamente.

No, because sometimes the speed of the internet did not allow me to read properly.

When asked if their listening comprehension had improved, positive responses were not expected, as students indicated that Internet connection was a significant problem for some of the questions in Table Two. Nevertheless, the majority, nineteen out of thirty-one students, answered positively. Students indicated that the fact that the lessons were recorded was beneficial to them, even if the Internet connection was not suitable.

Si, porque podía repetir más veces.

Yes, because I could repeat more times

Si, porque la clase fue grabada y nosotros podíamos repetir varias veces la palabra que se hacía difícil entender y también el trabajo que la profesora nos dejaba era referente a muchos videos, entonces nosotros teníamos que estar atentos a los videos para poder responder.

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Yes, because the class was recorded and we could repeat many times the word that made it difficult to understand and also the work that the teacher left us was related to many videos so we had to be very attentive to the videos to be able to answer.

On the question of writing, most students were in favor. Twenty-one out of thirty-one. In this open-ended question, there were the most positive responses. However, this does not necessarily mean that students learned correctly because of the use of translators available online. This skill might be one of the most difficult to improve in online learning because many resources can help students write and correct them, which might not be conducive to knowledge. There are ways to motivate students, but ultimately it is up to the students whether or not they use an online translator.

Si, porque nosotros podíamos hacer más escritos en línea.

Yes, because we could do more writings online.

Si, porque las plataformas o aplicaciones me ayudan a corregir y practicar mi escritura.

Yes, because the platforms or applications help me to correct and practice my writing.

Si, porque mucho más cómodo y practico escribir en la computadora, además de contar con ayudas para la corrección ortográfica.

Yes, because it is much more comfortable and practical to write on the computer, in addition to having spell-checking aids

Si, porque es más fácil practicar en la computadora y si la respuesta es incorrecta, es más fácil corregirla.

Yes, because it is easier to practice on the computer and if the answer is wrong It is easier to correct

4. Discussion

After analyzing the results, Picciano's concept of 'community of inquiry' can be considered. He points out that one of the most popular models for online learning is blended courses, where students participate in class and engage in discussion forums, blogs, wikis, and other platforms that allow discussion among all participants outside of class. Since one of the main problems students had in this study was internet connectivity, this could be very effective for them. Not only would students have the opportunity to read their classmates' posts after the online class, but also because they won't feel left out. It also gives the teacher a sense of how students understand the material presented in class and whether adjustments need to be made for future courses. Panev (2021) also shows that the main problem is access to course materials, which in this case wasn't the problem because students have access to computers in the language center and are taught how and where to access course materials. One concern that the (Arab World) raised was the lack of

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real English language practice with teachers and classmates. This study also found this issue, as some students were on and off classes due to connectivity failure. According to Fuentes and Silva (2020), a clear communication channel must be established for successful teaching to familiarize students with the online learning platforms used during the online course. This is positively related to the research results, where more than 50% of students indicated that they felt the material posted on the platforms helped them better understand the lessons.

5. Conclusion

According to Allen and Seaman (2013), the demand for online courses increases in times of crisis because companies lay off their employees, and some then go to college to be more competitive later. So, if universities not only offer Internet access on their campuses but also have the option to use it at home, and this is included in tuition, this will lead to a better online learning environment, and the universities would include those who cannot afford high-speed Internet access at home or no Internet at all. Online learning isn't new; it didn't just start with the pandemic. But not everyone was willing and/or volunteered to study or teach online. Nevertheless, the results showed that the majority of students were comfortable learning in online courses. This is similar to the findings of Evisen et al. (2020) and coincides with the statements of Khan et al. (2021) that young people are open to new learning methods to fulfill their needs or desire to progress. That being said, many considerations should be taken into account. Universities shouldn't wait for another health disaster to come across or expect it never to happen again. Universities should evaluate what happened during the lockdown. Implement a contingency plan and have alternatives not only for students but for professors. Also, in this study we analyzed the perceptions of students regarding online learning but students who had to drop out due to economical situations is something that should be consider for future studies. Likewise, there were teachers that were not able to continue because they were not prepare for an online teaching environment and the universities did not have a plan for them. The world is changing constantly, and online education is here to stay. University administrators should take in consideration the possibility of teachers training programs for online teaching. It is unfair and unethical to think that if something similar or worse strikes in our life's the easiest solution is to fire professors with many years of experience but not with the ability to teach online. Instead hiring in most cases young people with little to no experience on how to teach but with technological abilities. Teaching is not for everyone; it is an honorable profession that requires dedication and sacrifice. It is not fall down career. To be a teacher you need knowledge of the topic but to be a good teacher you need to know how to transmit that knowledge to your students. As it is for public and for private education students expect quality, not quantity.

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AUTHORS

María Gracia Flores Flores. Docente traductora en el Centro de Idiomas de la Universidad Católica de Cuenca. Magíster en Marketing y Gestión Comercial por la EAE Business School de Barcelona, España.

Antonio Lenin Argudo Garzón. Docente-Investigador de la Universidad Católica de Cuenca y Coordinador del Centro de Idiomas con experiencia en varias universidades de la ciudad. Maestría en Migración, Derechos Humanos y Política Pública por la Universidad de Cuenca.

STATEMENT