

A Blog to Teach English in High School during the Covid-19 Confinement

Un Blog para Enseñar Inglés en Preparatoria durante el Confinamiento por Covid-19

* Original Research Article

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Abstract

This research explored the outcomes of using a blog to upload the content of EFL classes during the Covid-19 confinement to discover to what extent the adaptation of this e-tool could be of benefit to access content for economically disadvantaged students. This study was carried out in a high school located in Veracruz, México. The participants were 171 second semester students who were taking the subject *Inglés II* from February 2021 to July 2021; during that period students accessed the content of the EFL course using a blog. The data were collected through questionnaires and interviews to obtain a close perception of emergency remote teaching in this particular scenario. The main findings indicated predominantly positive experiences related to accessibility to the asynchronous course in the blog, as well as perceived improvement in writing and reading skills in a large scale, whereas listening and speaking skills improved in a minor scale.

Keywords: blogs, emergency remote teaching, high school, EFL, Covid-19.

Resumen

Esta investigación estuvo encaminada a explorar el uso de un blog para contenidos de clase de inglés durante el confinamiento por Covid-19, para determinar cómo la adaptación de dicha herramienta digital podría resultar beneficiosa para el acceso a contenidos de parte de estudiantes de bajos recursos. La investigación se realizó en un bachillerato en Veracruz, México. Participaron 171 estudiantes de segundo semestre que cursaban Inglés II entre febrero y julio de 2021; durante ese periodo los estudiantes accedieron al contenido utilizando un blog. La información fue colectada mediante entrevistas y cuestionarios para obtener un panorama detallado de la educación remota de emergencia en este contexto. Los hallazgos indican experiencias positivas en relación con el acceso al curso de forma asíncrona, a través del blog. El aprendizaje percibido por los estudiantes fue predominante en escritura y lectura en inglés, mientras que la comprensión y conversación fueron percibidas como menos desarrolladas.

Palabras clave: blogs, educación remota de emergencia, bachillerato, Covid-19, inglés como lengua extranjera.

Introduction

Since the Covid-19 pandemic started and governmental entities around the world declared it as a health contingency, education worldwide had to migrate from face-to-face teaching to emergency remote teaching (ERT), affecting more than 191 countries and 1,570 billion students (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020); this transition has led to several difficulties in many educational contexts where students do not have the needed resources to access virtual education, especially in rural areas (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021).

Due to the unpredictable declaration of the health contingency, there was limited time to design a plan for the continuity of education, therefore many aspects related to accessibility and digital management were an issue in most countries. As a result, teachers had to look for new solutions that allowed them to adapt the content and design of their learning courses, and to choose the tools they considered appropriate to use in their teaching practice during emergency remote teaching. (Zapata-Garibay et al., 2021).

The present study provides a close perception of the aforementioned situation with second semester students who studied in a public high school located in Alvarado, Veracruz, México and were taking EFL, English as a Foreign Language (*Inglés I*), from February 2021 to July 2021.

During the six months of the course, students used a blog (Blogger) to access the content of *Inglés II*; a digital platform (Google Forms) for students to

submit their homework, and an app for instant messaging (WhatsApp) to keep in touch. All the previous technological tools were employed to help students access the class content as easily as possible and avoid the use of more complex software that may demand more resources that not every student could use, such as educational platforms and videoconference applications.

As stated by Azizinezhad and Hashemi (2011), “blogs introduce students to online learning communities so they can access and evaluate information and construct new paradigms for themselves” (p.870). The use of blogs to teach English as a Foreign Language—the study of the English language by non-native speakers in an environment where people do not use the target language to communicate outside the language classroom (Collins English Dictionary, 2021.)—has had positive outcomes in the past, since it was perceived as a beneficial tool to enhance communication among large groups of students and for constructing a high-sense of community (Gokdas & Kilic, 2014).

However, while researchers have focused on the use of blogs as a means of interaction among students (Aydin, 2014) and as a compendium of extra materials to work complementarily with face-to-face learning (Fatimah et al., 2020), their role as an informative platform for EFL teaching and learning has not been researched extensively. Hence, this enquiry attempts to fill that gap in the literature by exploring the learning process of students with the use of blogs as educational resources supported by accessible digital features.

Objective

Specifically, the general objective of this research was to explore the outcomes of using a blog to upload the EFL class content. Additionally, the specific objective was to find out to what extent this technological tool can be beneficial on students' access and participation, especially the ones who cannot afford the full equipment needed for remote education.

It has been demonstrated that blogs can be helpful in the improvement of writing skills, as well as critical thinking (Sanjaya et al., 2020). In addition, blogs are considered a great tool for extensive reading since they encourage students to read more texts (Fatimah, 2020). Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that the use of blogs as a medium for skills development may have a positive impact on students' learning processes. In short, the present study was aimed at exploring the outcomes of using blogs as informative tools and the effects in students' access and participation.

Research questions

1. How may uploading the EFL learning content to a blog impact students' access and participation?
2. What are students' attitudes towards using a blog to learn English as a Foreign Language?
3. What are the pedagogical implications of using blogs as educational platforms?

A Literature Review of Delivery Methods in Education during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The delivery method or delivery mode in education can be defined as the way in which educational instructions are transferred from the instructor to learners (Mollenkopf et al., 2020). The purpose of the delivery method is to permit and facilitate the learning process (Ileri et al., 2017). According to the Iowa State University (2017), face-to-face learning is considered as the most traditional delivery method in education; the teaching process takes place synchronously in a physical environment. In order to protect the public health, this traditional method was substituted in many educational institutions after the World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 outbreak as a pandemic in March of 2020. Due to pressing circumstances on how to continue with education, a new delivery mode terminology was adopted by several active members of the academic community: emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020).

Emergency Remote Teaching

According to Hodges et al. (2020), emergency remote teaching (ERT) is defined as a temporary transfer of instructional delivery to an alternative delivery method on account of a period of crisis; it includes fully remote teaching solutions for education. The main objective of emergency remote teaching is to allow temporary access to education in a way that can be easily adaptable and functional during the emergency.

Whittle et al. (2020) proposed and implemented an educational framework for emergency remote teaching environments (ERTE), not only for the Covid-19 pandemic, but for future global emergencies as well. This framework had three steps: inquiry, classifying available resources, and designing educational experiences. In this research, they identified some difficulties that teachers were facing during ERT, such as: instability of expectations, obfuscation of learning goals, and lack of knowledge to manage technological devices. Therefore, they proposed to establish learning goals to determine the learning strategy (synchronous or asynchronous), as well as the adaptation to students' non-scholastic factors like their home situation, parent involvement, and socioeconomic status.

The emergency remote teaching mode has been used as a synonym of online education, since digital tools are employed for education continuity during the pandemic (Hodges et al., 2020). Hence, it is important to point out the difference between emergency remote teaching and online education on a normal context, as well as the other delivery modes that are being used during the health contingency. Online education, virtual education, and distance education are the most popular delivery methods that are often used as synonyms during ERT but, with the Covid-19 crisis, these terms have adopted a more specific meaning (Ibáñez, 2020).

Online Education

Online education is described as the teaching and learning process that takes place synchronously on a digital environment that requires internet connection, in which learners can interact through online sessions with their instructors. In this method, it is quite common to have scheduled sessions in which students and teachers participate using videoconference platforms (Ibáñez, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020). This form of education has been suggested by many ministers of education during the pandemic in various countries (Ferri et al., 2020) and was proposed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as a practical solution to avoid direct contact between individuals and prevent the spread of the virus in schools (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020).

According to Dawhan (2020), one of the greatest advantages of online education is synchronous learning, which allows learners to attend live sessions, real-time interaction with their instructors, and the possibility to ask questions and receive instant feedback.

Hodges et al. (2020) state that online education is the result of using a systematic model for careful instructional design and planning. The planning process and preparation for an online course take from six to nine months. This is the major difference between the emergency remote teaching model and online learning, since the former leaves almost no time to plan a well-structured instruction (Ibáñez, 2020).

Virtual Education

It is internet-based and mostly implemented with the use of educational platforms that are administered by a teacher. This mode of education can be self-paced, but the learning process is under the regular supervision of a teacher. (Winstead, 2021). It is mainly developed asynchronously, but sometimes it could have synchronous sessions. Technological devices are required for this mode of delivery, but with less demand than in online education (Ibáñez, 2020).

The main advantages of virtual education are that it provides flexible learning in terms of time and location, individualised learning process and remote access to many educational services (Racheva, 2017). Virtual education does not try to replicate face-to-face learning, but to expand educational experiences (Meyer, 2020).

Distance Education

Distance education involves the physical separation between the teacher and learners in space and time, as well as the use of technology to access course material. It does not necessarily require internet connection, since the learning goals can be achieved through one-way massive broadcasting (TV and radio programs) or print-based learning materials. This mode of education demands more independency from the learner throughout the learning process (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020).

According to the National Council for the Provision of Services for the Attention, Care, and Comprehensive Development of Children (Consejo Nacional

de Prestación de Servicios para la Atención, Cuidado y Desarrollo Integral Infantil, 2020), an example of distance learning could be the proposed method for emergency remote teaching in Mexico: a TV program called *Aprende en casa* promoted by the Mexican government as a temporary solution to preserve education continuity at basic levels of instruction.

Difficulties to access education during emergency remote learning in Mexico

During the transition from classroom-based education to the different delivery methods under the health Covid-19 emergency, the main problem was that economically disadvantaged students did not have access to internet connection or a personal computer (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). The National Institute of Statistics and Geography (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2020) indicates that 44.3% of households in Mexico have a computer, 76.6% of the urban population have access to internet connection but only 47.7% of rural communities do. The most used devices to access internet connection are: 95.3% smartphones, 33.2% laptop computers and 28.8% desktop computers (INEGI, 2020). Based on these data, it seems likely to assume that technological resources were insufficient for all students in Mexico to access educational content during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Those difficulties represented a huge challenge for teachers in Mexico, who had to work with innovative solutions to simplify the content of their learning courses (Fernandez et al., 2020). To keep in contact with students, some teachers

decided to use social networks, since students tend to have easier access to social media through their phones than with educational platforms (Osorio, 2020).

English language teaching (ELT) during emergency remote teaching

Erarslan (2021) shows the analysis of results provided by several studies related to ELT during the pandemic from March of 2020 to February of 2021. They suggest that online education was the most popular delivery mode during ERT; English teachers preferred educational platforms and applications such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet. This required stable internet connection and direct access to smartphones and computers.

Huang et al. (2020) present the perspectives of a university in China during ERT of English as foreign language; this university used online platforms for learning EFL during the Covid-19 pandemic. They found that most students preferred to access English learning material through their mobile phones and use Rain Classroom as a platform. In addition, students found that online education during ERT provided them with flexibility of learning time and location.

In Mexico, Juárez-Díaz and Perales (2021) carried out an investigation to gather data related to English teachers' experiences and emotions toward ERT. Most English teachers reported negative feelings, as did their students; the negative feelings experienced by the students were strictly related to the lack of interaction and insufficient internet connection. Teachers who worked asynchronously with educational platforms had worse results in terms of teaching outcomes than the ones who worked synchronously. The authors point out that the

digital gap in Mexico and the lack of teacher's training in the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are two intrinsic limitations for ERT.

Technology-based tools for language teaching

Web-based technologies have gained popularity in the past years; however, with the implementation of ERT, the number of teachers and students who are now users of digital-based tools has increased considerably. The most used tools for language teaching during ERT are: learning management systems, videoconference platforms, and messaging applications (Abubakar & Tsuraya, 2021; Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021).

Learning management systems

According to Adzharuddin and Ling (2013), Learning Management Systems (LMS) can be defined as 'an environment with digital software which is designed to manage user learning interventions as well as deliver learning content and resources to students' (p. 248). This type of tools has become integral systems of teaching and learning (Amin & Sundari, 2020) since they provide the option to deliver instructional content and keep a record of students' performance during the course. Google Classroom is a popular example of LMS; this platform allows teachers and students to form a digital classroom in which they can interact and access information asynchronously (Abubakar & Tsuraya, 2021).

In a study conducted by Amin and Sundari (2020), they found that EFL students who used Google Classroom agreed that this tool was acceptable for language learning; however, they were not entirely convinced they would keep

using it for future courses. In a previous study on LMS for ELT, Basal (2016) stated that most LMS were designed for virtual education but not particularly for second language acquisition, because these technology-based tools do not have the needed elements for language learning.

Video Conferences

Flatley (2007, as cited in Amin & Sundari, 2020, p. 366) stated that “a virtual real-time video presentation is one synchronous delivered live from a desktop or laptop computer to an audience anywhere in the world with an internet connection”. There are several videoconferencing platforms that can be used for language teaching, such as Zoom, Skype, and Google Meet.

Abubakar and Tsuraya (2021) found that students considered video conferences as impractical solutions for language learning in ERT, since a stable internet connection is necessary. Other students mentioned that they had to pay for more internet vouchers as audio-visual resources consume more internet quota (Suputra, 2021).

Instant messaging

Instant messaging (IM) can be defined as “a type of service available on the internet that allows you to exchange written messages with someone else who is using the service at the same time.” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). Instant messaging applications WhatsApp, a popular tool during the Covid-19 pandemic (Mulyono et al., 2021). In prior research, it has been found that using WhatsApp could be beneficial for students in terms of economy. Students stated that their

mobile data plans included free social networks; therefore, they did not have to spend more money to access regular platforms (Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021).

Use of blogs in English Language Teaching

A blog is a website where the content is uploaded in the form of posts or entries that are displayed in reverse chronological order (Põldoja et al., 2016). The word blog is the short term used for weblog and it was coined in the late 90's (Gaurav, 2019). Even though blogs already existed, it was not until 2004 when their popularity started to arise. (Wang, 2008). In education, blogs have been used as a complementary tool of face-to-face classes, especially in higher education. Research suggests that blogs provide a space of reflection for students and the possibility to create digital portfolios (Põldoja et al., 2016). Blogs allow students to work with interactive activities and can be a helpful application to improve students' learning progress by facilitating the interaction between students and teachers (Fatimah, 2020).

Miftachudin (2017) highlights three beneficial aspects of using blogs for ELT: 1) it is helpful to improve writing skills, 2) it facilitates the access of reading material, 3) students consider it as a good medium to interact with people online. Ahluwalia et al. (2011) found that most English language learners agreed that using blogs as a medium of self-expression was their most useful aspect, followed by writing skills development and information exchange.

In EFL learning, students can use the target language to interact, discuss and make comments on their classmates' posts (Aydin, 2014). According to Kern

(2012), blogs promote new forms of discourse as well as new forms of identity construction; he pointed out the fact that blogs maintain learning communities that cross physical and national boundaries.

The use of blogs in language teaching have been found to enhance reading processes and the development of critical thinking skills. It indicates the promotion of autonomous learning and information exchange of EFL learners outside face-to-face classes (Aydin, 2014). In addition, it has been shown to help introverted learners to share their viewpoints through blog posts without feeling pressured by direct interactions (Sawmiller, 2010). Moreover, blogs have been identified as a communicative resource that can successfully serve for many purposes in the education context (Badusah et al., 2009). Blogs have also been found to enhance students' literacy skills considerably, to encourage the learning of EFL, and to form online communities to collaborate with peers and develop linguistic competence (Spanou & Zafiri, 2019). In addition, blogging also promotes learning autonomy and allows language learners to use the target language not only in class time but for communicative and authentic purposes as well.

The main disadvantage of using blogs in education is the danger of focusing all the attention on writing skills whereas the development of speaking and reading skills becomes neglected (Põldoja et al., 2016). Furthermore, one of the biggest challenges to use blogs in education is the limited access to personal computers (DiGregorio & Featro, 2016).

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2021), there is evident inequality among students to access education with the use of technology during the pandemic; the lack of equipment and Wi-Fi connection represents an enormous challenge, especially in rural areas. Previous studies in the use of blogs for language education and the fact that blogs are simple to operate and maintain make them an appropriate and accessible tool for EFL teaching during the ERT (Fatimah, 2020). Nowadays, people can access blogs in cell phones using a browser or a specific app, which makes it even more accessible for readers (Google, 2021).

Methodology

Creswell (2014) points out that research approaches are “plans and procedures for research that span the steps from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation” (p. 31). This study used a mixed method approach, following a case study tradition. Quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection were integrated for a better understanding of the research purpose (Plano & Ivankova, 2016). This study employed questionnaires and interviews with the purpose of obtaining as much information as possible about students’ experiences and emotions from using the blog and the secondary digital tools during ERT.

There are three reasons to use a mixed method approach:

1. Confirmatory and exploratory research questions could be answered with the integration of both approaches.

2. More credible conclusions or inferences could be reached.
3. Contrasting viewpoints of the same situation could be identified (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

This research used the convergent design since the results from the questionnaire and the findings from the interviews were merged to obtain an overall interpretation of the integrated results.

Case study

Creswell and Plano (2018) proposed the mixed methods case study design, where quantitative and qualitative data are used to provide evidence for a case or several cases. For this research, the case study tradition was chosen for the first and the third reasons reported by Yin (2009). The research questions were exploratory; therefore, all of them included 'how' in order to find detailed information of the event. The circumstances in which this research was implemented were significant to follow the case study.

This research complies with the characteristics of an instrumental case study (Creswell, 2013), since it approached a worldwide concern and focused on a specific context to best understand the problem: the case of group of second semester from a public high school in the southeast of Mexico.

Data collection methods and Instruments

In this research, questionnaires and interviews were conducted to answer the research questions; they were administered in Spanish, since it is the mother tongue of the participants. To obtain the quantitative data, a questionnaire with 12

close-ended questions was designed in Google Forms and administered to the 171 students that used the blog to access the content of the EFL class from February 2021 to July 2021, as well as the two complementary digital tools to communicate and submit their homework.

Questionnaires were chosen for this research because this type of instrument eases the implementation process when there is a large number of participants (Zohrabi, 2013); in this case, there were a total of 171 participants. Quad (2016) claims that these instruments can be used to collect data on a large-scale basis; the data obtained is intended to be more identical and standard. Even though open-ended questions can provide a great level of discovery (Gillham, 2000), in this case, closed questions with predetermined answers were found to provide more accurate information.

Four semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain to obtain first-hand information from knowledgeable informants (Brown & Harris, 2010; Zohrabi, 2013) about their experiences when using the blog, as well as their attitudes and impressions toward taking the EFL course during emergency remote teaching. The semi-structured interview guide was designed to complement or contrast the information obtained from the questionnaires.

Context

This study was carried out in a public Mexican high school in a small city in the state of Veracruz, where students attend classes from Monday to Friday and

take classes such as mathematics, biology, geography, English as a foreign language, among others. The study took six months to complete.

At the beginning of ERT in Mexico, this high school started the implementation of online sessions using video conference platforms, such as Zoom, Google Meet and Teams. Nevertheless, the majority of students were not able to attend the online sessions because they did not own a personal computer nor did they have a stable internet connection; therefore, some students had access to the class content and some others did not. The students that were able to attend the live sessions had to struggle with technical problems during classes.

The high school principal allowed teachers to choose the modality they preferred during ERT. We decided to use a blog, an instant messaging application, and a survey administration software. *Blogger*, from the Google Suite, was used as the main tool to upload the topics; each week we posted an entry that contained the corresponding topic explanation, some graphical resources to support the topic, and the instructions to do homework. At the end of each entry, there were links to the survey administration software. Students had to work on tasks or upload images of their homework. We used WhatsApp to form groups of *Inglés II* and provide a communication tool to answer the students' questions and share the link of the new entry every week. We based our decisions on elements such as the apps that consumed less internet quota and the compatibility with smartphones.

Participants

The participants of this study were 171 high school students of second semester who were taking the subject *Inglés II* from February 2021 to July 2021. In this high school, the total of students of one grade is divided into four groups: A, B, C and D. The age of these students ranged from 15 to 17 (figure 1). The average students' level of English proficiency was A2; however, there were some variations. The blog and the two complementary tools were implemented with the four groups of students during six months.

The questionnaire was administered a few days before finishing the academic year; the 171 students were requested to answer the questionnaire. For the interviews, only one student per group participated, since interviews demand more interaction with students and the high school has certain regulations regarding this. The students were extended invitations to participate in the interview, which they could decline.

To ensure that participants were treated according to practical ethical guidelines (Smith, 2003) during the research implementation, a consent form was sent to the students' parents, stating the purpose of this research and how the data obtained from the questionnaires and interviews would be used. Pseudonyms were used to safeguard confidentiality.

Data analysis

The method employed to analyse the data obtained from the questionnaires and the interviews was thematic analysis, as it can be adapted (due to its flexibility)

to tailor the requirements of many kinds of research (Caulfield, 2019). The purpose was to identify significant themes through coding and categorizing. The aim was to obtain information related to participants' opinions or experiences toward an event (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Caulfield, 2019).

The two most common approaches within thematic analysis are inductive and deductive (Braun & Clarke, 2006); this research study used the deductive approach to both forms of data. Taking into consideration the steps suggested by Creswell and Plano (2018), We grouped the data gathered on the preconceived categories under the same themes. Subsequently, a comparison was drawn by identifying differences and similarities on quantitative results and qualitative findings.

Findings

The findings were categorized in four major themes: blog accessibility, language improvement, assignment submission, and the students' attitudes, and comparison with other platforms.

Blog accessibility

The importance of blog accessibility relies on the fact that it is a key element to find out whether most of the students were able to access the content of the EFL class. The questionnaire showed that most of the participants (41%) considered the blog access to be simple, whereas the rest of the students reported a good experience (30%), and considered it acceptable (27%), while a minority (2%)

encountered difficulties when accessing. Apparently, most of the students had a positive experience accessing the blog.

Coincidentally, in the interviews, S1, S2 and S3 reported that their access to the blog was easy and simple. S4 reported inconveniences because his Wi-Fi connection was unstable, but despite his internet issues, he accessed the blog without major complications:

- *With my internet connection back then it wasn't as easy, but if I had to use the blog at present, it may be easier [...]. Despite my low-quality internet, I could access without any trouble.*

Most of the students (60.2%) considered the blog design as the main aspect that facilitated their access. It is important to report that 30.4% of the students found that the short demand of internet quota to access the blog was an important trait that facilitated access. In contrast, 17% of participants reported not finding any positive traits.

Similarly, the four interviewees also mentioned the blog design. S1 and S2 said that it was easy for them to access and understand the content of the blog due to the graphic elements included. S4 mentioned that despite his technical issues he was able to access the blog. S3 pointed out the blog was user-friendly, because even though she had never used it before, she found it really easy to use:

- *I found it easy, even though I had never used that platform before. I understood everything that was written there. Also, the images and videos were very helpful. I really liked it. I understood everything.*

Nevertheless, the data from the questionnaire indicated that most of the students (53%) had difficulties with their internet connection and access to electronic devices, whereas 10% of them reported not having access to electronic devices or internet connection at all. The biggest challenge faced by the students was directly related to technical issues derived from the digital divide in Mexico. Even though the students received instructional advice to use the blog, 8.8% considered the blog design to be an issue; 33.9% did not find any inconveniences in terms of accessibility and only 3% reported other difficulties that were also related to technical inconveniences.

Conversely, in the interviews, S1, S2 and S3 did not encounter any difficulties when accessing the blog; they pointed out that it was easy for them to access. Only S4 reported inconveniences related to his low-quality internet connection and compared his experience with synchronous lessons that he was taking in other subjects.

- *With the other teachers, we used videoconferences, but I had to deal with the screen constantly freezing, and it was really hard for me to access any sessions due to the low-quality internet we have in town.*

Language Improvement

In general, the questionnaire revealed that most of the students perceived improvement in their target language skills after using the blog (75.4%), whereas the rest of the students did not notice any changes (24.6%). Moreover, all the interviewees stated that they noticed improvement in their language acquisition

after using the blog to access the content of the EFL course content. The students' perception toward their language improvement and skills development was predominantly positive. In the questionnaire, a high number of the participants (44.3%) stated that they improved their writing skills; others reported improvement in their reading ability (37.9%) and listening skills (37.1%). The materials made available to the students in the blog focused on writing and reading. The improvement in their listening skills may be related to the videos also shared in the blog. A minority (2.1%) did not perceive any learning improvement, while the rest (1.4%) stated that they had acquired new vocabulary.

S1 and S3 claimed that they had developed their speaking skills and improved their pronunciation because they had practiced with the videos. The students who committed to their language acquisition process or established a study routine were able to enhance their speaking skills. S4 pointed out that he developed grammar related issues by learning new words and by forming affirmative, interrogative, and negative sentences in different tenses. S1 also mentioned sentence formation and enhanced syntax skills:

- *I think that structuring sentences according to the tenses the teacher indicated; in past tense, or whatever tense he used to indicate, I believe that I can manage them in a better way.*

However, more than half the participants (50.6%) stated that lack of direct interaction with the teacher was the aspect that made it difficult to acquire new knowledge. Other students (24.1%) reported having issues to access the blog and

understand the information uploaded (20.5%), whereas 8.4% stated that they had difficulties to study at home and that they did not consider themselves to be good at learning EFL.

It seems that the students may need direct interaction with the teacher to facilitate their language acquisition process. The data suggest that since the blog was content oriented, it lacked interaction activities that the students might have found useful to share their questions or concerns about blog management and course content.

Conversely, S1, S2 and S3 did not mention any difficulties to improve their language skills. S4 mentioned that he was not fully committed to the course, therefore he used to skip the videos the teacher uploaded in the blog:

- *I used to feel lazy when watching the videos. I would watch them at the last minute and sometimes I even played the videos at 1.5x speed so they could run faster [...]. The truth is that the amount of homework annoyed me; that's why I sometimes used to skip the videos. But for the first two months, I used to watch them completely and it was helpful.*

Assignment submission

The data obtained from the questionnaires show that most of the students (36.8%) described their experience using Google Forms to submit assignments as excellent and good; 19.3% rated it as acceptable, whereas the rest of the students

reported having unsatisfactory (5.8%) and poor experiences (1.2%) when using the software.

The participants positive aspects in assignment submission. Most of the students (45%) reported that the application allowed them to do their tasks faster. 40% of them considered this program was easy to manage and 28.7% indicated that a short demand of internet quota was a plus. Only 6.4% of the participants did not identify any advantages of this software. The data indicate that the positive aspects perceived were mainly related to the usability of the program.

Likewise, during the interviews most of the participants considered Google Forms to be a good option to upload their homework, although a few of them preferred other methods of homework submission, such as Google Classroom and Teams.

On the other hand, 23.4% of the students pointed out that this application presented technical issues regularly, and 9.4% considered it difficult to understand. A minority (3%) choose the option 'other' to express their discomfort with technical issues. For example, S1 stated that the fact the app had no reminders to submit homework was a disadvantage. S3 and S4 reported feeling insecure when sending their homework using Google Forms because the app did not provide them with evidence to corroborate submission of their work:

- *That was what I didn't like [...], I didn't know if I had sent my work, I mean, it seemed as if I had sent it but, but I never received confirmation that it had actually been sent. Due to my low-quality*

internet, that was my fear. Sometimes I even took screenshot, just in case.

Students' attitudes toward the use of the blog

Data from the questionnaires indicated that a considerable number of the participants (88.9%) believe that the blog was a good option to learn EFL, whereas 11.1% consider it otherwise. This suggests that the blog was accepted and perceived positively by most of the participants. 56.6% of them considered the blog was practical and interesting; 33.9% indicated that it facilitated their learning process; and 33.3% said it tailored their needs. On the contrary, some students (14%) reported that using the blog caused difficulties in their learning process; 5.3% stated the blog did not meet their needs; 2.9% found it difficult to use; and 0.6% pointed out the need of reminders for homework. Even though most of the students had a positive perception toward the use of the blog, there are some aspects that may need modification to get better outcomes in terms of enhancing the learning process.

Additionally, all the interviewees manifested positive attitudes when talking about their experiences using the blog. S1 mentioned that the blog did not cause storage problems like other platforms she used with her other subjects at school. What is more, S2 felt comfortable using the blog because it was easy to manage. S3 stated that she found the blog easy to use and appealing. Succinctly, S4 emphasised how innovative the blog was and stated that it was good to work with something different from regular platforms:

- *That was the thing I liked most: the way I interacted and how new things were implemented, not just your typical Classroom and Teams stuff, as it is these days. That was what I liked most about the course.*

S4 also referred to how the teacher interacted with students and kept them informed about new uploads. Since, we aimed to improve the students' access and participation, it was also important to provide them with materials that made them feel comfortable.

Comparison with other platforms

This subtheme approaches a broad perception of the blog used as an education platform to submit the content of the course. Most of the participants (59.9%) reported that they would like to keep working with the blog to learn EFL, whereas the rest of participants (40.1%) stated that they would like to use a different LMS, like Google Classroom.

In the interviews, the participants informed that they had worked with different LMS before. S2 stated that she would like to continue using the blog, whereas S1, S3 and S4 said that they would prefer to keep using the blog to access the content of the course, and a different LMS to submit their homework. S1 provided a clear example based on her experience:

- *I like to use Classroom because, because I always try to submit my assignments on time[...], but I often forget things if no one reminds me to do something; thus, I feel that Classroom works better for me [...]. I*

preferred using the blog, because sometimes, in order to remember things I had to do in Classroom, I used to tell myself: 'Oh! I have to download it because I won't remember otherwise'. Then, my USB memory got full. When using the blog, I used to say: 'I have to study this, and I have to learn it. If I don't, I won't be able to download it'. So, I tried get used to studying or I worked harder to learn things.

It appears that the blog was considered a good option by most students in comparison with a different LMS: 88.9% of the students claimed the blog as an appropriate option to learn EFL; however, 29% of those same students would prefer to keep working with a different. It appears that some changes have to be implemented in the blog to rise the students' interest and homework submission, so they feel secure when sending and keeping record of their work.

Discussion

In terms of access, most of the students reported positive experiences that were related to the usability of the blog. This is consistent with Fatimah et al. (2020) who state that blogs which are simple to operate, appropriate, and accessible for EFL students. The biggest challenge faced by the students to access the blog was related to technical issues that included unstable internet connection and lack of electronic devices. This echoes what Erarslan (2021) claims to be one of the biggest challenges in regard to accessibility of ELT during emergency remote teaching.

In line with Juárez-Díaz and Perales (2021) who reported in their study that most students were able to access the content of their courses when using platforms in asynchronous learning than in synchronous learning, the findings of this research suggest that using the blog presented fewer difficulties in accessing information than in synchronous lessons. In addition, using the blog allowed the students to access the content of the EFL course despite unstable internet connection; therefore, inconveniences in terms of low-quality internet may not always be a major impediment to approach the content of an asynchronous EFL course.

Furthermore, another aspect that the students considered to have facilitated access to the blog was the short demand of internet quota. This resounds with Suputra (2021), who highlights that students during ERT had to pay for more internet vouchers due to the fact that videoconference platforms consume more internet quota. By choosing e-tools—the blog, in this case— that allow students to access information asynchronously can facilitate students' access to education.

In terms of language improvement, the general perception of the students was predominantly positive; however, this was not validated by any external assessment. Students reported to have improved their writing skills mainly, followed by their reading skills. This is consistent with previous literature that establishes that writing skills are the most fostered during emergency remote teaching (Erarslan, 2021), and that the use of blogs enhance reading processes (Aydin, 2014). Some students also perceived improvement in their listening and speaking skills. This may be related to the fact that the content of the course

included videos uploaded to the blog for the students to work with them autonomously. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020), learning autonomy is one of the fundamental characteristics to work in remote learning. Since the information provided in the blog did not need to be downloaded, it helped them to study harder to develop linguistic competence, which supports the claims that the use of blogs may also promote learning autonomy (Aydin, 2014; Spanou & Zafiri, 2019).

The aspect that most students considered an area of improvement during the blog implementation was the need for interaction. This echoes what Juárez-Díaz and Perales (2021) found to be one of the main reasons for EFL students reporting negative experiences and emotions toward ERT. The development of activities and strategies that promote interaction among students and the teacher is necessary to achieve what prior literature refers to as a high sense of community (Gokdas & Kilic, 2014).

Despite this, most of the students agreed that the blog was a better option than other LMS, like Google Classroom because they found it practical and convenient for their learning process. This is in line with Amin and Sundari (2020), who found that EFL students considered Google Classroom as an acceptable tool for language learning but were not sure to keep using it in the future for that purpose. Tools like this were intended to improve the students' access to the course content. Thus, adaptations need to be implemented to tailor the students' needs and provide a more appropriate learning environment for English language teaching during emergency remote teaching.

Conclusion

The findings indicated that the students had positive experiences working with the blog due to the usability of the platform and the short demand of internet quota. The biggest difficulty faced by the students in terms of accessibility was unstable internet connection; however, with asynchronous lessons, the inconveniences related to internet connection were no longer a major impediment to access the content of the course in the blog. Asynchronous blog use, besides facilitating students' access, seems to have promoted autonomous learning and assisted in the development of some language skills.

The students reported to have improved their writing skills and their reading skills as expected, whereas some students reported improvement in their speaking and listening skills because they practiced with the videos included in the blog. Nevertheless, this could not be corroborated by any form assessment. The need for interaction was one of the weaknesses reported by the participants. Despite this, the students' attitudes toward the use of the blog were predominantly positive.

In view of this, the blog use to deliver content of the EFL course appears to have been advantageous, but more interactive activities would render blog a more complete tool for learning the target language, creating sense of community, and catering for students' needs in a better way.

The findings suggest that blogs can provide benefits when it comes to language learning; ELT teachers might consider it an advantageous e-tool that can

be both affordable, convenient, as well as a suitable alternative for ELT teachers interested in working with e-tools.

It is our hope that this study may contribute to a growing body of evidence supporting the adaptation of e-tools within the context of emergency remote teaching, and the use of blogs as educational instrument in the wide field of language teaching to make education more accessible for students in impacted communities in a period of crisis.

Limitations

Besides the interpretation of the findings and the contributions, it is appropriate to recognise the limitations of this study. One possible limitation was that the number of students who participated in the interviews was limited by school regulations and may be considered as insufficient for mixed methods research. Despite what Creswell and Plano (2018) point out about how inconsequential the difference of sample sizes in convergent mixed methods research can be, it might have been valuable to obtain more qualitative information from the interviews. It is equally important to point out that this research lacked corroboration of students' perceived gains in terms of language development, therefore the conclusions related to language acquisition were based on the students' perceptions.

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