

UCUENCA

Universidad de Cuenca

Facultad de Filosofía, Letras y Ciencias de la Educación

Carrera de Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros

EFL Professors' Perception of the Use of Virtual Platforms for Education at the University of Cuenca

Trabajo de titulación previo a la obtención del título de Licenciada en Pedagogía del Idioma Inglés


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Cuenca, Ecuador

2023-09-22

Resumen

Durante los últimos años, la educación en el Ecuador sufrió una transición forzada de modalidad debido a restricciones ocasionadas por la COVID-19. Todos los niveles de educación, incluyendo la educación superior, tuvieron que laborar de manera completamente virtual. Dicho cambio tuvo grandes repercusiones para los profesionales de la enseñanza del inglés que no han sido analizadas en profundidad. Al ser el docente de inglés, parte importante del cuerpo docente y del proceso educativo, es importante conocer cuáles fueron sus percepciones relacionadas a la educación de la lengua inglesa en la virtualidad. A raíz de esto, nace este análisis descriptivo que busca presentar a la comunidad las percepciones de los docentes de la Universidad de Cuenca relacionadas a la enseñanza del Inglés como lengua extranjera en la virtualidad. Después de haber conducido una Encuesta a 31 docentes del Instituto de Idiomas y la Carrera de Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros, se constató que el uso de plataformas virtuales en la enseñanza del inglés implicó un avance en el autoaprendizaje ya que los estudiantes se volvieron más independientes. Sin embargo, las habilidades de producción del lenguaje (Speaking and Writing) fueron afectadas debido a la baja participación de los estudiantes. Adicionalmente, de acuerdo a los docentes, la virtualidad supuso problemas de deshonestidad académica que no pudieron ser solventados por la falta de control en esta modalidad. Finalmente, los resultados coinciden con estudios de diferentes autores que mencionan que los profesores de Inglés consideran negativo el uso constante de estas plataformas.

Palabras clave: plataformas virtuales, ICT, EFL, virtualidad, habilidades de lenguaje, E-learning



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Abstract

During the last few years, education in Ecuador underwent a forced transition of modality due to the restrictions caused by COVID-19. All levels of education, including higher education, went completely virtual. This change had great repercussions for English language teaching professionals that have not been analyzed in depth. Since English teachers are an essential part of the teaching staff and of the educational process in the classroom, it is important to know what their perceptions were related to English language education in the virtual world. This descriptive research analyzes the perceptions of the teachers of the University of Cuenca related to the teaching of English as a foreign language. After surveying 31 teachers from the Language Institute and the Pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program teachers, it was found that the use of virtual platforms in the teaching of English brought with it an advance in self-learning since students became more independent. However, language productive skills (Speaking and Writing) were reduced due to low student participation. Additionally, according to the teachers, virtuality brought with it problems of academic dishonesty that could not be solved due to the lack of control within this modality of studies. Finally, the results obtained coincide with other studies by different authors who mention that English teachers consider the constant use of these platforms to be negative.

Keywords: virtual platforms, ICT, EFL, virtuality, language skills, E-learning



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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who have supported me during the process of my research and the development of this thesis. I am very grateful to my tutor Dr. Juanita Argudo, for her guidance and patience throughout the process. I would also like to thank my “Fine Knight” and friends Gennesis, Vale, and Taty for their support and encouragement. I am deeply grateful to my family and friends for their unceasing support and encouragement throughout this journey. Your love, support, and understanding have driven me to follow my dreams. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my partner Chris Tapia, who has accompanied me during this process by giving me support and encouragement.

María José Bacuilima

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge this Descriptive Research to Dr. Juanita Argudo. This project would not have been possible without her guidance, corrections and her willingness to contribute to the development of this research. In the same way, I want to express my appreciation to my partner, Majo, who worked with me hand in hand unconditionally. Furthermore, I am deeply thankful to Dr. Mónica Abad, Dr. Ana María Calle, Dr. Sandra Cabrera, and my 2nd BGU English Teacher. Their lessons always stood out among others and became the model I want to follow. In addition, I am deeply thankful to my best friend, Damaris Nicole, who brought me the horizon to become a better person for a long time. Last but not least, I would like to thank my Family members, Luis, Rosa, and Diana, who supported me economically and emotionally throughout my whole life.

Christian Ismael Tapia

Dedicatory

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Pablo and Sandra, and my brother, Sebastian, who have always guided me. They have taught me the value of education and the importance of hard work. Their unconditional love and support have been my strength throughout this journey. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my grandparents Gustavo and Mercedes, who believed in me and motivated me to continue despite the difficulties. To my "Fine Knight" because he was always there to be my light in every moment of darkness in my life. Finally, to my pets, Suzy and Lassy, who spent countless sleepless nights accompanying me and giving me their unconditional love and support. I could not have done it without them.

María José Bacuilima Ochoa

Dedicatory

I would like to dedicate this achievement to my silent princess, María Belén. Your company has always given me calm on storm days, and that's something I will always be thankful for. I can do nothing but wait for your dreams to come true. Additionally, I dedicate this project to all people I ever met. Those who got lost on the way, and those who continue with me nowadays. It is dangerous to go alone, so your company heartened me on this journey.

Christian Ismael Tapia

Introduction

Virtual education gained strength in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic; this pandemic demanded education to adapt to a digital environment to continue the educational process. During this period, teachers had to adjust their resources and materials with the help of various digital platforms (Khadija et al., 2020). This experience with virtual platforms led teachers to have perceptions that varied among them due to different factors; as a result, the objective of this study is to analyze and record the perceptions of EFL professors at the University of Cuenca about digital platforms

This descriptive research consists of five chapters, which contain detailed information on the different research stages carried out during the development of this study. Chapter one includes detailed information on the background that led to the need to investigate the topic; additionally, chapter one contains information on the problem encountered and the research questions that arose based on it. Chapter two presents several definitions that are essential for understanding the subject developed throughout this work; this chapter includes a series of theories related to the topic and an analysis of different studies closely related to the topic of study. Chapter three describes the methodology used to collect and analyze the necessary data and the reasons for choosing the type of study and its characteristics. This section contains details related to the type of data collected and the features of the participants of the study. In chapter four, there is an analysis and tabulation of the results. In this section, the findings are divided into sections; for each section there is its own interpretation and contrast with other research studies. Finally, the fifth chapter presents the conclusions and recommendations; this section completes the research project by giving conclusions based on the results and closes the study with proposals for future work and suggestions for improving aspects related to the topic.

Chapter 1

Description of the Research

Background

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, ICT is an acronym for Information and Communication Technology, which is a subject that studies the use of technological devices. While this term does not refer only to education, a considerable section of ICTs is used frequently in educational contexts. Part of this section is called 'virtual educational platforms'; they are described as didactic tools created to enhance the learning process (Valencia et al., 2017). Another important term that requires clarification is 'e-learning.' As Area and Adell (2009) mentioned, e-learning can be defined as a teaching-learning model in which the educator makes use of ICTs to offer a learning program to participants who are separated in terms of time or location.

During the last two years, education worldwide was forced to migrate from physical to virtual interaction. This situation arose as a result of the lockdown that many countries put into effect due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Khadija et al., 2020). During this period, teachers were forced to use virtual educational platforms to continue regularly with the teaching process (Contreras et al., 2021). The use of virtual platforms brought several advantages to the educational field; but also brought concerns about their use in classrooms (Jefferson & Arnold, 2009).

First, regarding advantages, Mohammad and Sandaran (2020) explained in their study that e-learning can be implemented in any place in which students or teachers are located. Therefore, the limitations of a physical classroom can be avoided. Furthermore, e-learning also provides teachers and students with a better organization of their schedules since they can work at any time.

On the other hand, a recent study conducted by Contreras et al. (2021) established that the use of ZOOM and MOODLE, which are educational platforms, brought teachers and students difficulties such as interaction due to the deficiency of internet connection or the lack of technological devices to receive classes that did not allow students to be in contact with their teachers. Additionally, Nalliveetil (2019) concluded in his study that the lack of preparation for the use of virtual platforms on the part of teachers is a challenge that frequently limits its use.

E-learning is a result of the expansion of new technologies, and it has brought both; advantages and disadvantages. Several studies have been carried out to collect and analyze the impact of e-learning and virtual platforms on the educational field. For example, Peñafiel

et al. (2015) conducted a study to gather teachers' perceptions regarding the Moodle platform. They concluded that, despite the benefits, teachers did not fully exploit Moodle because of their lack of training in using the platform. Additionally, Ly et al. (2021) explored a variety of e-learning platforms used by teachers in online classes; the researcher concluded that the main reasons for their use were "information provision, communication, and collaboration creation" (p. 36). However, the studies cannot be generalized in all contexts due to the different factors that may affect the introduction of technology into the educational field.

Statement of the problem

Innovation is a matter that has been present in education throughout its history. According to Hwang et al. (2015), there is a tendency to implement technology in classrooms, resulting in innovative teaching processes. Nevertheless, the implementation of these processes has brought some concerns to the educational field.

Berman and McLaughlin (1976) stated that technology's application in education could result in an arduous process since the education system seems to be reluctant to such a change. Corroborating Berman and McLaughlin's study, Hamlaoui (2021) pointed out that education's resistance to change is one of the biggest problems for ICTs implementation. Based on those studies, which are 45 years apart, it can be said that education's resistance to innovations is not new, but it has been happening for a long time.

In addition, Nallivettil (2019) concluded his study by stating that teachers require previous training in the use of virtual platforms for them to use all the advantages provided by those platforms. Equally, teachers' perceptions about virtual platforms play a crucial role in implementing them since e-learning implies serious challenges for teachers, such as a change in methodologies and class organization (Islam et al. 2015).

Consequently, the purpose of this study is to analyze the perceptions of the professors from the Pre-service EFL program of the University of Cuenca and from the language institute to gather information to describe the opportunities and concerns that this innovative process of e-learning and virtual platforms' usage has presented to our educational community.

Rationale

Raja and Nagasubramani (2018) explained the role of technology in education as a tool that turns passive and reactive learning into an interactive and aggressive one. Technology has brought several possibilities to the educational field, such as the chance of turning face-to-face education into a virtual education (e-learning); consequently, many educational institutions in our country decided to implement technology into the educational process.

Further investigation on the impact of e-learning and the use of virtual platforms in education is necessary since globalization continues straightaway, and education evolves every day (Bezovski & Poorani, 2016). Moreover, research on teachers' perceptions of e-learning revealed that students got influenced by what their instructors thought about e-learning (Aristovnik et al., 2019). According to Salloum, (as cited in Khadija et al., 2020), a good perception of technology and its use for teaching and learning will create classrooms where students feel comfortable and support their learning with technology.

Several studies about teachers' perceptions of virtual platforms and e-learning have been conducted (Romero et al., 2019). However, the lack of studies developed in our educational context makes it difficult to identify how our educators feel about the technology's incorporation into education and its usage. As a result, collecting data related to this topic will provide an understanding of how our educational environment develops regarding virtual platforms.

A descriptive research approach has been chosen to study this phenomenon. The main reasons for applying this methodology are to collect data from our educational context, which may be a base for further research, and to present to the community the perceptions of our educators.

Research questions

- What are the perceptions of the University of Cuenca EFL professors from the language institute and the Pre-service EFL program about virtual platforms in education?
- What are the teaching issues that University of Cuenca (UC) EFL professors from the language institute and the Pre-service EFL program faced during the use of virtual platforms?
- What are the benefits that EFL professors from the language institute and the pre-service EFL program consider that the use of virtual platforms brings?

Objectives

General Objective

- To analyze the EFL professors from the language institute and the pre-service EFL program perceptions about the use of virtual platforms for teaching.

Specific Objectives

- To identify and provide a record of the benefits that UC EFL professors from the language institute and the pre-service EFL program found in the integration of virtual platforms.

- To identify and provide a record of the issues that UC EFL professors from the language institute and the pre-service EFL program have encountered in virtual platforms.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

As an entry point to the discussion, it is important to present detailed information about the theories and concepts related to the topic that will serve as support for the study. According to Marilin and Goes (2011), it is important to conduct an investigation that does not focus only on the researcher's perceptions; instead, it should contain reliable sources of information. In the same way, Grant and Osanloo (2014) defined a theoretical framework as the part of the research that contains the set of theories underpinning the investigation, the concepts, and the definitions relevant to it.

Thus, this framework emphasizes the definitions of E-learning and Virtual Education. Furthermore, the study exposes the types of virtual platforms used in higher education; finally, it explains the historical application and viability that these tools have had in our social and regional context.

Definition of E-learning and virtual education

Education has been a preeminent pillar for human development since 1948 when the Human Declaration on Human Rights stated education as a fundamental right (Assembly, 1948). For many years, education has been imparted in a face-to-face modality; however, the technological development of recent years allowed education to move into a digital modality which gave birth to two important terms, e-learning, and virtual education.

Firstly, the term e-learning has had different complex definitions over time; however, Horton (2012) offers a simple and brief definition of e-learning. He expresses that e-learning involves using technology and electronic devices to create a learning experience. Similarly, Clark and Mayer (2016) defined e-learning as the type of instruction delivered through digital devices such as computers, tablets, smartphones, etc.; they also consider that this type of instruction supports learning. E-learning has some key characteristics to consider; in the first place, Clark and Mayer divided e-learning into two branches, synchronous and asynchronous e-learning. The main difference between those two types of e-learning is the design; synchronous e-learning is instructor-led, so it must have a teacher conducting all the learning experiences. On the contrary, asynchronous e-learning is designed for individual study, meaning that the learning is not led by a teacher but by the learner (Clark & Mayer, 2016). To complement this, Horton (2012) explained that the learning experience of e-learning depends on two factors:

design and development. Design involves decisions or what is done, and development implies decisions or how those decisions are conducted. In closing, e-learning is an instruction that involves the use of technological devices and may be self-conducted or conducted by a teacher.

Types of virtual platforms used in university and EFL education

Before analyzing the theory regarding the types of virtual platforms. It is important to emphasize the fact that virtual platforms are educational tools used by teachers and students that serve as the entrance to online learning. (Shen & Liu, 2022). Therefore, online learning is closely related to virtual platforms. Thus the project needs to explain the discussed theory about online learning. Online learning (and consequently, virtual platforms) can be divided depending on the target approach (i.e. the goal of the learning program) (Singh, 2014)

In her book, Harasim (2012) establishes that online learning can be subdivided into *Online collaborative learning*, which is the type of online learning in which teachers play the role of leaders and students collaborate. Then, the next subtype of online learning is *Online Distance Education*, this approach emphasizes students' self-learning, but there is a space for individual communication with the teacher. Finally, *Online Courseware* is the last theory proposed by the author. This theory englobes online learning that uses individualized learning without teachers monitoring students' progress.

With this introduction to online learning theories, we can continue with an overview of virtual platform classification. In teaching English as a foreign language online, Psoinos (2021) establishes that there are two main forms in which a virtual platform can function: synchronous development or asynchronous development.

The author states that the former, synchronous development, involves the use of a virtual platform that guarantees the appropriate set of conditions in which the teacher and the students can interact in real-time. In other words, even though the classes are imparted online, the participants must be present simultaneously to form part of the class.

On the other hand, it is possible to encounter platforms that aim for asynchronous development. In this case, a virtual platform is structured in such a way that allows participants to have the opportunity to perform tasks at their own pace without the need for real-time interaction. As the author mentions, asynchronous platforms are highly structured. (i.e. the platform contains sections, themes, or blocks in which the students and teachers can monitor their progress).

According to Bri et al. (2009), the virtual platforms used at universities that can be found on the web are numerous. However, based on the number of mentions on the web that each platform has, there are 4 main platforms used regularly: *Moodle*, *Blackboard*, *WebCT*, and *Sakai*. However, since the first quarter of 2020, *Google Scholar* and *Zoom* have obtained a substantial amount of users around the world (Rahmar, 2021). Despite the high amount of platforms that are present nowadays, they are not used for the same educational purposes.

Taking into account the theory provided by Psoinos (2021) and Harasim (2012); *Google Scholar*, and *Zoom* are platforms that fall into the category of synchronous since in their principal components, they require the presence of all participants of a class to work. In contrast, Moodle, Blackboard, and Sakai do not require real-time interaction, and therefore, they can be categorized into asynchronous platforms. Additionally, all these platforms serve as tools for online learning and based on their components, they can be used for all types of online learning: *Online collaborative learning*, *online distance education*, or *online courseware*.

The historical application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and virtual platforms on EFL higher education in Ecuador

Contrary to the naive idea that the implementation of ICTs (which are defined by Vajargah et al. (2010) as the technological supplies used for the traffic of information and communication) arose as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the beginning of the use of such tools can be traced back decades ago. In former times, Ecuadorian institutions imparted EFL classes in language laboratories dedicated to encouraging the use of technology for communication and interaction (Solano et al., 2017).

Thenceforth, the next vestige of virtual platforms and ICTs in Ecuadorian universities arose in 2012 as a result of ministerial agreements that encouraged the creation of online intensive courses for English educators due to the lack of English proficiency of EFL teachers from that time (Cáneppa et al., 2018). In addition, from 2009 to 2013, a higher education curriculum was created to build up English proficiency for pre-service language teachers to equal the international English standards. As a result, an *English program Net* was launched during the period (Cáneppa et al., 2018).

Finally, not long ago, on March 25, 2020, the Minister of Higher Education approved the resolution *RPC-SE-03-No.046-2020*, which obliged the transition to virtual education due to the lockdown. In consequence, the EFL programs at the universities (and all educational institutions) moved to a completely virtual approach with the use of new rising programs and technologies.

Viability of the use of virtual platforms in Ecuadorian universities

For several years, the implementation of virtual platforms in education was seen as something innovative. However, technological advancement and the change in the modality of classes during the pandemic allowed the implementation of digital platforms at all educational levels. During this time, several universities decided to use digital platforms to support teaching; although the use of digital platforms was not an entirely new process, this experience managed to demonstrate once again the feasibility of using such platforms for teaching. In a study conducted by Cadena-Vela et. al (2017), changes were observed in the Central University of Ecuador after the implementation of the Moodle platform as a support tool for learning and teaching. The results confirmed the high viability of the use of virtual platforms in Ecuadorian universities, since the data showed the benefits of the use of the platforms as well as the high level of advantage taken from them.

Although digital platforms are there to support the educational process, some considerations must be taken into account before implementing them. Shewell (2020) proposes a pyramid model based on Maslow's model; in which he presents the needs for successful online learning. At the base of the pyramid, Shewell places the equipment needed to access online learning; here are internet access and devices such as phones and tablets. At the next level is the environment; Shewell considers that students require a quiet place to concentrate and work. The next level includes interaction and community; as it is considered that interaction among students and with teachers is important, so a platform or a set of platforms that allow this interaction should be considered. The next level is self-reliance, which includes student responsibility and autonomy since the use of platforms requires a large part of the student's responsibility. Finally, there is creativity; Shewell considers that it is necessary to work together with activities and tasks that demand work by the students where they can use their cognitive skills.

In short, it is totally viable to use digital platforms in Ecuador, since most universities have the requirements needed for implementing them; additionally, most universities are already using digital platforms as a means of teaching.

Literature Review

Research conducted during the pandemic period has concluded that during these years, teachers felt motivated to use virtual platforms, online learning, and ICTs and that they had a positive attitude towards these tools despite the negative affairs they encountered (Rahayu and Wirza, 2020). Additionally, research conducted by Huang (2021) mentions that students

have the desire of using online learning tools if the teacher provides activities that help them produce language learning.

This literature review searches for the explanation of aspects related to teachers' attitudes regarding online learning, and also tries to identify the usages teachers popularly give to it. In consequence, it was divided into 4 sections: the implementation and popularization of virtual platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers' capacity to use virtual platforms during the development of an academic period, advantages and disadvantages of the implementation of virtual platforms as tools to teach in EFL classes, and common usages for virtual platforms in EFL classrooms.

The implementation and popularization of virtual platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic

Several studies conducted around the world show that virtual platform popularization arose during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Khosla et al. (2021) and Tarkar (2020) mentioned that the lockdown resulted due to the COVID-19 pandemic forced institutions around the world to develop more *digitized* teaching and learning plans as a result of the intention of the government to continue with education during the pandemic without risking the population's health. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that while both studies support the popularization of virtual platforms, only the one conducted by Tarkar (2020) mentioned that just a few non-superior institutions operated through a virtual modality while the rest closed completely, at least in India.

Furthermore, deeper analysis in the field of higher education (i.e., college or higher education), was proposed by Hermawan (2021) and Isna (2020), whose studies demonstrated that e-learning increased in popularity and provided a proper tool for teaching. The authors also provided some relevant information about the usage of virtual platforms in classes. For example, Isna (2020) mentioned that apps such as Webex or Zoom increased their overall downloads by up to 67% since March 2020, a date that coincides with the beginning of the lockdown almost globally. Furthermore, Hermawan (2021) centered a part of his research to detail that at least 30-45 minutes of a class in private institutions make use of a virtual platform.

Although the studies presented above show agreement between different authors in terms of the popularization of virtual platforms as a result of the lockdown, an older study differs with this information. As reported by Umpstead (2009), the rise of virtual platforms resulted from the opportunities that these tools provided to those students who for personal reasons could not attend regular classes. Khosla (2021) emphasizes this idea since he mentions that during

the pandemic lockdown, students that were the nucleus of a family felt the benefit from the flexibility that virtual platforms offered.

Teachers' capacity to use virtual platforms during the development of an academic period

Extensive research about teachers' preparation for new formats of education with an emphasis on virtual platforms has been published by many pundits on the web. For instance, Dowling and Lai (2003) mentioned that the implementation of virtual platforms has a symbiotic relationship with the proficiency that teachers may have with technological devices and their willingness to propose changes to their lesson plans. Additionally, Becker et al. (2017) and Dowling and Lai (2003) considered evolving education requires digitalization with the work of teachers.

These articles serve as an entry point to an up-to-date discussion on the topic. Nevertheless, by themselves, they do not convey any explanation on the preparation of teachers. Thus, the research proposed by Moore-Adams et al. (2016) and Wolf (2006); coincided with the idea that most of the time, teachers tend to apply transferring process from face-to-face classes to online classes (i.e., the use of techniques that have positive results in regular courses in online courses), and as a result, their performance gets compromised. According to the authors, this practice is a result of the lack of training programs in the area.

What is more, Abuhmaid (2011) and Goktas et al. (2008) presented the results of a study within their studies that demonstrated that ICT courses developed for teaching programs have a positive effect on class development.

With this information in mind, it might be correct to assume that teachers who attended ICT courses will develop their job competences better when using virtual platforms. However, it is not mandatory. Such courses are not essential for the use of virtual platforms, and therefore, teachers with basic knowledge of how to use technology can implement e-learning.

Advantages and disadvantages of the implementation of virtual platforms as tools to teach in EFL classes

The implementation of virtual platforms brought both advantages and disadvantages to teachers and students (Morera, 2018). Regarding advantages, many authors found that the main advantage was the change in the methodology used during the classes.

According to Huang and Chiu (2015), Mujtaba and Mubarak (2013), and Raspopovic et al. (2017), the use of virtual platforms allowed students to become independent learners since

teachers started to use a student-centered methodology. Also, Cutter (2015) and Peck (2015) mentioned that virtual platforms helped to improve the communication skills of some students since the shy and quiet students began to participate more during their online classes.

Morera (2018) and O'Hara et al. (2012) reported that another advantage for teachers was that a large variety of online resources were available, which helped them to support their classes and provide extra material to students. Finally, one of the biggest advantages was that all the participants of virtual classes could participate in them no matter where they were.

However, there were some disadvantages especially related to the teachers' preparation and issues with technology. Mathew and Alidmat (2013), and Mollaei and Riasati (2013) stated that the main problem during virtual classes was the lack of Internet connection; Mohamed (2014) and Mollaei and Riasati (2013) agreed that the lack of technological devices was a big problem too. On the other hand, Mohamed (2014), Mohammed (2014), and Morera (2018) found that many teachers were not trained to use virtual platforms, so they were not able to get full advantage of those technological resources.

Finally, according to Dudeney and Hockley (2007) and Mohamed (2014), bad experiences that involve technological issues led teachers to have a bad perception of virtual platforms as teaching tools.

Common usages for virtual platforms in EFL classrooms

Morera (2018) and Mujtaba and Mubarak (2013) agreed that virtual platforms were first used as a way of communication between students and teachers. Then, the lockdown situation moved teachers and students to use virtual platforms as educational environments. Arnó (2012) and Mohammed (2014) realized that most virtual platforms were introduced as a way to continue with the teaching–learning process without sharing the same physical space.

Additionally, Morera (2018) and O'Hara et al. (2012) stated that virtual platforms provided a wide variety of resources since virtual platforms are directly connected to the Internet, the biggest container of information. To support this idea, Arnó (2012) and Tabari and Tabari (2014) stated that most teachers use virtual platforms for looking for different resources and materials that they used during their classes. In the same way, Mohamed (2014) said that teachers had good opportunities to use a wide variety of activities to motivate students and support their learning process.

Finally, Bradford et al. (2007) and Thi and Minh (2022) indicated that many teachers use virtual platforms to assess students. Teachers can grade evaluations in an easier way, and some

platforms provide immediate feedback to students without requiring the teacher to check all answers one by one (Thi and Minh, 2022).

In this realm, it is imperative to have an approach to the perceptions that EFL teachers of our context hold regarding virtual platforms for language teaching as well as the pros and cons they encountered.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Research approach and design

According to Calderon (as cited in Rillo & Alieto, 2018), descriptive research is a purposive process of collecting data on a specific topic; furthermore, descriptive research provides descriptions or characteristics of a subject as a result (Rillo & Alieto, 2018). Therefore, based on the characteristics of our topic, the study will follow a descriptive research design.

As stated by Creswell (2009), a mixed methodology is a research approach that makes use of quantitative and qualitative instruments for collecting data. During our data collection stage, quantitative methods are required to measure the extent of the use of virtual platforms, and qualitative methods are to analyze the professors' perceptions about e-learning and virtual platforms. Therefore, the mixed methodology will be used for the development of the project.

Participants and Context

This study considers the participation of a voluntary group of professors from the University of Cuenca from the Language Institute and the Pre-service EFL program. The former institute aims to instruct students to reach a B1 Level of English according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFRL), while the Pre-service EFL program trains students to become English teachers.

As a condition for taking part in the study, the participants must have used virtual classrooms for their teaching processes during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 - 2021. Considering the previous requirements, the participants in the study shall be EFL professors working in the university for at least one year. The study will appeal for the support of the authorities themselves, making use of written request letters to communicate with them to guarantee the participation of the individuals.

Data collection instruments and analysis

This study will apply a semi-structured web survey, which will be divided into two sections to gather both quantitative and qualitative data, as the principal instrument for collecting professors' information. As mentioned by Scheuren (2004), a survey is an instrument used to collect data about people's knowledge, behaviors, or attitudes from a sample. Additionally, surveys conducted through the web provide a faster analysis of data and a better organization of the questionnaire (Wyatt, 2000).

Firstly, for the quantitative stage, close-ended questions will be included in the first section of the survey. These questions will provide specific data about the participants; the data collected from this section will be analyzed by using descriptive statistics in *Microsoft Excel*.

Secondly, for the qualitative stage, the survey will make use of open-ended questions to collect the participants' opinions. These types of questions enrich the gathered data since participants will have the opportunity to answer the questions naturally. This feature increases the possible answers that can be obtained (Reja et al., 2003). The answers from the second section will be analyzed through the identification of repeated patterns, interpretation, and the creation of codes and themes (Braun & Clarke, as cited in Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Cortazzi et al. (2011) stated that using the participants' native language allows them to answer the questions freely and use a wide range of vocabulary. Therefore, the surveys will be conducted using the native language of the participants to benefit the process of communication.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis, Results, and Discussion

Data Analysis

To collect the data for this descriptive research, a semi-structured survey was developed; it was supervised and validated by an EFL teacher from the University of Cuenca before its application. After a series of corrections and changes, the survey was sent through email to all the EFL professors at the University of Cuenca from the Language Institute and the Pre-service EFL Program. 31 professors voluntarily answered the survey; however, just 30 professors completed all the questions.

Section A – General information

The survey started with a general information section to have a broad idea of the sample; this section contains three statements to have a profile of each participant. ‘Section A’ provides information about participants’ age, gender, and online teaching experience. It is important to mention that the participants who have no online teaching experience cannot answer the other sections of the survey since one of the requirements to participate was to have experience imparting online classes.

Table 1 illustrates the answer to the first statement which was related to the range of age of the participants.

Table 1

Age of participants

	Frequency	Percent (%)
25 – 35	5	16
36 – 45	9	29
46 – 55	14	45
56 or more	3	10
Total	31	100

Note. Data gathered from the survey regarding professors’ age

Table 1 shows the range of age of the participants. As seen in Table 1 there are 14 professors, corresponding to 45% of the sample, who are a range of age between 46 and 55 years old. Then, there are nine professors, two in age between 36 and 45 years old; finally, there are just three participants, 10%, who are in an age of 56 or more years old.

It is essential to mention that age is an important factor to take into account since, as stated by Rahayu and Wirza (2020) in their study, the perceptions of some people may be affected by their age. Their study revealed that elderly teachers found it hard to learn how to use virtual platforms, so they avoid using them. This lack of familiarity with online tools leads to a negative opinion of online teaching by elderly teachers. Similarly, the current study conducted at the University of Cuenca revealed that indeed exists a negative perception among elderly teachers; however, this negativeness is associated with other factors aside from the lack of familiarity such as the lack of participation and connectivity issues. Additionally, Morera (2018) said that older teachers are less inclined to use ICTs than younger ones. The survey used in this research showed that most professors are older than 45 years, which may explain why they have a negative opinion about online platforms and online teaching.

The following statement is related to the gender of participants; Table 2 contains the answers of the participants.

Table 2

Gender of participants

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Male	8	26
Female	23	74
Other	0	0
Total	31	100

Note. Data was gathered from the survey regarding the gender of participants.

Table 2 shows data regarding the gender of the participants; the categories were divided into male, female, and other. The data obtained showed that 74% of the sample, which corresponds to 23 participants, were females while 26%, eight participants, were male; there were no participants who identified with other genders.

Regarding gender, it is important to mention that in some studies, such as the ones from Rahayu and Wirza (2020) and Thi and Minh (2022), the EFL teachers who participated were predominantly females; this coincides with the current study's results since 74% of the participants were females too. However, there was no evidence of gender affecting teachers' perceptions, just the fact that women are more likely to become teachers and to participate voluntarily.

Table 3 shows the results from the last statement from 'Section A' which is related to the professors' experience regarding online teaching.

Table 3

Online teaching experience

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	30	97
No	1	3
Total	31	100

Note. Data was gathered to know if all the participants have experience with online teaching.

Table 3 shows the number of participants who are familiarized with online teaching and the participants who have no experience with online teaching. Data shows that almost all the participants of this study have conducted virtual classes; of the 30 participants, 97% of the sample have experience teaching online. The data also shows that just one participant has no online teaching experience; since one of the requirements to participate in the survey was to have online teaching experience, this participant was not allowed to answer the other sections of the survey.

Thi and Minh (2022) revealed that many teachers started to get involved with technology due to the COVID-19 pandemic; in the same way, the data gathered in the study revealed that all teachers who had experience teaching online started to get familiarized with the virtual classrooms during the years of the pandemic. Consequently, it can be said that most teachers and professors gained experience in online teaching because they were forced to use it during the global lockdown.

Section B - Communication and interaction with students

This section analyzes the communication and interaction that teachers had with students and the extent to which it was affected by online learning. 'Section B' includes statements related to the time that teachers were in a virtual modality and the tools they used in classes.

Table 4 shows the data related to the amount of time that teachers were giving online classes.

Table 4

Time, in months, that teachers have taught online classes

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Less than 6 months	0	0
From 6 months to 1 year	2	7
From 1 year to 2 years	15	50
2 years to 3 years	13	43
More than 3 years	0	0
Total	30	100

Note. Data was gathered to know the time that teachers were giving online classes.

Table 4 shows that 15 professors, 50% of the sample, have been teaching online for one year to two years; additionally, 13 professors, which corresponds to 43% of the sample, have been teaching online for two to three years. Finally, just two participants, 7%, were teaching online for six months to one year.

Data shows that most teachers have been teaching online for at least one year, which means that most of them are familiarized with online teaching and digital tools. Additionally, it is important to notice that the time that teachers have been teaching online has a close relationship with the pandemic since none of the participants have conducted online classes for more than three years or less than a year; this information matches the isolation time due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This agrees with the findings of Thi and Minh (2022), who stated that almost all teachers started their experience in online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic since the lockdown forced education to move to a digital mode.

Next, Table 5 shows the different platforms that could have been used by professors as tools during virtual classes.

Table 5

Top used platforms

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Zoom	30	100
Moodle	23	77
Google Meets	12	40
Flipgrid	4	13
Microsoft Teams	3	10
Webex	2	7
Google Classroom	1	3
Facebook Live	0	0

Note. Data related to the platforms that teachers used the most during online teaching.

Table 5 shows the data related to the most used platforms to teach online. Data shows that 30 teachers, 100% of the sample, used Zoom during the online teaching process, followed by Moodle which was used by 23 teachers, 77% of the sample. However, it is important to highlight that Facebook Live was not used as a teaching platform.

The participants agreed that the most used platforms, Zoom and Moodle, were used because they are easy to operate. Also, participants said that they used those platforms because the university provided Zoom and Moodle licenses, which allowed full and free access to these platforms. Finally, professors used those platforms because they allow several activities such as watching videos in real-time or taking lessons and giving immediate feedback. The top used platforms by EFL professors at the University of Cuenca have always been among the most used platforms in the educational world; this can be evidenced in the studies conducted by Bri et al. (2009), Peñafiel et al. (2015), and Cadena-Vela et al (2017) which are investigations conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic. This information is corroborated by recent studies by Isna (2020), Contreras et al. (2021), and Rahmar (2021), where Zoom and

Moodle continue to be the most used teaching platforms; this affair might explain as well why these platforms were chosen among others at the University of Cuenca.

Section C - Teachers' perception of virtual education

This section aims to collect data about the outcomes of using online teaching in students' interaction with professors and classmates before, during, and after the class period. It also contrasts this information with students' interaction during regular classes.

Table 6

Virtual platforms influence communication

	Frequency	Percent (%)
They greatly facilitate communication with students.	9	30
Slightly facilitate communication with students.	8	26
They neither facilitate nor impair communication with students.	2	7
Slightly impair communication with students.	9	30
They greatly impair communication with students.	2	7
Total	30	100

Note. Data associated with teachers' perceptions in terms of interaction with students.

Table 6 demonstrates that there is a significant disagreement between the idea that virtual platforms facilitate communication with students. Even though 56% of English teachers consider virtual platforms helpful for communication to some degree; there is 37% percent of participants that consider they weaken this area. Finally, 7% of participants felt indifferent to this affair.

As mentioned before, 56% of the people that answered this survey consider online classes to facilitate communication with students. Teachers consider that they are versatile and facilitate material sharing. However, there is a higher amount of negative opinions about this aspect. The most common ones mention that first, students tend to turn off their cameras; second, students do not participate; and third, students get distracted, and the teacher cannot control them. This information agrees with the one presented in the study conducted by Thi and Minh

(2022), which stated that some teachers feel lonely during online classes since students were not participating.

Table 7

Students' attendance to virtual classes

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes, significantly.	7	23
Yes, slightly.	17	57
It was not reduced.	6	20
Total	30	100

Note. The table shows EFL teachers' perceptions of students' attendance.

Table 7 evinces that the majority of participants felt that students attended classes with less regularity in virtual classes if compared to face-to-face classes, yet 23% of participants consider that this decrease in attendance was significant and 57% of them consider it was less noticeable. On the other hand, 20% of the sample did not notice any change in this aspect. This information contrasts with the findings of Cutter (2015) and Mollaei and Riasati (2013), who declared that students' participation increased during virtual classes. The reason for this contrast may be due to the different contexts in which students were and the situation in which they were living, since these studies were carried out years before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 8

Students' participation in online classes

	Frequency	Percent (%)
It increased a lot	1	3
It increased a little	2	7
It neither increased nor decreased	8	27
It decreased a little	4	13

It decreased a lot	15	50
Total	30	100

Note. Data gathered to highlight changes in participation behavior during online classes.

Table 8 indicates that half of the sample noticed a huge reduction in students' participation during online classes. Additionally, 13% of the participants considered this reduction was less severe. Meanwhile, only 10% of the participants noticed an increase to some degree. Finally, 27% of the 30 teachers did not notice any change in this aspect.

This information agrees with the findings of Thi and Minh (2022), who said that most teachers noticed a reduction in students' participation during online classes. The reason for this reduction was highly associated with the lack of technological devices and a lack of good connectivity.

Section D - Teaching in the virtual world

The goal of this section is to gather information about the impact either positive or negative that virtual classes have had on the main English skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing) as well as different sub-skills such as *grammar* or *vocabulary*.

Table 9

Negative Impact on English language skills and sub-skills

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	28	93
No	2	7
Total	30	100

Note. Overall thoughts on the impact of online learning on L2 (English) skills and sub-skills.

Table 9 evinces that there is almost complete agreement on the idea that during the pandemic, online classes have negatively compromised the acquisition of English Language skills and sub-skills. Nevertheless, the position is not unanimous since 2 participants think there was not a negative impact on this affair.

Table 10

English language skills and sub-skills most affected

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Grammar	0	0
Listening	0	0
Reading	1	3
Writing	10	32
Speaking	19	65
Vocabulary	0	0
Total	30	100

Note. Overall opinions about the affected skills and sub-skills.

Table 10 continues the work done in Table 9 and helps to clarify which of the skills or sub-skills were considered the most affected ones during the 2 years of online learning. Starting from the less compromised skills/sub-skills, the survey found that grammar, listening, and vocabulary were not affected significantly to be considered the choice of any of the participants (0%). After that, reading was only the selection of one person (3%). Thus, this skill is also not considered affected significantly. In contrast, writing and speaking, which are productive skills, were selected as the most affected ones with 32% (10 participants) and 65% (19 participants) respectively.

Among the different opinions gathered, teachers stand out that participation and interaction among students was the major reason why they (the students) reduced their listening/speaking performance. Also, teachers mention that connectivity issues were a constant limitation to learning. About writing, teachers agree that academic misconduct was a limitation that could not be controlled; some examples mentioned by them are plagiarism or the use of translators. Finally, it is important to note that for some teachers, there was a need to give feedback with face-to-face interaction. However, this was not possible and resulted in a lack of improvement. In contrast with these findings, Cutter (2015) and Peck (2015) mentioned that online classes helped to improve communication skills among some students due to the rise of participation and interaction in online classes; the reason for this huge variation among the findings may be related to the context in which the virtual classes were held.

Section E - Virtual teaching work

In this section, participants answered statements regarding their job and the impact that virtuality had on them. This is an important part since professors will have to finish the survey by explaining why or why not they recommend the extended application and use of virtual platforms to teach English at the University of Cuenca.

Table 11 illustrates the teachers’ perceptions regarding the students’ grades during online classes and how they were positively or negatively affected by online instruction.

Table 11

Students’ grades during online classes

	Frequency	Percent (%)
They increased a lot	14	47
They increased a little	10	33
They were not affected	3	10
They decreased a little	2	7
They decreased a lot	1	3
Total	30	100

Note. Data regarding the impact of virtuality on students’ grades.

Professors’ perceptions about students’ grades during online classes are displayed in Table 11. As seen, 24 participants said that students’ grades increased during online classes; in contrast, just three participants said that the grades of their students decreased during online classes. However, three professors said that there were no changes in the students’ grades about the ones in face-to-face classes.

Most participants said that some of the reasons for the improvement in students’ grades were that teachers were forced to be more flexible regarding assignments and evaluations; due to the modality, the evaluations were simpler and shorter. Teachers claim that most evaluations were oral due to authorities’ policies that sought to provide more opportunities for students to prove what they knew; however, most professors said that it was difficult to control plagiarism and cheating during virtual modality, so a lot of students took advantage of that to cheat during

evaluations. On the other hand, just three teachers said that grades decreased; they said that students did not attend classes and they did not do their homework or autonomous learning.

Different authors mentioned that students became more autonomous during online classes, which resulted in an improvement in students' grades (Huang and Chiu, 2015; Mujtaba and Mubarak, 2013; and Raspopovic et al., 2017); this opinion agrees with the findings since they consider that students' grades increased; however, the reasons for that improvement are totally different in our context and in the context of the other studies.

Table 12

Recommendation of online classes as alternative classes

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	14	47
No	16	53
Total	30	100

Note. Data regarding participants' perceptions about alternative online classes.

Table 12 illustrates the professors' answers regarding their personal opinion about having online classes as alternative classes to face-to-face classes. Data shows that 16 participants, 53%, think that it is not a good idea to implement online classes as alternative classes; however, 14 professors, 47%, said that it is a good idea to implement online classes as alternative classes at the University of Cuenca.

The participants said that it is a good idea to implement virtual classes since it will allow more students into the university; also, it may be helpful for those students who live in other parts of the country and cannot come to Cuenca. In contrast, 53% of the sample said that neither students nor teachers are ready to implement online classes since there is a lack of technological devices, a lack of training for teachers to use technology, and a lack of compromise from students to develop their autonomous learning. In the same way, Nalliveettil (2019) and Romero et al. (2019) found that teachers and students were not prepared to use virtual platforms for teaching due to some factors such as the lack of training, the lack of internet connection or the lack of technological devices.

Professors' perceptions of the way that virtuality facilitates their tasks as teachers are shown in Table 13.

Table 13*The role of virtuality in facilitating teacher-associated tasks*

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes, it was easier to perform these tasks	12	40
No, it was more complicated to perform these tasks	15	50
I did not notice any change in this aspect.	3	10
Total	30	100

Note. Participants' perceptions about how virtuality benefits or affects tasks such as grading assignments, preparing material, checking exams, etc.

Data shows that 15 participants think that it was more complicated to perform teachers' tasks outside the classroom. This represents 50% of the sample. 12 of them consider it helped them to perform certain tasks, which represents 40% of the sample. Finally, a minimum of three participants did not notice any change (10%). Therefore, there is no agreement in this area of the survey. In this sense, a deeper qualitative analysis should be conducted.

In this case, Moore-Adams et al. (2016) and Wolf (2006) established that professors did not find advantageous the use of virtual platforms due to their lack of training on its use; this agrees with the idea of 50% of the participants.

Table 14*Considerations of the expansion of the use of digital platforms*

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	26	87
No	4	13
Total	30	100

Note. Participants answered if digital platforms should be used more or not.

The major opinion for this question was that digital platforms should be implemented more frequently during classes. This is the perception of 26 people, which represents 87% of the

complete sample. However, four professors do not consider digital platforms should be used more frequently.

The reasons given by the teachers who answered **Yes** to this question were in most cases related to the autonomous work of students. Participants consider that the increase in digital platforms usage is important since it provides students with tools to develop academic activities without the need of a teacher. Also, teachers mentioned that students feel motivated to study with these platforms since they are accustomed to working with technology during their life. Nevertheless, the majority of participants also consider that this implementation would result in more work for the teacher.

On the other hand, participants that answered **No** mentioned that first, teachers need to center their efforts on preparing face-to-face classes rather than on complementary digital activities; and second, that the teaching-learning process requires a direct relationship between teachers and students that benefit both parts and according to them, this is something that cannot be achieved through virtual education.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

After conducting this study, important conclusions need to be established in order to have a better understanding of the overall idea that teachers have about the use and implementation of virtual platforms in EFL classes.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, education migrated to virtuality, which forced the use of virtual platforms to continue the teaching process. The results of this study showed that the University of Cuenca EFL professors from the language institute and the Pre-service EFL program perceive that virtual education is at a preliminary stage. In general terms, most professors agreed that they are not ready to use virtual platforms as an alternative to face-to-face classes; they acknowledged that teachers need more training to take full advantage of those tools. Professors were aware of the positive impact that platforms could create, such as the increase of individualized learning; however, they said that it does not compensate for the disadvantages that those online portals brought, especially the ones related to the growth of students' academic misconduct (i.e. cheating, using translators, receiving help from outsiders, etc.). The study also revealed that professors found a series of issues while using virtual platforms; professors stated that the lack of an appropriate environment to provide feedback to students, a lack of ways to control students' progress and performance, and the extra work that online teaching represents for them should be analyzed before introducing virtual classrooms as alternatives to face-to-face classes. These negative perceptions gathered generally came from elderly teachers; this situation agrees with some of the studies presented by other researchers and mentioned previously in this study. Finally, EFL professors pointed out some benefits that virtual platforms may bring; they stated that the correct use of virtual platforms may help students to become independent learners and have better methodologies to study. Also, they recognized the online platforms' potential to increase both macro and micro-skills of the English language.

Recommendations

This study was conducted taking into account the University of Cuenca EFL teachers' perceptions; in this realm; it would be advisable to expand the sample to other universities or institutions to collect more data regarding the topic. Additionally, conducting individual interviews with participants might be beneficial to the discussion since participants will have the opportunity to express their feelings about the topic freely and more deeply. The results

showed that many teachers found it difficult to adapt their classes to a virtual environment; consequently, it will be necessary to provide different training courses regularly so that teachers may be able to use virtual platforms correctly and efficiently. Finally, this study was centered on teachers' perceptions; however, students also need to be heard; thus, it would be very rewarding to conduct research centered on their own experiences in virtual classrooms.

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