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"IMPROVING TEENAGERS' ENGLISH READING SKILLS: AN ANALYSIS OF

THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF USING A VIRTUAL

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT"

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RESUMEN

El aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera requiere de tiempo, práctica y del uso de diferentes recursos. Afortunadamente, el rápido desarrollo de la informática ha permitido la creación de entornos virtuales de aprendizaje que pueden contribuir al desarrollo de las habilidades lingüísticas. Una de las habilidades que los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera deberían dominar es la habilidad de lectura no solamente para cumplir con los objetivos del curso sino también para enriquecer su conocimiento y continuar aprendiendo a lo largo de toda la vida. Este estudio examina las ventajas y desventajas de usar un entorno virtual de aprendizaje para desarrollar las habilidades de lectura, a través del análisis de estudios experimentales y encuestas a profesores y estudiantes del colegio Técnico Salesianos. Los hallazgos muestran que aunque los entornos virtuales de aprendizaje pueden presentar problemas técnicos o exigir una mayor carga de trabajo para los profesores, facilitan el aprendizaje, proveen una variedad de recursos, motivan a los estudiantes a aprender y mejoran las habilidades de lectura. Por lo tanto, se sugiere a los profesores de inglés estar abiertos a la implementación de entornos virtuales para el mejoramiento de su enseñanza y para fomentar la lectura en los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: Habilidades de Lectura, Entornos Virtuales de Aprendizaje, y Tecnología.

Universidad de Cuenca

ABSTRACT

Learning a foreign language requires time, practice and the use of different resources. Fortunately, the fast development of computer technology has allowed the creation of virtual learning environments, which can be a way to contribute to the development of language skills. One of the skills that English as Foreign Language (EFL) students should master is the reading skill not only to fulfil the class objectives but also for enriching their knowledge and for life-long learning. This study examines the advantages and disadvantages of using virtual learning environments for developing reading skills through the analysis of empirical studies and teachers and students surveys conducted at Técnico Salesianos high school. The findings show that although virtual learning environments can present technical problems and demand a higher workload for EFL teachers, they facilitate learning, provide a variety of resources, motivate students to learn and enhance reading skills. Therefore, it is suggested that EFL teachers should be open to implement this tool to improve instruction and foster reading.

Key words: Reading Skills, Virtual Learning Environments, and Technology.

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CLÁUSULA DE PROPIEDAD INTELECTUAL

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Cecilia Marieta Vázquez Patiño, autora de la tesis "Improving Teenagers' English Reading Skills: an Analysis of the Advantages and Disadvantages of Using a Virtual Learning Environment", certifico que todas las ideas, opiniones y contenidos expuestos en la presente investigación son de exclusiva responsabilidad de su autor/a.

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CLÁUSULA DE DERECHOS DE AUTOR

DEDICATION

Along my entire academic life, I always had my parents' and brothers' unconditional support. They were always willing to help me with everything I needed and supported me to reach all my goals. Today, I can say that I could finish a very important stage of my life thanks to each one of them.

I dedicate this work

To my parents for giving me love since I was a little girl, for getting up early to make sure I had everything I needed, and for transmitting their good values to me.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, technological advances have incorporated new ways of teaching. Due to the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for education, a great number of virtual learning environments have been created. Their use is becoming more and more frequent so that many teachers are reevaluating their approaches and looking for ways to implement them in the classroom.

This research examines the advantages and disadvantages of using virtual learning environments in general to enhance reading skills in EFL classrooms, but it also refers to the importance of developing students' English reading skills to perform successfully and efficiently in school and in today's society. The advantages are described with experiences that show how teachers from other places have employed virtual learning environments to foster reading. Additionally, this work offers an explanation of how virtual learning environments can motivate students to keep active when reading and to develop this skill successfully. Furthermore, it provides an insight on the role of virtual learning environments in education, as well as their functionalities and tools to improve language skills, especially reading. Finally, this work encourages teachers to use virtual learning environments as tools to enhance their teaching since they show friendly interfaces.

This document is mainly a bibliographic research since its primary objective is to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of using virtual learning environments to enhance reading skills. It is also an exploratory research because

it examines the topic through surveys which were conducted to Técnico Salesianos high school students and teachers in order to know their perceptions about the use of virtual learning environments.

On the other hand, a virtual learning environment can serve as a means for students to learn by themselves, but it also allows students to interact and work together to achieve the same objective. Students can enrich their knowledge working collaboratively and sharing and exchanging information. Therefore, in this research, theoretical perspectives and principles such as *constructivism, collaborative learning* and *the multimedia principle* are used as a framework for the analysis.

This research is organized into five chapters. The first chapter includes the statement of the problem, the background, the justification, the research questions, and the general and specific objectives for the development of this study. The second chapter contains the theoretical framework and the literature review which encompass learning theories and empirical studies about reading and virtual learning environments that have been applied in other schools or other contexts in order to show the advantages and disadvantages that EFL teachers have found. The third chapter explains the methodology of the research, in which the instrumentation and participants are detailed. The fourth chapter includes the data analysis and the results of the collected data. Finally, the last chapter shows the conclusions of the study.

CHAPTER 1: THE STUDY

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The acquisition of reading skills when learning a foreign language demands a lot of time and practice because it involves learning vocabulary constantly in order to understand a text (Sedita, 2005). However, the number of hours of English instruction in schools in Cuenca might be not enough to develop them. In a short period of time, it is unlike that every student can participate in the class, so they might not get familiarized enough with the language and may not develop reading skills successfully. Therefore, adding extra material to practice the language seems necessary to overcome this difficulty, and virtual learning environments offer a variety of ways in which this can be done.

Yusof (2005) says that ICTs have the ability to motivate and engage students in learning (as cited in Noor-Ul-Amin, n.d.). If students are not motivated enough to learn, a virtual learning platform can be a way to arouse their motivation. Since reading is considered the second main source to access innumerable sources of information after listening, and a valuable source to learn a second language (Scott & Ytreberg, 1991), this skill should be strengthened at its maximum through the use of different means.

Students seem to be losing interest in reading physical books. In the words of White (2013) "the fact that print newspaper sales are declining and amazon.com sells more electronic books than print books indicates the importance of digital media, especially in education" (p. 2). Nowadays, it can be said that when students have to do some research, they do not consider libraries as their first choice. They prefer to spend time surfing the Web because they are more familiarized with this

tool, and it provides a more attractive environment for them since they can have various Websites open at the same time.

Because students are constantly surfing the Web, teachers can take advantage of ICTs to help their students link ICTs with the habit of reading. For this reason, using a virtual learning environment for educational purposes can be one of the ways in which teachers can encourage students to develop the reading skill.

1.2. Background and Justification

Since the past few years, the fast development of technology has permitted the creation of innumerable tools with educational purposes (e.g. Moodle platforms, Edmodo, Google scholar). Students are living in a period where the Internet is constantly used due to its easy access and all the advantages it offers. Before the technological boom, education was based on what could be found in books, written encyclopedias, or the teacher's knowledge. However, in the last 15 years, the Internet revolutionized the way of teaching and learning (Ghanbari, Shamsoddini, & Radmehr, 2015). Nowadays, teachers are able to show pictures and videos through projectors, interactive whiteboards or computers (Chin, 2004). These tools have a big influence on how people read, write, listen, and communicate. Teenagers spend many hours surfing the Web on their cellphones, tablets or laptops.

The Internet provides many advantages to the educational field. For example, the use of ICTs give students the possibility to "develop the digital competence and technical competences, which are needed for employment, education, self-development, and general activeness in the modern society"

(Lepičnik-Vodopivec, 2012, p. 54). Furthermore, its use has proved to be a helpful tool for the development of the necessary skills to improve reading (Tseng, 2007; Ghanbari, Shamsoddini, & Radmehr, 2015).

Reading is important because when a person starts learning and developing a target language "the printed word becomes the main source of expanding and strengthening the language" (Scott & Ytreberg, 1991, p. 49). Most of the information that students know is acquired through reading. Therefore, it is important that teachers strengthen this skill from beginning levels of language instruction, so learners can keep doing it later by themselves. The combination of reading and virtual learning environments can have a profound impact in developing students' reading skills. Some studies have demonstrated that virtual learning environments increase students' interest, get them more involved in reading and help them to acquire more vocabulary (Ghanbari et al., 2015; Sioofy & Ahangari, 2013).

During my student teaching experience at Técnico Salesianos high school, I could observe that although this high school has a virtual learning environment (Moodle platform) to teach English, many of the students struggled at reading. Even the students of the advanced levels were not able to neither read fluently nor understand the main ideas of a text. Therefore, it seemed relevant to investigate how teachers used the Moodle platform to teach reading in order to offer new alternatives to enhance the use of this virtual learning environment so that students can have a better development of this skill. On the other hand, the investigation of the students' perceptions towards using virtual learning environments can give the teachers insight into more useful ways to employ the virtual learning environment

in order to facilitate the development of the reading skill. Thus, this study could be advantageous for EFL teachers as it can supply important information on how to foster reading through virtual learning environments.

1.3. Research Questions

- How does research address the advantages and disadvantages for using virtual learning environments to support the development of reading skills in an EFL classroom?

- What are the Técnico Salesianos high school students' and teachers' opinions towards reading in the EFL classroom and the use of virtual learning environments for teaching reading?

1.4. Objectives

1.4.1. General Objective

- To analyze the advantages and disadvantages of using virtual learning environments to develop reading skills, so that they could be properly integrated in the EFL classroom.

1.4.2. Specific Objectives

- To compare the gains of using virtual learning environments for developing the reading skill with the difficulties that their implementation imply.

- To determine the students' preferences for reading material and their opinions towards the use of virtual learning environments.

- To find out about the teachers' perceptions towards the use of virtual learning environments for teaching reading.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Nowadays, technology is influencing many aspects of people's life. Around the world, it has become an important part of business, communication, and education, just to mention a few areas. The easiness to access the Internet has created the opportunity for many people to benefit from the online information and all the tools that the Internet provides. For instance, in business, people are using it for communication and for training employees. In the communication field, technology is helping in the fast diffusion of news around the world. In education, it is influencing how teachers and students interact; therefore, it is changing students' and teachers' roles.

On the other hand, technology has also influenced the way people read, and nowadays it can be said that reading is not limited to printed information since the Internet can provide students with a lot of helpful written material to develop this skill. Among the four English skills, reading can allow students to access myriad sources of information and can serve as a base for life-long learning (Lepičnik-Vodopivec, 2012). Besides, reading in English enables the possibility of becoming aware of other cultures and news around the world because a lot of the information is written in this language.

Considering these two aspects, it can be said that the combination of the Internet and reading can make the creation of new teaching approaches feasible. For instance, distance learning through virtual learning environments can be a new way for language learning that allows more EFL teachers and students to access information and develop language skills. This new field is known as Computer

Assisted Language Learning (CALL) which refers to the use of computers to support language teaching and learning through the presentation of different activities (Butler-Pascoe, 2011). Therefore, some learning theories that support the use of virtual learning environments to develop language skills are analyzed in this chapter.

2.1. Collaborative Learning and Constructivism

The positive results of using virtual learning environments to develop reading are not only based on the use of the newest technology or latest equipment, but on the way they are used, that is to say, the pedagogical approaches they follow and the appropriate use of virtual activities and materials.

Virtual learning environments are based on collaborative and constructivism theories in which students are the main actors in the construction of knowledge while teachers are only facilitators of knowledge; at the same time, students can learn by working collaboratively in groups and helping each other by "adopting new roles, offering multiple perspectives, becoming peer tutors, and taking on projects and tasks that would be difficult or impossible for a single learner" (Noor-Ul-Amin, 2013).

The first theory, collaborative learning, refers to "instructional methods in which students are encouraged or required to work together on learning tasks" or to solve a problem (Lehtinen, 2003, p. 7). Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) has contributed to the collaborative approach. It proposes that collaboration between students or between teachers and students helps a person to advance in his ZPD. The ZPD is the difference between what a person can do

alone, and what that person can do with others' help (Vygotsky, 1978). In the classroom, there are students who learn faster than others, so more advanced students can cooperate with those less advanced because learning in general is a social process, and cooperation is even more important when developing second language skills because students can learn from each other (Lehtinen, 2003).

Besides, each student has unique life experiences; therefore, constant interaction among them leads to different ways of learning. Miyake and Hutchins argued that the combination of social interaction along with technological tools provide new cognitive resources for human cognitive accomplishment (as cited in Lehtinen, 2003). Therefore, frequent interaction among teachers and students is essential to have effective language learning in distance education.

Furthermore, when students work together on an interesting activity, they are more willing to get involved in the activity. They have to interact to accomplish a common goal, which can increase their levels of satisfaction and feelings of connection with the class community (Alzahrani & Woollard, 2013). These authors recognized that a virtual learning environment can motivate students' responsibility for the construction of knowledge, which fits well with the social constructivist approach in a virtual learning environment. All the arguments, comments, and conversations that each student hold can cooperate to the construction of knowledge and to the development of second language reading skills because "collaborative groups facilitate greater cognitive development than the same individuals would achieve when working alone" (Lehtinen, 2003, p. 9).

On the other hand, Vygotsky's theory mentioned that learning comes in two steps. Firstly, people learn in contact with others because it is a social process,

and second, that knowledge is internalized by the person and becomes meaningful (Vygotsky, 1978), which has to do with constructivism.

Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner stated that learners can use their prior knowledge and relate it to the new one, so that they can learn actively and construct new knowledge based on their past experiences (as cited in Huang, 2002). Learning is built individually, however, students cannot learn in isolation. They need to share what they learn and, also, need to learn from others, so their knowledge is also constructed through social interaction as mentioned above. Furthermore, "cognitive psychology has gradually established that people naturally learn and work collaboratively in their lives" (Huang, 2002, p. 32).

Nevertheless, students also need to internalize the knowledge built in contact with other people in order to develop internal skills. The constructivism theory states that all the information learned in school has to develop learners' ability to solve real life problems and develop their critical thinking. When students have control of their learning, it will be easier to adapt what they learn to their real life environment. To make it possible, a teacher needs to be a guide, facilitator, resource provider, or consultant to whom the students can ask for help at any moment (Huang, 2002). When teachers provide them with adequate resources and use appropriate techniques to teach, students can be encouraged to have a more active participation and interaction, since the teacher's role implies the creation of "rich environments, experiences, and activities for learning by incorporating opportunities for collaborative work, problem solving, and authentic tasks" (Alzahrani & Woollard, 2013).

In conclusion, virtual learning environments provide rich resources to help

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students build their knowledge individually and, also, work together to achieve a common goal. They function as facilitators, especially in education and language learning because they follow learner centered approaches that allow interactive learning and enhance knowledge construction individually and in group (Kim, 2007; Noor-Ul-Amin, 2013).

2.2. Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants

The way students of this generation learn differs greatly from the way students of past generations used to learn; therefore, due to these differences, new terms have been invented. Prensky (2001) calls this new generation *Digital Natives* because they are growing up in a period where technology can be found everywhere, and for this reason, it is common, easy, and familiar for them to use it. A second term, *Digital Immigrants*, has emerged for those who were born and grew up when technology was not common. It is an appropriate term for them because although they can master most aspects of the new technology, they were not born during this period; they have only adopted it. A clear example of this is when digital natives and digital immigrants search for information. Most digital natives will prefer to use the Internet as his first option because for them it is the fastest way to find information, while some digital Immigrants, who have not completely mastered technology, will ask for help or will be directed to use other means.

2.3. The Technology Acceptance Model

A well-known theory about informational systems use and acceptance is the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) proposed by Davis (1989) and based on the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA). Taking into consideration learners' beliefs and

attitudes, it tries to explain why a person accepts or rejects technology based on two factors: perceived of usefulness and perceived ease of use. The former refers to the person's point of view about technology, that is to say, if that person considers a particular information system useful to improve his job performance, he/ she will be more willing to use it. The latter factor refers to the person's belief that if certain informational system is easy to be used and free of effort, there are more possibilities to be used again. Therefore, it could be inferred that if language learners and EFL teachers perceive virtual learning environments useful, easy to use, and with educational value, they will accept and start using them as a means to enhance their language teaching and language learning.

2.4. Multimedia Principle

Mayer's multimedia principle states that people learn and understand more from words and pictures than from words alone. The use of pictures includes images, animations, videos, or anything that permits to have a visual representation of an object (Mayer, 2005). The combination of words and pictures when reading in a second language is more engaging and, also, helps the learners to have a clearer concept of the idea that the teacher tries to communicate, because learners can make connections between the two. This is what computers and virtual learning environments can provide.

Literature Review

The development of technological devices has created the need to find new ways of learning. Nowadays, online learning through virtual learning environments has become extensively used and has emerged as a solution to overcome physical

barriers (Huang, 2002). EFL teachers can use the available technologies to provide activities for engaging students in active learning and for developing their language skills.

In addition, surfing the Web has become an everyday activity for many people. Teenagers, especially, use it for leisure time, communication, entertainment, or for school activities that demand reading, so they have a lot of practice in using google, playing games, chatting, e-mailing, among others. The frequent use of the Internet and electronic devices allow the possibility of implementing online learning as well as the use of computer applications for second language learning (Farrah & Tushyeh, 2010). Virtual learning environments can be implemented in schools as a means to develop teenagers' reading skills and to support teachers' instruction.

2.5. Virtual Learning Environments

The combination of the Internet and computers has made distance learning possible and has also allowed the creation of computer applications and systems such as virtual learning environments. Virtual learning environments, introduced around the 1900s, are online systems that allow an integrated online learning environment, support distance and interactive learning, and allow member's participation; they are mediated by computers or any digital media (Sidorko, 2009). Besides, students have the possibility to get access to many activities and other valuable resources such as videos and audios.

2.5.1. Examples of Virtual Learning Environments

There are many types of virtual learning environments that display similar characteristics. For instance, Moodle Platforms, Blackboards, Toolbook and WebCT are common open Web-based systems that have a flexible and easy to modify software in which teachers can set up their own preferences according to the students' needs (Perry & Bulatov, 2010). Another characteristic is that they can be linked to other systems such as mail servers or student directories (Dougiamas & Taylor, 2003). Dougiamas and Taylor (2003) stated that Moodle platforms are widely used for different levels and by a variety of EFL teachers (e.g. school, universities, independent teachers) and are available in twenty-seven languages. More characteristics of virtual learning environments are explained below.

2.5.2. Functionalities and Tools of Virtual Learning Environments

A virtual learning environment shares the following features: it is an online space where teachers and students can share information, has a social function in terms of communication, allows students to be actors and contributors of their own learning, combines different functions and tools, allows distance education, and enriches and complements teachers' pedagogy and classroom learning (Dillenbourg, Schneider, & Synteta, 2002). To access a virtual learning environment, students and teachers need to log in with a username and a password. On the other hand, virtual learning environments can vary from very simple spaces where teachers can upload links or activities to more advanced spaces, such as 3 dimensional environments where students can perceive more vivid activities through avatars and can have more real life resources.

Depending on the type of virtual learning environments, some of the main characteristics they present are the following: chat rooms, forums, grading information, e-mailing, calendar, progress tracking, timed automatically graded quizzes, loading of course material, among others (Keller, 2007). This author added that there are synchronous and asynchronous virtual learning environments. When they are synchronous, participation of the group members occurs at the same time or simultaneously such as in chats, video conferences or audio conferences. On the other hand, when they are asynchronous, participation of the group members is not simultaneous such as in e-mails, forums, or discussion groups. Another characteristic is that conversations held among students are saved, so they can be checked after by the group members as many times as they want.

The growing multimedia technology seems to be an appealing alternative to complement direct student-teacher interaction (Yusof, 2012). EFL teachers have seen virtual learning environments as an option to enhance and support their teaching instruction since they can combine written texts, pictures and audio materials at the same time; besides they can have a rich quantity of material and activities at their disposal. The variety of readings gives students the opportunity to choose one according to their interests, which can increase their motivation to read. It is necessary to bear in mind that the material should be adapted to the students' interest, age, and level, and that the use of virtual learning environments does not replace teachers' instruction, but rather can support their teaching and can help students improve their reading skills in a different and more modern way.

Virtual learning environments have two functions. On the one hand, they can

be useful to improve the education system, and on the other hand, they can be useful for training students' skills for their future jobs, which is really necessary in this technological era in which most jobs require technological abilities. Moreover, it is worthy to mention that important tests that evaluate non-native speakers' ability to use and understand English, like the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), are computer based and include a lot of reading. Therefore, it seems necessary that EFL teachers help teenagers become acquainted with both reading in English and technological advancements so that they can perform well on this type of tests.

However, teachers' and students' perceptions about using virtual learning environments in schools may vary a lot. Some teachers may completely reject them, while others may use them partially or fully. In a review of distance education in Sweden, it was found that the teachers considered virtual learning environments as a way to reach out more students, and the students considered them as an independent way to learn without time and space restrictions. On the other hand, the students claimed that the quality of instruction of virtual classes is lower than on campus classes, while the teachers emphasized that it is a heavy workload due to the time that preparation of activities demands (Keller, 2007). Because of their different opinions, the next sections examine the advantages and disadvantages of using virtual learning environments to develop reading skills, and the perspectives of students and teachers about their use.

2.5.3. Advantages of Virtual Learning Environments

Virtual learning environments can enlarge teaching and learning opportunities for many people because they provide more facilities than what the classroom environment can offer. For instance, many people who could not finish school or could not continue studying in the university for different circumstances (having dependents at home, health problems, economic factors, demanding schedules, etc.) can take advantage of the implementation of virtual learning environments, which in many institutions have given the opportunity for many people to continue studying from home (Huang, 2002). Evidently, teachers and learners are separated by physical distance, but at the same time, they are joined by the online media. Virtual learning environments appear as a means to solve physical and time barriers because the physical presence of the students is no longer required; rather they can stay at home, plan their own schedule, and receive online classes.

Warschauer and Healey mentioned some benefits of using virtual learning environments for language learning: "instant feedback, allow individualization in a large class, pair and small group work on projects, the fun factor, variety in the resources available and learning styles, exploratory learning with large amounts of language data, and real-life skill-building in computer use" (as cited in Kim, 2007, p. 29). The variety of activities they offer can increase students' motivation to learn since virtual learning environments can improve their language abilities in a more meaningful and funnier way. Moreover, EFL teachers can supply students with much more activities than the printed paper can allow. However, Kim (2007) emphasized that computers should not replace teachers or change the educational

practice; rather they should improve language learning and complement the teachers' instruction.

On the other hand, when learning a second language, students need to develop different skills. Virtual learning environments present authentic materials and tools for communication that allow the development of language skills, especially reading skills, since most of the activities are found written. Also, their use allows students to be more autonomous because they can read at their own pace and can learn according to their particular learning styles, which can also reduce anxiety levels (Huang, 2002). Teachers are able to give instant feedback and reinforce a topic learned in the classroom. Additionally, virtual learning environments offer engaging and interactive activities which attracts students' attention. Furthermore, they follow a learner-centered approach because students are in charge of acquiring their knowledge and strengthening their reading skills which prepares them for long life learning, personal development, and proficient language use (Farrah & Tushyeh, 2010). All these tools can help to improve both language skills and technological skills to fulfill the requirements of this technological world which are indispensable for education, employment, personal development and for keeping people active in today's society (Igwesi, Chimah, & Nwachukwu, 2012; Lepičnik-Vodopivec, 2012).

In the classroom setting, some students may sometimes be too shy to participate or may be afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates, so when the teacher asks a question, only few students are willing to participate. However, in a virtual learning environment the way of communication is different. While participating in a forum or in a chat conversation, language learners have

more time to think of an answer, read and understand a text, plan their responses, or even read additional information on the Web in order to clarify a topic. The Web gives the learner the opportunity to search actively and discover rich resources to solve problems, construct knowledge and improve reading skills (Huang, 2002). In addition, virtual learning environments present a lot of written texts which are useful for the development of reading skills. Furthermore, students can express their ideas freely as long as they do it appropriately and respecting each other's opinions. Communication among students is important because "in social constructivism, knowledge is developed through cognitive activity which happens through the discussion of experiences with other individuals or in groups" (Alzahrani & Woollard, 2013, p. 5). Thus, virtual learning environments provide many opportunities for both teachers and students to practice the language.

Additionally, many studies have reported the effects of CALL on reading comprehension. Stakhnevich (2002) studied the impact of a Web instructional medium on independent reading, and compared it to the print medium. This study indicated that the way or medium of reading has an important impact on reading comprehension. Scores showed learners' better performance when using the Web program, which included "electronic dictionaries, Web animations, and fast delivery of these multimedia reading supports through well-designed navigational strategies and orientation cues". These findings also showed that the students were able to increase knowledge by themselves, which is in line with the constructivism learning theory.

Another study carried out in Iran showed that the use of a computerized program to develop EFL learners' reading comprehension skills was effective. The

participants received a six-week course where lessons were accompanied with vocabulary software, a CD, and slides. The results indicated that the members of the experimental group performed better and showed higher development than the participants of the control group, and the results of the pre-test and post-test showed reading comprehension improvement (Ghanbari et al., 2015). This study proves Mayer's multimedia principle that the use of pictures and text has a more profound impact when learning to read.

Shang (2015) investigated the effect of a hypertext system on EFL students' reading comprehension, and the way how both perceived usefulness and future use of this system were related. The findings showed that EFL students perceived this way of learning useful and that the system was not difficult to use; therefore, they stated that they would use this e-learning system in the future. The results are consistent with Davis' TAM theory in which he claimed that perceived of usefulness and perceived ease of use are crucial for using a computerized system in the future.

Omheni and Kacem (2016) investigated the efficiency of a virtual environment (where students could read, make annotations and share ideas with their peers) to improve students' reading comprehension skills. It was a collaborative online environment where good readers shared their comments with all the students so that poor readers could be able to understand a text. This study showed that virtual learning environments can create the appropriate atmosphere to exchange knowledge in a collaborative environment and can have positive effects in language learners' reading skills.

2.5.4. Disadvantages of Virtual Learning Environments

Nobody can deny that the Internet along with virtual learning environments cooperate to the improvement of language learning and provide a lot of benefits as mentioned above. In spite of them, there are some disadvantages that should be considered. First of all, searching for all the material that should be uploaded to the virtual learning environment (readings, links, pictures, videos, activities, etc.) takes an enormous amount of time and effort, so teachers need to set aside time from their busy schedules in order to find reliable and useful information. Besides that, neither teachers nor students have complete control of this type of technology; therefore, if technical difficulties appear, teachers will not be able to present the materials and students will not be able to log in and complete the activities (Kim, 2007). Furthermore, some schools may not be able to afford the necessary equipment to create a virtual learning environment, such as computers or internet connection, so students cannot benefit from it.

In addition, when it comes to psychological and social effects of technology, its excessive usage can lead to addiction which in turn can affect teenagers' social life. They begin to spend less time interacting face to face with their friends and close family and are seen most of the time isolated from people (Lepičnik-Vodopivec, 2012). Besides, virtual learning environments allow communication through computer technology but not with a real person, so, humanity is lost in the process and social isolation is produced (Huang, 2002). In addition, while using virtual learning environments, many physical aspects are lost, such as voice intonation, facial expressions, and body language which are considered truly important to understand a message while learning a target language. Moreover,

some students may cheat; they may ask a proficient English speaker to take a test or to complete the activities, instead of doing them by themselves.

In addition, a study about a Web-based extensive reading program with university students carried out in Venezuela reported that the participants had access problems to the program at home and complained about the texts selected by the teachers (Pino-Silva, 2006). It seems that in spite of taking into account students' interests, it is complicated for teachers to select texts that engage every single student. However, it is something that can occur with printed readings too.

Tseng (2007) examined EFL learners' reading skills through printed text and hypertext. It was found that most of the students preferred to see pictures on the screen because they are more colorful and clearer; however, some students still preferred to read on paper and take printed tests because of the text font size. It seems that language learners prefer the electronic media for searching, while the printed media for the consumption of information (Liu, 2005).

Although virtual learning environments can have some disadvantages, many studies have indicated that they can provide more benefits than drawbacks when used adequately. Therefore, EFL teachers should consider using virtual learning environments for their students' benefit, so they can become successful readers and skillfully users of technology.

2.5.5. Virtual Learning Environments as a Motivational Tool

It is really valuable what virtual learning environments can offer to EFL teachers and language learners. Becker mentioned that they can "motivate students to learn, increase the learner's control over the material being presented,

and allow the learner to take an active role in the learning process" (as cited in Al Udaini & Soliman Keshta, 2012, p. 606). Students can have more control of their learning and can get more involved in interactive activities when working in virtual learning environments. Furthermore, once students have developed basic computer skills, they can feel more motivated to use them more frequently, so they can have more contact with the language which in turn can help them improve their reading skills.

Since the beginning of the internet boom, researchers have investigated the use of computers and its effects in reading comprehension. Arroyo (1992) investigated the effect of a computer-assisted program on 75 elementary students for the entire school year and found out that the students who used the computer program had a better reading achievement, and it seems that these students increased their motivation to learn. In the same way, Aweiss (1993) tested the effect of a computer system on students' reading comprehension. The results showed that the learners improved reading and felt more motivated to learn.

Soltanian (2010) examined the effects of computer software on students' reading comprehension of short texts. The findings showed the language learners could do reading alone because the program was easy to use. Also, the questionnaires taken after the program indicated that the students showed positive attitudes using this program and its various activities because they were useful to improve reading, as a consequence, they affirmed that they would continue using it, which agrees with Davis's theory about students' attitudes toward technology use.

Taking all these facts into consideration, it can be said that when teenagers find something important, easy to use and useful to improve their language skills, they are more motivated to use it again. Also, the results indicate that teenagers are familiar with computer technologies since we live in the information age. Thus, a well-designed virtual learning environment can encourage students to be more willing to learn because it provides the means for interaction, enjoyment, and pleasure. It works as a motivational tool because "technology use encourages students to spend more time on a task, providing them with increased opportunities to process linguistic and content information" (Kim, 2007, p. 32). Therefore, it could be said that the more time teenagers spend navigating in a virtual learning environment, the more reading skills are likely to develop.

2.6. Reading

2.6.1 Reading Importance for Language Learning

Learning to read is a complex process in which language learners have to recognize words, construct meaning and retain information in memory (National Reading Panel, 2000). People read for different purposes; some people read for pleasure, others for staying informed, and most students read for developing school tasks; regardless the reason, reading permits to analyze vast sources of information. While reading, the person's brain tries to decode a message, and when the message is processed, the person is able to relate new information to previous knowledge and decide what is useful for him/her (Alderson, 2000).

The ability to read fluently in a second language is an active process in which the reader and the reading material interact in order to build meaning.

Anderson (2003) stated that learning to read in a second language encompasses "learning new skills, learning new vocabulary and collocations, and acquiring the ability to transfer these skills from the classroom to the real world, where English may be used " (p. 2). This author adds that reading comprehension implies the development of skills to recognize words rapidly and efficiently, and interpret meaning according to the background knowledge of the language learner. Through reading, language learners can enrich knowledge of idioms and set phrases, in short, improve their target language since words are better memorized when they are embedded in a context (Kledecka-Nadera, 2001). Moreover, this author emphasizes that reading in a second language can help students develop a feeling of success and personal achievement.

In addition, the role of vocabulary in second language learning is crucial for academic success. There is a close relationship between word knowledge and reading comprehension, since learners with large vocabulary knowledge can understand concepts and ideas easily, while learners with limited vocabulary struggle at understanding the general idea of a text (Sedita, 2005). Therefore, it can be concluded that in order to understand a text better, learners need to acquire more vocabulary through reading.

Furthermore, reading is important not only as a way of enjoyment but also as a really necessary tool for education and the basis for language learning since a lot of the information is found written (as cited in Igwesi et al., 2012). Reading is needed when doing summaries, answering questions, studying for tests, learning new topics, completing tasks, in short, it is used all the time. Therefore, the development of a good reading culture and the construction of a rich reading

environment are essential for effective language learning and for actual development of students' reading skills and, later, for active involvement in this modern society. Also, a reading culture helps in the development of a positive attitude toward the habit of reading, which implies the development of "a critical, analytical, creative, imaginative, innovative mind, and evaluative kind of thinking" (Igwesi et al., 2012).

Finally, reading implies self-learning, a way of communication, the development of critical thinking and the development of the brain. It is the base to produce independent learners and literacy promotion (Igwesi et al., 2012). Once students learn to read, they can continue learning by themselves in the future. Furthermore, reading helps to complement and develop other language skills. Kledecka-Nadera (2001) stated that writing skills are learned after the reading ones, and Anderson (2003) added that improving reading skills produce a great progress in other language areas. However, there are some problems that language learners can face while developing reading skills.

2.6.2 Reading Problems

It was found that the average of a second language learner reading skills is commonly below in comparison with his/her first language skills (Anderson, 2003). Although some language learners have studied the language for a long time, they may have problems when reading or understanding the message of a text. Lack of vocabulary can be one of these problems which can make learners read less because of the difficulty they face when reading (Sedita, 2005).

Another reading problem can be the differences between the English

language and the student's native language in terms of structure, rules, patterns, vocabulary or pronunciation. Sometimes, students tend to transfer rules of their native language to their target language without realizing such differences (Hanifi, 2015). A different order in the language structure can sound incoherent to language learners. For instance, in English, the adjective comes before the noun while in Spanish is the other way around.

A third factor that can affect reading is the insufficient exposure to the target language or poor reading environments (Igwesi et al., 2012). If language learners do not create opportunities to practice the language, they will not be able to develop their reading skills successfully; as a consequence, they will not be able to master their second language in general. Practicing the language arouses its understanding and improves word recognition and eventually takes the language learner to fluent text reading (Macaruso & Walker, 2008). The more exposed teenagers are to the target language, the more familiar they become with its grammatical structures, so it can be easier for them to understand the language.

A fourth reason is that students who have reading problems in their mother tongue are more willing to show the same problems in their second language. The Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis (LTH) states that learners must acquire second language linguistic ability in order to be able to read successfully in their second language. This implies that the learner must be a successful learner of a foreign language to become also a successful reader. A second hypothesis complements the former one. The Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis (LIH) expresses that the reading ability in the target language has much to do with the reading ability, the linguistic knowledge, and the skills of the mother tongue (Chun, 1997).

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Finally, there are two disadvantages that make English a difficult language for Spanish speakers. The first one is related to idiomatic expressions which are characteristic expressions of a particular language that cannot be translated literally; instead, they need to be memorized. The second disadvantage is the difference between the way English words are written and the way they are pronounced (Baugh & Cable, 2002). Only in the word Abraham, there are three different ways of pronouncing the letter *a*. However, in Spanish, words are pronounced as they are written.

Overcoming these problems is a fundamental part to develop strong reading skills. Therefore, teachers should facilitate readings for students and transform the classroom in a rich reading environment in which students can acquire more vocabulary, overcome language differences, get familiar with grammatical structures, learn idiomatic expressions, and practice the language in general.

2.6.3 Reading and Virtual Learning Environments

Today's society gives much importance to digital skills and reading abilities since they are " required for written communication and serves as a core ability for long-life learning" (Hahnel, Goldhammer, Naumann, & Kröhne, 2016). Students who have no opportunity to interact with English native speakers can get into contact with the language through reading, or if they cannot afford a trip, they can become acquainted with other cultures by reading, which include learning language and costumes that otherwise language learners will not be able to find in their context. In addition, reading has a social and emotional value because through it, the cultural and social human heritage pass from one generation to

another (Al Udaini & Soliman Keshta, 2012).

Also, teachers have to bear in mind that the main objective of teaching reading is "to train students to read efficiently and quickly so as to get information and meaning rapidly with full understanding and enjoyment" (Al Udaini & Soliman Keshta, 2012, p. 604). In addition, the habit of reading is a central part for personal and collective development in a literate society that promotes a competitive world (Igwesi et al., 2012). On the other hand, language learners are surrounded by technological devices, so reading is not restricted only to printed paper. Liu (2005) stated that more and more "young generations are found spending more time reading electronic media" (as cited in Kim, 2007, p. 32). This happens because the digital media contains large amounts of written material which learners seem to prefer to spend time reading on their computers or mobile devices. Therefore, teachers should not be restricted to give learners only printed reading materials.

In addition, Anderson (2003) noticed that "the Internet is a tool that began to be used in classrooms faster than books, television, computers, telephones, or any other technological devices for information and communication" (p.3). Therefore, in order to fit in this new technological era, teachers can use the Internet to create virtual learning environments so that language learners can strengthen reading skills. For this, students and teachers must develop the necessary abilities to use virtual learning environments efficiently and, also, develop strategies to become successful readers ready to adapt to this rapid technological changing world. These skills will be useful not only for school, but also for their future jobs where reading skills along with technological abilities are needed, and even more important, for the development of the nation (Igwesi et al., 2012).

Furthermore, teenagers need skills to deal with computer interfaces in general. These fundamental skills are described as "basic computer skills, which comprise actions of accessing, collecting, and providing information on a computer interface" (Hahnel et al., 2016). Teenagers can have more success in digital reading tasks when they have mastered basic computer skills, but their success arouses even more when they use their investigation and navigation skills in order to select relevant information. Therefore, if teenagers develop basic computer skills, they would handle digital readings more efficiently.

In addition, the creation of a virtual learning environment where students can share and negotiate their responses can promote critical thinking and collaboration among them. These skills will help teenagers to evaluate reliable online information to become successful in digital reading. For this reason, language learners should take advantage of it and should "learn how to manage, analyze, critique, cross-reference, and transform information into valuable knowledge" (Huang, 2002, p. 34).

Since the principal objective of education is to polish students' skills and prepare them to have an active participation and contribution to the real world, teachers should try new methodologies that call students' attention such as virtual learning environments, and should provide them with more opportunities to be in constant contact with vocabulary and English structures in order to develop their reading skills successfully.

2.6.4 The Role of Virtual Learning Environments in Reading

Education is characterized by its especial combination of technology (computers, the Internet), participants (students, teachers), and all the subjects that compose the educational curricula (math, language, science, art, music, etc.). This combination makes school the appropriate place to learn and develop social and technological skills. The integration of computers and the Internet has affected language learning including the way how teenagers read and communicate.

Reading in virtual learning environments is not the same as reading in printed paper since virtual learning environments can show more resources like links, graphics, sounds, pictures, and animations which facilitate understanding and learning (Kim, 2007). For this reason, the use of this tool requires teachers and students to develop new skills, such as effective navigation and investigation, reading and thinking skills at the same time. Finally, Kim (2007) added that the role of a virtual learning environment is to be an online learning facilitator and a teachers' helper to enhance language learning.

A study investigated the effect of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) on 56 intermediate level university students in terms of vocabulary, reading comprehension, and speed of word recognition. It was found that the participants who used the software gained more vocabulary and recognized words faster, which resulted in better reading comprehension than those who used paper instructional modules (Kim, 2007).

Virtual learning environments can be a way to motivate learners to take control of their own learning in an interactive way. Soltanian (2010) stated that computer applications to teach reading can be useful tools to "increase the

students' engagement in reading, to promote reading comprehension, to stimulate interest, and to improve reading skills" (132). With all these facts, it can be concluded that virtual learning environments stimulate teenagers to spend more time doing a task, which can eventually lead them to improve their reading abilities.

However, implementing virtual learning environments in schools is also changing the way how instructors teach the class and how students learn. In order for virtual learning activities to be successful, "teachers need to be aware of the online reading strategies that L2 learners use" (Anderson, 2003). Furthermore, they need to understand the impact of technology in teenagers' lives and adapt it to their educational needs. In addition, the teacher is the information facilitator and the one who makes sharing information among classmates possible. In a study on virtual learning environments, it was found that the teachers who used them changed their way of teaching, that is to say, they established a more collaborative environment in their classes and considered themselves as knowledge facilitators, instead of knowledge providers (Dillenbourg et al., 2002).

Thus, only when teachers take control of this technology and use it to their advantage, students will benefit the most (Soltanian, 2010). Of course, it can be a challenge for some teachers and for some students who are not digital natives, but their use reports remarkable benefits.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This research can be defined as bibliographic because it focuses on analyzing the advantages and disadvantages that virtual learning environments have for developing reading through the examination of some empirical studies and the literature related to this issue. All the information was gathered through different sources (books, journals, case studies, and reports) and then, analyzed and interpreted in order to answer the first research question. The study is also exploratory since in order to answer the second research question, the participants were surveyed about their opinions towards the virtual learning environment (Moodle Platform) used at Técnico Salesianos high school for developing reading skills.

In this chapter, the participants, instruments and procedures used for the data collection are explained in detail.

3.1. Participants and Context

In Ecuador, there are some institutions that have already implemented virtual learning environments fully or partially as a means to have online education. The universities that have made online teaching and learning their main way of teaching are Universidad Tecnológica Equinoccial (UTE) and Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja (UTPL). They have branch offices in different parts of the country which allows students to receive online classes. Usually, all the content that is going to be taught during the semester is uploaded to the virtual learning environment along with activities, quizzes, assignments, games, links, videos, audios, and other tasks, except from exams and some tests which are taken at the

university campus. Students have a calendar that shows when all the assignments are due and when tests and exams are taken. Also, they can participate in forums, blogs and chats.

Basically, students learn by themselves through making summaries, reading, or watching videos; when they do not understand a topic, they can send an e-mail or inbox message to their teachers asking for some explanation, or write questions in a forum where other students can help. In other words, they are a community where students assist each other in order to learn and the teacher is the material facilitator.

On the other hand, Técnico Salesianos high school uses a virtual learning environment (Moodle Platform) only partially, that is to say, it is only used as complement of the teacher's instruction. The students have the opportunity to work in the Moodle platform in the high school computer laboratory twice a month; however, they use it regularly to complete activities, worksheets, review links for grammar explanation, and take quizzes in order to reinforce at home what they learned in the classroom. The students, whose age range between 12 to 19, receive five hours of English classes a week and use the book *In Sync 1,2,3* and *4* according to their level. The books provide the students with readings, grammar rules, writing tasks and listening and speaking activities which give the students the opportunity to develop the four English skills.

Técnico Salesianos high school has an average of 2000 students a year. For this research, 249 (170 males and 79 females) students, from 8th grade to senior year, participated. Most of the surveys were conducted in certain classrooms where I was allowed to hand them out, while some others were filled

out by a few students during their break time. On the other hand, an attempt was made to contact all the English teachers for the study, but two of them had permission for personal circumstances. Therefore, 8 (5 women and 3 men) from the 10 teachers, aged from 24 to 43, participated in this study.

3.2.   Research Instrument

The research instrument used for this work was a survey. A survey is a systematic research method for collecting information about a specific topic from a sample of individuals who represent the whole group in order to gain an insight of what the group thinks or does (The European Association of Methodology, 2008). This instrument was selected due to the advantages it has. First, it is a practical tool for collecting large amounts of data in short time and at low cost. Furthermore, a survey, with well-designed questions, is a reliable technique because questions are standardized, so every participant has to choose an answer from the same options. Besides, quantitative results can be quickly analyzed through charts or graphics and in an objective way (Blackstone, 2012). On the other hand, surveys also show disadvantages. There is no way to know how truthful the answers of the participants are or if the way they understand a question is correct. However, Blackstone (2012) emphasized that surveys are a fast way to collect big amounts of information with a low cost; other methods can take longer and show similar disadvantages. For this reason, I decided to use surveys.

Two paper-based surveys were designed (one for the teachers and the other for the students) to collect information regarding how Técnico Salesianos high school teachers used virtual learning environments to develop students'

reading skills. In addition, they intended to find out about the advantages and disadvantages that teachers had found while using them, as well as the students' reading preferences. Finally, they inquired into the students' and teachers' perspectives about the usage of virtual learning environments and the opportunities they provide to improve students' reading skills.

The survey for the teachers consisted of ten questions: seven structured or closed questions and three unstructured or open questions. It contained unstructured questions so that greater variety of answers and additional details could be collected since the teachers didn't have to select an answer from a particular list (see Appendix 1). On the other hand, the survey for the students had nine questions; all of them were structured questions and in two of them students could select more than one option (see Appendix 2).

A Likert scale was used to assess the degree of agreement or disagreement of the participants for each structured question. It is a widely used scale and have also shown good results because there is a balance between the number of positive and negatives options (Losby & Wetmore, 2012).

Depending on the type of questions, the participants had to select from these five options: strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, disagree, and strongly disagree as the Likert scale recommended. In other questions, they had to express frequency among these five options: always, often, sometimes, rarely and never. The usage of a virtual learning environment was assessed through the scale very easy, easy, difficult and very difficult. Furthermore, there were two multiple choice questions and a space labeled "others" so that students could write their own answers.

On the other hand, since not all the students were able to understand English, in fact, some of them just started to learn it (8th graders), the surveys for the students were written in Spanish to get more reliable answers. If they had been designed in English, many students would have been excluded, which could have introduced bias nonresponse, that is to say, not all the students would have been able to participate in the surveys which could have altered the results (The European Association of Methodology, 2008). Likewise, the surveys for the teachers were written in Spanish in order to have more reliable results.

3.3. Procedure

For the bibliographic research, language learning approaches that support the use of virtual learning environments were selected in order to know how they (along with technology) could improve language learning, especially reading. Next, empirical studies carried out in different places were chosen in order to find the advantages and disadvantages of using virtual learning environments as well as their role as motivational tools to keep students engaged in reading.

Most of the information was found on the Internet. Google Scholar was mainly used because of the reliable content it provides, but some printed books were also selected. Journals and empirical studies were mostly used. Additionally, online books, reports, presentations, and conferences were also helpful to complete this research. Phrases such as the following were used as key words for the search: "ICTs and reading", "Virtual Platforms to develop reading skills", and "The Effects of Computerized Programs to improve reading skills".

For the exploratory study, first, the surveys were reviewed by the thesis

director. Then, permission to hand out the surveys to the teachers and the students was requested. Once the permission was approved, the objectives of the surveys were clearly explained so that the teachers and the students could understand their purpose. In addition, verbal consent was asked to use their answers specifically for this study. The surveys were collected soon after their distribution. Finally, all the answers were analyzed and the results are shown in chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The data were analyzed using the free software environment for statistical computing called *R,* which allowed to find the *p* values by means of *Chi Square* (χ^2) as a hypothesis test. There was a comparison between female and male students' answers in order to know their different perceptions about the use of virtual learning environments.

4.1. Analysis of the Students' Surveys

The first question intended to find if the students liked to read. The results show that most of them (64%) do not like to read much (Figure 1). More than one third (36%) of the students like to read a lot, more than a half (56%) like to read a little, and only few students do not like to read at all (8%). However, there is a statistically significant difference of reading likes between boys and girls (see Table 1). While more than 50% of female students like to read a lot, 30% of boys like to read a little. Although the sample is not large enough to generalize the findings, they are in line with the report of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2010) which shows that girls like to read for pleasure more than boys. Thus, it shows how important is for teachers to take into account differences between male and female preferences when implementing a virtual learning environment.
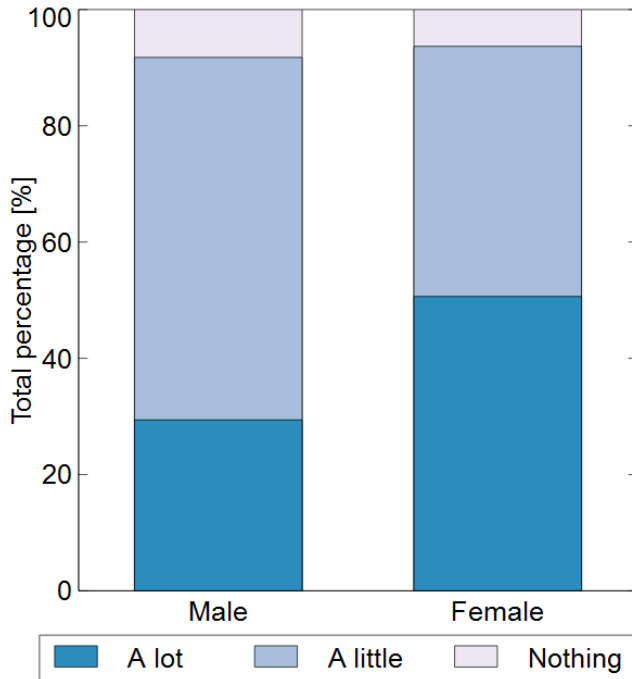
Figure 1. **Proportion of the students' reading likes (Question 1)**

Table 1

P values and means of questions 1, 2, 4 and 8.

Questions	Male Mean	Female Mean	Total %	p
Students like to read	2.22	2.42	2.28	0.005
Frequency of reading	3.12	3.42	3.21	0.009
Readings in classroom are enough to develop this skill	3.49	3.11	3.37	0.02
How easy it is to use a virtual platform	3.64	3.37	3.56	0.001

Note. The total represents the mean (over 3,5,5 and 4 respectively) of all the students' answers.

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The second question investigated the students' reading frequency. It was found that most students (61%) do not have a reading habit (38% sometimes read; 20% barely read; 3% never read). In this research, students whose answers were "often" (32% of students) or "always" (7% of students) were considered as having a reading habit. According to these results, a statistically significant difference between genders is evident: female students read more frequently than male students (see Table 1). Once again, these results agree with the OECD (2010) report which indicates that girls read more often than boys. Therefore, teachers should pay more attention to this group by introducing content that attract male students, so they can be able to develop their reading skills successfully.
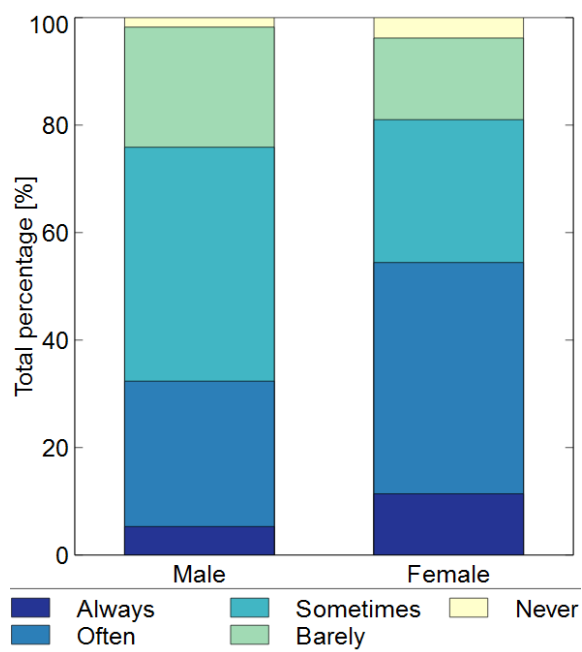
Figure 2. **The students' reading frequency (Question 2)**

The third question aimed to find the kind of readings students most like. Figure 3 shows the counting of students reading preferences in which it can be seen that both female and male students' personal preferences are science fiction (sci-fi) readings. However, there are about the same number of female students who like romantic, drama, and sci-fi readings. Meanwhile, male students like comedy and drama alike. Other kinds of readings students are interested in are terror and suspense (mentioned under the category "others"). Although the sample is not big enough to have conclusive results that can be applied generally, the important point is that, from the given options, sci-fi and drama should be highly considered to teach reading; mainly sci-fi. On the other hand, if the teachers' objectives are to personalize their classes, they can use comedy for this particular group of male students and romance for the female. These findings are consistent with the OECD (2010) results which show that sci-fi was preferred by most 15-year-old teenagers.
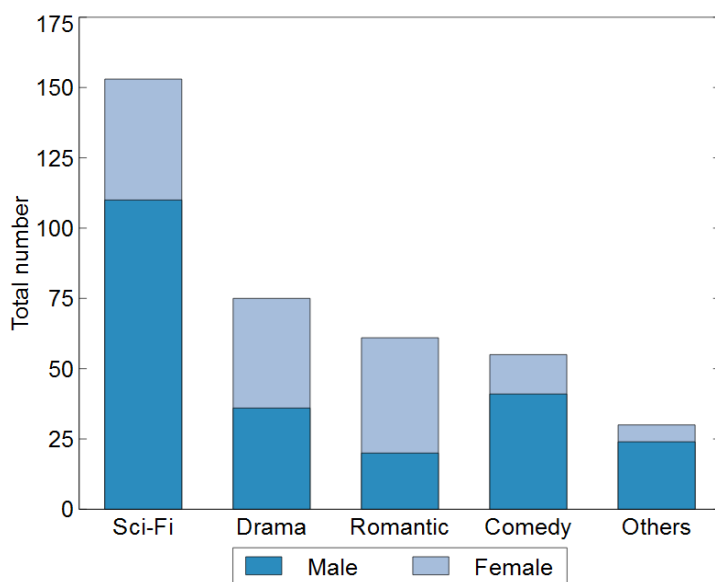
Figure 3. **The students' reading preferences. (More than one option could be selected). (Question 3)**

The fourth question aimed to investigate if students considered readings done in the classroom enough to develop this skill. It is necessary to bear in mind that every student is different and, therefore, has a particular way of learning. Although about half of the students stated that it was enough, more engaging ways of developing reading skills should be done to help the other half who considered that more readings should be done to strengthen this skill. Today's technology allows teachers to customize classes. For this, an assessment can be done to all the students in order to get information about the group who needs extra material to improve reading skills. For example, in a Moodle platform, it is possible to divide the course into several groups and provide content according to the students' requirements (Cole & Foster, 2008). On the other hand, a statistically significant difference is evident between male and female students in which more male students (58%) considered readings in the classroom enough to develop reading than female students (36%) (see Table 1).

The fifth question addressed the necessity of additional readings to practice reading at home. The students' perceptions toward this question are that more practice is needed (80% of students). There are even studies that indicate that sending appropriate homework to students helps them perform better in tests and enhance their achievement (Marzano & Pickering, 2007). It is not necessary to send a lot of homework, but it can be sent according to the students' needs and using different resources in order to reinforce their knowledge.

The sixth question intended to find out how easy (or how difficult) is for the students to access the Web. 232 out of the 249 students stated that they have internet connection at home; other students can access the Internet at the school,

in some parks or cyber cafes (see Figure 4). Only one student mentioned that he was not able to have access to the Internet. In the local context, the government wants Cuenca to become a digital city; for this reason, there is free internet connection in many parks around the city and there also are plans to implement internet connection in the public transportation (Mora, 2016). The students' answers along with the government initiative show that, in this high school, it is feasible to use virtual learning environments to foster reading skills since having access to the Internet is not an issue for these students.
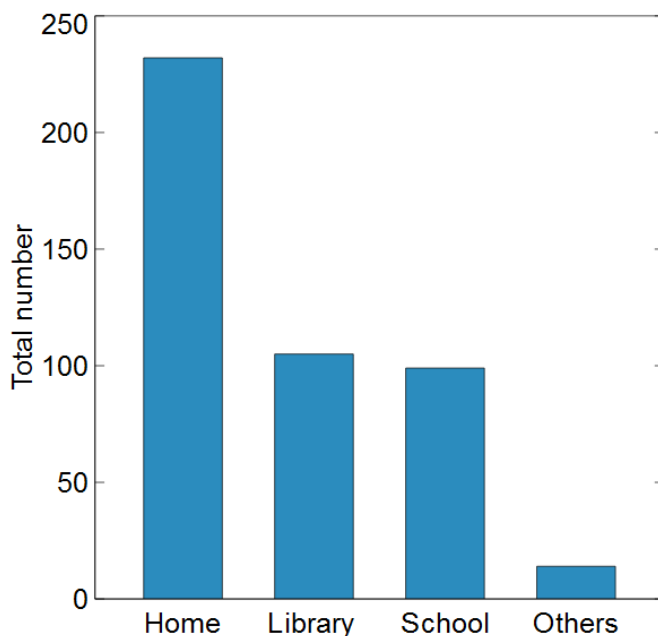
Figure 4. **Places in which the students can access the Internet. (More than one option could be selected). (Question 6).**

The question seven found out the students' perceptions about the teachers' frequency use of the virtual learning environment for reading. It is important to mention that Técnico Salesianos high school uses a Moodle platform very often; however, developing reading skills has not been the main concern. Therefore, the students' perceptions are that the virtual learning environment is not used

specifically for that purpose. This is in line with the teachers' answers who also stated that they do not use it for specifically developing reading skills (see next section for the teachers' answers to question 4).

The eighth question aimed to investigate how easy it is for the students to use virtual learning environments. More than 96% of the students considered virtual platforms very easy or easy to use. It is remarkable to remember that most of them are digital natives or are surrounded by technological devices, which facilitates learning to use a virtual environment. In this question, there is a statistically significant difference between the females' and the males' answers which shows that for the male students it is easier to use the virtual learning environment than for the female students (see Table 1).

The ninth question intended to find out if students considered virtual learning environments as an opportunity to improve reading skills. The students' answers indicate that they are aware that reading skills need to be improved and most of them (77%) perceive that virtual learning environments are a way to reach this goal.

4.2. Analysis of the Teachers' Surveys

The first question tried to find out how often the teachers introduced readings to their students without using the virtual platform. The findings show that six of the eight teachers often introduce readings. This shows that the teachers are aware of the importance of this skill; however, different ways should be used in order to improve students' reading skills since the students' answers reveal that they do not have the habit of reading (see previous students' answers to question

2).

The second question intended to find out if the teachers considered that readings done in the classroom were enough to develop this skill. Half of the teachers agree with this statement, while the other half thinks they are not enough. Thus, for the teachers who think that more readings should be done, it would be suitable to use a virtual learning environment due to all the advantages it provides (see students' answers to question 4 and teachers' answers to question 8). Also, the teachers are in contact with their students almost every day, which gives them the opportunity to analyze what their reading needs are and thus, upload the appropriate reading material in the Moodle platform to suit those needs.

The third question investigated if the teachers think that additional readings are needed for students to practice at home. The results show that 6 out of 8 teachers strongly agree that students need more practice to develop this skill. These teachers could take advantage of the variety of free educational resources available online for different levels and topics (e.g., British Council[1], Cambridge English[2], Deep English[3]) in which the teachers only have to enroll in a course (in some cases), choose the material and upload it to the virtual environment. It is rarely that teachers have to create new material for specific requirements of a group.

The fourth question was related to the frequency the teachers used the virtual learning environment to teach reading. Their responses show that they usually use it but not to teach reading specifically. Some of them said that the

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[1] https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org
[2] www.cambridgeenglish.org
[3] https://deepenglish.com/

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Moodle platform is more interactive, allows pictures presentation and improves their attention toward small details. On the other hand, the teachers who do not use the Moodle platform for teaching reading said that they preferred to present printed readings or to read with the students in the classroom. However, a virtual platform can be personalized and teachers can show any type of material in an interactive way, so they can combine printed and computer-based resources to have more effective results in developing the students' reading skills.

The fifth question was an open question which intended to find how the teachers used the virtual platform. As mentioned before, the findings showed that teachers do not use it to specifically develop reading skills, but they tend to use it for different purposes such as:

- Testing

- Completing exercises

- Writing stories

- Doing worksheets

- Participating in forums

- Chatting

The sixth question tried to investigate how easy it is for the teachers to use the virtual learning environment. Although the teachers are digital immigrants, none of them considers it difficult to use. Instead, half of the respondents considered it very easy while the other half considered it easy to use. Thus, even people who weren't raised surrounded by technology can learn easily because a virtual

learning environment has a user-friendly interface[4].

The seventh question investigated the easiness for the teachers to set aside time to prepare different activities for the virtual learning environment. Most of the teachers find it easy but two of them said that it was difficult. It is true that the workload for the teacher is higher (look for the content, choose and upload it), but the management of the virtual learning environment is done automatically (e.g. grading, reusing the course).

The eighth question was an open question and was related to the advantages of using virtual platforms to develop reading skills. The teachers' answers show a variety of advantages as the following:

- Easy access

- Variety of activities

- Virtual interaction

- No schedules

Some of the teachers' answers agree with the advantages cited in Kim (2007) when they said that virtual environments provide variety in the resources and activities. In addition, easy access is in line with one of the principles of TAM's theory (see chapter 2).

The ninth question was also an open question and intended to find out the disadvantages of using virtual learning environments. Some of the teachers' answers are the following:

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[4] There is a research area called human-computer interaction (HCI) which is dedicated specifically to analyze and improve human interaction with user interfaces so that these systems are easy to be used by most system users (e.g. Dix, Finlay, Abowd & Beale, 2004). This makes most systems that are professionally designed follow specific guidelines to improve their interactivity and usability.

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- Lack of students' responsibility to complete the activities

- Not everybody has access to the Internet

- Technological problems

- Students lost their passwords

- Absence of teachers to provide instruction

Finally, the tenth question tried to find out if the teachers believed that virtual learning environments provide opportunities to develop reading skills. Most of the teachers agreed with this statement which shows that they are conscious of the virtual learning environments' potential to foster reading skills.

4.3. Analysis of the Students' and the Teachers' Answers

Some of the questions were the same for the teachers and the students so that their answers can be compared in order to find agreement between both. The results show that about half of the students and half of the teachers consider that readings carried out in the classroom are not enough to develop this skill; rather, they consider that more practice should be done to strengthen this skill. In addition, it can be feasible for this high school to use the Moodle Platform to develop reading since the teachers are used to using it and because they recognize that it strengthens students' attention toward reading and allows the presentation of images and other resources.

Nevertheless, the teachers found some disadvantages when using the virtual learning environment. They stated that lack of students' responsibility to complete the activities is evident. However, students may not be motivated enough to use the virtual environment if they consider it boring. For this reason, different

and engaging exercises such as games can be uploaded in order to call the students' attention. A second problem that teachers mentioned was that not everybody has access to the Internet, but it does not agree with the students' answers aforementioned. Another disadvantage was related to technological problems that sometimes may appear, but they can be repaired immediately and also do not occur all the time. A fourth problem that was mentioned is that the students tend to forget their passwords. It is true that the students can sometimes forget their passwords, but there are always ways to recover them. Also, if the students use the virtual learning environment more often, it is less probably that they forget them. Finally, another disadvantage was the absence of teachers to provide instructions. In this case, instructions must be written down clearly in the virtual learning environment so that the students can understand what to do, but if they need help, it can be a way for the students to work collaboratively in group through forums or they can even ask the teacher for help through an instant message.

On the other hand, the teachers also found some advantages of using the Moodle platform. They said it is easy for all the teachers and the students to access, provides variety of activities and catches the students' attention. Furthermore, the findings indicate that both the teachers and the students consider the virtual platform easy to use, so if TAM theory is considered, the surveys show that one of its principles (perceived ease of use) is accomplished. On the other hand, most of the teachers and most of the students consider virtual platforms as useful tools that provide opportunities to improve reading, so this completes the other TAM theory's principle about perceived of usefulness. In short, the results

show that Técnico Salesianos High school teachers and students are willing to continue using the Moodle platform to improve language learning in general, but more effort should be put to improve reading   .

The teachers usually introduce readings to the students in the classroom; however, most of them said they do not like to read very often. Therefore, teachers should look for other ways to catch students' attention toward developing their reading skills so they can be eager readers. In addition, although the teachers use the Moodle platform for different purposes (not for reading in particular), they should take advantage of this tool and focus on helping weak readers become strong readers, so they can be prepared for life-long learning. Even though teachers have found some disadvantages, the results indicate that students can benefit from all the advantages virtual learning environments provide. If the students are given entertaining activities, they will probably consider using the virtual learning environment as a way to foster their reading instead of a workload. They may not solve readings problems but can help to enhance students' reading skills.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

Nowadays, technology has become an important part in almost every aspect of peoples' lives. One of the fields that has been greatly influenced by it is education. Teachers have at their disposal different tools to improve their instruction; for example, virtual learning environments can be a way to enhance education because of all the features and tools they offer. Nevertheless, the analyzed information indicate that a virtual learning environment can show some disadvantages such as technical problems and a higher workload for teachers; however, it shows more advantages than drawbacks. For instance, it has a social function because teachers and students can share a lot of information and communicate quickly in order to receive instant feedback, and it also permits the members to get more familiarized with the language.

The studies mentioned in the literature review show that in different parts of the world virtual learning environments are employed to motivate students to read since they provide various types of multimedia such as pictures or videos, which make activities more engaging for students with different interests. At the same time, they encourage the development of technological skills that are useful to fit in this technological society. However, there are some students who still prefer to read in printed paper (Liu, 2005; Tseng, 2007). Therefore, a combination of both printed and digital media should be used for better results.

On the other hand, some students may show reading problems either by the difference of the languages' structures (mother and target language), by the lack of vocabulary or by the insufficient exposure to the target language. Also, teachers should consider that English classes have a limited period of time at school, so

more practice is needed after school for better development of this skill. Since the role of virtual learning environments is to facilitate learning, reading is a skill that should be strengthened through this tool because it is really necessary for accessing information, developing critical skills, enriching knowledge and for life-long learning (Lepičnik-Vodopivec, 2012). Furthermore, since internet connection is not a limitation, students can access the virtual learning environment more frequently so they can have a richer reading environment. When they are in contact with the language more often, they can be able to understand its rules and grammar and acquire more vocabulary (Sedita, 2005).

Finally, the surveys indicate that teachers and students perceive virtual environments useful and easy to use. According to Davis (1989), it could be inferred that they will continue using it to improve language learning. Thus, if teachers in general have the necessary equipment to use virtual learning environments, they should be aware of the benefits of using them and evidence by themselves the improvement that students can reach through their use.

This study should be considered as a preliminary investigation that analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of virtual learning environments to develop EFL students' reading skills. Further investigation that includes more students and other institutions should be done in order to authenticate these findings. Although this research had a limited number of participants, it could be the first step for EFL teachers and institutions that are considering using virtual learning environments for language teaching.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Survey for the Teachers

<div align="center">Encuesta para profesores</div>

Por favor, sírvase llenar la siguiente encuesta, con la mayor sinceridad, puesto que servirá para determinar cómo se usan las plataformas virtuales para desarrollar la lectura en inglés en los estudiantes, así como también para conocer sus ventajas y desventajas.

Sexo: M ☐   F ☐   Cursos: _____   Edad: _____

Marque su respuesta con una X.

1. ¿Con qué frecuencia presenta lecturas a sus estudiantes?

Siempre ☐   A menudo ☐   A veces ☐   Rara vez ☐   Nunca ☐

2. Las lecturas en clase son suficientes para desarrollar esta habilidad.

Muy de acuerdo ☐   De acuerdo ☐   Poco de acuerdo ☐   En desacuerdo ☐   Muy en desacuerdo ☐

3. El uso de lecturas adicionales para practicar en casa son necesarias.

Muy de acuerdo ☐   De acuerdo ☐   Poco de acuerdo ☐   En desacuerdo ☐   Muy en desacuerdo ☐

4. ¿Con qué frecuencia usa una plataforma virtual para enseñar lectura?

Siempre ☐   A menudo ☐   A veces ☐   Rara vez ☐   Nunca ☐

¿Por qué?_____

5. ¿Cómo usa la plataforma virtual?

_____
_____

6. ¿Qué tan fácil es para usted usar una plataforma virtual?

Muy fácil ☐   Fácil ☐   Difícil ☐   Muy difícil ☐

7. ¿Qué tan fácil es para usted separar tiempo para preparar actividades en la plataforma virtual?

Muy fácil ☐   Fácil ☐   Difícil ☐   Muy difícil ☐

8. ¿Cuáles son las ventajas de usar plataformas virtuales para desarrollar la lectura?

_____
_____

9. ¿Cuáles son las desventajas de usar plataformas virtuales para desarrollar la lectura?

_____
_____

10. Las plataformas virtuales proveen oportunidades para mejorar la lectura.

Muy de acuerdo ☐   De acuerdo   Poco de acuerdo ☐   En desacuerdo ☐   Muy en desacuerdo ☐

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Appendix 2: Survey for the Students

<p style="text-align:center">Encuesta para estudiantes</p>

Por favor, sírvase llenar la siguiente encuesta, con la mayor sinceridad, puesto que servirá para determinar si se usan plataformas virtuales para desarrollar la lectura en inglés.

Sexo: Masculino ☐   Femenino ☐   **Curso:**_____   **Edad:** _____

Marque su respuesta con una X.

1. **¿Le gusta leer?**

Mucho ☐   Poco ☐   Nada | ☐

2. **¿Con qué frecuencia lee?**

Siempre ☐   A menudo ☐   A veces ☐   Rara vez ☐   Nunca ☐

3. **¿Qué tipos de lectura le gusta?**

Romántico ☐   Drama ☐   Ciencia ficción ☐   Comedia   ☐

Otros _____

4. **Las lecturas en inglés realizadas en clase son suficientes para desarrollar esta habilidad.**

Muy de acuerdo ☐   De acuerdo ☐   Poco de acuerdo ☐   En desacuerdo ☐   Muy en desacuerdo ☐

5. **El uso de lecturas adicionales para practicar en casa son necesarias.**

Muy de acuerdo ☐   De acuerdo ☐   Poco de acuerdo ☐   En desacuerdo ☐   Muy en desacuerdo ☐

6. **¿En dónde puede tener acceso a internet?**

En casa ☐   En la escuela ☐   En la biblioteca ☐   Otros_____

7. **¿Con qué frecuencia usa su profesor una plataforma virtual para enseñar lectura?**

Siempre ☐   A menudo ☐   A veces ☐   Rara vez ☐   Nunca ☐

8. **¿Qué tan fácil es para usted usar una plataforma virtual?**

Muy fácil ☐   Fácil ☐   Difícil ☐   Muy difícil ☐

9. **Las plataformas virtuales proveen oportunidades para mejorar la lectura.**

Muy de acuerdo ☐   De acuerdo ☐   Poco de acuerdo ☐   En desacuerdo ☐   Muy en desacuerdo ☐