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Teaching techniques applied in EFL during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak: A review in Ecuadorian secondary education

Técnicas de enseñanza aplicadas en inglés como lengua extranjera durante la pandemia de COVID-19: una revisión en la educación secundaria ecuatoriana

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken every member of the global society unprepared to deal with an extreme event that not only affected people's health but also the economy and education of every country of the world. Translating face-to-face interaction into an online teaching context was a challenge for all educators. For this reason, the aim of this study is to analyze the teaching techniques EFL teachers had applied during the lockdown. A semi-structured interview was applied to ten EFL secondary public and private teachers who provided a clear vision of their teaching reality. It was determined that the main issues to deal with are internet problems, planning time and the lack of an EFL-centered platform.

Keywords: COVID 19, education, english teaching, online teaching, teaching techniques

Resumen

La pandemia de COVID-19 ha tomado a todos los miembros de la sociedad global desprevenidos para enfrentar un evento extremo que no solo afectó la salud de las personas sino también la economía y la educación de todos los países del mundo. Traducir la interacción cara a cara en un contexto de enseñanza en línea fue un desafío para todos los educadores. Por este motivo, el objetivo de este estudio es analizar las técnicas de enseñanza que los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera habían aplicado durante el confinamiento. Se aplicó una entrevista semiestructurada a diez docentes de EFL de secundaria pública y privada quienes brindaron una visión clara de su realidad docente. Se determinó que los principales temas a tratar son los problemas de internet, el tiempo de planificación y la falta de una plataforma centrada en EFL.

Palabras clave: COVID 19, educación, enseñanza de inglés, enseñanza en línea, técnicas de enseñanza

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the first COVID-19 victims in Ecuador were reported. The first city to be affected was Guayaquil, with 157 confirmed cases by the time the government decided to call for a lockdown to stop its spread in the national territory (7). Progressively, other cities such as Quito, Cuenca and Babahoyo had a significant increase in confirmed cases and deaths related to the coronavirus. Given this tragic situation, a quarantine was in mandated not only in Ecuador but also in other countries in the world. This measure affected several aspects of society, one of them being education.

From that point on, education had to dramatically switch face-to-face classes to online sessions with the help of different applications like Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, or Zoom. This change took every teacher and professor by surprise, urging them to be proficient in digital tools, learning platforms and online assessment. While a good number of educators manage the technological aspect without difficulty, there are several that were in urgent need of training to carry on with their educational duty.

In Ecuador, the reality regarding technology and easy access to the internet was revealed once it was necessary to perform daily activities with the help of a computer and an internet connection. According to UNICEF (10), only 37% of Ecuadorian households have access to the internet, while in rural areas the number is lower, only 16%. With this obstacle, many students decided to stop their educational process. According to data gathered by the Ministry of Education, over one hundred students didn't access the online education modality, either for the lack of an internet connection, for not having a suitable device to be part of online sessions.

In efforts to reach the student population that was left behind due to their technological shortcomings, the Ecuadorian government with the Constitutional Court through decree number 220-EE-20 established that those students must get access to their education through radio and television, to give them equal opportunities of learning (7). Within this new context, the Ecuadorian society embarked on a never-before-seen learning adventure, with digitally proficient teachers and students, households adapted to this new need and multitasking families, carrying out their professional and personal activities in the same place.

English as a foreign language (EFL) has been a mandatory subject in every school curriculum since 2016 after a two-year hiatus proposed by the national government (11). Consequently, the Ecuadorian secondary teaching system has determined that every student must have a B1 level of English to obtain their baccalaureate. For this reason, EFL classes have been an essential part of every student's schedule and, therefore, a big number of EFL teachers have been tackling the issue of online classes with a dose of creativity and a big amount of experience and knowledge.

It is the aim of this study to analyze how EFL teachers have been managing their online classes during the COVID-19 emergency teaching period. In order to do it, several articles on the same topic have been considering having a clearer idea of the reality teachers must face.

According to Cheung (3), EFL teachers in Hong Kong managed their online classes during the Covid-19 lockdown without any methodological or technological problem since their professional beliefs, knowledge and experience made it possible for them to carry out their teaching duties without any type of concern. This study also manifests that the interaction between teacher-students is minimal, however, this has not posed any type of problem to reach the goal of language learning.

Arif and Arief (12) carry out a study focused on Indonesian EFL teachers. They point out that no one was prepared for this situation. To learn more about this experience, EFL teachers were asked to write their reflections about their experience with the online teaching reality. The gathered

information revealed some important details about their educational duty, among them the following: the need of training to work with online platforms and a better planning system that fits their current situation. The authors encourage researchers to continue studying this topic to provide teachers with resources to fulfill their goal.

Given the never seen context, educators perform in, Arif et al. (12) have gathered information about EFL teaching in the university environment in Indonesia. A semi-structured interview and written reflections of 17 Indonesian EFL teachers helped to identify that it is necessary to count on a specialized platform, it was also revealed that there is a lack of students' motivation and engagement, as well as the big amount of time teachers dedicate to creating online material. In order to enhance learning efficacy, it is necessary to create a suitable platform that has all the required material to help teachers, students and institutions in general.

In Saudi Arabia, this same reality was studied by Mohamed (4). A qualitative and quantitative study was carried out with the help of a questionnaire applied to teachers in different universities in Saudi Arabia, it was distributed with the help of different tools such as WhatsApp groups, email, and Facebook. The results depicted that it is necessary to have the right training and orientation programs to work with proper platforms not only for teachers but also for students.

The EFL teaching approach at the University of India was also studied by Lokanath (6), specifically on how the applied methods in face-to-face classes can be translated to an online context. According to the obtained results, it seems that the key to a good online teaching-learning process is to have good class management with a holistic approach, meaning that all aspects of education must be taken into account, with a special emphasis on the well-being of the student.

Dr. Mahyoob (8) in his study emphasizes the usefulness of the WhatsApp message app as a support system in the learning process, with which students could constantly communicate with their teachers and their peers in the midst of this crisis. This strongly supports the point made by Kaid & Hady (4), who stated that social media can be used as contributing foreign language learning tool.

Even if this context seems new to most of society, online education has been a reality for a long time. It has been applied by a small number of institutions, in Ecuador, however, it is not only a great source of knowledge and materials but, according to Krish (5), it has also been a great opportunity to collaborate and associate with other course participants. Even if there were not many study programs offered by Ecuadorian secondary or tertiary education centers, this study modality gave people the opportunity to get their desired preparation level.

METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out at the secondary level of Ecuadorian private and public institutions, with a total of 10 teachers who willingly collaborated with the semi-structured interview, which gathered relevant information about EFL educators and their teaching context during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. They were 6 females and 4 males, ages 25-41, from private and public secondary educational institutions from the city of Ambato.

This topic was deemed important given that the last results provided by Education First (13) depict Ecuador in position 82 out of the tested countries assessed in their English proficiency level. Among the regional countries, it is ranked third-to-last place out of 20 Latin American countries.

In previous years, its position was not favorable either, but this year the results are worrying. For this reason, it is necessary to know what is the reality EFL secondary teachers are dealing with. However, given the sanitary crisis, the context has dramatically changed for every person in the world. An analysis of the teaching techniques applied by the educators is necessary to understand the strengths that need to be valued and the weaknesses that need to be dealt with.

The English Language teachers who cooperated by answering the questions of a structured interview were divided into two groups. Seven of them work in public institutions and three are private school instructors. The participants were interviewed with the help of WhatsApp video calls and Zoom calls. All of them were informed of the aim of this study and the value of the information they could provide. The data were reduced and transcribed with the help of Google Cloud Speech-to-text. Data coding was carried out to classify data and to identify trends among the participants. Once the results were processed, they were condensed to present in the results section along with their respective discussion.

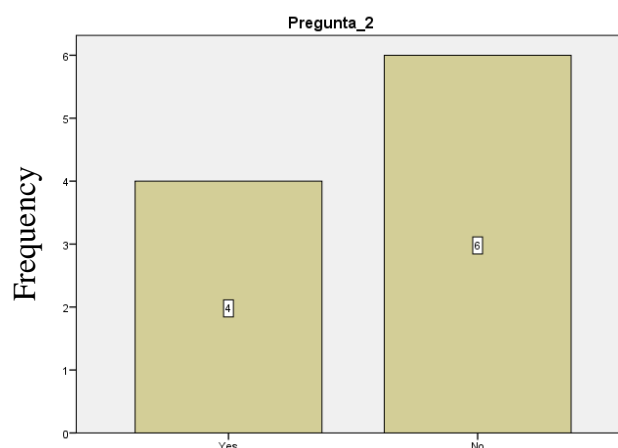
RESULTS

This sample was made up of people who were willing to participate and tell their experience during the lockdown online teaching period. This information was obtained thanks to question one. 60% percent of them used Microsoft's Teams as a teaching means, while 40% worked via Zoom.

The second question was related to the use of a textbook, to which 60% answered that they didn't have a specific EFL book to teach during the lockdown period. The 40% remaining stated that both their students and themselves were able to work with a book that provided the 75% of them with digital resources for their online sessions. 25% of the teacher who used a textbook, mentioned that it didn't have any digital tools.

Figure 1

The second question was related to the use of a textbook



Fuente: Andrea Salazar, 2023.

Another important point to mention is that public school teachers were the ones who didn't have an official guidebook, mostly to the governmental decision of not asking the students to purchase any other school supplies than those that were strictly required.

The EFL teachers that answered that they didn't use a textbook to guide them, declared that they applied the material provided by the government, interactive online websites, self-made worksheets or they just simply didn't use any support teaching tool.

Table 1

Question 3: Applied didactic resources

	Frecuency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Accumulated percentage
Modules from the government	3	50,0	50,0	50,0
Interactive Page	1	16,7	16,7	66,7
Don't use teaching resources	1	16,7	16,7	83,3
Worksheet papers	1	16,7	16,7	100,0
Total	6	100,0	100,0	

Fuente: Andrea Salazar, 2023.

The group of teachers shared their experience teaching the English language skills. In relation to grammar, the most popular way to teach it was with the help of PowerPoint, Canva and other presentation tools. 50% of them applied this teaching technique to grab their students' attention. 20% stated that YouTube videos were helpful during this period. 10% mentioned online apps to practice grammar after the teaching process.

When asked about their approach to vocabulary, 50% acknowledged the importance of using pictures in online presentations. 20% of them relied on the Flipped Classroom techniques. It is necessary to point out that these answers remark on the importance of games and ludic activities to learn vocabulary.

In relation to reading, 30% of the participants used websites and online platforms to check reading comprehension. There was also stated that Active Thinking was essential given the context. 10% highlighted the importance of working in groups for better results in virtual learning.

As to writing, the participants' answers were varied. They applied online forums, apps, summaries, short essays, writing essays at home and submitting them on a picture through Whatsapp. They pointed out that feedback was crucial, regardless of the manner in which their students presented in their writing.

In terms of autonomous work and assessment, the EFL teachers provided a wide array of answers. 30% agreed on applying online platforms such as Edmodo for their students to practice the language. They have also translated the face-to-face technique of collaborative work to have them work together and to assess their peers. They mentioned technological online tools for formative assessments, as well as interactive worksheets and games. The use of songs to strengthen their knowledge was also brought up.

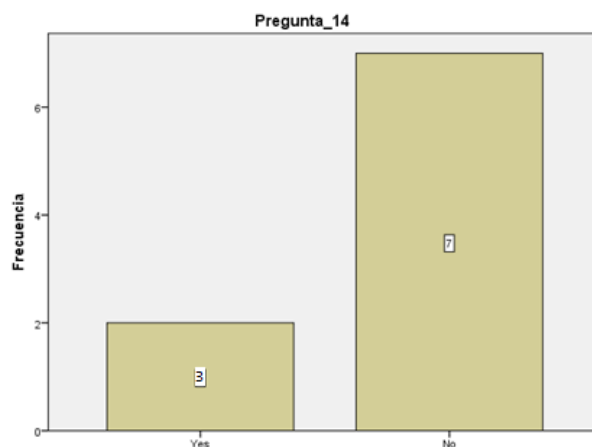
They were also inquired about their students' progress monitoring systems. 60% commented that the only way to do this was with online homework, online portfolio and virtual interaction. These teachers are part of the public educational system, however, those working for private schools

had access to online platforms such as Moodle to monitor their students' progress. One of the participants pointed out that by the end of the school year, the students had to take the TOEFL Junior exam and obtain a high score in order to pass the level, which is how their progress was monitored.

Even if this study focuses on EFL teaching techniques, there were some aspects that needed to be considered to be asked so that the context in which the teachers had to carry out the teaching-learning process can be better understood. One of those aspects was training. Considering that the COVID-19 pandemic was a never-before-seen event, it is evident that teachers had educated themselves in matters of virtual learning. 70% affirm that they were not trained by their schools, this group being part of the public school system.

Figure 2

Were you trained by your school to carry out the online teaching?



In this regard, they were also asked about their technological tools' management, to which 70% stated to be good at them. This implies that, even if they were not officially trained, they didn't have any major inconvenience during this teaching-learning process. Among the shared comments they said that they had to learn how to use the platforms to access the sessions.

Table 2

How would you rate your technological tool management?

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Accumulated percentage
Excellent	2	20,0	20,0	20,0
Good	7	70,0	70,0	90,0
Fair	1	10,0	10,0	100,0
Total	10	100,0	100,0	

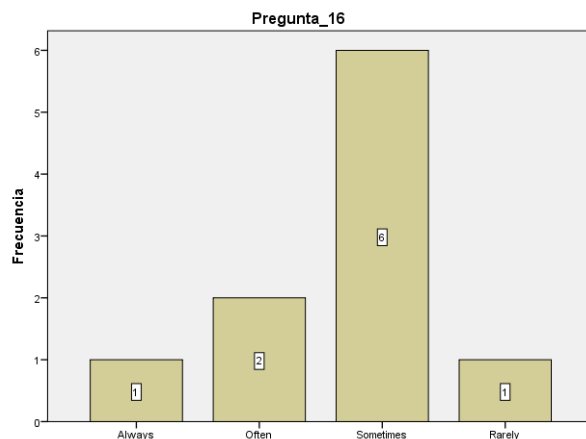
Fuente: Andrea Salazar, 2023.

The participants were also asked about the technical support they received from their school, 60% stated that they sometimes got any help, 10% stated that they were rarely associated. These answers came from the public system teachers who, quote, were not properly managed regarding

the technical context. The replies, “often” and “sometimes” come from private school EFL teachers.

Figure 3

How often did you have technical support from your school?

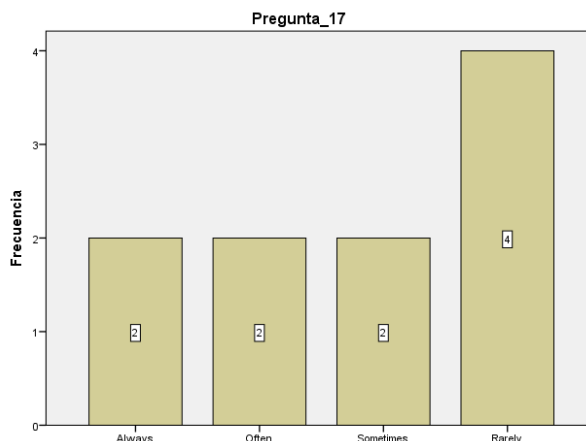


Fuente: Andrea Salazar, 2023.

It was equally important, to better understand the situation, the participants were going through, to learn about their students’ possibilities to join the online sessions during the pandemic lockdown. They were asked about their students’ access to a device that made it possible for them to attend online classes. They affirmed that most of the public school students could rarely be in class, due to the lack of a proper appliance to log in. The remaining participants have varied answers, as depicted in the following chart:

Figure 4

Did your students have the required technological devices to attend your online sessions?



Fuente: Andrea Salazar, 2023.

The participants shared information about their planning hours working at home. Given all the circumstances presented above, it was deemed imperative to determine how many hours a day

the EFL teachers used to plan their online classes, an average of three to four hours. These are the expressed results:

Table 3

How many hours a day did you devote to planning your lessons for virtual learning environments?

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Accumulated percentage
1 to 2 hours	1	10,0	10,0	10,0
2 to 3 hours	2	20,0	20,0	30,0
3 to 4 hours	6	60,0	60,0	80,0
4 to 5 hours	1	10,0	10,0	100,0
Total	10	100,0	100,0	

Fuente: Andrea Salazar, 2023.

As it is depicted, teachers devoted from 3 to 4 hours to plan the activities to be applied in their online sessions. This means that their commitment to their teaching duty demanded them to spend more time than they would normally do. This conclusion is reached given that teachers have their planning hours as part of their working schedule. However, due to this unprecedented event, they had to take up more hours of their daily routines to find the best way to reach their students through virtual means.

DISCUSSION

After the analysis of the gathered data, it is possible to state that public school teachers faced bigger challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, they were not able to have a textbook for teaching support, and neither did their students. The measure was considered given the economic consequences of the lockdown in the Ecuadorian families.

Another reason for the statement above is the fact that they didn't have any training in how to teach online using meeting apps. Their dexterity came from their own experience and they were rarely assisted by their schools whenever they faced a technological predicament. In addition, they did not have access to a learning platform to keep track of their students' progress as the private EFL teacher's did. The class management between the two is notoriously different, given that private teachers could evidence their students' work by logging into Moodle or other platforms. Furthermore, another obstacle for the teaching-learning process was that a vast number of public schools' students were not able to access their online sessions on the grounds that they did not have an appropriate device.

It is necessary to remark that, even with limitations, public and private teachers managed to practice the language skills in virtual learning environments. The use of online resources was the most popular option, as well as the interaction through meeting apps that made it possible to translate, to certain extent, activities that were applied in face-to-face classes such as reading comprehension, oral presentation, grammar and vocabulary practice games, and others. All this was possible as a result of an arduous process of planning carried out at an average of 3 to 4 hours a day, where grammar and vocabulary presentation, formal and informal assessments, and evaluation portfolios were adapted to a never-before-seen educational context in which the EFL teachers' performance could be described as outstanding.

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