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LANGUAGE CENTER STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AS PROFICIENCY

PERCEPÇÕES DOS ALUNOS DO CENTRO DE LÍNGUAS DA APRENDIZAGEM VIRTUAL DE INGLÊS COMO COMPETÊNCIA

PERCEPCIONES DE LOS ESTUDIANTES DEL CENTRO DE IDIOMAS SOBRE EL APRENDIZAJE DE INGLÉS VIRTUAL COMO COMPETENCIA

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Abstract: English is one of the most widely used languages worldwide, which is why there is a need to introduce this language in the educational field, especially in higher education, since nowadays it has become a basic need for professionals. This study was focused on analyzing students' perceptions of online English learning at the Language Center of the Technical University of Cotopaxi. A qualitative approach and a case study method was used. As a data collection technique, an unstructured interview was applied to ten students from different careers and English levels. The results revealed that the majority of students choose English as a proficiency because it is one of the most in-demand languages for getting a job. Moreover, some students take English courses only to fulfill a mandatory requirement before graduation. Additionally, inside online English learning there are certain complications with respect to the development of speaking skills. Furthermore, low student participation is due to lack of interest or fear of making mistakes. Therefore, it is necessary to implement different techniques and methods to carry out the online teaching-learning process of English as a proficiency in an effective way and thus be able to achieve all the expectations that students have.

Keywords: English; Perception; Online learning; Skill.

Resumo: O inglês é uma das línguas mais utilizadas em todo o mundo, por isso existe a necessidade de introduzir esta língua no campo educacional, principalmente no ensino superior, hoje aprender inglês se tornou uma necessidade básica para os profissionais. Este estudo teve como objetivo analisar as percepções dos alunos sobre a aprendizagem de inglês online como competência no Centro de Línguas da Universidade Técnica de Cotopaxi. Utilizou-se uma abordagem qualitativa e o método de estudo de caso. Como técnica de coleta de dados, uma entrevista não estruturada foi aplicada a dez alunos de diferentes carreiras e níveis de inglês. Os resultados revelaram que a maioria dos alunos escolhe o inglês como competência por ser um dos idiomas mais solicitados para conseguir um emprego. Além disso, alguns alunos aprendem inglês apenas como um requisito obrigatório antes de se formarem. Além disso, no aprendizado de inglês online, existem certas complicações relacionadas ao desenvolvimento das habilidades de fala. Além disso, a baixa participação dos alunos se deve ao desinteresse ou ao medo de cometer erros. Assim, é necessário implementar diferentes técnicas e métodos no processo de ensino-aprendizagem virtual de inglês como domínio de forma a atender todas as expectativas que os alunos têm.

Palavras-chave: Inglês; Percepção; Aprendizagem em linha; Habilidade.

Resumen: El inglés es uno de los idiomas más utilizados mundialmente, entonces existe la necesidad de introducir este idioma en la educación superior, en la actualidad este se ha convertido en una necesidad básica para los profesionales. Este estudio se centra en analizar las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre el aprendizaje del inglés como competencia en el Centro de Idiomas de la Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi. Se utilizó un enfoque cualitativo, un método de estudio de casos y se aplicó una entrevista no estructurada a diez estudiantes de diferentes carreras y niveles de inglés para recolectar datos. Los resultados revelaron que la mayoría de los estudiantes eligen el inglés como competencia porque es de los idiomas más solicitados para conseguir un trabajo. Además, algunos estudiantes toman el aprendizaje del inglés como un requisito obligatorio para graduarse. Adicionalmente, en el aprendizaje de inglés en línea existen complicaciones en el desarrollo de las habilidades para hablar. También, la baja participación de los estudiantes es por la falta de interés o el miedo de cometer errores. Entonces, es necesario implementar diferentes técnicas y métodos en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje virtual del inglés como dominio para poder alcanzar todas las expectativas que tienen los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: Inglés; Percepción; Aprendizaje en línea; Habilidad.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English is one of the most widely used languages in the world, so learning and teaching this language has become an essential part of Ecuadorian education. In 2012, the Ministry of Education of Ecuador established a new National English Curriculum and a series of associated measures, which were to be overseen by a newly created English section within the ministry. Its goal was to eliminate inequality in access to English language learning in the public and private sectors and to improve the quality of teaching in both (British Council & Education Intelligence, 2015). Currently, there is a great demand for professionals with a high level of English in most fields of work. As claimed by Roshid & Chowdhury (2013) "English language has generally been seen as one of the important determinants of employment in recent decades. It is argued that the English

language has a positive impact on employment and earnings” (p.74). That is why many of the third level institutions in Ecuador have established a mandatory requirement for all students: to obtain a foreign language proficiency certificate. English is the most commonly chosen language to fulfill this requirement.

Undergraduate students in most universities in Ecuador are enrolled in general language courses as part of their degree programs. EFL, like any other subject in the curriculum, is considered a requirement for all the degree programs, therefore students must earn a certain number of credits according to the rules of the higher education institutions (Castro, 2011, p.12).

Students have several reasons for choosing to study another language. For example, many choose to do so to fulfill a legal requirement necessary to graduate. This finding is in accordance with Gestanti et al. (2019) research who said that "Most students state that they learn English for academic purpose and because they are obliged to learn it" (p.103). However, others think they need it because it is important when it comes to getting a job or traveling abroad. As mentioned by Roshid & Chowdhury (2013) “proficiency in English therefore is needed for employees to advance in both local and international companies and improve their technical knowledge and skills” (p.1). Furthermore, according to Gestanti et al. (2019) “other students admit that having good English skill is beneficial and highly valued for their career in the future, especially for those who will work in communication fields such as journalism, public relations, broadcasting, public speaking, etc” (p.103). Besides, Zainura (2019) pointed out that “Some students argue that English is the suitable language used as the language of instruction in learning because besides English is an international language, English will also greatly help students if they want to study or travel abroad” (p.34).

Therefore, in order to develop the English language proficiency program, it is essential for teachers to know the level of commitment that students have during this process and what the students' perceptions of English language proficiency are in order to improve teaching and provide better guidance on the importance of English language learning based on the students' perceptions. That is why, in order to develop this research, the following question was posed: What are the students' perceptions of online English learning at the Language Center of the Technical University of Cotopaxi?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Perception is closely related to the attitudes that people have towards their environment (Pickens, 2005). That is why, perception can influence people's point of view depending on the context with which they are going to relate. Learning English plays a role in various aspects as a communication tool, facilitating adaptation to the environment and work in the present and the future (Putra, 2020). Therefore, according to Jamaluddin (2016) English language proficiency helps students in their studies and assures them jobs after graduation because there are more job opportunities when they are proficient in English. For these reasons in the Universities, there is a Language Center where students can choose the language that they want to learn as proficiency.

Due to the Covid- 19 pandemic, face-to face classes transitioned to a virtual, or online format. As mentioned by Rifiyanti (2020, p.32), “Online learning is an education that takes place over the Internet”. The same way Bakia et al. (2012) mentioned that “Online learning comprises a wide variety of programs that use the Internet within and beyond school walls to provide access to instructional materials as well as facilitate

interaction among teachers and students” (p. 2). Furthermore, Coman et al. (2020) note that “Internet-based learning is considered an option, an alternative to traditional learning, during the Coronavirus pandemic it became an essential element for maintaining the activity of schools and universities” (p.1). There are some advantages and disadvantages about online classes. As mentioned by Mahyoob (2020) one advantage in virtual learning is that students no longer have to go to the University, which saves money and time. Disadvantages include difficulties in developing English language skills. Also the teaching of aspects that would be better taught in person but an even weaker point is that some students lack Internet connectivity, which makes it difficult to learn well.

Language proficiency is how much linguistic cognition an individual possesses towards a language. To achieve language proficiency, an individual must develop the four linguistic skills, such as listening, speaking, reading and writing (Hulstijn, 2011). In the process of proficiency in English, skills must be developed so that students can better use the target language, that is, they can use it appropriately in any environment. On the other hand, “English communication skills are an important prerequisite for a career at national or international level. English proficiency is a key factor for employment success and advancement” (Durga, 2018, p.3). Besides, the English language proficiency program focuses on helping students develop each of the English skills that play an essential role in the use of English in different environments. As claimed by Durga (2018, p.4) “the four major skills of language learning, listening, speaking, reading and writing provide a platform for the learners to polish their proficiency in English”.

An important point to achieve a good command of English are the teaching strategies and materials applied by the teacher. According to Diyanti (2016) materials are used for increase the knowledge of the language learners are learning, in other words, teachers use materials as important resources for students to learn English. Teachers select materials for their students and they need to adapt the materials so that students create better language learning. In addition, Gestanti et al. (2019, p.112) states, “Employing more strategies will be more effective for students to be more successful in their learning”. This refers to the fact that the teacher must have knowledge of different learning strategies as well as teaching methods, which implies didactic material according to the needs of the students.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research was based on a qualitative approach, as it focuses on understanding the interpretations of reality by taking into account the individuals’ experiences and opinions in a particular context. Researchers followed an inductive process by gathering data and using participants’ excerpts to support the findings and understand the phenomena from their perspective (Merriam, 2002). Analyzing and interpreting students’ perceptions of learning English, as proficiency in the context of the Language center at the Technical University of Cotopaxi [UTC] was the focus on the study. In addition, an unstructured interview with open-ended questions was used as an instrument for data collection; it was applied to ten students from different careers and levels of English. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, the process of the interviews was conducted by the Zoom platform. In addition, this research followed the case study method, where a unit of analysis must be chosen (Merriam, 2002). In this research, online English learning in the language center at the UTC was the analyzed unit, consistent with the case study method.

To select participants, a purposeful sampling was used, “since qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspective of the participants, it is important to select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2002, p.12), instead of “how much” or “how often”. To begin this sampling, we first determined what criteria was essential in choosing who was to be interviewed (Merriam, 2002). To be chosen students had to meet the following criteria: 1. Fall within the determined age range, 2. identity as a current UTC student, 3. Have an A1 or A2 English level, and 4. Produce an information-rich interview. The participants were ten students of the Language Center at UTC belonging to different careers, two students were in level A1 and eight students were in level A2; the age range was 20-24 years. Finally, for the organization of data analysis, the bottom up approach was used (Creswell, 2012). The findings were validated through the triangulation technique (Creswell, 2012).

As ethical considerations, informed consents for the participants were designed. Through these documents, the students could understand the purpose of the research, their level of participation, and the use of the obtained information, that is, for purely academic and research purposes. As they understood the scope of the research, they agreed to be interviewed anonymously.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In order to achieve the main objective, we analyzed the information from students' interviews. From this analysis, we found that five categories: student's goals, english language skills, learning materials and activities, student's participation and english learning benefits, described the participants' excerpts.

4.1. Category A: Student's goals

Students' goals are reflected in the results they want to achieve by learning English. In this category, the students mentioned some comments about why they choose English as a language proficiency and what their goals are in learning this language. So, students said:

“My objective is to learn the language well and to be able to get by more with this language, because at some point I will still have to use it” (S5A2-E¹)

“Well, my objective in learning English is to be able to reinforce this language so that in the future I will have more opportunities for work and to get to know other countries”. (S6A2-EI)

On the other hand, some students interviewed mentioned that for them, the process of learning English is only a necessary requirement for graduation. They said:

“Well, my objective of obtaining English proficiency is only to obtain the certificate we need to graduate, otherwise try to manage and understand something about the language” (S8A2-II)

The students' expressions show that they choose the English language because it has greater acceptance in the work and social environment. That is, they have the perspective that this language will be of great use in their work environment in the future and will help them to relate socially. For these arguments, Jamaluddin's findings (2016) state, “most students agreed that English proficiency is important in their daily lives” (p.80). However, some students have the perception of obtaining a certificate of English proficiency in order to graduate because it is a requirement in college, as an obligation.

This has a strong similarity with the findings of Gestanti et al. (2019, p.103) “Most students claim that they learn English for academic purposes and because they are forced to learn it”. Therefore, students' perceptions vary according to their way of thinking. As the results show, some participants see the language only as a mandatory requirement for their degree, while others see learning English as a useful tool for their future in the workplace.

4.2. Category B. English language skills

This category mentions the development of English skills in the language center. Language is composed of four essential skills, speaking, listening, reading and writing. It is important to mention that in the English proficiency program, all these skills are covered, but there are certain skills that are better developed than others are. That is why some students mentioned:

“I think that the three skills are very important, that is to say fundamental, because they help English to complement each other, so if one cannot listen, one cannot understand what the teacher is transmitting, it will be very difficult for the student to learn, so I think that the three skills are very important.” (S9A2-EM)

“In my point of view I think the proficiency program is focused on the writing part, a little bit on the listening and speaking part” (S9A2-EM)

“Well I have had better progress in writing and listening skills” (S6A2-EI)

In the proficiency program, it is essential that students are able to develop English skills, as this is the main objective of the program. However, according to the students' expressions, teachers focus more on the development of certain skills depending on the level, and one of their teachers focuses more on writing skills. These results are similar to the findings of Tamayo & Cajas (2020, p.669) “Writing is the second most developed skill, the reason why these two skills have a higher progress than the others may have to do with the individual essence of online learning”.

On the other hand, there are certain English skills in which students have had some difficulty developing.

“Speaking is the skill that I consider the most complicated and I believe that it is not developed much because we receive classes virtually. There is not much interaction and we do not carry out activities such as group conversations in order to use the language.” (S8A2-II)

“Personally, speaking is difficult for me because I understand a lot when I listen, but when I speak I get stuck with some words” (S1A1-CS)

“Speaking is the skill that I consider the most complicated because in certain occasions I feel nervous or I am afraid to make a mistake. That is why, I do not like to speak very much and for me it is one of the most difficult skills to develop” (S10A2-EM)

According to the students' expressions, they consider that the most difficult skill to learn is speaking, as they tend not to develop this skill in the best way since there is not much interaction to use the language due to the online learning that has occurred because of the pandemic. These results have some similarity with the findings of Rahmawati et al. (2021, p.75)

E- Learning does not produce a good effect and is not asked to be used in learning media for speaking skills. This happens because there are several difficulties

found in students where students cannot do the practice directly to hone the speaking.

In addition, the findings of Rahmawati et al. findings (2021), emphasize what makes it difficult for students to develop speaking skills is the lack of direct practice in the process of learning speaking, that is there is a need for interlocutors to interact between students and with other students, so that learners can show interest and be participative during the learning process.

Another reason why the students consider it difficult to develop this skill is the fear of making a mistake, for that reason, they mentioned that they do not like to speak and therefore see this skill as one of the most complicated. These results are similar with what was found by Jimenez (2018, p.77) "Most participants disliked talking in English and taking the initiative to express verbally in English was difficult for most participants, since they mentioned being afraid of making mistakes" (p.77). Therefore, according to what was expressed by the students, it is demonstrated that one of the most complicated skills for them to develop is the speaking skill because there is not the necessary interaction in their class. Since, as mentioned, online learning has been hindering the development of different activities such as dialogues, conversations or debates in which the student can make use of the language and develop it through practice.

4.3.Category C. Learning materials and activities

The materials and activities used in the English language teaching-learning process motivate in a very significant way the learning of the language. This theme is related to teaching materials, activities and educational platforms that describe positive and negative points about learning English. According to the expressions of the interviewees, some of them agree with the didactic material used by their teachers. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, teachers and students had to adapt to virtual classes, so most of the teachers have used the Cambridge platform. In addition, teachers use PowerPoint slides with which they are more familiar to explain the learning subject. Therefore, the students said that:

"When the teacher uses slides, they serve as an aid to understanding the lecture" (S6A2-EI).

"We start doing activities either through games where he teaches us how we can put the articles, verbs and so we can write or pronounce better" (S5A2-EI)

"My teacher uses the kahoot platform to assess us on the knowledge we have learned in a dynamic and different way" (S11A2-EM)

"The resources they use are good as the Cambridge platform has a lot of activities in which you can practice the different English skills" (S11A2-EM).

However, these materials such as PowerPoint slides and Cambridge platform are not enough to develop English learning; students need more didactic material to help them learn successfully. As mentioned above, due to the pandemic, students feel tired and do not pay attention to the English class, so they need the class to be more interactive.

"I consider that it is a program that has been structured well but it also has some deficiencies I think it would be better to give the students more dynamic tools and not as strict as we could say. They could also give us an option to talk among peers so we can use the language" (S1A1-CS).

"If I had to implement other activities because with just slides and two hours sitting there, we do not learn much" (S5A2-EI).

“They are very useful but not enough to be able to help us understand 100 % English more strategies would be needed” (S6A2-EI)

“I think that more learning resources should be used” (S6A2-EI).

“I consider that the activities that my teacher performs are not so good since we are in this pandemic in virtual modality. We are using what is the Cambridge platform” (S2A1-CS)

According to these expressions, the resources used in learning English as a proficiency play an essential role in this process, since through the use of resources the students will show more interest in learning and, therefore, the language will be easily understood. As mentioned (Harsono, 2007, p.170) “Foreign language teachers should implement a myriad of instructional materials to help to teach language learners”. So, developing a variety of activities in class is essential because it helps students to learn the English language but specially to develop the different English skills. In fact, (Gestanti et al. 2019, p.108) say about that the book is a good resource for teaching and learning English:

It is known that most students find it difficult to learn English when there is no module or book available for them during the class. Had they assisted with this kind of book, they can easily learn the explained material, practice the exercises and the tasks given and review the material that has been discussed in the class.

Additionally, students mentioned that teachers should implement more teaching resources and strategies to improve learning. Jamaluddin (2016) says that it is important to “improve students' interest in learning the English language by planning and preparing some strategies” (p.80). It is also mentioned by students that in virtual classes the teachers rely on the powerpoint slides to teach, however, there are more educational platforms where students can interact and use language to learn. However, the study by Jimenez (2018) concluded, “learning a language successfully depends not only on didactic materials, activities, or the teacher. This process also depends on learners' interest, their self-motivation, and their autonomy, by assuming a more cooperative attitude by both parties” (p. 84).

4.4. Category D. Student's participation

This category reflects the student's participation in English online class. Students cite essential reasons that hinder their participation in English class, such as lack of motivation, lack of trust, and embarrassment. In addition, on certain occasions, the teacher in exchange for a grade often forces participation. So, the students said:

“There is not much participation and I think it is because most through this virtual medium do not focus much on learning” (S4A2-EI).

“In my course there is not much participation and I think it may be due to lack of trust or shame when speaking” (S1A1-CS)

“There are times when the engineer has to force participation because the camera is not turned on and he notices the absence of the students” (S6A2-EI).

“But if the teacher says let's talk about a specific topic and at the end of the class there will be a test that is when we pay attention and from there there is not much participation”(S2A1-CS)

As mentioned by the participants, there is little participation in class due to lack of interest or because students feel embarrassed to participate. However, teachers often force them to participate in class in exchange for a grade. This is similar to that demonstrated

by Memić-Fišić & Bijedić (2017) when they say that students will have a better participation if the activities are graded. Additionally, many online classes experience a lack of participation. Coman et al. (2020) in their findings establish that another challenge in virtual classes is that students look for strategies or excuses not to participate in class, for example they say that they have connection problems, technical problems or personal problems. Maybe these situations can be real in a certain case but usually they see it as excuses for an active participation in the online class. Another reason could be there is no commitment and motivation in students to participate in class. As mentioned by Jimenez (2018) “factors that affect a good performance in English include a lack of motivation, interest, effort, and commitment; plus not having enough time to study and absenteeism” (p. 84).

4.5. Category E. English learning benefits

Learning a second language has many benefits in different areas such as social, occupational and personal. This category refers to the strengths of the English proficiency program. According to the students' expressions, it is evident that choosing English as a proficiency has positive points for them. Thus, they say that:

“Yes, there are benefits and it may be that in the future they can help us to develop as people in other countries and so on.” (S4A2-EI)

“Yes, it has many benefits because it can open up many opportunities for us, both in our careers and in being able to travel, see new places or find more work.” (S6A2-EI)

“Benefits we can have in the labor field can open different opportunities within the country outside the country. Based on what would be personal meet new people and know another type of culture in other countries that would be” (S9A2-EM)

“There are benefits and one of them is that you learn to interact more with foreign people and you lose the fear of making mistakes” (S7A2-II)

According to the students' comments, learning English is very useful and helps them a lot in different situations. They mentioned that English would help them in different aspects such as labor, academics and traveling to other countries. In the same way, Gestanti et al. (2019) mention, “Students admit that English is beneficial for their next studies, but the use of English at work is more considerable for them”(p.104). Besides et al. (2013) “Despite the varied levels of success and levels of English proficiency, all participants believed better English yielded better employment” (p.76). Therefore, students think that learning English is essential in their lives because they have a better chance of being successful in the workplace.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that the English language proficiency program is useful for university students, as it offers them the possibility of acquiring language skills to achieve their expectations. Most students have the perspective that learning English is necessary for their future, as English is in high demand in the workplace. On the other hand, the idea that taking English is no more than an obligation in order to graduate from higher education is another perspective that students have, which is concordant with Jamaluddin (2016) and Gestanti et al. (2019).

As regards the development of language skills, in the context of online learning, some students develop writing more than others, similar to Tamayo & Cajas (2020); On the other hand, the participants think that speaking skills are more difficult to develop due to lack of interaction in online classes, coinciding with Rahmawati et al. (2021).

Likewise, the improvement of teaching resources is essential to achieve a better learning of the English language, which implies the proper development of language skills. Besides, the low participation of students is due to reasons such as lack of interest, fear of making mistakes when expressing themselves, and shyness when using the language, congruent with Jimenez (2018).

As a suggestion for future research, it is necessary that the English teachers of the language center of the Technical University of Cotopaxi analyze in depth the use of the strategies, materials, and quality of teaching in the proficiency program in the online modality. It is important to take into account the perceptions of students to meet their needs and thus achieve better performance during the English proficiency program.

NOTE

¹Is a code that each student interviewed has to keep his identity anonymous. To make these codes we focus on aspects such as the order in which he/she was interviewed, the level of English in which each student is, and the career to which he/she belongs.

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