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Adapting ESL Teaching Methodology to Virtual Instruction: Digital Tools and Ideas for Building Linguistic Competencies

Adaptando la metodología para la enseñanza del inglés como segunda lengua a la educación virtual: herramientas digitales e ideas para desarrollar competencias lingüísticas

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Abstract:

Shifting from traditional face-to-face instruction to teaching English online implied significant challenges. One of them is adapting ESL teaching pedagogy to the new teaching scenario for successfully addressing the learning needs of students in this era. Fortunately, the digital world offers a fast-growing number of resources to provide our digital learners with the effective instruction required to achieve knowledge and proficiency in this language. Nonetheless, success during the process largely depends on instructors' ability to innovate and adjust their teaching methodology to the new demands. This article highlights the applicability of ESL teaching fundamentals in the virtual learning environment to develop students' L2 competencies. It also includes ideas on teaching the four basic linguistic skills more innovatively with the help of several internet tools.

Key words: face-to-face instruction, virtual instruction, feedback, online tools, ESL instruction.

Resumen

La transición de una instrucción presencial tradicional a enseñar inglés en línea implicó grandes retos. Uno de ellos es adaptar la pedagogía para la enseñanza de un segundo idioma a el nuevo escenario para satisfacer las necesidades de aprendizaje de los estudiantes en esta era. Afortunadamente, el mundo digital ofrece un creciente número de recursos disponibles para ofrecer a nuestros alumnos digitales una instrucción efectiva que les permita alcanzar conocimiento y dominio de este idioma. No obstante, el éxito de este proceso depende grandemente de la habilidad de los docentes para innovar y ajustar su metodología de enseñanza a las nuevas exigencias. Este artículo ofrece valiosas consideraciones sobre la aplicación de los fundamentos teóricos para la enseñanza de un segundo idioma al entorno virtual de aprendizaje a fin de desarrollar las competencias en esta lengua extranjera. Además, incluye ideas sobre cómo usar algunas herramientas que nos ofrece la internet para enseñar las cuatro habilidades lingüísticas de una forma más innovadora.

Palabras clave: modalidad presencial, modalidad virtual, retroalimentación, herramientas en línea, instrucción en inglés como segunda lengua.

Virtual Education and L2 Teaching in the Digital Era

Shifting from a face-to-face learning modality to a full-time ESL virtual instruction has not been an easy task for students and professors of the English School at the University of Panama. Although the concept of virtual education in our country is not new, getting better acquainted with this medium of instruction and all that it entails has also been a challenge. Thus, it is important to review some key concepts about this type of instruction that can provide readers with a better understanding of the issues that will be addressed in this article.

First, it is necessary to remember that virtual education is under the umbrella of distance education which according to Christison and Murray (2014) originated from some people's necessity to have access to education regardless of the physical conditions that could prevent them from attending schools daily.   There are, of course, two remarkable differences between distance education in the past and distance education in the 21st century. The first one is the evolution of the world to a digital era with a variety of tools for enhancing distance learning; and the second one, a more demanding marketplace that requires an up-to-

date academic preparation to help students succeed in the fast-evolving real-life scenarios (Tucker, 2012, as cited in Parris et al., 2017).

In this sense, we should see teaching English online as an alternative to provide students with the contents, instruction, and assessment required for learning the language efficiently. Indeed, teaching English through digital technologies has many advantages over traditional face-to-face instruction. Parris et al. (2017) affirm that "Today's current and developing technology tools have expanded opportunities for teachers to provide real-world experiences" (p. 15). These *real-world experiences* can also increase learners' motivation to master the language in a learning context where they can have more control over their learning and progress.

On the other hand, and despite all the literature that promotes virtual education as a great alternative to English language teaching (ELT), it is still a challenge to ensure effective language learning in the digital learning context especially in a country full of social inequalities. This might seem a valid argument especially for people who see online teaching as a palliative measure to face the educational crisis post-pandemic. However, virtual learning is inherent in the digital era we are living in. The learning scenarios have drastically changed over the last years which implies changes to a student-centered teaching methodology and the use of digital learning tools to promote the development of the skills students need to survive this century (Norris, 2019). In the same line of thought, The British Council (2021) states that technological innovations "have changed our lives and completely changed the ways in which we communicate and access information and learning" (p. 4). In other words, it is necessary to embrace a different way of instruction that can also produce good results more tuned with the demands of the century.

Nonetheless, it is important to admit that "stepping into the digital world overnight can be challenging for many teachers" (British Council, 2021, p. 5). Consequently, teaching online can become a long rocky way for language teachers without insights on the different aspects to consider when delivering virtual language instruction. First of all, online teaching involves equal responsibilities for administrative and educators who must become familiar with the demands of this learning context and the tools available to face them. This is, perhaps, the first step to guarantee quality teaching through the different virtual platforms. It can be a painstaking process given the fact that we come from a face-to face learning environment where all the elements are previously set for us: the role of instructors and students during the class development and the patterns of interaction among themselves; the

physical environment and the resources for learners; and, of course, the responsibilities for successful course completion on both sides (Ragan, 2009).

Another essential element for online language instruction is adapting contents and curriculum to the new learning context. When describing their work at an English language development center in Thailand through online classes, Christison and Murray (2014) point out the importance of training the teachers "in how to effectively adapt and create online course materials" (p. 37). They also remark that it is necessary to consider technology when designing a curriculum for language instruction. These adaptations involve anticipating situations and minimizing improvisation in a process that requires careful selection of the technological tools that better meet the students' learning needs.

Creating opportunities to allow interaction in the target language is also a challenge for ESL instruction. Teaching English online is more than just providing students with the same materials they would see in the classroom through the web to do assignments. Consequently, instructors need to be creative when presenting content to foster interaction among learners through the guided use of digital tools. This is hard to digest since "much of the focus in language teaching in the past has typically been on classroom-based language learning" (Richards, 2014, p. 3-4). Richards (2014) also points out how textbooks and other classroom resources have been the center of curriculum design and classroom instruction. However, this is a new chance to expose students to the wide variety of authentic materials available on the web as they reflect on global issues and interact through varied digital tools.

A final relevant aspect of online ELT discussed in this section is establishing the course rules and patterns that determine the course dynamic and successful development. According to Ragan (2009), the flexible environment of a virtual classroom requires the careful setting of "patterns of course activities" that can facilitate the development of a learning routine and the effective interaction between students and professors (p. 9). He also points out that "one of the most challenging aspects of designing an online classroom is working without the confines of time and location" (p. 9). Consequently, the success of virtual instruction will largely depend on the instructor's ability to set a work pace for the course with a time frame for class delivery and assignments completion, which benefit both professors and students. Providing learners with clear guidelines and instructions about their duties makes it easier for them to organize their time and to assume responsibility for their performance.

The patterns established for course activities should apply to both synchronous and asynchronous sessions, which at the same time must adjust to "student learning preferences

and needs" (Anderson, 2008, p.279). As a result, it is necessary to define the parameters for class delivery, especially for asynchronous instruction, which accounts for autonomous learning since students have more chances to work at their own pace, but always under the orientation and guidelines provided by the instructors.

It also has important implications for class management. Professors are now the tutors in charge of directing, regulating, and facilitating the teaching and learning process assisted by virtual platforms and tools. In this scenario, we are not the only source of knowledge available to help students build L2 proficiency. Instead, we are the moderators who manage students' exposure and interaction with the language online by establishing a course dynamic that must be "appropriate to student needs, teacher skills, and style, and institutional technical capacity" (Anderson, 2008, p. 279).

Adapting ESL Methodology to Virtual Instruction

Teaching English as a second language has its foundations on cognitivist, psychological, and behaviorist theories. Behaviorists see ELT as a habit formation process that comes to happen with imitation, practice, repetition, and feedback on progress (Lightbrown and Spada, 2011). Repetitive drilling of structural patterns and vocabulary from audiovisual materials and positive reinforcement on correct answers have been typical behaviorist practices among English teachers (Brown, 2007). Drilling techniques are essential for practicing phonemes, allophones, and suprasegmental features of pronunciation.

 Similarly, drama and imitation techniques with showing and mirroring gestures are effective activities for mastering pronunciation skills. But, how to incorporate drilling and imitation into the teaching of pronunciation in a virtual classroom? Many internet resources allow students to practice and receive feedback on their performance asynchronously in a more attractive environment. Some of them include: Speech Ace, Ororo TV, and Speak English Everywhere, which allow students to listen to sounds, words, expressions, or even short texts that they must repeat as accurately as possible and as many times as required. There are great tools for mimicry and drama like *Flipgrid, Tik Tok, and the Instagram reels,* which allow students to have great fun recording themselves while imitating stress or intonation patterns in model audio texts. They can later share their videos with the instructor on a platform for feedback and assessment.

Another very influential theory in second language acquisition is Krashen's monitor model. This paradigm explains L2 learning as a function of five hypotheses: acquisition versus learning, the monitor hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the input hypothesis, and the affective filter hypothesis (Lightbrown and Spada, 2004). Krashen emphasizes

acquisition over learning by indicating that it is responsible for language fluency arising from subconscious exposure to comprehensible language input. On the other hand, learning implies conscious learning of structural patterns of language through direct instructions. He assures that actual language competence is only achieved through indirect exposure to written or spoken language that is both comprehensible and varied (Krashen, 1983).

Fortunately, one of the advantages of this digital age is the exposure to authentic language that students can get either synchronously or asynchronously, which fosters language acquisition. As indicated by Richards (2014), "Today, however, the internet, technology and the media, and the use of English in face-to-face, as well as virtual social networks, provide greater opportunities for meaningful and authentic language use than are available in the classroom" (p. 1). We are not the only source of language input; neither the books nor the printed materials used in face-to-face classes. As a result, we must leave behind traditional teaching practices that do not fit the new learning environment. We do not need to spend valuable time of synchronous session lecturing on topics or presenting information that students can easily access through YouTube videos, TedTalks, documentaries, magazines, newspapers, and the like.

We cannot forget that internet tools and resources do not replace the instructor's role. Indeed, we are the ones who know our students' needs, strengths, and limitations; so, we have to make the decisions regarding materials selection and the design of learning activities that will allow learners to work with the language for acquisition to occur. In other words, we need to choose the language materials that are suitable to the course objectives without losing sight of Krashen's $(i + 1)$ component; that is to say, written or spoken language that they can comprehend, but that is also "a step beyond that language level" (Lightbrown and Spada, 2004, p.37). Hence, the need to evaluate the language to be presented to our students. There is a wide variety of audiovisual materials available on the internet, yet, if they do not meet the requirements to be considered *comprehensible*; the learning experience might not produce the expected results.

Subconscious exposure to language is also achieved with learner-centered activities, which promote the acquisition of language proficiency required to thrive in a more demanding century. If we guide our students to explore the language in new exciting ways, they will eventually enjoy the process of working with it through the use of internet tools. If exposed to written or spoken discourse, students can work on activities with different learning goals. They can do it collaboratively, synchronously or asynchronously.

Krashen's affective filter hypothesis also has significant implications in the teaching of ESL online. The affective filter refers to the emotional states that can block language acquisition even when "appropriate input is available" (Lightbrown and Spada, 2004, p. 37). Virtual classes post-pandemic can generate great stress and anxiety due to varied factors associated with the economy, health, familiarity with online tools, and others. Additionally, students might feel *English shy* when recording videos, especially if their skills are limited. Therefore, it is vital to consider ways to keep them at ease when promoting practice and interaction in a safe digital environment, with empathy to understand the difficulties our students face when dealing with synchronous or asynchronous classes.

Cognitivist trends on ESL teaching methodology can also be adapted to online language instruction. The interaction hypothesis points out the role of interaction and the corrective feedback that interlocutors obtain from modified input. In other words, learners can get the language they need to acquire through comprehension checks, clarification requests, and self-repetition required for successful communication to happen (Lightbrown and Spada, 2004). The noticing hypothesis affirms that students can only acquire the features of language that they notice when being exposed to it. This phenomenon is affected by students' capacity to process form and meaning simultaneously due to their tendency to concentrate more on features that can help them make sense in a specific context (Lightbrown and Spada, 2004). Finally, the information-processing model states that the processing of linguistic features depends on the amount of practice and exposure to language until they become automatically accessible for language production.

These cognitivist theories have relevant implications for teaching English in a virtual environment where oral interaction might seem limited compared to face-to-face classes. However, it is essential to remember that internet resources offer great opportunities for out-of-class interaction with the language through different tools and tasks. Richards (2014) remarks that "Learners can interact using English with people in almost every part of the world" (p. 2). Thus, as facilitators of the learning process, we must choose the tools that allow students to interact and get modified input beyond the synchronous sessions. As an illustration, the chat rooms created for language learners to interact among themselves and with native speakers "often result in more successful comprehension as well as a greater quantity of target language production than classroom-based communication" (Richards, 2014, p. 4).

Social network and texting apps like Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal are good tools to have students interact with English-speaking friends and relatives

from all over the world. Similarly, videoconferencing or video calling apps enable synchronous interaction among students and English speakers in conversational clubs, interviews, or any other task that elicits informal use of the target language. In my case, one of the advantages of virtual classes has been inviting international guests to classes to have more casual meetings with my students as they interact and use the language for actual communication purposes.

There are also some important considerations regarding the applications of the noticing and information-processing hypothesis when choosing materials and designing learning activities. We need to carefully examine the material to be presented to make sure that they contain the features of language that they have to notice. After careful materials selection, we have to design activities that guide their attention to the aspects of language they are expected to acquire. There are many techniques that may look traditional, but that are still useful like questionaries, concept mapping, etc. However, there are many tools that allow you to create online polls, quizzes, and other interactive exercises around the language presented in a text, video or audio; and which can result quite entertaining.

We also need to provide students with plenty of opportunities to practice the target language features until they reach a level of automaticity for accessing them when producing utterances. We can take advantage of the digital tools that promote asynchronous practice for further discussion in synchronous sessions. Nevertheless, we must balance the number of materials and practice we provide students with and their information-processing capacity. Although some instructors may consider it necessary to compensate for the lack of face-to-face instruction with out-of-class work, overwhelming learners with excessive assignments or digital content can set their affective filter high enough to limit their progress. The internet offers a limitless number of teaching resources available; yet, we should only choose those that better adjust to students' learning needs in the ESL online classroom.

Constructivist paradigms also imply strong connections between ESL teaching and the virtual learning environment. According to Anderson (2011), constructivists see learners as active builders of their knowledge through processing and interpretation of external input. This *learning by doing* trend creates opportunities to use the language for solving problems or reflecting upon global issues with meaningful interaction and collaborative work. The internet provides instructors with tools for class projects and task-based teaching, which combine language production and high-order thinking skills. In this way, they can show off their skills and knowledge by creating audiovisual or multimedia products like podcasts, documentaries, blogs, journals, research projects, digital storytelling, among others.

Finally, we will address the implications of the sociocultural perspective for language teaching, which states that an individual acquires a language when he interacts with others and gets feedback from them (Lightbrown and Spada, 2004). This hypothesis is usually associated with the interaction hypothesis previously mentioned. Both emphasize the role of interaction in the language learning process. This theory reaffirms the necessity to create opportunities for meaningful written and oral interchange with native or non-native English speakers either synchronously and asynchronously.

Many tools allow learners to get the interaction they need as they work collaboratively assisted by chat rooms; or with free voice and video calls. Nonetheless, these tools do not replace our role as designers and monitors of our students' work and progress. Consequently, we must not leave them alone during the process. We have to assume responsibility for helping them get the interaction they need in a safe environment and confirming that it fosters the development of linguistic skills.

Online Tools and Ideas for Developing Linguistic Skills

Theoretical knowledge of ESL teaching methodology is not enough for successful language instruction. Teaching a second language is a complex process that requires the application of theories and approaches that better fit the language learning needs of students in a given context. Therefore, it is necessary to explore new ways of enhancing linguistic skills with the digital tools available to create valuable opportunities for language exposure and production regardless of the linguistic skill we teach.

Teaching Speaking

Celce-Murcia et al. (2014) affirm that "speaking is considered by many to be the fundamental skill in second language (L2) learning" (p. 106). Teaching speaking in a Spanish-speaking country becomes far more challenging in a virtual learning environment. Fortunately, there are plenty of digital tools which if paired with creativity, can generate activities for developing fluent, accurate, appropriate and authentic L2 speaking competence (Celce-Murcia et al., 2014).

- Roleplaying in Tik Tok or Instagram reels can be a fun speaking activity suitable for developing different speaking skills in a new exciting way.
- *Group discussions* with meaningful interaction are also possible through videoconferencing platforms like Google Meets, Gypsi Meet, or Zoom. The latter even allows you to separate students in break-out rooms for small group discussion.

You can also have animated group discussions in WhatsApp groups through texts or voice notes.

- Asynchronous oral presentations are also possible through video presentations recorded with cellphones and tools like Flipgrid and Animoto. If you want to assign something more challenging and reduce the degree of memorization, you can try Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube lives. Students talk about different topics and interact with their audience (classmates and professor) in real-time by answering the comments or questions they post.

  Students can also upload their oral presentations to their *YouTube channel* (which they can keep private) for further evaluation and feedback on their performance. In this way, you use the limited time in synchronous classes for impromptu presentations and more interactive speaking activities. If you have students with limited internet access, *WhatsApp* can also help send and receive videos or have one-on-one oral presentations through video calls.

- Conversations are also possible with voice recording tools for smartphones like Anchor, VoiceThread, and QuickVoice Recorder. They allow learners to call each other, record their conversations and send their audio files for evaluation and feedback. In this way, we keep track of their work and progress.

- Students can also have great fun by creating their podcasts on different topics with tools like Spotify. You can also plan wonderful podcast-based speaking lessons for your online speaking classes.

- Learners can *self-record* imitating a model audio text for later pair or group discussions on their experience and analysis of their performance compared with the model text.

- Virtual classes shorten distances by connecting people regardless of their location. This makes it possible to *bring English-speaking guests to class* (even better if native-speaker) to talk about a specific topic and have meaningful interaction that can foster cultural awareness.

- With tools like *Flipgrid, Vizia, and the Queue*, you can also have oral forums. You can post a prompt (a text or video) for students to respond orally with a video. They can even react to answers posted by other students. These oral forums are also possible via WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal through voice notes.

- *Cool English* is an interactive website that contains fun activities for developing the four linguistic skills, grammar exercises, and icebreakers to live up the class. It has a variety of games and prompts for the impromptu use of English. Students can also work independently on the activities in this platform.

- Students can also show off their spoken skills and creativity by creating *documentaries or talk shows* about local and global issues that impact society with the help of video apps.

Teaching Listening

The teaching of listening skills is a core component of second language acquisition. According to Richards (2008), "listening can provide input that triggers the further development of second-language proficiency" (p. 3). Consequently, it is essential to carefully choose the input, which should be authentic, natural texts that can give students a taste of the language used in the real world (Brown, 2007).

- With *TV commercials,* you can create fun listening activities that can facilitate exposure to pragmatic and cultural aspects of the English language.

- *TedTalks* provide students with valuable language input for meaningful intensive or extensive listening practice. It all depends on your creativity to adapt the talk to your lesson plans and to connect it to other productive skills through follow-up activities that require speaking or writing.

- *TEDEd* is also a good resource for listening practice. Even when the language may not be considered authentic, it has good videos and lectures on many different topics with a series of listening exercises. It also allows you to customize or to create your own listening lessons around the videos available according to the language contents and objectives.

- *Movies and TV series* on Netflix, YouTube, cable TV, and the like; are a good source of exposure to the language spoken by actual people in real-life situations. They allow students to get familiar with pragmatic, cultural, and phonological aspects of spoken discourse. There are ready-made lessons on YouTube for episodes of famous TV series like *Friends,* and movie scenes which even include repetitive drills and cloze exercises. These types of listening activities are very entertaining.

- Students love music, so *lyricstraining.com* is a great tool to listen to their favorite songs as they do some online listening exercises.

- You can also create extensive or intensive listening practice from *podcasts* about different topics by using some of the tools previously mentioned.

- Students can also participate in *webinars or online workshops* to listen to different speakers from different countries. They can take notes on the presentation and share their experiences with the rest of the class in synchronous sessions, or through any other assignment as a post-listening activity. There are many free-access webinars on interesting ELT topics.

- *Listening logs***:** These types of listening activities allow students to reflect on their listening skills as they participate in extensive listening practice out-of-class through webinars, videos, movies and TV shows. They document their experiences for class discussion on the difficulties they had or the specific features of language that the instructor can ask them to notice (Richards, 2014).

Teaching Writing

Teaching academic writing online is not an easy task. It requires using the right tools for producing different types of essays and texts. Grading students' papers and giving them corrective feedback can also become tiring and painstaking. Fortunately, many resources can help you make virtual composition classes an enjoyable experience for both instructors and learners.

- *Google docs* available in *Google Drive* allow you to create online writing tasks that can be inserted in *Google Classroom.* You can also grade them and provide feedback to your students by adding direct comments on their text. Additionally, they can work collaboratively to edit shared documents which usually results in a fun and engaging writing practice.

- *Padlet* is an interactive board where you can insert writing prompts for your students to answer on the same layout. You can also set it for them to give likes or write comments on their classmates' work. It works perfectly for both synchronous or asynchronous classes.

- *Grammarly* is a grammar and spelling checker that students can use for proofreading or editing their essays. There is a similar tool called *Hemingway* which also examines the readability of texts and makes suggestions for improvement.

- *The Purdue Online Writing Lab* provides students with valuable information about the writing process. It also has resources and exercises to improve their academic writing

skills in stylistics, mechanics, and the English writing conventions. It can become a great teaching assistant and reliable reference for the writing process.

- *Blogging* is also an innovative way for students to free- write about different topics daily or weekly or to keep a journal. There are a variety of websites that allow students to create their own blogs for free with just a few steps. These websites include *Google Blogger, Blogger and Edubblogs.*

- *Book Story* is another app that allows students and instructors to create and to publish their written assignments in a highly attractive manner.

Besides these tools, you can also access varied online authentic written materials from different genres to provide students with reference texts for their writing assignments. You can also find many online writing exercises for standardized tests like TOEFL or IELT, which can give students a close-up of the expected writing performance beyond the classroom.

Teaching Reading

A large part of academic success depends on the learners' ability to decode information from written materials and process it to perform specific academic reading tasks. The virtual world offers numerous ways of exposing students to written language through digital resources such as interactive exercises, audio files for reading articles, or online apps for creating graphics and visual materials to demonstrate their comprehensive reading skills.

- *Biblionasum* is a highly attractive website for teachers to recommend books and to create reading challenges for students. Even when it might seem more suitable for the little ones, you can find interesting reading texts for extensive reading activities.

- *Padlet* is also helpful for individual or collaborative reading activities where class participants can post their answers, comment on their peers' posts, and give likes to others.

- *Flipgrid* works well as a reading response tool where you can post questions or reflection prompts about texts that your students can answer through a video. It is also suitable for oral forums about selected reading materials because it allows students to respond to others and give likes.

- With *Google Forms*, you can create online reading exercises for formative or summative assessment by inserting direct links to texts on the web or inserting chunks of a text. You can create different types of questions with different types of answers.

- *Pear Deck,* also available with Google, allows you to create fun interactive presentations with comprehensive reading exercises that you can easily adapt to the different levels of instruction. *Socrative, Kahoot, WordWall* are also tools for creating reading activities or eliciting discussions as formative assessments throughout the reading process.

- *National Geographic Learning Life (NGL Life)* helps you save time and effort with ready-made reading exercises. They include reading texts, audio files, interactive games, grammar and vocabulary activities, and even extra reading activities that your students can easily access for asynchronous work and further discussion in a video class.

- *Canva* is a good software for creating graphics such as mind maps, posters, concept maps, graphic organizers, and others; for students to demonstrate their reading comprehension as they focus on specific features of the reading materials.

The internet also gives you access to authentic reading materials for intensive or extensive reading practice and the opportunity to assign reading exercises for standardized tests like TOEFL and IELTS.

It is important to remember that some of these tools have limited free access and that you do not need to use all of them. You have to carefully choose what works better for your students and the course. It is vital to redesign our ESL courses with more interactive, creative, and up-to-date teaching materials, resources, and activities according to the demands of the virtual scenario and the learning needs of this era. We cannot forget our role as the facilitators in charge of providing the guidance, feedback, scaffolding, and supervision required for success. Education is constantly changing, yet, facing the challenges of virtual instruction strengthens our teaching skills and helps us become more competent educators capable of dealing with any adverse teaching situation.

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