From Face-to-Face to Virtual Sessions during Lockdown

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Abstract

In December 2019, the outbreak of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) caused by SARS-CoV-2 suddenly emerged in China and has now spread in many countries around the world. As it was immediately declared as a pandemic, most nations in the globe, including Mexico, decided to start school closures in order to avoid risk of contagion among students, teachers and families.

The University of Veracruz started its school closure in late March to comply with the social distancing and lockdown instructions issued by Mexican authorities. With the implementation of this measure, all students and teachers moved to online sessions and activities.

This paper presents the description of the migration from the face-to-face modality to the virtual mode of a Basic English course at the Poza Rica Language Center. It focuses on the steps followed to carefully prepare students to work in a different learning environment. It also aims at knowing the participants' opinion about online learning and virtual lessons during confinement. To achieve this aim, an action research qualitative study was carried out on 53 learners.

The study subjects were non-university students who attended courses aimed at the general public such as high school students, professionals and housewives. The results suggest a high acceptance of the work done by students who finished the course but they also show a high dropout rate.

Keywords: *coronavirus, learning environments, lockdown, pandemic*

1. Introduction

The SARS-Cov-2 coronavirus is a virus that appeared in China. Later it spread to all the continents of the world causing a pandemic. Currently, Europe and America are the most affected continents (Secretaría de Salud, "Información General", par. 1).

This new virus causes the disease known as COVID-19, which is highly contagious, so the World Health Organization, through the Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan against the new coronavirus, called on world leaders to take the necessary measures to prevent its further spread, through national strategies to contain community transmission. These strategies include community-level measures that reduce person-to-person contact, such as suspending mass gatherings, closing non-essential workplaces and educational establishments, and reducing public transportation (World Health Organization p. 10).

In Mexico, the Ministry of Public Education in conjunction with the country's Ministry of Health agreed on preventive measures for COVID-19 for public educational institutions at all levels, including participation in voluntary isolation and the adoption of distance learning (Secretaría de Educación Pública. "Boletín 72", par. 1).

The University of Veracruz, as a public institution of higher education, followed the instructions of the federal authorities by suspending face-to-face classes in all its academic entities and continuing to teach distance classes.

Therefore, the present research work aims to describe the experience of the migration of a Basic English course that began with face-to-face classes to the virtual modality.

The background and objectives are presented first and then the methodology implemented to migrate to online classes and evaluate students is described. Finally, it gives an account of the results obtained with the emergent work through the percentages of approval and disapproval and desertion of the students, as well as their opinion about their learning experience during confinement.

1.1 Background

In March 2020, the University of Veracruz, in compliance with the federal government's provisions regarding isolation and social distance measures to stop COVID 19, published the first statement to inform the university community about the suspension of academic activities on March 21 as of April

19, professors having to maintain remote communication channels between students, academics, workers and authorities (Universidad Veracruzana, "COVID 19 Disposiciones generales, par. 2).

Faced with this situation, the General Directorate of Language and Self-Access Centers held urgent meetings with Coordinators to define the steps to follow regarding the remote work that should be carried out in an emergency manner and complying the following guidelines:

1. To be aware of institutional emails and internal messaging groups of the entity, at least during their working hours.

2. Constant communication with students.

3. The work of the academics with their students can be, without being limited to: answering doubts about the course, sending reinforcement activities, presenting them with the pages of the CAAs of all the regions, online consultancies, etc. For this they can use the platforms of EMINUS, Zoom, social networks among others.

4. All must submit a weekly report of activities carried out, it will be available on the institutional portal (Universidad Veracruzana-DCIA. "Plan de contingencia", par. 2).

Upon arrival on April 19 and observing that due to the growing number of infections the conditions to return to face-to-face classes were not met, work began on new evaluation criteria and the possibility of continuing with online classes. To do this, through meetings using the Zoom application, an agreement was reached not to apply written face-to-face final exams in order to promote social distancing, so the new evaluation criteria were as follows:

PORCENTAJES DE EVALUACIÓN CURSOS INGLÉS 4 HABILIDADES (Conversación básico, intermedio y avanzado)			
Rubro	Evidencia de desempeño	Ámbito de aplicación	Valor
Portafolio	• Actividades y tareas • Mapas mentales (funciones/temáticas) • Glosario – pictionary/memorama (visual con texto) • Autoevaluación (cuestionario)	Aula o virtual	40%
Quizzes (en línea y presencial)	4 (1 por habilidad o 1 evaluando todas)	Aula o virtual	20%
Composiciones escritas	2 (sugerencia) • *Básico* – descripciones • *Intermedio* – tópico/tema • *Avanzado* - ensayo	Aula o virtual	10%
Presentación oral (con rúbrica)	2 (audio o video) *(Avanzado ver conferencia y dar reporte)*	Aula o virtual	20%
Workbook	Round up/extra gramar plus	Aula o virtual	10%
Trabajo durante contingencia	EXTRA (para alumnos que en tiempo y forma cumplieron)		10%

(Fig. 1. Centro de idiomas PR. Criterios de evaluación)

The portfolio item, whose evidence includes activities, tasks, mind maps, glossaries, etc. with a value of 40%.
4 quizzes online with a value of 5% each, giving a total of 20%.
2 written compositions with a value of 5% each, giving a total of 10%.
An oral presentation either by audio or video with a value of 20%.
The tasks of the workbook with a value of 10%.
An extra 10% for those students who have done all the work during the contingency.

Once these criteria were defined, it was determined that as of May 2020, remote classes would start through the platforms chosen by the academics, extending the school calendar until the end of July of the same year to give students the opportunity to engage and catch up on this emerging modality.

1.2 General objective

• To know the opinion of the students about their learning experience from a face-to-face mode to a virtual mode.
• To describe the steps to carry out the migration from a Basic English course that started with face-to-face classes to the virtual mode.

2. Methodology

2.1 Action-research

This qualitative study was implemented using the action-research methodology; which, according to Latorre (2003), constitutes an inquiry strategy that starts from the detection of a specific problem to

which a pedagogical treatment is applied in order to obtain data that must be tested experimentally to modify an educational reality.

This method is done by collecting information in daily teaching practice and analyzing it with the objective of making decisions about how it should be in the future (Wallace, 2008, p.4).

We followed the procedure of Bizquerra (2009), which indicates that action-research is carried out through a systematized process that includes the following steps: problem, diagnosis, design of a change proposal, application of the proposal, and evaluation.

2.2 Problem and diagnosis

The students of the Poza Rica Language Center who enrolled in face-to-face courses during the period February-July 2020 found it necessary to migrate from this modality to a virtual learning environment when they had only been in classes for a month.

In the case of students with basic English at the first level, it was observed that most of them did not have the experience of taking English classes online, so a change proposal was designed that would allow them to first know the institutional platform for distance classes and later work formally in their virtual course.

2.3 Proposal of change

The Eminus platform of the University of Veracruz is a system that manages flexible learning environments and allows the presentation of online courses. It is supported by the use of multimedia and collaboration tools for synchronous and asynchronous communication.

It also offers a reliable variety of educational resources for teachers and students since the system guarantees the protection of the information handled by all users. In addition, it is very easy to create, manage and publish a course on the platform with additional materials such as videos, slides and spreadsheets, which can be accessed by students from all over the world.

Eminus has a variety of advanced technologies for online collaborative work as well as different communication, collaboration and administration features. Colunga (2007), lists some of the most important:

• Learning tools such as: content viewer and learning objects, content management, evaluation modules.

• Communication tools such as: forums, chats, virtual classroom and videoconference for synchronous and asynchronous communication. The platform also has a "help center" and has sections for practice activities and assessments.

Therefore, students were proposed to work through the Eminus institutional platform, for which they began with a short induction course to learn how to work online through it, where the students were made aware that the remote classes would be held synchronously at the same time they had using the "Classroom" tool.

This tool has a space designed for interaction through audio, video, images and text. Documents and images can be displayed within a presentation area and on which simple annotations can be made (Universidad Veracruzana. Eminus, Students' manual p. 40).

2.4 Application of the proposal

All registered students obtained a special user account to access the platform in which they first carried out review activities as an induction to work online and later took their remote classes synchronously, where the topics of the course were explained to them.

Once each of the lessons was finished, the participants proceeded to carry out various activities consisting of writing short paragraphs and making audio-recordings of conversations in English which they should upload to the "Evaluations" section.

Later they had to carry out the activities in their workbook and upload them in the "Practice activities" section.

At the end of each module of the course, students took an online quiz type exam through the Eminus "Evaluations" section.

2.5 Evaluation

The evaluation of this emerging pedagogical intervention was carried out through the opinion of the students about the experience left by having migrated from one modality to another due to the SARS

COV 2 pandemic. To do so, a questionnaire of 20 open and closed questions was designed and divided into 4 sections:

The first section focused on knowing the opinion of the participants regarding the accessibility of the Eminus platform. The second focused on the instructional design of the remote course. The third questioned about the development of self-recordings and paragraphs for the practice of oral and written skills, and the fourth section was made up of 4 open questions about the experience of having migrated from one modality to another.

2.6 Participants

This pedagogical treatment was worked with 53 students enrolled in the Basic English 1 course at the Poza Rica Language Centre, of the University of Veracruz, Mexico during the February-July 2020 semester. Most of them were high school students, but there were also professionals and housewives. Due to the pandemic, they have had to migrate from an in-person to a virtual modality.

3. Results

The results obtained are presented through two important moments for achieving the objectives of the pedagogical treatment that are described below.

3.1 Development and analysis of the intervention

At the beginning of the February-July 2020 semester, the participants in this intervention had enrolled in the first level of a Basic English course in the face-to-face mode, but due to the suspension of face-to-face academic activities by COVID 19, it was necessary to migrate to the virtual modality through a pedagogical proposal which considered the use of the Eminus institutional platform and an instructional design appropriate to emerging needs.

At the beginning of the intervention, the migration of most of the students was achieved firstly to an induction work that consisted mainly of performing speaking and writing exercises as a review of the topics seen in person and as practice to learn to upload the tasks and activities in the corresponding sections.

In this process, the first dropouts from the course began, which according to conversations by WhatsApp with these students, were mainly due to: problems with the internet and lack of time due to the excessive work of their schools. Of 77 students enrolled in 3 first level English groups, 24 dropped out, leaving 53 students.

After this induction, the remote classes began, continuing the program from where it had been in the face-to-face mode before confinement. In remote classes, topics were explained and English language skills were practiced just as in the face-to-face mode.

During these synchronous sessions a low attendance rate was observed by the students. It is worth mentioning that due to the conditions caused by the pandemic, there were students who could not work regularly because they could not pay for the internet or because they had too many activities derived from their formal education.

However, the students who attended these classes managed to finish their course successfully. At the end of this it was observed that of the 53 students who remained, 45 students managed to accredit it and 8 students could not do it.

3.2 Students' opinion about the project

One of the objectives of this work is to know the opinion of the about their learning experience when migrating from the face-to-face mode to the virtual mode. Participant responses are summarized below:

3.2.1 Students' opinion on the Eminus platform

Most of the students (97%) had not previously worked with the Eminus platform but considered that this platform was suitable for their learning of the English language.

Most of the participants believe that the platform's Classroom tool was adequate to replace their face-to-face classes and that it facilitated their learning.

3.2.2 Students' opinion on the instructional design of the remote course

Over 50% of students believe that the general distribution of the course on the platform (Remote Classes, Assessments, Workbook Tasks and online exams) facilitated their learning.

Most of the participants considered that the evaluations and activities carried out on the platform (speaking, writing, grammar exercises, revisions) contributed to the reinforcement of the topics seen in class and that the online exams were adequate to assess their learning.

3.2.3 Students' opinion on the activities carried out for the development of oral and written skills

Most of the students indicated that the self-recording activities for the practice of oral skills were to their liking and useful for developing oral production. They also stated that they had made a great effort to deliver self-recordings with good pronunciation. In the same way, the majority stated that the activities carried out to develop their writing skills helped them improve it.

3.2.4 Students' opinion on the experience of having emigrated from face-to-face mode to virtual mode

The most pleasant experiences for the students were the following:
1. The self-recordings, since they were helpful in improving their pronunciation.
2. The synchronous classes, because the schedule was respected and they were able to participate and work as in a face-to-face class.
3. Take classes in the comfort of your home.
4. The Eminus platform, since everything was well distributed and easy to use,
5. The facilitator, since she had good didactics, explained well and cleared up doubts.

The least pleasant experiences for the students were the following:
1. In a minority, students stated that they did not like virtual classes very much because they preferred face-to-face sessions.
2. Another part of the virtual course that some students did not like was the deadline for delivery of evaluations, since they forgot the delivery dates.

4. Conclusions

The objective of this work on the migration from a face-to-face course to a virtual course due to the COVID 19 pandemic was to describe how this emerging change of modality was made and to find out the opinion of the students about this experience.

The results included a description of the way in which the migration from the face-to-face modality to the virtual modality was carried out and the opinion of the participants about it.

From the above, it may be concluded that the strategy implemented for the migration of the course was of great support for students who managed to successfully complete their first level English course, since they were able to understand how to use the Eminus platform, perform the activities in a timely manner and attend remote classes.

It should be noted that these students showed great commitment and interest in virtual work, mainly with regard to the practice of oral skills asynchronously, since most of them made the suggested self-recordings, which gave them greater opportunities for practice and improved their pronunciation in the target language.

It was perhaps unexpected to find that despite the high dropout rate, 45 out of 77 students enrolled, which is equivalent to 58%, managed to finish the course that was originally supposed to end at the beginning of June and that due to the confinement conditions ended until the end of July. Although there was a high dropout rate, more than half of the students were able to pass the next level.

Finally, the need to have public free internet in open areas such as parks or sports fields is highlighted, so that those students who have connection problems due to lack of budget or other issues, can go out to take their classes and carry out their tasks, taking the precautions necessary for healthy distance.

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