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# PERCEPTIONS OF EFL TEACHERS ON A RESEARCH METHODS COURSE IN A DISTANCE EDUCATION CONTEXT

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## » Resumen

Desarrollar las habilidades de investigación de los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera no es tarea fácil dado que difícilmente se perciben a sí mismos como investigadores (Borg, 2008). La situación puede ser aún más compleja cuando los profesores se encuentran en un contexto de educación a distancia. Este estudio cualitativo presenta las percepciones de un grupo de profesores mexicanos de inglés sobre un curso de investigación a distancia. El docente utilizó una combinación de videoconferencia y plataforma de administración de cursos en línea. El propósito del estudio era explorar las opiniones de los maestros al utilizar tecnologías de educación a distancia por primera vez en un curso de métodos de investigación. La información se obtuvo de dos fuentes: un foro de discusión en línea y el blog del curso. Los resultados indican que los participantes

valoraron la interacción con los compañeros distantes, el asesor y la instructora para obtener asistencia académica, una perspectiva distinta sobre su trabajo, entusiasmo, retroalimentación, y oportunidades para confrontar ideas y compartir sentimientos. Los participantes se sintieron incómodos con el uso de los dispositivos de comunicación del sistema de videoconferencia. Sin embargo, consideraron que la plataforma de administración del curso en línea (Blackboard) fue muy benéfica para su aprendizaje por la cantidad y variedad de recursos de apoyo que ofrecía en un solo lugar. Futuros estudios deben indagar sobre las mejores formas de asesorar proyectos de investigación a distancia.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Formación de profesores, educación a distancia, lenguas extranjeras, educación superior, investigación

## » Abstract

Developing research skills of teachers of English as a foreign language is not always easy given that they hardly perceive themselves as researchers (Borg, 2009). The situation may turn more complex when they are in a distance learning context. This qualitative study discusses the perceptions of a group of Mexican in-service teachers of English as a foreign language taking a distance education course on research methods. The instructor used a combination of videoconference and online course management technologies. The purpose of the study was to explore the student teachers' views on using distance learning technologies for the first time in a research methods course. Data for the study came from an online class discussion forum and a course blog. Findings indicate that students valued interacting with distant peers, the instructor and the adviser through technology to get academic assistance, a different perspective on their work, enthusiasm, feedback, and opportunities to confront ideas and share feelings. The participants felt uncomfortable with the use of the videoconference communication devices. However, the online management technology (Blackboard) was perceived as highly beneficial to their learning because of the amount and variety of learning resources stored in a single place. More research should be carried out to identify better ways of distance research advising.

KEY WORDS: Teacher education; distance learning; foreign languages; higher education; research

## INTRODUCTION

The claim that English language teachers need research knowledge and skills has been widely acknowledged by second language teacher educators in English speaking countries (Bell, 1997; Brindley, 1991; Brown, 1999; Burns, 1999;

Day, 1991; Day and Conklin, 1992; Gebhard, Gaitan & Oprandy, 2000; McDonough, 1997; Nunan, 2003; Richards, 2000; Richards and Lockman, 1996; Schieppegtell, 1997; Wallace, 2004). It is argued that teachers need to know how to read and understand research to evaluate the applicability of different approaches and techniques (Brown, 1999); to become more effective trying out and testing received knowledge (Day,1991); to make decisions about what and how to teach (Gebhard, Gaitan & Oprandy, 2000); to become producers rather than consumers of knowledge (Nunan, 2003); to develop a critical perspective on practice (Burns, 1999); to improve and develop for life as teachers (Wallace, 2006); to increase their opportunities for research-based funding (Brindley, 1991); and to contribute to the continuous professionalization of the field (Richards, 2000). Research knowledge is thought to be particularly useful for those with teaching experience, language competence, and academic orientation (Crookes and Chandler, 2001).

Language teacher educators have different views on how research knowledge benefits teachers. Wallace (2006), for example, maintains that the incorporation of research activities into teaching is one of the most effective ways of developing and improving the professional practice of pre-service and in-service teachers and teacher educators. He suggests that teachers who experience the process of doing research (isolating an area of inquiry, asking questions, collecting data, analyzing data, and reflecting on what is discovered), are more prepared to enhance their teaching. Wallace (2006) points to two pragmatic reasons for including research activities in teacher education programs. First, teachers who have the necessary skills to analyze and improve their own teaching will be more prepared to independently continue their professional development for life. Second, teachers who want to improve their qualifications through further studies have better chances to succeed if they possess the

knowledge and skills to perform the extended study required in graduate programs.

Nunan (2003), on the other hand, considers that research knowledge is useful for language teachers at a time when language learning and teaching have changed from a prescriptive to an empirical orientation. Teachers who used to rely on pedagogical recommendations on what and how to teach are now basing their decisions on empirical evidence about what learners actually do with and through their second language. Furthermore, teachers with a prescriptive orientation can better benefit from the research made by others if they test findings in the realities of their own classrooms. To do this, they not only need to be capable of reading reports by other researchers in an informed and critical way, but they also need to have the skills to plan, implement and evaluate their own studies.

For Burns (2009) research knowledge not only allows teachers to develop a critical perspective on their practice, but it also gives them the possibility of observing the various influential factors that operate in their classrooms. The purpose of using a research perspective is, according to Burns, to develop a greater understanding of what happens in the classroom to promote change that enhances the learning outcomes of students. Often, this research is most successful when teachers collaborate in the research process or engage in inquiry or study groups that meet periodically to discuss findings. The publication of the results of teacher research in journals, stories, or case studies provides opportunities for other teachers to explore changes in their own practice.

Research knowledge, however, is not the only condition that language teachers need to inquire into their own practice. Continued support from a more experienced individual and opportunities to participate in a community of colleagues are also necessary (Borg, 2006). At least initially, teachers need to be scaffolded, especially when they feel isolated and where a research culture

is incipient. Opportunities to collaborate, to discuss research issues, and to develop a sense of community with others engaged in teacher research, are necessary forms of support if teachers are to carry out practitioner inquiry (Nunan, 1992).

Globally speaking, language teachers do not engage in any significant manner with research (Borg, 2003). Most teachers would argue for lack of time as the main reason however, lack of research knowledge is seldom mentioned. Research knowledge is becoming an integral part of the language teaching curriculum in México. The problem is that although some research has been done, there is not enough information about the conditions that facilitate teacher research in particular contexts (Borg, 2006; 2010). The question arises as to whether research knowledge is more difficult to develop when teachers are in a distance education condition.

This study was developed to explore the use of videoconferencing and online course management technologies in a research methods distance education course for English language teachers in Mexico. Specifically, the study aimed at understanding the learning opportunities and difficulties associated with the technologies used, from the perspective of the student teachers.

## METHOD

This is a qualitative interpretive study. Interpretive description (Thorne, 2008) is an inductive analytic approach used to capture themes and patterns within subjective perceptions to generate an interpretive description capable of informing understanding. This approach builds upon relatively small purposive samples, using interviews, participant observation or documentary analysis to articulate a coherent and meaningful account of experiential knowledge. The product is a

coherent conceptual description that taps thematic patterns and commonalities believed to characterize the phenomenon that is being studied.

## The participants

Participants of the study were 18 in-service teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) enrolled in a distance education research course. The class included 24 student teachers, however, six of them did not return the letter of informed consent and therefore the information they provided was not considered in the analysis. The group of participants was composed of 17 female and 1 male EFL teachers of elementary, middle and high school levels. Their ages were between 24 and 52. They were native speakers of Spanish, in their last year of undergraduate studies. Their English language proficiency was varied; their ITP-TOEFL scores ranged from 480 to 610 points. Their teaching experience ranged from four to seven years.

Although the EFL teachers were already hired by different educational institutions, they were in the process of acquiring a teaching undergraduate degree. In México, elementary, middle, and high-school language teachers, especially in private schools, are not required a teaching certificate, as long as they are able to communicate fluently in English. Only university language teachers are required to hold at least an undergraduate degree. Working requirements for English language teachers are gradually changing and more teachers are entering higher education. Student teachers in this study were in six different locations and they attended a local videoconference class once a week for four hours.

## THE RESEARCH COURSE

The research course was part of a BA in English Language delivered by a public university to videoconference classrooms in seven cities in Mexico. The need to offer the program had

been identified for a long time. However, the scarcity and dispersion of the language teacher education professionals impeded setting it in operation. Videoconference technology solved the problem because instructors delivered their courses from their place of residence. Students therefore had some courses in which the instructor was physically in their site.

The research course was the last of a set of three research courses included in a distance undergraduate program in English Language. The program had a total of 36 courses on four areas of knowledge: (a) English language and culture, (b) language teaching pedagogy, (c) pedagogic content, and (c) research knowledge. Courses were offered to the students via videoconference and a combination of email, telephone, fax and mail. It was for the research course of this study that a course management platform Blackboard was incorporated into the distance education program for the first time. Hence the importance of collecting evidence of the ways in which students perceived the innovation.

Teaching teachers how to inquire their own teaching is a complex process because it involves not only introducing them to diverse research methods and techniques, but also discussing the assumptions that teachers bring to the course about research and how it is produced. Many teachers, for example, associate research with scientists, experiments and statistics (Borg, 2009). It is through reading, writing and discussing that they come to realize that in teacher research, the goal is to understand rather than to prove; that teachers can be researchers; and the self can be accepted as a legitimate focus of inquiry.

The research courses were delivered through videoconference technology for formal presentations, whole class discussion, group-building and decision-making activities. The Web course management system blackboard was used to provide the students with two

kinds of learning resources: (1) pre-designed learning activities, and (2) learner support. Learner support included a discussion forum for goal-oriented dialogue; a blog to express thoughts and reflections; a portfolio to display students' drafts and finished research products; and email to communicate with the instructor, the adviser, and peers. Learner support through blackboard also included a research-resources area in which students made full use of research articles, books and other materials to read or print for offline independent learning. Finally, each student teacher was allocated an adviser as an additional source of academic support. Advisers were members of the academic staff of the program who taught other courses. Students selected their advisers and they could contact them by email to discuss research interests and problems. Each adviser could not accept more than four advisees.

On the first day of class, students were trained in the use of blackboard during a one-hour session by videoconference. The students watched the instructor demonstrating the use of the online platform and took notes. They later entered the platform individually, at home.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data for the study came from two sources: the discussion forum and the course blog. The research course lasted 15 weeks. On the 3rd week the participants signed an informed consent letter. On the 7th, 8th, and 9th weeks, three open-ended questions were posted on the discussion forum to investigate: (1) the learning support needs of students; (2) the advantages and challenges perceived in the use of videoconference technology to acquire research knowledge and skills; and (3) the advantages and challenges perceived in the use of blackboard. On the 14th week, once the participants had several opportunities to use

the different supports provided, three blogs were created for students to respond to five open-ended questions that correspond to the research questions of this study.

Six one-paragraph long comments were obtained from each participant, making a total of 108 comments. Comments were printed from the blackboard archives and assigned a number. Pseudonyms were given to each participant to protect their identity.

The analysis consisted in finding similarities and differences in the participants' views. The authors independently read all the comments several times, separating the ones that referred to the videoconference system and those that referred to the online platform. Then, comments were classified into positive or negative. The authors' analysis agreed in 87% of the cases. All other cases were discussed until consensus was reached.

## RESULTS

### Opportunities and difficulties with the videoconference system

Perceptions of the participants on videoconference were mixed. While some student teachers acknowledged its benefits in terms of real-time interaction and immediacy, others complained about the time-delay and the lack of contact with instructors in the remote sites. The strengths of videoconference technology mentioned were largely related to having questions answered by the instructor in real-time. This characteristic helped them learn course content. Many of the positive comments on videoconference point to the specific contents learned, as in the case of Pat, whose opinion was the following.

*I learned about the characteristics of quality research, different research methods, how to design*

questionnaires, and the use of elicitation techniques. I could also clarify the doubts raised by the readings. The videoconference had its problems sometimes, like the blurred screen or when the audio got disconnected. But this did not happen all the time. Videoconference is the only way to take this program and I got used to it very quickly, even to the problems. (Pat, C-19)

Other participants focused on the advantage of being able to interact with distant peers. This interaction provided exposure to different perspectives on the topic in turn, and contributed to the construction of the participants' identity as researchers. The opinion given by Susan illustrates this point.

*I could listen to my peers' experiences and their comments helped me analyze different ways in carrying out a study. This helped me grow as researcher and not only as teacher. I also learned the theory about doing research. (Susan, C-25)*

Perceived challenges of videoconference to learning were few. One of the challenges mentioned was the physical absence of the instructor in the remote sites. Students assumed that learning occurs when there is face-to-face contact with the instructor, and while in a videoconference situation learning may occur, this learning is not full or complete. Students seemed to perceive that learning is not of the same quality when the instructor is not present. Having the instructor on a screen rather than in person discourages them from making questions, which inhibits their learning. Rachel was in such case. The following is her opinion.

*I think that videoconference is not a hundred per cent effective because*

*as student I sometimes felt frustrated by not having the teacher in front of me, to solve my problems and questions. I had to use the Internet to communicate and many times teachers don't get the messages or they take too long to respond. I couldn't get to know how my study was going. Then I had to use the phone to ask and it became a bit complicated because of the professor's schedule and my own schedule. (Rachel, C-30)*

Other participants clearly accepted that they felt uncomfortable in the videoconference environment because they had to use a microphone to participate and watch the instructor on a screen. Those students simply avoid communicating with instructors or students in other locations. Rebecca, for example, perceived communicating through videoconference as difficult. Difficulties to communicate necessarily bring difficulties to learn. A fragment of Rebecca's account reflects her perspective on how videoconference technology hindered her learning.

*Personally, it is difficult for me to interact with a microphone and a screen. I feel better when I can talk to a person because this facilitates direct communication. This situation, however, forced me to substitute the lack of communication with more reading. Contact time by videoconference all in all is very short anyway. I spend a lot of time reading. (Rebecca, C-31)*

Laura had the same problem. In spite of the two years of exposure to the camera, the screen and the microphone, she still had not overcome her difficulties with the equipment. She knew that class participation was important; however she felt that she could not do anything about it, as it is expressed on the following commentary.

*On the other hand, the use of the microphone has limited my participation in class. I cannot manage confidently behind a microphone and in front of a screen. I think I would talk in class much more if I didn't have to use them. The way in which this interferes essentially is in my participation. (Laura, C-35)*

As in face-to-face classes there are always students who feel more comfortable without participating in discussions. The fact that in order to make comments in videoconference requires the use of a microphone probably makes the lack of participation more obvious and more uncomfortable for such students.

## **Opportunities and difficulties of the online course platform**

The majority of the participants of the study perceived the online course management platform as convenient and helpful. The platform included research articles organized by theme, chapters of research methods books, forums to discuss emergent issues and concerns, portfolios where students could read their peers' work and publish their own, and email to contact their adviser, the instructor or other students. The platform was used by the students for the first time on the research course and the process of getting acquainted with the system did not take long. Elsa referred to this process in the following excerpt.

*Blackboard was the means to receive the theory about how to do research, specific material about my topic, the way to turn in my research drafts, and to receive feedback and my grades. I learned how to use this system and took advantages of technology to read my peers' work and make comparisons to develop my study. I could say that*

*when I began using the blackboard, more than being a benefit, it was an obstacle. I had hard times while learning how to use it to receive or send information. But now I feel more confident when working with this system. It's nice to have everything there. (Elsa, C-51)*

Perceived benefits of the platform included the multidimensional kind of learning that it promotes. While developing research knowledge, the participants were also enhancing their computer skills and becoming aware of the complexity of distance learning. This learning condition is not possible in a regular classroom and by course books only. Employing technologies such as the Internet, applying collaborative learning, making course management tools accessible to learners, and using distance learning applications such as videoconference, create information-rich, stimulant conditions for learning of different kinds. In a very short text Sylvia reflects on how the course environment contributed to her learning.

*Blackboard helped a lot to communicate timely and effectively with my instructors and classmates. I think blackboard helped me understand the idea of distance learning. It was very rewarding to read our work online. I felt I grew as a teacher and I understand more and more about research. It also helped me understand technology. (Sylvia, C-45)*

The perceived weaknesses of blackboard had to do with reading preferences and time management skills. Although most students were used to spending many hours working on the computer, some of them complained of having to spend on printing materials because they did not feel comfortable reading online. Working long hours with computers can make



the eyes hurt. The fact that all reading materials were online was not helpful for Pat, who perceived that blackboard did not meet her needs. She referred to the problems she had with the platform in the following terms.

*Personally, I like to highlight the most important ideas on my reading material to understand deeply. I need to have the printed material because I get very tired of being in front of the computer. Also, there is the problem that some professors take too long in uploading materials. I think more people should be hired to help the instructor in replying to emails, uploading materials and all the activities involved. (Pat, C-1)*

## CONCLUSIONS

Evidence from this study indicates that distance students valued videoconference for the support provided by their peers and the instructor. The challenges perceived in the videoconference environment were the physical absence of the instructor and having to use a microphone and a screen to communicate with her. The online course management system was perceived as highly beneficial to their learning mainly because of the amount and variety of support resources concentrated in the site; and because it stimulates different kinds of learning. Some students, however, were not comfortable reading online.

The first implication of these findings is that the combination of videoconference and course management platform is perfectly suited to develop research knowledge in language teacher education programs. Borg (2006) has stressed the importance of continued support from a more experienced individual and opportunities to participate in a community of colleagues as necessary conditions to develop research

knowledge in EFL teachers. The participants gave different examples of how technology facilitated opportunities to collaborate, to discuss research issues, and to develop a sense of community. Contrary to what some language educators may think, distance education does not hinder in any way the teachers' efforts to engage in research. On the contrary, they receive more proper and richer guidance because Web-based technology facilitates the provision of a larger and more diversified array of reading materials in a more organized way.

Moreover, teachers can request and receive assistance in oral or written form, depending on the medium they decide to use or the kind of support need. For academic assistance they can resort to the instructor, the adviser or peers, either through videoconference, portfolio, discussion forum, blog, or email. For the sharing of feelings the discussion forum seemed to be to be most frequently used. The possibility of communicating with an adviser was considered important given the nature of the course. Based on the value that students placed on this kind of support, we suggest that distance research courses include local or distant advisers, and that more research is carried out to identify better ways of distance advising.

Borg (2006) has called for more empirical studies on the conditions that facilitate research in particular contexts. Distance learning environments may be rich in information and opportunities for interaction, however not all teachers were able to take advantage of the available resources due to skills, preferences and beliefs about learning. Teachers who have a high value for technology and perceive it to be useful seem to have fewer problems with its use. Teachers who are not confident enough using computers need to be given evidence that technology can make learning more interesting, easier, more enjoyable and motivating. The characteristics of such training should be further investigated.

Interaction with others seemed to be what students valued more as learner support. Learner support involves relationships among individuals and therefore the ways in which learner support is used should be viewed within the context of culturally specific patterns of social interaction. Cultural differences may have implications for the mode of support distance students prefer and the effectiveness of the support they seek. Further research may investigate these issues.

This study did not attempt to investigate in any detailed way the different ways in which interaction was constructed by the students. Further studies, however, could analyze samples of recorded utterances of students engaged in different types of activities through different communication tools to understand how specific supports contribute to and improve the development of research knowledge.

This field study was not without limitations; one of such limitations is the exclusive use of transcript analysis. Despite this limitation, even interpreted tentatively, the results of this study contribute to the current body of research on distance education and language teacher education.

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