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ELT Teachers' and Learners' Perceptions of Online Core Language Courses during Pandemic

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Abstract

In 2020, the global sanitary crisis of COVID-19 prompted us to search for strategies to keep communicating in all areas of society. The education domain had to adapt and quickly made a significant shift towards digital interactions to facilitate instructional delivery for teaching and learning. This qualitative case study aimed at exploring the perceptions and most challenging facts associated with an Online education model applied to core courses in an ELT program at a Colombian university. Data from surveys interviews and focus groups applied to 115 learners and 20 teachers suggested that despite the benefits regarding authentic materials for language learners, constraints related to learners connectivity, teachers-students interaction, social presence, motivation, evaluation, and the delivery of feedback were the most challenging situations. The overview portrayed in this study will facilitate comprehension of the learning and teaching issues presented during Covid 19 pandemic and will raise awareness of new perspectives for further online instruction.

Keywords

online education, Colombian higher education, face-to-face classes, virtual environments.

1. Introduction

Online education (OnLE) is a way of learning employing the internet as a medium of instruction and classes are conveyed through it with a computer or any other electronic device where students can be anywhere (independently) to learn and interact with teachers and peers (Carliner, 2004). During the last

decade, online courses have become more popular since they provide students with a non-traditional way of learning so they can organize their schedules better.

Practitioners claimed the benefits and downfalls of the online model. According to Weissman (2017), advantages include more communication, convenience, flexibility, optimization of classroom facilities, promoting more collaboration, critical thinking and discussions, as well as risk-taking. However, the listed disadvantages are counted as high time consumption, commitments for teachers and students, increased workload, increased cheating and plagiarism, less social contact, less active learning, and feelings of isolation among students.

Finch and Jacobs (2012) called some advantages of OnLE, time reduction, traveling cost, interaction with experts no matter the place or nationality, and flexible time for developing tasks, among others. But it was until 2020, that the entire world was compelled to rapidly shift from face-to-face (F2F) classes to online models of instruction when schools and universities closed due to the globalized breakdown of the pandemic with Covid-19. This transition with limited or no training led to challenges for teachers, students, coordinators, and families.

The abrupt immersion into an online mode of instruction evidenced different institutional shortcomings such as connectivity, course materials, and lack of suitable equipment, as well as the sanitary emergency, social difficulties, and personal, emotional, and family problems faced by students all around the world. According to UNICEF (2020), the pandemic has affected an estimated 1.6 billion learners in over 150 countries worldwide.

In Colombia, like in other parts of the world, online learning sooner became the model adopted for instruction. Concerns about the impact of working with the online model led many researchers to inquire about the way teachers and students faced learning for two years to continue education, minimizing personal contact through technology, and enabling communication.

A great number of studies on OnLE have been published across the world during 2021 and 2022 on critical issues linked to their struggles, and experiences. For instance, Olasile, and Emrah (2020), described how to change instruction methods to face the pandemic. Similarly, Moise et al. (2021), researched undergraduate and graduate students' perceptions of OnLE. Starkey et al. (2021), reported a worldwide educational response to the crisis using technology. Singh et al. (2022) and Joshi et al. (2021), inquired about the teachers' barriers to teaching and assessing learners. Furthermore, Jena, P. (2020) reported the Indian government's measures to cope with Covid-19 in schools; and Onyema et al. (2020), studied the harmful effects of Covid-19 in education.

However, few studies have asked to teachers and students directly about their perceptions of the way they faced learning through OnLE, particularly we focused on expanding information related to interactions in online classes. This study explored the teachers' and learners' perceptions regarding the main challenges and issues presented in an OnLE model during the pandemic breakdown, for developing core Communication and Grammar courses (formerly F2F) at a higher education campus. With that purpose, the present inquiry displays the conceptual framework with relevant studies, to

latterly, explain the methodology, results, discussion, and conclusions.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

1.1.1 Online Education

OnLE is a model of learning delivered via the Internet using a computer or any other electronic device. It does not refer to particular applications but to educational computer networking (Harasim, 2012).

OnLE allows students to turn anywhere into a classroom, providing a rich learning environment with much more flexibility than a traditional classroom, and live chats with teachers and classmates which characterized its conditions, as Harasim (2012), claimed: "the attributes of any time, any place communication make group interaction and collaboration in online media, distinctive" (p. 204).

Online course numbers have been rising exponentially since they provide learners with several benefits. Moving from one place to another is one of the most engaging reasons that entails economic benefits (Zengin, 2020). This flexibility is one of the most appreciated features of OnLE since students can organize their schedules and attend classes sitting in their living rooms or taking care of their children. This implies that students will learn at their own pace and rhythm and will probably develop different skills and their attitude toward their learning process might change (Dyer et al., 2018).

This change is met as a new paradigm for learning, rooted in the shifts facilitated by the way to deliver the message for communication. Recently theories of learning and cognition have been characterized by the communication metaphor based on a transmission model (Cunningham et al., 1986), where the teacher is the only source of information rather than the multiple original forms of delivering the data in the online model, provoking learners' opportunities to build their knowledge, to reflect on the topics, sharing and discussing with their peers assuming in some way the traditional role of teacher.

Despite these potential benefits related to the learner-centered approach to gaining knowledge in OnLE, some challenges need to be addressed. Dumford and Miller (2018) argued that OnLE has the characteristic of discouraging collaborative learning, quality of interactions, and discussions with others, rather than traditional F2F environments. It is probable that as learners can work at their own pace alone, interaction is reduced, and collaboration is as well. Additionally, for teachers, the workload is increased, since it takes time to respond to multiple emails about students' questions, and at the same time provide feedback.

Interaction is an essential component of effective learning in the classroom (Xiao & Li, 2021). However, the lack of it among learners has been identified as a critical issue in online models of education. According to Anderson et al. (2001), the absence of active participation and collaborative learning in the classroom can result in decreasing student's motivation and engagement, leading to hampered learning outcomes.

Additionally, they complement the idea that traditional teaching methods focusing on information delivery rather than active engagement contribute to these teacher-centered teaching practices.

Similarly, Mäkitalo-Siegl et al. (2016) discovered limited learner interaction in OnLE, primarily directed towards the teacher, which hinders collaborative learning and active participation.

1.1.2 Interactions and Social Presence in Online Education

Lee and Warschauer (2017) noted that learners in online language courses may experience feelings of isolation and a lack of interaction with teachers and peers. Virtual education often lacks what has been called social presence (Anderson et al., 2001), which is present in traditional F2F learning environments. This is because the physical distance and lack of nonverbal cues made it difficult for students to feel connected to their peers and instructors. These interactions allow students to build relationships with their peers and instructors, which in turn, can improve learning outcomes.

Social presence refers to the degree to which individuals feel connected to and immersed in a social environment, particularly in online or digital contexts (Whiteman, 2002; Leh, 2001; Rourke et al. 1999). Some other authors describe it as "the extent to which learners perceive themselves and others as real people in a virtual environment and can establish and maintain interpersonal relationships" (Rogers & Xie, 2020, p. 3). An intrapersonal condition that arises from digital interactions, wherein individuals apprehend a feeling of affiliation with fellow participants, the subject matter, and the virtual environment, as Richardson & Swan, 2020 stated

All these definitions highlight the importance of feeling real in virtual environments and thus interacting freely as in F2F encounters, which provide learners with the sense of belonging to a social group, what Garrison et al. (2000) defined as a Community of Inquiry (CoI), aiming to promote a comprehensive and valuable online learning experience. This model emphasizes the importance of creating a community of learners who engage in critical discourse, reflection, and inquiry, highlighting the significance of both social and cognitive presence in online learning environments. Using this model, instructors can design and facilitate online courses that encourage active learning and engagement, foster a sense of community among learners, and provide a rich and meaningful learning experience.

2. Method

2.1 Context and Population

This study followed a qualitative inquiry, particularly used a case study design (Creswell, 2014) and involved a total population of 115 participants: 20 experienced in-service teachers and 95 randomly chosen students from the core courses: Communication (English Language classes) from semester III to semester VII, and Grammar courses (Linguistic part of the language classes) from semester III, IV and Advanced Grammar course. They belonged to an English Language Teaching (ELT) program at a Colombian Public University. Teachers must have worked at the university for several years; additionally, they must have experience teaching these language courses from the first to seventh semester of the bachelor's degree. The data collection procedures were Online surveys of 20 teachers and 95 students. Semi-structured interviews with 5 teachers via cellphone, and 3 virtual focus groups ~~to~~ with students, each one involving 3 students. This data was collected during the second semester of 2020 and the first semester of 2021.

The excerpt from teachers' interviews (named by their initials: LL, DB, JN, YT, EG), and excerpts from students' focus groups will be named S1-1 (S= student 1 = Identification of the participant and -1 corresponding to the first focus group) as well as tables of students' and teachers' responses, were deeply analyzed to provide an answer to the research questions of this study: Which are teachers' and learners' perceptions regarding main challenges and issues presented in an online model of education during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2.2 Data Analysis

Data analysis was done using thematic analysis which according to (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 11) "involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data. It organizes and describes data in a detailed way and allows researchers to identify important features of it, highlight similarities, differences, trends, and patterns that may not be immediately apparent". The quantitative data (surveys), was nominal (set of categories), that were counted by simple frequency of how often the categorical data occurs. This was presented using descriptive statistics analysis in charts, Gray (2014).

3. Result

3.1 Perceived Advantages of the Online Model

The information obtained from interviews questionnaires and focus groups revealed key advantageous areas of a fully virtual model for teaching Grammar and Communication. The most highlighted are easy management of virtual resources, access to information, flexibility, self-paced learning, autonomy, and time and cost savings (Table 1).

Table 1. Teachers' and Learners' Responses on Advantages of the Online Model

Choose which of the following factors have been advantages during your online teaching/learning process. (Choose various)		
	Teachers' response N (%)	Learners' response N (%)
Connectivity	6 (30%)	33 (9.5%)
Online tools/platforms management	15 (15%)	66 (9.5%)
Device's availability	14 (14%)	37 (9.5%)
Autonomy	10 (50%)	53 (9.5%)
Motivation to teach/attend online classes	9 (45%)	32 (9.5%)
Schedule flexibility	16 (80%)	57 (9.5%)
Availability of time	10 (50%)	38 (9.5%)
Teachers'/Learners' commitment to using online…	4 (20%)	38 (9.5%)
Teachers' preparation on online ed.	4 (20%)	34 (9.5%)

Academic load	6 (30%)	12 (9.5%)
Teacher-Learners' interaction	3 (15%)	18 (9.5%)
Interaction between students	3 (15%)	7 (9.5%)
Number of ss per group	4 (20%)	15 (29.5%)
Institutional support/training	11 (55%)	12 (9.5)
Assessment/Evaluation	3 (15%)	7 (9.5%)
Learning process tracking	2 (10%)	---
Courses completion	1 (05%)	---

N: surveys choosing that option.

%: response percentage based on all surveys.

---: not answered in that survey.

As shown in Table 1, the main advantages of this model were schedule flexibility, availability of time and autonomy. Digital tools facilitate access to a diverse range of information, resources, instructional approaches, and continued engagement in the learning process as YT expressed "*There is a lot of access to real, authentic information. Maybe having students go and read the news in a real newspaper or participate in a forum and exchange ideas with native speakers".* It implied accessing first-hand information in real-time, as well as, allowing them to be part of communicative or exchanging activities with people from all over the globe, anytime.

Students expressed the easiness of using platforms and online resources once they got acquainted with them. The university platform, seemed to be simple to manage and allowed them to have an organization of sessions, content, online materials, and resources. S2-3 said: *"It is nice to have the information there and you can see it whenever you want and need, that point, I liked it*", additionally S3-1 expressed *"contents in the platform of the U is easy to use, Cinthia is available, but not all the teachers used it, others uploaded in Google Classroom, that was ok too"*

Another situation of OnLE is the academic and curricular flexibility the university applied to encourage the whole academic community to reach learning goals, independently from the situation they were going through. Learners access information and process data and content at their rhythm, time, and schedule; Teacher LL mentioned that "*a sign that the students have had an advantage in these courses has been the flexibility, unlike the F2F classes where there were established deadlines, now the processes are more delayed".*

In accordance with the teacher, S2-2 expressed *"I have noticed that now we have more time to accomplish works, teachers give us more time, that is good, but for some partners, I think is not ok because they just relax and do not force themselves to do it on time"*.

However, the autonomy to achieve learning goals depends on learners' responsibility to make OnLE part of their academic life and develop an awareness of the role they have in their learning process; this

is why LL claimed that *"the virtuality has its advantages to the extent that the student appropriates the knowledge, responds to the processes, and develops work schedules and routines."*

In the same perspective S1-3 said, *"This kind of learning is more demanding, because you have to work by yourself, the teacher is not there to see if you're working or not…"*

Online classes have been demonstrated to be useful in shortening activities that physically take more time, such as commuting from one place to another, and meetings for group work when needed.

DB mentioned that *"an advantage of virtual classes is that one can spend, perhaps, less time teaching the class",* as one of many examples; *"Another advantage is that money is not spent on transportation",* he added, *"another upside is that we can save a lot of paper"*, which implies that OnLE allows new ways of accessing material.

3.2 Perceptions on the Effectiveness of the Online Model

The analysis of both tables and interviews led to controversial perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the model for core courses such as Grammar and Communication. As it can see below (Table 2), 70% of the teachers expressed that this model is effective for teaching those courses.

Table 2. Teachers' Perceptions about the Effectiveness of Model

For teaching of higher education courses, you consider that the virtual methodology is:	
	N (%)
Very effective	04 (20%)
Effective	14 (70%)
Not very effective	02 (10%)
N: surveys choosing that option.	
%: response percentage based on all surveys.	

Some of them expressed disagreement; as teacher DB, claimed: *"I think that virtual teaching is not that it does not work, but that it cannot be compared to how you teach F2F."* Moreover, Professor YT added: *"I would not say that it is ineffective. It does help and contribute, but not entirely because we are in a culture where the student sometimes needs more"*. Teachers consider the model useful; however, they expressed it does not have the same impact on students' learning process as teaching F2F does, that is the reason they do not prefer to teach Grammar and Communication courses using this model as it was evidenced in Table 3.

Table 3. Preference of Model

What methodology, do you feel comfortable with for teaching communication and grammar courses?

	N (%)
Virtual	1 (5%)
F2F	13 (65%)
Blended	06 (30%)

N: surveys choosing that option.

%: response percentage based on all surveys.

On the contrary, students consider virtual learning less effective than the F2F model. As you can see below (Table 4), 80% of the students claimed that a F2F model is much more effective for teaching Grammar and Communication.

Table 4. Students' Perceptions about the Effectiveness of the Model

What method of education do you consider the most suitable for the development of Communication and Grammar courses?	
	N (%)
F2F	77 (80%)
Blended	14 (14%)
Virtual	04 (06%)

N: surveys choosing that option.

%: response percentage based on all surveys.

Learners, perceive this model as not so effective as S3-1 said "*To be honest, I feel I'm not learning so much",* in the same view, S1-2 expressed*: "It's not the same, you know, I feel I can't learn, because I don't want to access to classes sometimes, it's so boring."*

3.3 Challenges in Online Education

According to learners' and teachers' responses, most difficulties in teaching and learning Grammar and Communication were focused on the availability of technological devices and connectivity, online interactions, control of students' performance during the meetings, and tracking of learners' progress and feedback delivery.

In Table 5, teachers and learners agreed with the most salient disadvantages: connectivity (45% and 62.1%) and online interactions (60% and 42.1%)

Table 5. Teachers' and Learners' Responses on Disadvantages/Issues of the Model

Choose which of the following factors have been disadvantages during your online teaching/learning process. (Choose various)		
	Teachers' response	Learners' response

	N (%)	N (%)
Connectivity	9 (45%)	59 (62.1%)
Online tools/platforms management	2 (10%)	9 (9.5%)
Device's availability	5 (25%)	18 (18.9%)
Autonomy	---	2 (2.1%)
Motivation to teach/attend online classes	5 (25%)	32 (33.7%)
Schedule flexibility	1 (05%)	5 (5.3%)
Availability of time	3 (15%)	16 (16.8%)
Teachers'/Learners' commitment to using online…	15 (75%)	11 (11.6%)
Teachers' preparation on online ed.	---	11 (11.6%)
Academic load	1 (05%)	43 (45.3%)
Teacher-Learners' interaction	12 (60%)	40 (42.1%)
Interaction between students	11 (55%)	28 (29.5%)
Number of ss per group	5 (25%)	11 (11.6%)
Institutional support/training	2 (10%)	---
Assessment/Evaluation	8 (40%)	---
Learning process tracking	7 (35%)	---
Courses completion	2 (10%)	---

N: surveys choosing that option.

%: response percentage based on all surveys.

---: not answered

3.3.1 Availability of Technological Devices and Connectivity

The change of model took by surprise a great number of learners since it became a hard situation for those who lacked access to an internet connection and the appropriate electronic devices to attend online meetings. These aspects were worsened by additional factors: location (rural or urban), and social-economic status to afford internet, which may lead to decreased learners' motivation to be responsible with their academic duties.

Teacher DB said: *"We depend on a good internet connection or the use of a platform that often does not work well, and that many students do not have access to it or do not know how to handle it."*.

This same feeling was expressed by learners who said: "*It's been difficult for us as students, because for example, sometimes I can't attend the class because in my town lights went out sometimes, or the internet fails, it's just by moments it is ok."* (S3-3)

Following learners' idea, YT claimed: *"The problem is that not all students have an efficient connection or resources and as a teacher, one feels powerless if there are students who need to improve certain skills and it cannot be done due to this limitation".*

Thus, the evidence suggested that regularly, students who cannot afford to access electronic devices and internet connectivity were the students perceived as requiring closer attention and greater support during the learning process.

3.3.2 Teachers-Students' Relationship and Interaction

Teachers' and students' first contact may be considered the starting point and pivotal bond for goal-reaching and a good relationship in the classroom. It involves building rapport, which can have a profound impact on their academic performance, motivation, and overall well-being (Wilson & Ryan, 2011).

Throughout the interviews, teachers agreed that a close and constant student-teacher connection influences learning and teaching processes positively. However, their perceptions in this regard were divided. For some of them, it was positive, but not for others.

Teachers' perceptions were divided, LL expressed: "*The student-teacher relationship has been more positive than negative. Today, the student constantly interacts with their teacher through communication channels*". Teachers mentioned they communicate with their students through emails, phone calls, and WhatsApp.

However, other teachers said: *"The teacher-student relationship did change, I would say that in a negative way […] I would have liked to do a better job with my students, spend more time with them, and assign more activities, but there were limitations […] the students may not dare to talk about their problems with the teachers because they may have never seen the teachers F2F, so students feel scared or not confident".* (DB)

In the same perspective students expressed: *"This was a kind of weir, although we can communicate with the teacher by different means, it wasn't the same, you sometimes even don't feel how the teacher was true"* (S2-1), this same thought was shared by teacher DB, when expressed "*The teacher-student interaction is not the same, it is not as direct as in the presence; perhaps, it is not so easy to talk with the student as to when one did it in person".*

This feeling was perceived in students' interaction as they said: *"As we didn't know some partners in the classroom, nobody wanted to participate, sometimes classes were so bored and teachers had to obliged to talk, while this never happens in the real class*" (S1-2).

Some teachers similarly expressed how difficult was to interact with the whole group with very limited time, which represented a constraint for class interaction and could influence, the completion of meaningful processes. For instance, EG said: *"It was difficult proper interaction and enough time, not all students can have them in the virtual class."*

The link between teachers and students was different, teachers expressed that although communication with some students was constant, by WhatsApp or email it was not enough because of others' limitations to do so.

The other aspect included in this interaction pattern was the visual contact (seeing people behind a screen). In this regard, teachers perceived this as a negative aspect of the virtual model since not having a visual connection with students and among them, may inhibit the development of activities, as well as question teachers' reliance on students' honesty during participation and performance.

DB mentioned that *"students do not want to turn on the computer or cell phone cameras at the time of class",* even when they are asked to do it to participate or provide an answer or comment about a topic. In this same view, students said: *"It was like most of the people in the class don't want to turn the camera on, because we didn't want others to see our houses, bad looking mode, you know, our space"* (S2-1).

3.3.3 Tracking of Learners' Progress and Feedback Delivery

Learners' level of performance is tied to their progression and commitment during their learning process and to their evidence in the classroom. However, working virtually and not being able to check what students did in class as it was done F2F, was a real challenge for teachers since it was difficult to know learners' honesty in their performance.

LL expressed that:

"One of the greatest difficulties is to verify if the student is being objective with their answers to evaluate them (…) The problem with virtual classes is that someone else can intervene or be behind that student's participation; and that is a negative side of virtual education".

Students' responses were in the same perspective as teachers', when they said: *"That's why I consider this is a negative part of classes online, because, we have a lot of ways to cheat during an exam or an activity we have to do, although we know it is not fair, we want to assure the grade, you know"* (S3-3)

Likewise, DB mentioned that when learners know teachers' impotence to supervise them or assess them as they were before, they sort into *"learning traps",* as he named those problems related to cheating during participation, quizzes, exams, etc., which were impossible for teachers to control in the online processes of assessment, and this constituted a negative aspect of the virtual method. *"As teachers, we do not know what the student is doing at home or on the other side of the screen, if the student is reading a paper even with the camera activated"* (DB).

Regarding teachers' responsibility to provide feedback and follow students' progress, students agreed ith teachers' commitment to doing so in the best way, (Table 6) shows their perceptions of a good and constant track (56%) and support by teachers during the online methodology (up to 55%); as well as the chances for assessment and feedback after the development of content (up to 47%).

Table 6. Learners' Responses about Support, Assessment, and Feedback Received from Teachers

During the virtual classes, the support given by the teachers was…		Virtual classes provided an accurate environment and chances for assessment and feedback	
	N (%)		N (%)
Great	22 (23.2%)	Strongly agree	8 (7.6%)
Good	53 (55.8%)	Agree	45 (47.4%)
Regular	17 (17.9%)	Disagree	37 (39%)
Bad	2 (2.1%)	Strongly disagree	5 (06%)
Nule	1 (1.1%)		
During the virtual classes, teachers' tracking of your learning process was…			
N (%)			
Great	8 (8.4%)		
Good	54 (56.8%)		
Regular	27 (28.4%)		
Bad	6 (6.3%)		
Nule	0 (0%)		
N: surveys choosing that option.			
%: response percentage based on all surveys.			

Despite learners' perceptions, teachers expressed their impossibility of checking all learners' progress, tracking their activities, and providing suitable feedback, although they were willing to do so, they could not because of several reasons: the number of students per group, and a number of groups, limited communication, particularly with those students who need more support because of their low performance or participation DB's teacher claimed that *"the difficulty lies more in those who do not have a good level of learning. With them, I would have liked to do a better job, dedicate them more time, give them more assignments, but there were limitations".*

3.4 Students' Motivation and Commitment During the Virtual Learning Process

In OnLE, motivation plays a significant role in the learning process. In Table 7, different responses were grouped for questions related to students' expectations, likes, motivation, and commitment regarding the model. Learners' satisfaction with this mode was not particularly high (less than F2F 73%). They expressed a preference for F2F classes in Grammar and Communication courses, as virtual instruction did not meet their expectations (disagree 47%) and a significant proportion of the students displayed dislike towards several academic activities within this mode of instruction, and apathy to engage in classes (as committed as F2F classes 54%). Nevertheless, most participant learners felt motivated (46%) and expressed a feeling of commitment to classes.

Table 7. Learners' Responses on Online Lessons Development

The virtual methodology lives up to your expectations		Do you like online classes…	
	N (%)		N (%)
Strongly agree	4 (04%)	More than F2F	5 (05%)
Agree	36 (38%)	As much as F2F	20 (22%)
Disagree	45 (47%)	Less than F2F	70 (73%)
Strongly disagree	10 (11%)		
Attending your virtual lessons, you have been…		During the virtual classes, you have been…	
	N (%)		N (%)
Quite motivated	16 (17%)	More committed than F2F classes	12 (13%)
Motivated	44 (46%)	As committed as F2F classes.	51 (54%)
Little Motivated	26 (27%)	Less committed than F2F classes.	32 (33%)
Not Motivated	9 (10%)		
N: surveys choosing that option.			
%: response percentage based on all surveys.			

Regarding teachers, the majority observed a high level of lack of commitment from the students towards the learning process as evidenced in Table 8.

Table 8. Teachers' Responses about Learners' Commitment

Do you consider that your students are committed to online classes?	
	N(%)
Yes, I do	4 (20%)
No, I do not	16 (80%)

In this sense, EG agreed, saying that *"there were some constraints with some learners, their commitment to respond to the activities was very poor"*; additionally, LL claimed that *"there is little commitment, interest from some students, as well as constraints in online interaction…"*; and, DB said that he did not perceive many learners to be motivated because of their lack of autonomy for taking responsibility of their own learning:

"As most of the learners lack autonomy, we have to struggle with their demotivation to participate and to be part of the class". however, YT stated that *"they (*students*) were very motivated and active in classes after I looked for different strategies and resources to help them go on, so they have done their best and they have overcome those difficulties".*

4. Discussion

This study aimed at identifying the challenges and issues faced by learners and teachers during a fully OnLEal model for core courses in an ELT program during the pandemic.

The transition from a conventional pedagogical approach centered on F2F interaction to an alternative instructional model has presented significant challenges for both teachers and learners. The two of them agreed on the advantages that the model offers for flexibility, saving time and money on transportation as well as the easiness to access from any place at any time, as Weissman (2017) and Finch and Jacobs (2012) argued in their studies.

However, these advantages depended on the connectivity and availability of technological devices (first-order barriers, Schoepp, 2004, Lim and Khine 2006,) which were pointed as the most remarkable disadvantages of the virtual setting; as McCoy (2020) stated, "a virtual classroom is only as good as the technology behind it (…) if your Internet connection fails during a lesson, you may end up spending more time repairing your connection than learning the material" (p. 4).

In terms of effectiveness and satisfaction with the online model, contradictory perspectives underly teachers' and learners' responses to learning core courses of an ELT program. While teachers perceived the online model effective, with a reported satisfaction rate of 70%, they did not feel comfortable with teaching communication and grammar courses in this model. Only 5% of teachers selected the virtual mode for these courses, with the majority preferring F2F classes instead (65%). It seems that teachers feel that their learners need constant support for doing class activities, as it was found by Bedoya (2014); "a current problem in our context [Colombia] is that some teachers still believe that it is harder for students to learn a language in a virtual course than in a face-to-face one" (p. 93).

On the other hand, learners' responses indicate that the online model is not as effective as F2F classes. Learners feel that the way instruction was delivered did not engage or encourage them, which resulted in a lack of motivation and a decrease in commitment to course activities. This perception may have its explanation in the way teachers quickly had to adapt to online mode.

In this regard, most teachers were not enough prepared to do so, as noted by Poon and Teo (2020), "many teachers were not adequately trained or prepared to conduct online classes" (p. 132). The lack of training evidenced difficulties for teachers in effectively engaging students to communicate in a foreign language, especially in this type of instruction where success depends not only on the quality of instruction but on the learning environment provided to students. This is in coherence with Kahu's (2013), "The online learning environment is complex, and the quality of the online environment has an important influence on student motivation" (p. 410).

One perspective on these results is linked to the prevalence of traditional, teacher-centered learning in some educational settings, where learners are viewed as passive recipients of information and teachers as providers (Zohrabi & Baybourdiani, 2012). Such an approach does not allow learners to develop autonomy or become active participants in their learning process, impeding successful learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Learner-centered education principles are based on studies

suggesting that learning is enhanced when learners have supportive relationships, a sense of ownership and control over the learning process, and can learn with and from each other in safe and trusting learning environments (McCombs, 2003; McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

The dependence on the teacher as the provider of knowledge rather than developing as autonomous learners, might be the reason behind the fact that some learners experienced difficulties in adapting to the new online model (36.8%) This is consistent with Bedoya's (2014) findings: "These students have not believed yet that a foreign language can be learned through the virtual modality. They think that a lot of responsibility and commitment are needed to succeed in a virtual language course, and they do not feel prepared to face this challenge" (p. 94).

This conception implies a change of mind in terms of the learning process to more autonomous decisions that allow learners to engage in interesting, challenging activities developing their potential, as Dam (2011) argued, the development of learner autonomy is "a move from teacher-directed teaching environment to a learner-directed learning environment" (p. 41).

On the other hand, the online model implied that teachers and learners are no longer able to physically share the same space and engage in F2F communication. The change in the interaction between teachers and learners has posed serious challenges for both, particularly in using the target language and connectivity. 60% of teachers and 42% of learners expressed their concern about the change in the interaction pattern.

The limitation of the lack of physical presence has significantly impacted the learning process, as teachers have indicated their inability to contact learners, provide individual feedback, and establish a personal rapport with them. Such limitations have been identified as responsible for feelings of isolation, and disconnection with the learners' community. This lack of personal interaction and the absence of regular F2F encounters might lead to reduced motivation and a lack of commitment (Pekrun et al., 2011; Song et al., 2018). This is aligned with the results of Bedoya (2014), "most of the students maintained their preference for learning English in F2F instruction because they considered it more efficient due to the teacher's physical support" (p. 96).

Moreover, researchers have examined the idea of presence in online learning due to concerns regarding the absence of physical presence (Bibeau, 2001; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Some research emphasized the importance of social presence, which refers to the sense of participation and belonging (Garrison, 2006). Social presence is crucial in creating a community of learners (Aragon, 2003; Bibeau, 2001; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Rovai, 2002; Tu & McIsaac, 2002), and some experts suggest that establishing a social presence is a critical initial step in initiating online learning (Aragon, 2003).

In Social Presence, individuals can experience social proximity despite being geographically separated. In the absence of physical cues and F2F interaction, it becomes necessary to establish a feeling of intimacy through the online medium (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), which has been identified as one of the most critical and difficult issues in recent studies during the pandemic. Joshi et al. (2020), Güiza

(2022), and Miose et al. (2021) indicated the absence of F2F interaction as a major issue in online learning.

Singh and Matthee (2022) and Hazwani et al. (2020) low students' and teachers' motivation because of a lack of interaction and engagement, Hoi et al. (2022); Turk et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of social presence in online teaching. Finally, Aguilera-Hermida et al. (2021) reported students' and teachers' challenges in promoting social interactivity and the need to implement strategies for building community.

The importance of social presence demands teachers develop strategies to foster it in OnLE and provide learners' with opportunities to engage in collaborative learning and interaction with others. This can be done through the creation of Communities of Inquiry, (CoI) which is a theoretical construct developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) that emphasizes the importance of both social and cognitive presence in online learning environments. The CoI framework has been used to design and evaluate online courses, and it has been found to enhance students' critical thinking, communication, and collaborative learning skills (Swan & Ice, 2010).

5. Conclusion, Pedagogical Implications, and Limitations

The description of challenges and issues of an Online education model in the context of an ELT program, was the purpose of this study. The results indicated that the majority of teachers considered the model as successful for core courses of communication and grammar, although it is not of their preference, neither is it for students. The effectiveness of the model will depend on the improvement of certain components of the instruction as well as optimal conditions of connectivity to satisfy the requirements and expectations of both learners and teachers. Some areas presented difficulties including adaptation to the use of technological tools or platforms, the interaction between students and teachers, the creation of Communities of Learning (CoI) for social presence and the provision of feedback.

OnLE has emerged as a viable alternative to traditional F2F education as was demonstrated during the pandemic. Therefore, it is crucial to overcome the weaknesses, evidenced during the pandemic, such as technological barriers, limited interaction with instructors and classmates, and difficulties in adapting to the online learning environment. This study confirms the necessity to review teaching pedagogies in favor of learner autonomy in the virtual context, as the need for training teachers to create a high-quality online learning environment that can engage learners effectively.

A remarkable limitation this study encountered was the restricted collaboration that educators and staff provided. All teachers from the ELT program were asked to participate; however, not all of them were available to take the interviews.

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