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## Online Teaching during Covid-19: How to Maintain Students Motivated in an EFL Class

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to know the e-learning modality that stimulates students' learning process according to twenty-two English teachers in Santander, Colombia, and the correlation between learners' motivation and the challenges and opportunities in an online EFL class. To carry out this study, a mixed research approach was applied. To gather such information, a questionnaire was sent to the participants via email. Once data was scrutinized, it was found that this group of English teachers view synchronous encounters and access to information regardless of the geographical position as elements that can positively impact the students' motivation levels. Furthermore, this sample stated their role is significant, especially when mediating online lessons.

**Keywords:** E-learning, motivation, modalities, language skills, teachers' role, interactions

### Introduction

Coronavirus has impacted several spectrums of life worldwide, namely, social- life, economy, health, and education. Therefore, social-distancing was proposed to stop the proliferation of the virus in crowded places such as schools and universities.

On the one hand, the transition from in-person classes to online instruction occurs in a groundbreaking and staggering way, which constitutes a significant challenge for teachers (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020). They have been adapting their lessons to virtual environments in order to continue their labor of educating learners. To do such a thing, educators have encountered and interacted with numerous online resources available (e.g., learning management systems, video conferences apps, blogs, online games, and collaborative spaces).

On the other hand, “students taking online [lessons] could face difficulties that they might never have encountered in a traditional teaching and learning environment” (Tsai as cited in Kuama & Intharaksa, 2016). For instance, they are expected to access information and interact with peers and teachers through technological devices and applications to sign appropriate participation. However, it should be considered that not every single student is skilled in Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), “some respond with enthusiasm and a desire to become the master of the machines; others ... approach the situation with fear and apprehension”.

(Chien, 2008). In other words, not following a lesson could cause anxiety, demotivation, and some extra elements that teachers would have to deal with.

It is a fact that this outbreak has forced instructors of all subjects to change their teaching procedures; nevertheless, this paper will mainly focus on the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and will manage online learning, e-learning, and virtual learning as interchangeable terms.

### ***Research questions***

The study seeks to address the following research questions:

- Which is the e-teaching modality that motivates students the most according to English teachers in Santander, Colombia, during COVID- 19 pandemic?
- What is the relationship between learners' motivation and the advantages and disadvantages that may arise in the online teaching of English in Santander, Colombia, according to the educators?

### **Literature Review**

Several authors have described e-learning as a useful methodology to encompass knowledge, curriculum, and ICTs. Indeed, Oye, Mazleena & Iahad stated that “soon a higher demand of technology support is expected... software tools supporting the critical task of instruction design should provide automated support for the analysis, design, documentation, implementation, and deployment of instruction via Web” (2012: 48).

Within online learning, there are many modalities reported by the literature; notwithstanding, this paper will emphasize two of them: Synchronous and Asynchronous interactions. The former arranges learners to participate in the lesson at the same moment by using online tools like video conferencing, audio conferencing, text-based chat systems or instant messaging systems, and text-based virtual learning environments (Oye et al. 2012; Obasa, Eludire & Ajao 2013; Francis 2017). This type of encounter is likely to lead students to high-levels of motivation towards completing online activities since there is evident presence from peers and instructors (Yamagata-Lynch as cited in Perveen 2016). Referring to Asynchronous learning spaces, they provide freedom for both the teacher and the students to interact since the material or information is available to be studied, discussed, and solved at different paces. Examples of some resources concerning this type of e-learning include e-mail, discussion forums, audio, and video streaming.

Educators working online are intended to be acquainted with certain competencies. According to Queiroz and Mustaro (2003), "They should be able to use technology; to have skills to design and implement courses...; to moderate, organize and archive asynchronous discussions; [and] to establish ground rules". Moreover, teachers need to "guide and animate synchronous discussions; to integrate different teaching and learning styles to the course; to interact actively with students and give them constant feedback; to make students aware of cultural differences... among others".

Besides this, within the teaching practices, motivation has to be considered essential to create and carry out an online learning course. There exists an instructional design model called Attention, Relevance, Confidence, and Satisfaction (ARCS) proposed by John Keller in the eighties. It attempts to encourage and sustain motivation levels by systematically solving learning environments (Fazamin, Ali, Saman, Yusoff & Yacob, 2014: 287). Since the ARCS model is useful for both face-to-face and online lessons, English language educators should take advantage of this approach to maintain students captivated when giving virtual lessons. This model consists of ten steps as follows (see table 1).

**Table 1.** ARCS steps

1	Obtain course information
2	Obtain audience information
3	Analyze audience motivation
4	Analyze existing materials and conditions
5	List objectives and assessments
6	List potential tactics
7	Select and/or design tactics
8	Integrate with instruction
9	Select and develop materials
10	Evaluate and revise

Adapted from Kurt. & Keçik. (2017: 25)

Emphasizing on the last step, evaluate and revise, it seems worthy to include the term feedback taking on board that “[it is] ... one of the most valuable tools in the e-learning systems because [it allows] teachers monitoring and improving the performance of the students in several ways” (Yengin, Karahoca, Karahoca, & Yücel, 2010: 5780).

Aside from the ARCS model, some procedures help carry out a virtual course (See table 2).

**Table 2.** Procedures to Develop an Online Course

Develop And Structure the Learning Environment	
<b>Contact information</b>	Establish online and fastback hours.
<b>Course objectives</b>	State the course objectives as clearly as possible.
<b>Attendance requirements</b>	Define attendance and participation requirements throughout the course.

<b>Course Schedule</b>	Enumerate every course assignment taking into account its beginning date and deadline. Create a checklist for students to keep track of their progress.
<b>Orientation Aids</b>	Write reminders to improve students' success regarding course assignments. Propose a forum to solve frequently asked questions (FAQ).
<b>Grading scales and rubrics</b>	Determine the ways to assess students by proposing diverse criteria.

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#### Opening the Course

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<b>Introduction</b>	Attempt to know some information about the learners' background. Invite students to socialize with their peers. Implement ice breakers to reduce first session anxiousness.
<b>Emphasize the syllabus</b>	Familiarize students with the content of the syllabus using interactive activities like a scavenger hunt.

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#### Nurturing the Learning Community

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<b>Provide communication and facilitate discussion board.</b>	Facilitate reflective and proactive communication through the use of technological resources. Foster student-centered tasks while mediating knowledge. Provide feedback when necessary.
<b>Add emotion and belonging.</b>	Address each student by their preferred name or nickname. Avoid tricky instructions in order to dodge students' feelings of frustration. Write and send messages that express a friendly and joyful attitude. Keep a good sense of humor along with the lessons.

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Taken and adapted from Shelton & Saltsman (2004)

This literature review aims at enriching the practices of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the light of English teachers as a foreign language, they can implement, adjust and skip some issues considering variables such as L1 influence, students' attitudes and aptitudes towards acquiring the language.

### Methodology

This study attempts to answer two different research questions related to Online English teaching and its connection with students' motivation levels during the COVID-19 pandemic. For that reason, it was decided to gather and analyze information by adopting a Mixed-Method Research (MMR) because when combining qualitative and quantitative research tools, conclusions are broadened and reinforced. (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017).

To collect the data, a twelve-item google form questionnaire was sent to the participants via email. It consisted of both closed and open-ended questions directed to three main categories:

E-learning modalities, Advantages and disadvantages of e-learning, and Teachers' role in the students' online learning process. Each of the categories, as mentioned earlier, addressed motivation as a transversal theme.

Besides, this study utilized a convenience sampling when selecting the participants considering what was said by Samure "convenience sampling is researching those elements of the population readily available to the researcher (as cited in Leiner, 2014: 4). In this order of ideas, twenty-two English teachers working at language Institutes in Santander, Colombia were informed about the purpose of the study beforehand; then, they answered questions based on their own experience while teaching in virtual contexts during the 2020 pandemic.

## **Data Analysis and Findings**

### ***E- learning modalities***

Educators rely on synchronous and asynchronous interactions when teaching online, taking on board that those exchanges supply several opportunities for the learners. For that reason, the first set of questions were oriented to find out about the different modalities used by the sample of this study and its correlation to students' motivation. 14 out of 22 teachers manifested that they teach virtual lessons mostly in synchronous modality; 6 of them mainly implement both: synchronous and asynchronous, and the remaining 2 asserted to teach primarily in the asynchronous way.

Subsequently, teachers were asked about the modality they preferred the most and considered a key element to keep students motivated. They all seem to prefer synchronous encounters, and they also agree that these are effective in sustaining students' motivation levels high since interaction, guidance, and feedback can be provided in real-time. Twenty-one participants pointed out that the most common tool they used was video conferencing, one of the primary resources in the synchronous modality. To do such a thing, they have worked with applications, and websites like Zoom, GoogleMeets, Microsoft Teams, Skype, and Jitsi Meets. Additionally, several of them indicated learning platforms and email as standard tools.

### ***Language Skills and E- learning Modalities***

When teaching English, teachers should address the four language skills, i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking, to effectively lead the students towards meeting the standards proposed and developing their communicative proficiency (Sadiku, 2015: 29). In terms of synchronous exchanges, they have noticed that they contribute to developing students' oral skills. Whereas in asynchronous interactions, the language learning autonomy process is fostered respecting especially writing and reading (Felix, 2005: 19)

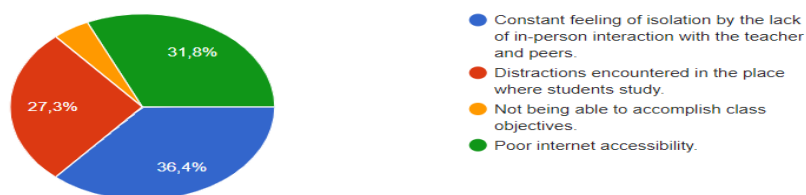
The literature reviewed has also reported positive and negative outcomes when combining technology and English language teaching. Some authors affirm that allowing students to utilize technological tools (e.g., blogs, forums, WhatsApp, Wikis, etc.) improve their reading and writing skills. Farooq, Fatima & Javid conducted a study that showcased "Blogs, [an asynchronous tool] .... increase students' interest and ownership in learning". They also noticed how fruitful it is to motivate students to improve their writing through blogging (2015: 113). Speaking and vocabulary

can be positively impacted by using some of these tools (Ahmadi, 2018: 120). Others have reported that students “may prefer to use their mother tongue instead of English because it is not mandatory for them to use it all the time” (Haron, Zaid & Ibrahim, 2015: 89).

Unexpectedly, our participants claimed that listening is the skill in which students have shown substantial progress, unlike speaking and writing. Regarding reading comprehension, teachers do not have a clear viewpoint of its enhancement because 11 of them suggested that it was improving, and the other half said the opposite. It could be assumed that the transition from in-person classes to virtual learning spaces due to COVID-19 has originated certain discomfort in students so that they feel limited to speak or write unless it is requested from the teacher. Because the main focus of this investigation is not on the language skills process in synchronous and asynchronous exchanges per se, it is suggested to conduct further research in the performance of these components during the 2020 pandemic.

### *Advantages and disadvantages of English e-learning*

Covid-19 opened the door to online teaching during the emergency and as a benchmark to the future learning spaces. For that reason, it is necessary to consider some of the advantages and disadvantages this type of learning might provide to teachers, students, and even institutions in the compliance of the curriculum. Thus, this research paper questioned the sample about the advantages and disadvantages listed in the study of Dhull and Arora (2017) named “ONLINE LEARNING”.



**Figure 1.** Situations that might demotivate students the most.

The twenty-two English teachers were requested to select the situation that might demotivate students the most when taking online classes. As evidenced in the pie chart, only one teacher asserted that not accomplishing class objectives is the least likely to demotivate students. Opposite to this, the other three options were chosen by a similar number of participants. Constant feeling of isolation by the lack of in-person interaction with the teacher and peers was the most voted with a percentage of 36,4% (i.e.8 teachers). In the same vein, poor internet accessibility was selected by 31,8% (i.e. seven teachers) and distractions encountered where student study was considered by 27,3% (i.e., six teachers). In other words, this group of English teachers contemplate the last three situations as detonators of demotivation.



**Figure 2.** Situations that might motivate students the most.

When asked about four different situations that can influence students' motivation, most English teachers (i.e., 68, 2 %, or 15 participants) strongly agreed with information accessibility regardless of the geographical position as the main element to boost motivation. What is more, 13,6% of educators indicated that the equal treatment given to participants in online learning spaces might increment motivation levels. Finally, the same number of participants (i.e., 9, 1%, or 2) thought that motivation might be fostered for two reasons: learning is economical, and students can work at their own pace.

In short, on account of Covid-19, English teachers have been dealing with challenges and opportunities to teach this language. By challenges, we mean that this situation was unexpected. Therefore, the teachers were unprepared. By opportunities, we refer to the different academic resources available on the internet that have served as a tool for both educators and learners in the continuity of the English learning process. Moreover, e-learning tools' usage might help the teacher keep students motivated, which is crucial in succeeding in every learning activity.

### *Teachers' role in the online learning process of students*

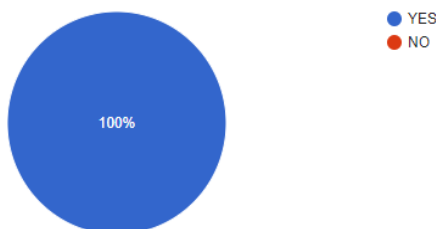
“Teachers play a vital role in creating an environment that supports students’ learning” (Johnson, 2017: 46), especially in times of adjusting the way teaching is being given because of the pandemic. Accordingly, the third section of the questionnaire was directed towards our participants' perception of teachers' role in students' online learning process. They were first asked which modality was more demanding than the other between virtual teaching and face-to-face classes. 17 English teachers replied that virtual teaching, unlike face-to-face, required much more skills and efforts. One of the participants stated that:

Both modalities are demanding since we have to spend certain amount of time planning a lesson and designing suitable materials to complement it. Nevertheless, in this moment I consider that virtual teaching has been extremely demanding since one can spend between 10 and 12 hours in front of the computer not only planning lessons and creating innovative materials but also grading, uploading scores, sending reminders of next class activities, sending observations and extra comments to parents, attending staff meetings and webinars. Same loop, week after week.

**Figure 3.** Participant’s reply.

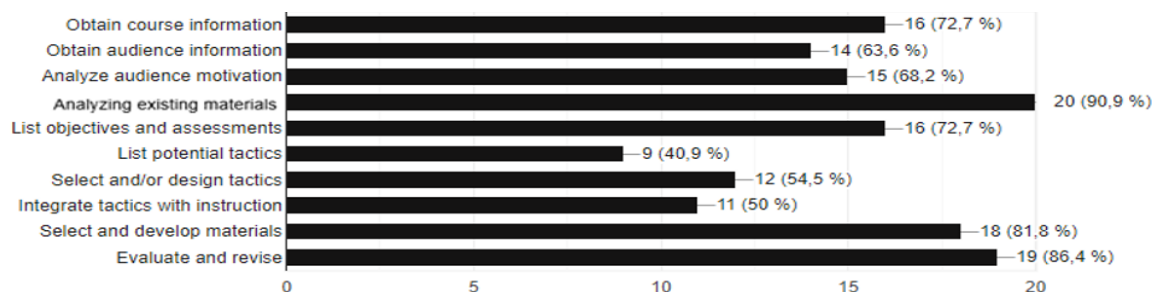


Likewise, we asked the sample of this study if they considered their role fundamental to keep students motivated. As expected, all of the educators answered positively. Therefore, it is apparent that this group of English teachers has embraced an external motivating factor. That is to say, educators' behavior and teaching style might influence whether students feel motivated or not (Tanveer, Shabbir, Ammar, Dolla & Aslam. 2012: 79).



**Figure 4.** Perception of the importance of teachers' role in regards to students' motivation.

Then, participants were questioned about the ARCS model, Keller's (2016) words, an instructional design that helps maintain students motivated in virtual contexts and consists of ten steps. Even though only three educators asserted to know this model, most of them have implemented several steps in their classes, as shown in figure 5. The step that has been used by the most significant number of teachers is *Analyzing existing materials*, followed by *Evaluating and revising*. More than ten teachers have implemented all of the steps except for listing potential tactics.



**Figure 5.** ARCS model steps.

### *Teachers' strategies in online English classes*

COVID-19 appeared when education relied on multiple learning trends; hence, learning did not stop, and it is being adapted. Another would have been the story if this virus had appeared 20 years ago. Particularly nowadays, English teachers have their hands in ICTs as a means of instruction for the different skills. With that in mind, in the last section of the questionnaire, the English teachers participating in this study were encouraged to share different strategies, models, tactics, and/or procedures beyond the ARCS model that they consider useful to apply during their lesson in these times. Among their responses, they mentioned TPR, communicative approach, flipped classroom, Adaptive learning, instructional design, online games, and interactive worksheets. It would be worth analyzing in a different study to what extent these other methodologies, approaches, etc. motivate students in the e-learning environment.

## Conclusion

The literature review of this study reported some methodologies, procedures, and strategies that can be useful while teaching English in virtual mode, taking into account that the epidemic COVID-19 opened and speeded up the possibility of virtualizing lessons. For that reason, a mix-method research study was conducted to gather information about English teachers' perceptions of the relationship among motivation and e-learning modalities, advantages and disadvantages, and the educator's role in virtual contexts.

When researching about teaching modalities, synchronous and asynchronous encounters were featured by several authors who approached them as effective means to develop virtual courses and to improve EFL students' skills. Although the sample of this study has approached both modalities, all of them claimed to prefer the synchronous exchanges considering that those are the ones that foster and maintain students' motivation levels high because it is the best to interact, provide guidance and feedback simultaneously.

Considering the e-learning process itself, it is worth discussing the advantages of ICTs and the challenges or disadvantages that revolve around teaching and learning. In the view of advantages, teachers consider that the almost unlimited access to information might be considered the key motivational element for the students compared to other factors. In contrast, the low motivation levels are related to more than one aspect: the constant feeling of isolation, poor internet accessibility, and distractions encountered in the place where students study.

As a final point, this study (i.e., English teachers) is conscious of the necessity of virtualizing classes because of COVID-19. That is why they claimed that their role was pivotal in keeping students' willingness to learn. "The role of the teacher should be of a facilitator instead of being authoritative. The passive learning method needs to be replaced by active learning methods preparing students to play their role as global citizens" (Khan, Nazneen, Ahmad & Khalid 2016: 90). This sudden transition from in-person classes to e-learning represents a challenge for the teacher when designing and implementing courses. Accordingly, some pedagogical issues were discussed and proposed to assist educators so that their students' learning process could continue in a smooth and meaningful way. Even though the ARCS model was convenient because it encircled steps to create and develop online classes and assure high levels of students' motivation, only three teachers were familiarized with this. Surprisingly, it seems that they are not aware that some of their practices are the steps suggested by Keller in the ARCS model.

In brief, motivation is one of the factors that has proven to be extremely important in effective learning processes of apprentices of foreign languages. D-19, students were an unexpected form of learning, and teachers were allowed to combine theoretical knowledge with experience in a different educational field that appears to be demanding.

As a limitation of this study, we consider that the number of participants could be expanded to have a more accurate insight into the perceptions that English teachers have when working in virtual environments and how they make students experience motivation.

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## Appendix 1

# Online Teaching During Covid-19: How to Maintain Students Motivated in an EFL Class

This questionnaire intends to gather information about English language teachers' experiences during the shift from face to face lessons to virtual ones due to COVID-19. The main aim of the study is to analyze how teachers have incorporated strategies to maintain students motivated while learning whether in synchronous or asynchronous modalities. The data collected will be used for academic purposes only. Therefore, the identities of the participants will be protected. For further information, please contact [solsmithuis@gmail.com](mailto:solsmithuis@gmail.com) - [narensilva04@gmail.com](mailto:narensilva04@gmail.com)

1. Do you accept participating in our study? \*

YES

NO

2. Email address: \*

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### E-LEARNING MODALITIES

3. Which modality do you use the most when giving your EFL classes? \*

Synchronous.

Asynchronous.

Both.

4. Which modality do you prefer? \*

Synchronous.

Asynchronous.

5. Which modality do you consider the most suitable to keep students' motivation levels high? \*

Synchronous.

Asynchronous.

6. Briefly, explain your previous answer. \*

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7. Which of the following tools have you been implementing when teaching English during the COVID-19 pandemic? You can choose more than one option. \*

- Videoconferencing
- Audio conferencing
- Text-based chat systems / Instant messaging systems
- Text-based virtual learning environments.
- E-mail
- Discussion forums
- Audio and video streaming
- Learning platforms

8. Provide examples of applications and websites that you have used to teach EFL online. \*

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**ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF E-LEARNING.**

9. Organize the language skills from 1 to 4 (being (1) the highest score and (4) the lowest) in terms of students' improvement during online teaching \*

	1	2	3	4
Speaking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Listening	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reading	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Writing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. According to your own experience, which of the following situations when teaching and/or learning online might demotivate English students the most: (Choose one) \*

- Constant feeling of isolation by the lack of in-person interaction with the teacher and peers.
- Distractions encountered in the place where students study.
- Not being able to accomplish class objectives.
- Poor internet accessibility.

11. According to your own experience, which of the following situations when teaching and/or learning online might motivate English students the most:(Choose one) \*

- Information accessibility regardless the geographical position.
- It can be personalized since students work at their own pace.
- Learning online is economical.
- Equal treatment is given to participants.

#### TEACHERS ROLE IN THE ONLINE LEARNING PROCESS OF THE STUDENT

12. According to your experience, what teaching modality has been the most demanding: \*

- Virtual teaching.
- Face- to face classes.

13. Briefly, explain your previous answer.

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14. Do you consider the role of the teacher pivotal to maintain students motivated during online lessons?

- YES
- NO

15. Are you familiar with the ARCS (Attention, Relevance, confidence, and satisfaction) model? \*

YES

NO

16. Have you implemented models, approaches, methodologies, or strategies that have resulted useful to maintain English students motivated during virtual lessons? \*

YES

NO

17. If yes, which ones have you implemented?

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18. Which of the following steps have you done while teaching English in a virtual mode? \*

- Obtain course information
- Obtain audience information
- Analyze audience motivation
- Analyze existing materials and conditions.
- List objectives and assessments
- List potential tactics
- Select and/or design tactics
- Integrate tactics with instruction
- Select and develop materials
- Evaluate and revise