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Virtual Learning Environments to Enhance Students' Positive Attitudes Towards English

Learning at Normal Superior de Medellín

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To Zoe

Abstract

The present study was aimed to examine the extent to which Virtual Learning Environments (VLE's) could enhance students' positive attitudes towards English learning at the Normal Superior de Medellín. Participants were pre-service teachers in their last year of training. Students' attitudes were measured through an attitudes' Likert scale and a self-report questionnaire. Journal, cooperative teacher interview, and focus group were implemented to identify the impact of VLE's on the attitudes towards English learning. Results showed that positive feelings, thoughts, and behaviors were simultaneously enhanced during the implementation, which in turn positively affected students' performance. The concept of stability between the three components of the attitudes is underlined and implications for English teachers are discussed.

Keywords: Attitudes, VLE's, English learning.

Degree Requirement

This action research project is submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of Education in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellin, Colombia.

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Preface

During the practicum, I identified that the students' attitudes towards learning was the most relevant problem in the classroom. Although attitude is one of the most studied concepts in social science, I decided to further explore the concept of attitude and its relation to English learning because there is still little research on this topic in our context.

Considering the context and the characteristics of the students at the second year of training as pre-service teachers, I decided to implement an action research based on Virtual Learning Environments. This strategy took special relevance during the time of quarantine, in which most of the intervention was carried out.

As expected, based on the theory and some studies exploring the relation between attitudes and learning, I found that VLE's enhance students' positive attitudes towards English learning. These findings highlight the importance of the tripartite model of attitudes and the crucial role that teachers play in the learning process.

Description of the Context

The official institution “Normal Superior de Medellín” was founded during the presidency of the General Pedro Alcántara Herrán on the 26th of June, 1842, when the 20th law was created in “La Nueva Granada”. The mission of the institution is to prepare teachers with academic, pedagogical, and research competences through the integration of pedagogy, didactics, and content knowledge. Regarding its vision, by 2023 the school will continue being an educational institution recognized for its quality in preschool and primary school teachers’ education. The institutional philosophy states that the school intends to educate students with commitment and social responsibility, with ethical, political and human values who will be able to lead pedagogical projects that promote social changes. The guiding principles of this philosophy are participation, responsibility, autonomy, solidarity, respect, and research spirit (Proyecto Educativo Institucional, 2019).

The old building structure offers the students quite suitable and comfortable spaces. The school has big classrooms, corridors, offices, and gardens. Each classroom is equipped with a television, board and comfortable chairs. There are two “digital rooms” equipped with computers for at least 30 students. The school also has a very well organized library which has a small “English room”; it is supposed to be the space for students and teachers to work on English projects. The small room allows no more than 15 students to work with a variety of material including original videos and movies, English books, dictionaries, textbooks such as “English please!” and posters. Additionally, the library has an almost new set of pedagogical English resources to be used by students and teachers such as table games, dictionaries, and other useful material. It even has an unpacked box with English material to be classified.

The Programa de Formación Complementaria (PFC) offers the students 4 semesters in order to complete an academic and pedagogical preparation which allows them to be teachers. During the first two semesters the “Programa de Formación Bilingue” intends to provide the future teachers with the linguistic tools that allow them to continue their second language “acquisition” process, which they have already started in their basic and middle education. Consequently, during the third and fourth semester, the program emphasizes on the didactic components of teaching. The specific objectives of the bilingual program are to take advantage of both virtual and face-to-face modalities to teach the language content, and to appreciate the sociocultural aspect in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning process.

The course in which this action research was implemented was a 21-student course who were in the second semester. The group was comprised by 18 females and 3 males, between 18 and 21 years old. Most of them live in the neighborhood where the institution is located. In general, they want to continue studying education to become professional teachers. However, according to the cooperating teacher, this group was not very engaged in the program, they lacked autonomy, and they needed a more active role of the teacher. This was consistent with my observations because I noticed that they had a negative attitude towards the class.

Regarding my cooperating teacher (CT), Erika Farley Torres Bedoya, she has a degree in History from Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana. In relation to her beliefs, I identified that she has a particular way of thinking about learning processes. She thinks that some teachers of the institution follow traditional approaches of teaching; they use “rewards and punishment” strategies, they do not promote autonomy, and they are more focused on controlling

discipline. According to her, students' attitudes and academic performance is a consequence of this traditional teaching style. That is why she gives students the opportunity to regulate themselves and control their own time.

Statement of the Problem

The "Normal Superior de Medellín" is a very well-known institution that has been in charge of the qualification and training of pre-service teachers for preschool and primary school. The PFC is a four-semester program for students who decide to continue their careers as teachers. During the last years, English has become an important subject in the study plan of the program. However, I identified some issues related to the students' negative attitudes towards their learning process, and to have evidence of this problem at the institution, I gathered some information through three different sources: direct observations in the classroom, conversations with my CT and other teachers from the program, and a survey applied to the students.

First, I observed the class "Research project" conducted by my CT. Through this observation I obtained important information regarding the students' attitudes towards the teacher, the methodology, and the topics they were studying. A relevant aspect observed was the teacher's "laissez-faire" style and students' attitudes towards her teaching method. During an observation on September 11th, I noticed that the teacher just asked them to rearrange the chairs to work in teams, and they were expected to act as self-regulated adults. During the class she went to each group to check if they had questions and talked to them for no more than 3 minutes per group. I observed that there was no respect for her as a figure of authority, students came and left the room without asking her, they talked, chatted, laughed, and used the cellphone as if they were in another setting, but definitely not in a classroom. After 30 minutes

of class, students just started packing and they finished the class without a single word from the teacher.

The second source was the conversations with my CT and some other teachers of the PFC. These conversations allowed me to understand the teachers' perspectives about the students' attitudes, behaviors, habits, and needs. Moreover, I compared my CT's teaching perspective against other teachers' of the program and I found an interesting insight because I realized that the students' attitudes are closely related to the teacher's beliefs and teaching styles. Compared to the other teachers of the PFC, Erika prefers to be more flexible and less worried about students' behavior. She thinks the school is not promoting autonomy because compared to her previous experience, this school model is not giving the students the chance to be responsible of their own learning process.

Finally, in order to gather information from the students, I conducted a survey about their attitudes towards English learning. The survey was designed in order to understand student's behaviors, thoughts, and feelings regarding their own process of English learning during their previous academic life. For each aspect, I included some statements; for example, regarding behaviors: "I participate actively in the English class", for thoughts: "I believe that learning English is a waste of time", and regarding feelings: "I enjoy the English class".

The attitude towards English learning was the most relevant factor I identified that could be interfering in the English learning process. According to Santillán, Ferret-Nieto, and López-Martínez (2018), attitude towards language is a factor that might affect learning. In fact, what I observed was a negative attitude towards English learning. Results of the survey confirmed the students' negative attitudes towards English learning; most of them accepted they did not participate actively in the English class. This was consistent with my

observations, and what the teacher said. Triangulating the information obtained, I confirmed that not only do they have a negative attitude towards English learning, but also this negative attitude has been negatively affecting their learning process.

Theoretical Background

Among many psychological aspects associated to the learning process, attitude has become a relevant factor because it includes emotional, behavioral, and cognitive aspects directly related to the performance in any kind of activity. These components are being influenced by the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's) in teaching learning processes. In the following lines, I will present the theoretical concepts that guide this action research study; namely, attitudes and learning, attitudes and English learning, ICT's, and Virtual Learning Environments (VLE's).

Attitudes and Learning

The concept of attitude has been one of the most important for social psychology (Morales, 2007), and there is a considerable amount of research on this phenomenon. According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), a general definition of attitude is "a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given object" (p. 6). These authors state that most of the researchers in the field agree that attitude can be understood as an evaluative mediating response, which is located in a bipolar affective dimension regarding the attitude object (p. 28).

The effects of attitudes towards learning have been largely studied, and most of the research has shown that positive attitudes towards the studied subject enhance the students' interest (Kara, 2009, p. 102). In a pretest-posttest design study, this author aimed to examine changes on teacher candidates' attitudes towards learning after receiving instruction about

learning concepts. The participants (N = 150) who belonged to the faculty of education at Adiyaman University in Turkey, took part in the study by answering a Likert scale of attitudes towards learning designed by the researcher, before and after the intervention. Results showed that students with a favorable attitude had a higher academic performance. Accordingly, these students were enthusiastic, showed positive expectations, and they were not anxious about the learning process (p. 101). In contrast, in another longitudinal study about the development and implementation of an instructional design, in which 118 students at the National Academies Summer Institutes on Undergraduate Education in Biology participated, results indicated that students who exhibited negative attitudes showed low class attendance, poor class participation, and low achievement (Armbruster, Patel, Johnson, & Weiss, 2009, p. 204). In this study, students' engagement and satisfaction were measured with a Likert scale before and after implementing some changes in the instructional design.

Breckler (1984) established that attitudes are composed by three types of response to the attitude object. First, the emotional response, which refers to feelings or mood associated to the object. Second, the behavioral response, which includes actions or behavioral intentions towards the attitude object. And third, the cognitive response, related to beliefs, knowledge, perceptions, and thoughts (p. 1191). The main idea regarding these components is that they vary in a continuum from pleasant to unpleasant (emotional), from favorable to unfavorable (behavioral), and from appropriate to inappropriate (cognitive).

Attitudes and English Learning

Several authors have established the importance of positive attitudes towards second language learning in order to facilitate the learning process and improve performance in the target language. However, only some of them have conceptualized attitudes as a factor

composed of three different dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. These aspects have been usually studied separately (De Bot, Lowie, Verspoor, & Verspoor, 2005; Feng & Chen, 2009; Padwick, 2010; Kara, 2009).

In order to understand how the three components of the attitudes affect language learning, it is important to clarify some concepts. First of all, the behavioral aspect which refers to the observable behaviors that the students exhibit towards the target language during the learning process (Kara, 2009). Similarly, Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi, and Alzwari (2012) stated that learners with positive attitudes seem to be more engaged, motivated to solve problems, and to obtain useful knowledge. Second, the cognitive aspect of the attitude which refers to the students' beliefs about the new information acquired during the learning process. According to these authors, there are four stages in the cognitive process: first, learners connect the new information to the previous knowledge; then, they produce new knowledge; after that, students verify the new knowledge; and finally, they apply the new knowledge in different scenarios (p. 121). The third component is the emotional aspect. In relation to this, Feng and Chen (2009) established that learning is an emotional process because students are emotionally engaged while learning; that is why the emotional factor directly affects the learning process. This aspect of the attitudes could be identified when students express feelings about the target language, what they like or dislike about the process of learning a second language.

In this respect, Choy and Troudi (2006) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the changes in students' attitudes towards learning English during the transition period from secondary school (Malay instruction) to college, where the instruction is conducted in English. Journals and interviews were used to collect data from 100 students enrolled in the first

semester. The results showed that students' attitudes towards learning English in college is more positive than in secondary school, and classroom environment is perceived as an important factor affecting students' attitudes towards learning English. Additionally, they found that the feelings English learners had about themselves could affect how they would learn the target language (p. 120).

In the same line, a longitudinal study conducted in a Libyan secondary school, Abidin et al. (2012) investigated students' attitudes towards learning English and their relation to demographic aspects such as gender, subject studied, and grade. A group of 180 students from three different grades were asked to answer a 30-item Likert scale adapted by the researchers. Results showed that students had a negative attitude towards learning English, with an overall mean score of 2.6167 (SD= 0.59177). According to the authors, learning a second language is a process that involves not only academic, but also social and psychological aspects, and the learners' attitudes towards the target language learning is one of the most important. Consequently, students with a negative attitude will not be interested in communicating with others by using the target language, which will in turn influence their performance (p. 121).

Information and Communication Technologies

According to Sarkar (2012), Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's) are the technological resources we can use for communication, and allow us to create, share, storage and administer information including voice, data, text or images. Information refers to the hardware such as cellular, cable, satellite, among others, while communication refers to the services that we can use such as internet, mail, radio and television. The impact of ICT's in education is growing and it "will become a strong agent for change among many educational practices" (p. 31).

Particularly in developing countries, it is evident how the use of ICT's could offer new opportunities to cover educational needs (Sarkar, 2012, p. 30). Moreover, according to Mullamaa, (2010), ICT's could play a crucial role to promote individualization, interaction and student motivation, three modern principles of learning and language acquisition (p. 38). This author has also suggested that ICT's give the students new chances for "making the learning process more interesting and challenging" (p. 39).

From the sociocultural perspective, ICT's seem to have a relevant influence on the learning process due to the fact that new technologies create new opportunities for social interaction as a mediational tool which allow students to communicate each other with images and text (Pelaez, 2004, p. 4). Cocea and Weibelzahl (2006) pointed out the relation between e-learning and the Social Cognitive Learning Theory (SCT), which imply the importance of collaborative learning strategies for students learning motivation, which in turn could lead to students' satisfaction, and increase academic results (p. 5).

Virtual Learning Environments and English Learning

As stated by Herrera (2017), Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are virtual spaces used for teachers and students' interaction in order to share information. These platforms can be implemented to deliver a complete online course or to support normal face-to-face classes (p. 481). Another approach to conceptualize the use of technology with English teaching purposes is Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), defined by Betty (2010) as "any process in which learners use a computer and, as a result, improve their language" (p. 7).

In a descriptive study conducted in a public university in Colombia, Herrera (2017) aimed to identify the effects of implementing a VLE's in English as a foreign language (EFL) courses. The sample was composed by 210 students and 5 teachers, and students' perceptions

and attitudes towards the use of VLE were measured with questionnaires, class observation notes, surveys, and teacher narratives. In regards to the students' attitudes, the results showed that most of the learners felt motivated and enthusiastic about the use of VLE in their EFL courses. Additionally, improvements in participation, behavior autonomy, and teacher-student communication were also observed. They suggest that some characteristics such as immediate feedback, interactivity and availability of learning tasks "encouraged students to perform their tasks better while allowing them to gain confidence to develop their linguistic skills" (p. 495).

In a quasi-experimental study, Zheng, Young, Brewer, and Wagner (2009) explored affective factors during the process of learning English as a foreign language in a virtual game, in which non-native English speakers had to solve online content related problems in collaboration with native speakers. This study was conducted in a middle school from China with a total of 61 participants. Researchers concluded that VLE's tend to enhance students' self-efficacy and attitudes toward English learning, reducing learners' anxiety while using the target language, reason why they suggested continuing exploring the potential to increase English learners' self-confidence.

Research Question

To what extent can Virtual Learning Environments enhance students' positive attitudes towards English learning at Normal Superior de Medellín?

General Objective

To explore the effectiveness of Virtual Learning Environments to enhance students' positive attitudes towards English learning

Specific Objectives

To identify students' attitudes towards English learning

To implement teaching learning strategies through Virtual Learning Environments.

To examine the effect of Virtual Learning Environments on students' attitudes towards English learning

Action Plan

In order to implement this research project, I planned some action strategies. The first strategy was the socialization of the study to be implemented. This was a crucial step for both the institution and the students to know what I would do, the purpose, the problem, the concrete action strategies and the expected results. After that, I designed an informed consent to ask for authorization to use the information collected with academic purposes. With this consent signed by the participants, I would get a proof that they voluntarily decided to participate in the research project after being informed about the characteristics of the research.

Afterwards, I would apply a pre-test in order to identify the students' attitudes towards English learning; it would be a Likert scale consisting of 18 items. This strategy would allow me to identify the current stage of students' attitudes, which was the problem I wanted to focus on with my project. Additionally, I planned a focus group with five students to be randomly selected in order to know their perceptions about the attitudes of the whole group towards English learning. Moreover, at the end of each intervention, I would implement a self-report with the whole group in order to know their perceptions regarding their attitudes during each class. Furthermore, in order to have another source of information regarding the problem, I would also observe and register some insights related to the students' behaviors, emotions and thoughts in relation to the learning process.

Subsequently, I designed a plan to be implemented during the regular English course to foster positive attitudes towards the English learning process. More specifically, I would implement a project based on a Facebook fan page. This social network would be used with the purpose of creating meaningful content to promote the use of the second language. This content was intended to inform the community of the school and the Normal schools in Colombia about their work as pre-service teachers and English students. Some of the activities would be related to describing real activities from a pedagogical perspective, defining pedagogical concepts, disclosing results from their own research project, producing audio-visual material to share knowledge, and uploading their outcomes to the school platform. Through these activities, students would learn some basic aspects of the target language, and hopefully enhance their positive attitudes towards the English learning process.

After three months of implementation I would gather information to verify whether there was a change in the initial stage of their attitudes towards English learning. During this step I would collect information from the same three different sources used at the beginning. First, I would make a focus group with the same five students who would also answer a post-test: the attitude Likert scale. Moreover, I would interview the teacher in order to see if he perceived a change on the students' attitudes. Finally, I would analyze the data collected, triangulate the information from the different sources, and compare the results after the intervention.

Development of Actions

During the implementation of the present research project, I used different strategies. The first strategy was the socialization of the study to be implemented. This was a crucial step for both the institution and the students to know what I would do, the purpose, the problem,

the concrete action strategies and the expected results. After that, I asked the students to sign the informed consent in which students voluntarily decided to participate in the research project after being informed about the characteristics of the research, and they also provided authorization to use the information collected with academic purposes.

Afterwards, I applied a pre-test in order to identify the students' attitudes towards English learning; it was a Likert scale consisting of 18 items. This strategy allowed me to identify the current stage of students' attitudes, which was the problem I wanted to focus on with my project. I implemented a research project aiming to foster positive attitudes towards the English learning process through the use of Virtual Learning Environments. I decided not to work with the Facebook fan page because during the quarantine a broader strategy was needed. The English content was presented based on the official English program of the NSM: contrasting different verb tenses simple past / simple present, future forms (going to/will), comparatives and superlatives. I also included a pedagogical topic (lesson planning) because during this semester, students are supposed to learn about methods.

The material produced during the course intended to provide meaningful information to the students as pre-service teachers and to promote the use of the target language. Particularly, and following the institutional goals, the project considered two parts, the design of an English lesson plan and an introduction to the language teaching methods. Then, the students' production was related to their role as teachers and at the end of the course they had some new useful material uploaded on the school platform.

Moreover, at the end of each intervention, I implemented a self-report with the whole group in order to know their perceptions regarding their attitudes during each class. After the first month of the implementation, the whole population was forced to be confined at home

because of the COVID 19. Although I continued with the implementation of the plan, I had to make some adaptations. In order to facilitate the development of each lesson, I decided to work with each team in 1-hour virtual class. I also designed digital version of the self-report and I sent it to the students after each session.

Furthermore, in order to have another source of information regarding the problem, I observed and registered some insights related to the students' behaviors, emotions and thoughts in relation to the learning process. Considering that the course was delivered in a virtual format, I also video recorded some classes, so that I had the opportunity to revise the class to complement the information registered in my journal. Additionally, I implemented a focus group with 5 students from the 4 different teams in order to know their perceptions about the attitudes of their own group towards English learning. Finally, I conducted an interview to the English teacher in order to know his perception of the students' attitudes towards the English learning and to have another perspective of the impact of the research project on students' attitudes.

Data Analysis

Regarding the data analysis, I followed the steps suggested by Burns (2009) in order to bring the information together, analyze, contrast and interpret the information gathered from the different sources. First, I organized the results from the attitude scale and created some graphs to show the frequency and the average attitudes according to the three components evaluated with the scale: cognitive, emotional and behavioral. Second, I organized the information from the self-report and identified common perceptions about the students' attitudes comparing the results between the reports to see changes over time. Additionally, I used the software package for qualitative data analysis MAXQDA suggested by Saldaña

(2009), in order to analyze both the information collected in my journal and the cooperating teacher interview. Finally, I triangulated the information in order to identify the impact of the intervention considering three different perspectives: students, cooperating teacher, and researcher.

Findings and Interpretations

Changes on students' attitudes towards English Learning through VLE's

In order to identify changes on students' attitudes towards English learning, I measured their attitudes at two different moments, before the implementation (pre-test) and at the end of the implementation of the research project (post-test). I measured students' attitudes with an 18-item Likert scale that the participants had to answer from "totally disagree" to "totally agree". The items were designed according to the three components of an attitude: Cognitive, emotional and behavioral. Overall, pre-test and post-test results from the attitude scale showed that at the beginning of the project 52% of the participants showed positive attitudes towards English learning, but at the end, this number increased up to 69%. Consequently, the number of answers expressing negative attitudes decreased from 21% to 10%. Figure 1 shows the changes on the participants' answers.

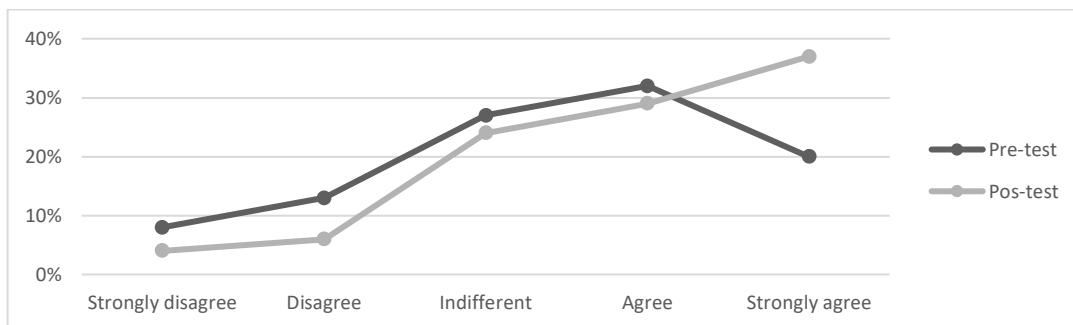


Figure 1. General results from the attitudes' scale towards English learning.

General results for each aspect of the attitude scale are shown in figure 2. Regarding the emotional aspect, results showed that 45% of the students have positive feelings about their English learning process, and 21% have negative feelings.

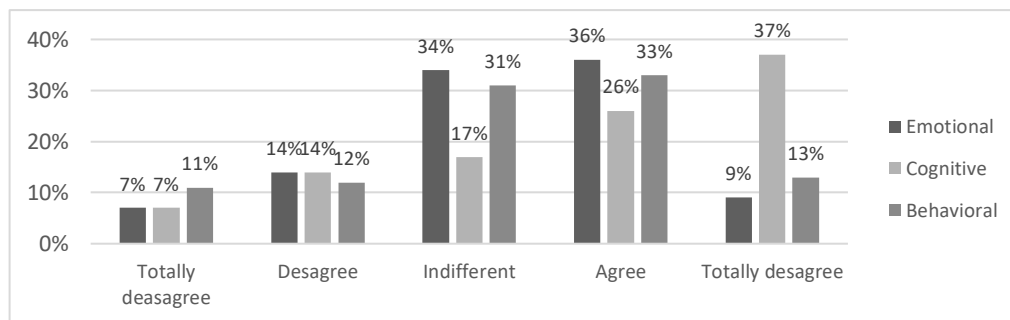


Figure 2. Comparison between each component according to percentage of answers for each option in the Likert scale.

The cognitive aspect showed the highest level with 63% of students having positive thoughts, while 21% are on the other side of the scale. Regarding the behavioral aspect, the results showed that 46% expressed positive behaviors towards the learning process; in contrast, 23 % accept to have negative behaviors.

The items for each component and the percentage of students who answered according to the Likert scale from totally agree to totally disagree are presented in figure 3. The emotional and the cognitive components only have 2 items over 50%, and the behavioral component has one; most of the items are under 50%. Only the cognitive aspect is over 50%, and several students selected the neutral answer on the scale “indifferent”, which means that they probably cannot self-evaluate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors towards the English learning process.

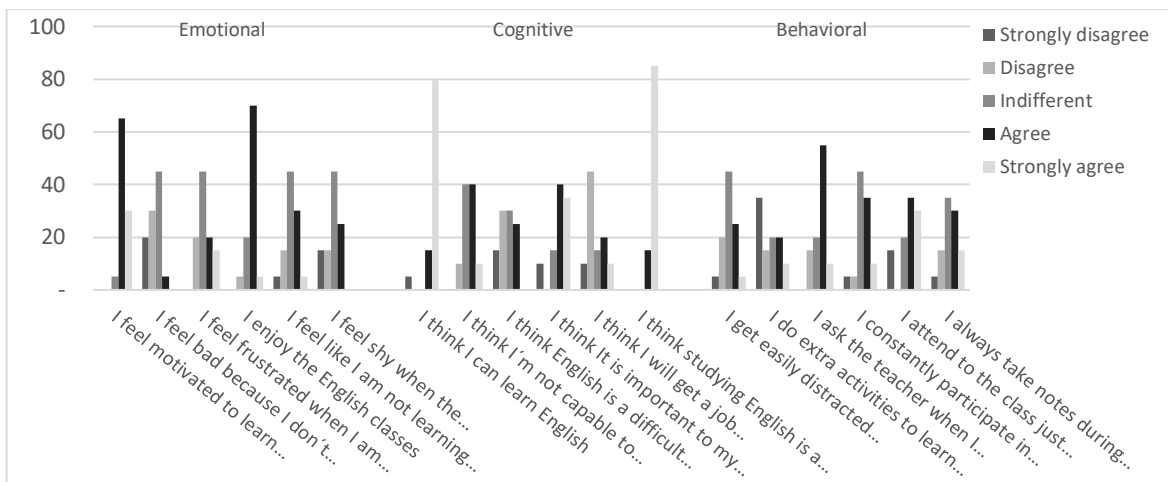


Figure 3. Pre-test results of the attitudes' scale towards English learning per component (emotional, cognitive, and behavioral).

Regarding the post-test, results revealed that in the three components the percentage of answers increased on the right side of the scale. This means that most of the students expressed a positive attitude towards the English learning process. Figure 4 illustrates general results for each component.

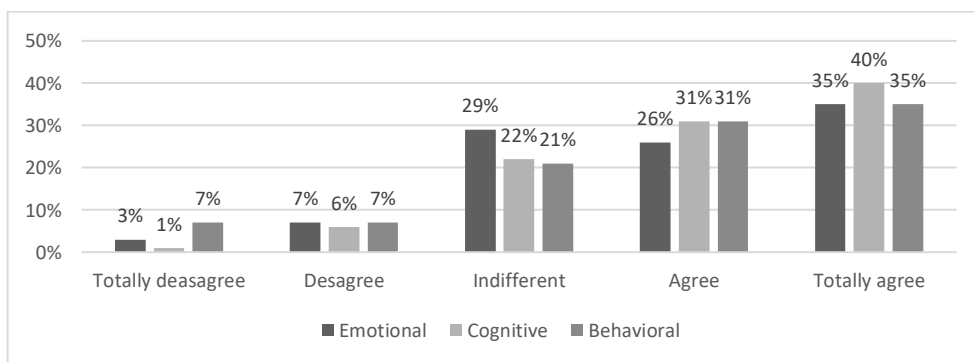


Figure 4. Comparison between each component according to percentage of answers for each option in the Likert scale.

In the emotional aspect of the attitudes, results showed that 61% of the students agree or totally agree on the positive statements, and 21% disagree. The Cognitive component showed that 71% of students have positive attitudes, while only 7% accepted to have negative attitudes. With respect to the behavioral component, 66% of the students presented positive behaviors towards the learning process, and 14% have a negative behavior.

Figure 5 illustrates the percentage of students who answered each item on the Likert scale from totally agree to totally disagree. Post-test results of the attitudes' scale towards English learning showed that all the components increased on the positive side of the scale and reduced on the negative side.

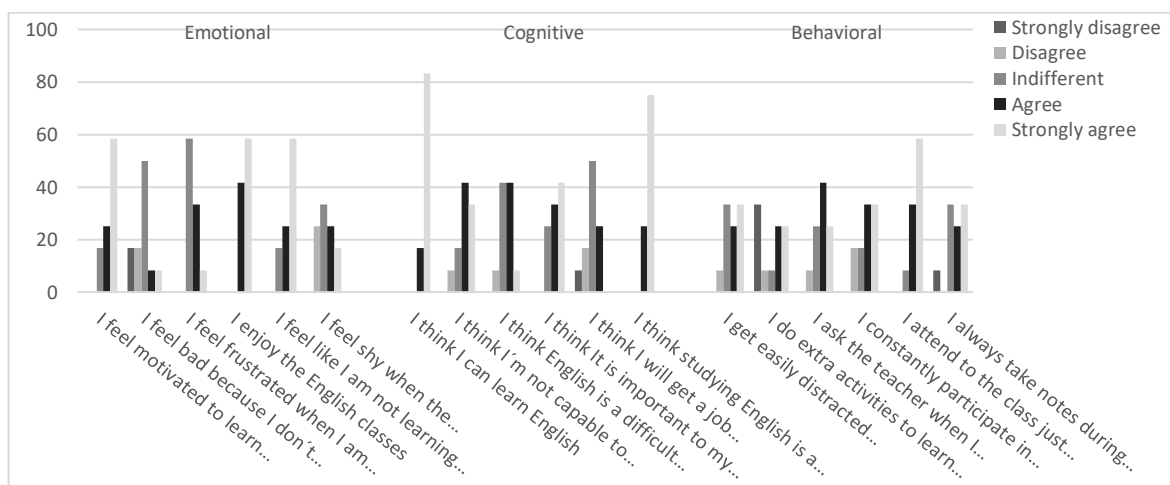


Figure 5. Pos-test results of the attitudes' scale towards English learning per component (emotional, cognitive, and behavioral).

These changes are more remarkable on the emotional and behavioral aspects. We can also observe how the percentage of neutral answers decreased in all the components. These results show that after the implementation of the action research project, the students' positive attitude towards English learning increased in each component, so that we can see a balance between the different aspects.

As we can see in Figure 6, there is a consistency between the components, which is in line with the theory. According to Breckler (1984), the consistency could be explained because, first, the three components imply the experience of the same person; and second, they are elicited in the same learning situation. In this case, students' attitudes were evaluated in the same context of VLE's for second language learning. Additionally, we can observe that the negative attitude towards the English learning process had a considerable decrease, with

67% less in the emotional and Cognitive components; and 39% less in the behavioral aspect. This could imply that after the intervention students are more aware of their own attitudes, so that they will be able to identify feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that interfere with their learning, which in turn could lead to an increase on their self-regulation towards the English learning.

In order to evaluate the students' self-perception during the English class, and to track the changes over the time during the action research project, I implemented a self-report after each lesson. With respect to the emotional component, students had to answer a yes/no question: Do I feel motivated to learn English in this class? After the first lesson 83.3% of the students reported they felt motivated towards English learning. After the second lesson, the number increased up to 87.5%, and after the next three sessions all the participants (100%) evaluated themselves as feeling motivated towards the English learning. Moreover, students were asked to choose, within a list of words, the ones that better expressed their feelings during the class. The words that participants chose the most were interest, concentration, enthusiasm, satisfaction, and joy. The frequency of these words is showed in the following word cloud (Figure 6).

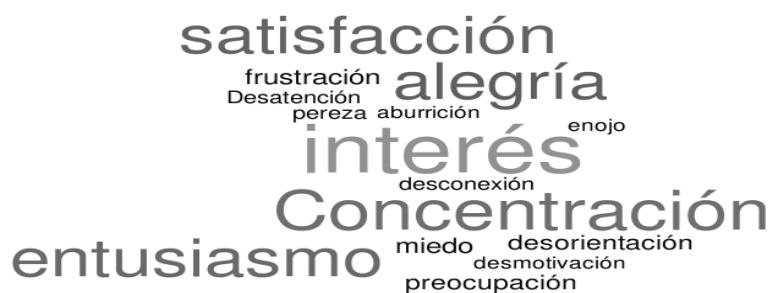


Figure 6. Frequency of words expressing feeling during the English class

With respect to the cognitive component, the self-report showed that in most of the classes 100% of students reported having positive thoughts about the class (interesting), their

own cognitive processes involved in the learning process (concentration), the methodology (increased participation), and the tools used in the virtual classes. Finally, regarding the behavioral component, students were asked to select from a list of behaviors what they did during the virtual class. Results of the self-report showed that most of the students increased behaviors such as taking notes, speaking in English or using virtual materials (Figure 7).

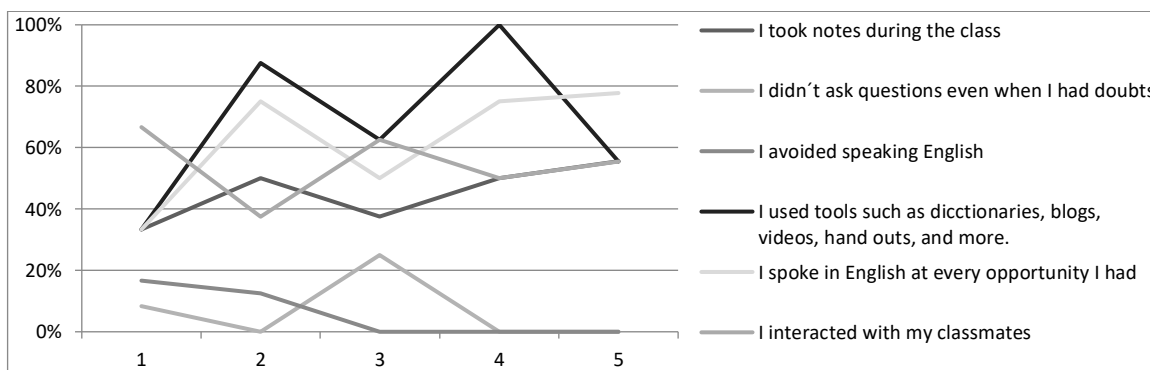


Figure 7. Frequency of behaviors during the English classes

In contrast, negative behaviors such as avoiding speaking or avoiding posing questions to the teacher were reduced. In the last class, positive behaviors were reported by more than 50 % of the students, while none of them reported negative behaviors. Overall, results from the self-report are in line with Mullamaa, (2010), who emphasized the importance of ICT's to promote students' motivation, giving them an opportunity to find the learning process more interesting.

The role of VLE's on the changes of students' attitudes towards English learning

In order to identify the impact of the action research project, I gathered information from different sources such as CT interview, a focus group and the journal. Regarding the emotional aspect, the teacher mentioned that the affective factor is evident in the process of learning the second language. He stated that emotions represent a barrier for the learning process. For instance, based on his experience, many students are ashamed to participate

because they are afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates. According to the teacher, they refuse to participate in English not because of they did not learn, but because they are not confident to produce the language. With respect to the cognitive component, the teacher talked about the importance of the brain functioning, and how the individual differences can also affect the way students face the challenge they find in the English class.

Finally, regarding the VLE's, the CT mentioned some advantages of virtual spaces such as sharing contents, interactive activities, and propose asynchronous assignments. Through these activities the teacher can promote the teacher-students communication, and in that way the learning can be facilitated. The CT thinks the use of VLE's could be a complement to the face to face classes. In addition, he stated that the effectiveness of VLE's depends on how the teacher takes advantage of the new opportunities provided by the technology. In addition, he stated that this project not only had an impact on the students, but also on the future students they will teach in their practicum. The teacher highlighted the fact that the classes were not only based on linguistic aspects, but also on the pedagogical aspects needed to design a lesson plan. He thinks the implementation took into consideration the context of the pre-service teachers and provided useful information for them.

In order to identify the students' perception about the implementation and its effects on the three different components of the attitudes, participants were invited to talk about their experience during the research project. Overall, students' opinions were consistent with the findings on the self-report. First, they highlighted the emotional aspect of the English learning process. They said that dividing the whole group into small groups and maintaining the same teams they were working with before the quarantine, increased their self-confidence to participate during the English sessions. Additionally, they said that the contents were based on

their real needs as pre-service teachers, and that was also important for them to be motivated, interested, and active during the classes. Teacher flexibility was also identified as an aspect that promoted their commitment and engagement. They enjoyed the methodology because it was different compared to the normal classes they have in the other courses. They found the tools used in class useful, not only for them to learn English, but also to implement in the future as teachers.

Regarding the cognitive aspect, there are two things they agreed on. First, they think their level of attention increased. They said that due to the better attention, they had a better comprehension of the content studied, which in turn enhanced their self-confidence and motivation. Second, they think the project help them to retrieve information they had studied before, so they changed the idea about their own learning process, and they seemed to be aware of their real capability to learn English.

Regarding behaviors, several actions were identified. First, they were surprised about their own participation in English. They associated this change to the fact that they increase their self-confidence, so they were less worried about making mistakes. Learners think the methodology implemented helps them to increase their interest on the content. Probably, because the program was designed to give them meaningful information related to pedagogical aspects to be considered when planning an English lesson and related to the methods used to teach English. Consequently, they finished the tasks, they followed the instructions provided, and they accomplished the goals exceeding the performance expectations. Finally, they were more engaged because of the tools used in class, they explored the options on their devices, and they learned how to use new interactive teaching

strategies on VLE's. As observed by Abidin, et al. (2012), engagement and motivation to learn useful content are associated to positive attitudes.

Through my observations, I noticed that students were more comfortable in the virtual class compared to the face-to-face class. They seemed to be more relaxed and less scared to talk in English. For instance, before the quarantine, when I asked them to participate in English, I usually got a negative answer and they refused to talk. In contrast, during the virtual classes, both the number of participation and the number of students who participated increased. The small groups strategy was the key to elicit participation and to promote engagement. Although most of their interactions were in Spanish, the outputs in English were progressively more frequent.

A considerable change was observed in the quality of the assignments. Students not only followed the instructions correctly, but they also went beyond the task. Surprisingly, they incorporated previous knowledge (e.g., they improved the lesson plan format by adding the concepts they used to write the objectives), explore different sources, and found additional information (e.g., they read additional material to present the methods of teaching English). These results confirm Kara's (2009) findings about the positive correlation between positive attitudes and academic performance.

Overall, the information gathered from the five different sources showed consistent evidence about the extent to which VLE's enhance positive students' attitudes towards English learning. Although the three components are independent dimensions that can follow different developmental roots and work independently (Breckler, 1984), it is of interest to identify how they are related, how they affect each other, and how they can work simultaneously during the learning process. The tripartite model has been largely studied

(Breckler, 1984), and the assumption of the positive correlation between the components was confirmed in this study. The following model illustrates the relation between the three components and its relation to the English learning process (Figure 8). In this adaptation of the tripartite view model, each component directly affects English learning independently, the positive or negative effect on the learning process generates a feedback to all the components, which in turn generates new responses. The stability of these responses emotional, cognitive and behavioral, defines the positive or negative attitude towards the studied subject.

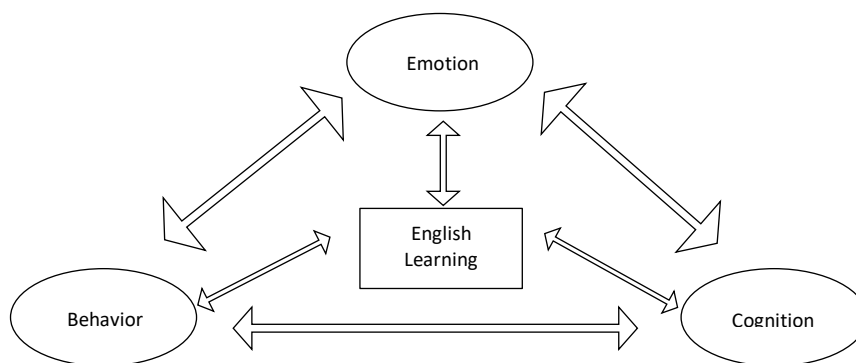


Figure 8. Relation between the three components and the English learning process

Conclusions

After the implementation of the action research project, some conclusions can be made regarding the learners, the teachers, and the VLE's. First, students must be aware of the three components in order to identify the weakest aspect on their attitudes. It would be advisable that after identifying the most affected response, students think of possible reasons for this negative tendency such as the methodology, the teacher, the learning environment (external factors), or psychological traits, self-esteem, self-confidence, among others (internal factors).

Second, regarding the teachers, they usually emphasize the behavioral aspect of learning, paying attention only to the observable actions such as the attendance, participation,

task performance, assignments completed, among others. However, since it is not possible to think on a hierarchical structure among the attitude components, teachers must keep in mind to work simultaneously on the three aspects in order to create and maintain positive attitudes towards the learning process. Moreover, in terms of the VLE's, I conclude that the virtual tools are not an environment itself. Although it is defined as “virtual spaces used for teachers and students’ interaction in order to share information” (Herrera, 2017), it is necessary to consider the role played for the human aspect. The “environment” involves more than the technological tools, or simply the way students interact and use the ICT's. The creation of an environment is a teacher task also in the virtual model of teaching. It is of high importance to pay attention to aspects such as empathy, rapport, availability (emotional component), and students’ interest, needs, learning styles, and beliefs (cognitive component). Additionally, teachers must to consider that VLE's provide them with new opportunities to engage students, to promote participation and interaction, and to foster positive thoughts regarding students’ self-efficacy, capability and language competence.

Finally, in agreement to current research on the field, I conclude that virtual environments enhance students’ attitudes toward English learning, and it is the consequence of the impact on the three components of the attitude. Reducing learners’ fear to use the language (emotion), increasing self-confidence (cognitive), and increasing students’ participation (behavior) are the key elements to foster positive attitudes to the English learning. Further studies could explore on different variables affecting students’ attitudes, especially those associated to teachers’ performance.

Reflections

The teaching practicum in foreign languages and the action research project have contributed towards my personal and professional development in several ways. At a personal level, this experience helped me to confirm my interest in being a language teacher. During the practicum, I strengthened my decision to face the challenge of being an active agent of change as an English teacher. This means that I truly believe in the students' capability to transform their reality and take actions to make the world a better place to live. I also think the practicum helped me to improve interpersonal skills to build positive relations with students, I think this was a crucial aspect to succeed on the implementation of my research project.

At a professional level, I think the practicum and the research process helped me a lot to improve my language performance on both competences writing and speaking. I am totally sure that I reach the end of this journey with a higher level regarding my language skills, which in turns had increased my chances to have a higher performance as a professional teacher. This process also allowed me to further explore the topic of VLE's, which unexpectedly have become a trending topic due to the quarantine, and it will probably be a new scenario where I will work. That means that I am also prepared to face the new challenges in education, more specifically, in second language teaching.

Moreover, the most challenging stage of the practicum was the transition from the face-to-face classes to the virtual classes. This transition was a proof of flexibility and adaptability, characteristics that every teacher needs in order to face daily situations in the classroom. Finally, for those who are about to start the practicum, I would suggest carefully following their schedule from the first stage; in that way, the process of writing will be much easier.

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