

DISTANCE LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN ELT AT MATANZAS UNIVERSITY DURING COVID19 PANDEMICS

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On March, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a pandemic. This situation impacted all areas of human activity worldwide. Our country, and therefore, our universities, were not an exception. Actions were immediately taken in order to mitigate and counteract its effects on education. Teachers, students and institutions dealt with many challenges in order to secure the teaching-learning process and adapt it to the new conditions.

Pandemic quarantine, social isolation and other compulsory measures that were taken, raised up anxiety, stress, fear, doubt and denying in our students. Therefore, we, educators, had the challenge to keep them engaged in the educational process while securing their well-being. Family also played an important role in supporting and securing this process. We had to introduce a hybrid structure that combined in-site and virtual environments in an effective way with the resources we had at hand. Whenever the situation allowed us to, we met our students in small groups in the different municipalities to give them information, provide materials and give general instructions. These moments also served the purpose to interact, encourage them and give them emotional support. We faced a transition from face-to-face learning to blended learning and, eventually, to distance learning. As the number of cases increased, there were long periods when we just had to rely on technology.

What were the main differences between the face-to-face lesson environment we had been accustomed to, and the “new” model we had to assume in a short period of time?

FACE-TO-FACE ENGLISH LESSONS:

- Physical interaction with the rest of the students and teachers.
- A dynamic classroom environment that allowed active debates and participation: group discussions, team work and pair work. Role plays, dramatizations.

DISTANCE LEARNING:

- Less engagement. Lack of in-person interaction.
- Flexibility
- Meets affective needs of students: motivation, self-esteem, and autonomy.
- Creativity and independent learning
- Uses multiple modalities to support different learning styles
- Respond to needs, seek feedback on what works, and find ways round apparent barriers.

What were the main challenges faced during this period?

STUDENTS



- ❖ Lack of connection
- ❖ Poor tech knowledge or lack of digital literacy
- ❖ Inability to submit on time
- ❖ Ineffective time management
- ❖ Technical issues
- ❖ Passive students, waiting for the instructions to get to them.
- ❖ Fear to interact in a virtual environment.
- ❖ Lack of skills required to conduct efficient web searches and determine the validity and reliability of web-based information.
- ❖ Distractions that led to time wastage, loss of concentration with the risk of losing focus on the work given.

TEACHERS



- ❖ Lack of connection
- ❖ Poor tech knowledge
- ❖ Ineffective time management
- ❖ Technical issues
- ❖ Added stress due to pandemic situation
- ❖ Adjustment of academic calendars and curriculum
- ❖ Methodological training and adjustment to distance learning pedagogy
- ❖ Designment of new activities, study guides and educational resources
- ❖ Time-consuming tasks

How could we assure our students this was the right way to go; and hence, go on with the process?

Enhancing both their motivation and their confidence to take responsibility for their learning process was absolutely necessary. We worked on exploring, not only their expectations, but also their previous experiences and learning preferences.

Teachers had, then, the challenge to improve students time-management skills and enhance their self-discipline. To fulfil this goal, we gave them some tips to organize and keep a class schedule even when they were at home. We asked them to identify or create a study space, set daily goals and make the most of their resources.

From a needs-based perspective we combined synchronous solutions such as “face-to-face interaction” through video and audio chats in Telegram with asynchronous communication tools (e.g. discussion groups in WhatsApp, study guides, work with infographics, video watching and reporting, songs, among others)

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- **Collaborative learning**, increasing students' interest in learning, especially when they were actively exchanging and negotiating ideas, engaging in discussion and taking responsibility for their learning.
- Technology also allowed them the opportunity to record themselves for playback at a later time. Students reported that the ability to listen and play recordings again helped them identify grammatical errors and inaccuracy in pronunciation, encouraging self-improvement.
- The internet has a vast treasure of English learning games and activities, but teachers should not underestimate the potential for making their own resources for their learners. Indeed, we experienced a great acceptance and a greater motivation from our students while working with materials designed by ourselves. Students considered that they learn best by hearing language being effectively modelled by their teachers, and having opportunities to use language in productive activities.

CONCLUSIONS

- Technology provides an effective and efficient distance education delivery system that overcomes the barriers of distance and time. It also stimulates students' potential by guiding them towards higher levels in the development of knowledge, skills and abilities while giving them the opportunity to acquire and practice essential 21st century professional skills.
- COVID19 pandemics demonstrated that teachers succeeded in helping students develop both the language competency and explore new study skills which helped them succeed and overcome the situation. It created a strong sense of mutual engagement, response to needs, feedback on what worked, and solutions to overcome the challenges and barriers.