



*Aprendizaje virtual y adquisición del idioma inglés en la educación superior:  
desafíos, adaptación y oportunidades*

*Virtual learning and English language acquisition in higher education:  
challenges, adaptation, and opportunities*

*Aprendizagem virtual e aquisição da língua inglesa no ensino superior: desafios,  
adaptação e oportunidades*

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## Resumen

Este artículo explora cómo la transición a entornos digitales influyó en la adquisición del inglés como lengua extranjera entre estudiantes universitarios en contextos hispanohablantes. El estudio adopta un enfoque teórico-exploratorio basado en revisión documental, centrándose en las implicaciones pedagógicas, tecnológicas y metodológicas de la educación en línea. La investigación destaca la flexibilidad del inglés como asignatura, lo que permitió una adaptación más fluida a la virtualidad en comparación con otras disciplinas. Se analizan las oportunidades creadas por herramientas digitales como plataformas multimedia, foros colaborativos y recursos asincrónicos, que favorecen un aprendizaje más personalizado, interactivo y autónomo. Sin embargo, estos beneficios contrastan con diversos desafíos, como el acceso desigual a la tecnología, la falta de capacitación docente y la ineficacia de métodos tradicionales en entornos no presenciales. Se identifican enfoques como el aprendizaje basado en proyectos y el enfoque comunicativo como los más adecuados para la enseñanza virtual del inglés. Asimismo, se resalta la transformación del rol docente, pasando de transmisores de contenido a facilitadores digitales y agentes reflexivos. Además, se observa que la virtualidad fomenta habilidades interdisciplinarias mediante la integración de herramientas de medios, diseño y gamificación. En conclusión, la educación virtual ha transformado de forma permanente la enseñanza del inglés. Aunque ofrece ventajas significativas, requiere una mejor planificación pedagógica, infraestructura tecnológica adecuada y formación docente continua. Las instituciones deben promover estrategias centradas en el estudiante para garantizar una enseñanza del inglés de calidad en contextos digitales. Los hallazgos subrayan que, cuando se implementa correctamente, la educación virtual puede fortalecer un enfoque más dinámico, equitativo y comunicativo del aprendizaje de idiomas en el siglo XXI.

**Palabras Clave:** Educación virtual; aprendizaje; educación superior; competencia comunicativa; pedagogía digital.

## Abstract

This article explores how the transition to digital environments influenced the acquisition of English as a foreign language among university students in Spanish-speaking contexts. The study adopts a theoretical-exploratory approach based on a documentary review, focusing on the pedagogical, technological, and methodological implications of online education. The research highlights the flexibility of English as a subject, which allowed for a more fluid adaptation to virtual

learning compared to other disciplines. The article analyzes the opportunities created by digital tools such as multimedia platforms, collaborative forums, and asynchronous resources, which foster more personalized, interactive, and autonomous learning. However, these benefits contrast with various challenges, such as unequal access to technology, lack of teacher training, and the ineffectiveness of traditional methods in non-face-to-face environments. Approaches such as project-based learning and communicative approaches are identified as the most appropriate for online English teaching. It also highlights the transformation of the teaching role from transmitters of content to digital facilitators and reflective agents. Furthermore, it is observed that virtual education fosters interdisciplinary skills through the integration of media, design, and gamification tools. In conclusion, virtual education has permanently transformed English language teaching. Although it offers significant advantages, it requires improved pedagogical planning, adequate technological infrastructure, and ongoing teacher training. Institutions must promote student-centered strategies to ensure quality English language teaching in digital contexts. The findings underscore that, when implemented correctly, virtual education can foster a more dynamic, equitable, and communicative approach to language learning in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** Virtual education; learning; higher education; communicative competence; digital pedagogy.

## Resumo

Este artigo explora como a transição para ambientes digitais influenciou a aquisição do inglês como língua estrangeira entre estudantes universitários em contextos de língua espanhola. O estudo adota uma abordagem teórico-exploratória baseada na revisão documental, com foco nas implicações pedagógicas, tecnológicas e metodológicas da educação online. A investigação destaca a flexibilidade do inglês como disciplina, que permitiu uma adaptação mais fluida à aprendizagem virtual em comparação com outras disciplinas. O artigo analisa as oportunidades criadas pelas ferramentas digitais, como as plataformas multimídia, os fóruns colaborativos e os recursos assíncronos, que promovem uma aprendizagem mais personalizada, interativa e autónoma. No entanto, estes benefícios contrastam com vários desafios, como o acesso desigual à tecnologia, a falta de formação de professores e a ineficácia dos métodos tradicionais em ambientes não presenciais. Abordagens como a aprendizagem baseada em projetos e as abordagens comunicativas são identificadas como as mais adequadas para o ensino de inglês online. Destaca ainda a

transformação do papel docente de transmissor de conteúdos para facilitador digital e agente reflexivo. Além disso, observa-se que a educação virtual promove competências interdisciplinares através da integração de ferramentas de media, design e gamificação. Em conclusão, a educação virtual transformou permanentemente o ensino da língua inglesa. Embora ofereça vantagens significativas, requer um planejamento pedagógico melhorado, infraestruturas tecnológicas adequadas e formação contínua dos professores. As instituições devem promover estratégias centradas no aluno para garantir um ensino de inglês de qualidade em contextos digitais. Os resultados realçam que, quando implementada corretamente, a educação virtual pode promover uma abordagem mais dinâmica, equitativa e comunicativa da aprendizagem de línguas no século XXI.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação virtual; aprendizagem; ensino superior; competência comunicativa; pedagogia digital.

## Introduction

The landscape of teaching English as a foreign language took an overwhelming turn, not only for teachers but also for students who visited classrooms and shifted their learning habits: from speaking Spanish everywhere, to arriving in the classroom and entering another world filled with language and culture.

Without a doubt, we've all experienced this feeling of emptiness, or at least those of us who chose teaching as our vocation and were happy to walk into a classroom full of students eagerly awaiting us to learn more about this beautiful and useful language. The pandemic sank deeply into educational institutions, completely emptying them and leaving a hole not only physical but emotional in those of us who attended daily with a common goal: learning.

Teachers have reinvented themselves to bring each of their subjects online and bring the best learning methods to the forefront, allowing students to naturally grasp, analyze, and share their knowledge. This is the case with English, which wasn't so difficult to adapt to due to its flexibility in both in-person and virtual teaching, which has existed for several years now, through the use of digital platforms that have become a collaborative and highly effective tool for learning foreign languages.

However, this accelerated transition to virtual education has also exposed multiple pedagogical and structural challenges that cannot be ignored. The main problems evident in this context lie in the

implementation of methodologies poorly adapted to the virtual environment, unequal access to technological tools, and the limited preparation of both teachers and students to effectively and meaningfully undertake an online teaching-learning process. This has generated legitimate concerns about the quality of English language learning in higher education, especially with regard to the development of communicative and linguistic skills in non-face-to-face contexts.

### **Justification**

This study is justified by the need to deeply understand how virtual learning environments have influenced the English language acquisition process among university students. The forced virtualization of education has revealed not only the resilience of the educational system but also its shortcomings, including its readiness for effective online language teaching. In this regard, it is essential to analyze whether the methodological strategies employed have been relevant, whether they have adapted to the technological realities of students, and whether they have promoted truly meaningful language learning. Furthermore, it is crucial to identify the positive aspects this modality has brought, such as access to interactive platforms, multimedia resources, and asynchronous experiences that enrich the learning process.

Based on this, this research not only aims to describe the current situation but also to provide elements that contribute to strengthening the English teaching process in digital settings, promoting equity, quality, and pedagogical relevance.

### **General objective**

- To describe the impact of virtual education on English language learning among higher education university students, analyzing its methodological, technological, and pedagogical implications.

### **Specific objectives**

1. Identify the main challenges faced by university teachers and students in teaching and learning English in virtual environments.
2. Analyze the methodological strategies used by teachers for teaching English online.
3. Evaluate the benefits and opportunities that digital platforms offer for

### **Delimitations**

This research is limited to a theoretical-exploratory analysis focused on the impact of virtual education on English language learning among higher education students in Spanish-speaking contexts. The study does not address a specific population through fieldwork but is based on a

documentary review of studies, articles, and previous experiences related to virtual English teaching. Furthermore, it focuses primarily on higher education levels, ignoring other educational levels such as primary or secondary education. It does not include institutional case studies or quantitative results derived from achievement tests. The temporality is situated in the post-pandemic context, considering the immediate and sustained effects of the transition to virtual environments during and after the lockdown.

## **Methodology**

To analyze the impact of virtual learning on English language learning, a theoretical-exploratory study is proposed. This methodology is appropriate given the limited number of specific previous studies on this topic, which justifies the need to conduct a thorough review of academic and specialized literature from a variety of sources. The objective is to construct a rigorous and well-founded approach to the object of study.

Likewise, a historical perspective is incorporated to understand how virtuality has consolidated itself as a central axis in educational communication processes. The health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic forced teachers to rapidly train in the use of technological tools to ensure the continuity of their teaching, research, outreach, and management roles.

A scientific research approach is also adopted, oriented toward systematic reflection on both theoretical and empirical realities, recognizing the urgency for teachers to update their digital skills to improve the methodological management of their classes. The historical-logical method will be used to interpret the collected information, allowing for the establishment of meaningful relationships between virtual teaching and its impact on English language learning in university settings.

## **Development**

### **1. Learning in the digital age**

Since the mid-20th century, technological evolution has transformed the dynamics of interaction between teachers and students. According to Flores, Ortega, and Sánchez (2021), changes in communication systems have profoundly influenced educational environments. However, the challenge has been to incorporate technology pedagogically, not just as an operational necessity. Loveless and Williamson (2017) argue that digital technologies have experienced significant expansion in the educational field. From the use of computers in the classroom to tools specifically



designed for pedagogical purposes, these technologies have been increasingly and steadily integrated into academic life.

ICTs have not only changed teaching methods but have also opened up new learning opportunities. According to Gonzáles, Sangrá , Alba, and Estévez (2018), four key drivers of this transformation are identified: (1) connectivity, which enables unprecedented interactions; (2) student empowerment, allowing students to make decisions about their own learning process; (3) overcoming space-time barriers; and (4) recognizing informal and invisible learning as an essential part of skills development.

## **2. English as a foreign language**

English is currently one of the most widely spoken languages globally, which has led numerous educational institutions to include it as a fundamental part of their curriculum. Learning English as a foreign language involves acquiring a language other than one's native language, generally in contexts where it is not spoken on a daily basis. Beltrán (2017) indicates that this process usually occurs in the school environment through planned and controlled activities, although its impact can be significant if available resources are properly utilized.

Ricoy and Álvarez (2016) identify various methods used in teaching foreign languages, among which the following stand out:

1. **Grammar-translation method:** based on grammatical rules and the use of the native language.
2. **Direct method:** promotes direct association between words and their real referents.
3. **Audio-oral method:** promotes oral expression through repetition.
4. **Audiovisual method:** uses visual and auditory resources to improve understanding.
5. **Communicative approach:** encourages the real use of the foreign language in meaningful contexts.
6. **Project-based learning:** encourages active and collaborative student participation.

These approaches, when combined with current teaching resources, can facilitate more effective learning. Peña (2019) highlights that, thanks to technological globalization, access to teaching materials has become more democratic, generating new opportunities for teaching English.

## **3. Communication skills**

Communicative competence is defined as the set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing. Reyzábal (2012) emphasizes the importance

of considering sociocultural, psychological, and contextual factors in the development of this competence.

According to Rosales, Zárate and Lozano (2013), learning a foreign language can be developed through two pathways: (1) formal acquisition through rules and correction, and (2) natural acquisition, based on spontaneous use in real-life contexts. While grammatical knowledge can facilitate the construction and correction of utterances, its effectiveness depends on integration into authentic communicative situations.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages defines competence as the set of knowledge, skills, and individual characteristics that enable the understanding and interpretation of messages. Consequently, adequate communicative competence is manifested in the speaker's ability to interact effectively in specific contexts.

#### **4. Virtual English language learning environments: new scenarios**

Bustos and Coll (2010) argue that ICTs play a dual role in education: as learning tools and as transformers of the educational environment. Their incorporation has generated new educational scenarios that transcend the traditional classroom.

Navas, Real, Pacheco, and Mayorga (2015) assert that virtual environments allow information to be transformed into new learning experiences, redefining the roles of teachers, students, and institutions. Through digital resources, it is possible to design hybrid learning spaces that integrate virtual elements with real-life situations.

Moreno and Galván (2020) agree that the current panorama demands a change in the educational paradigm, based on innovation and the integration of emerging technologies that respond to the needs of a global and digital society.

#### **5. The role of the English teacher in virtuality**

English teacher training must respond to the demands of a constantly evolving virtual environment. González, Ramírez, and Isaza (2021) emphasize that ICTs are one of the main methodological tools that strengthen new forms of language teaching.

Viñals and Cuenca (2016) point out that teachers must adapt to the characteristics of a new generation of digital native students, who demand dynamic, flexible, and interactive education. Many teachers have opted for ongoing self-training in order to stay up-to-date and respond effectively to these challenges.



In this sense, the role of teachers goes beyond simply transmitting knowledge: they must acquire digital skills, promote critical thinking, and encourage the reflective use of technology. The transformation of their role involves not only learning to use digital tools but also redefining their teaching practice in a highly technological environment.

## **Discussion - Results**

The findings derived from the theoretical-exploratory analysis show that virtual learning has profoundly transformed the teaching and learning of English in university settings. Based on the literature review, several key aspects are identified that allow us to understand the scope of these changes.

First, virtual learning has generated new, more flexible, interactive, and accessible learning environments. This has allowed university students to take a more autonomous and active role, fostering personalized learning and access to multimedia resources that enrich the educational experience. Connectivity and the availability of digital platforms have made it possible for English learning to transcend the physical barriers of the classroom, offering opportunities for continuous practice through simulators, videos, forums, and collaborative activities.

Secondly, there is a shift in the understanding of the teaching role. The English teacher has gone from being a transmitter of content to becoming a facilitator of learning, a mediator who must master digital skills, active methodologies, and technological tools to adapt their teaching to the demands of the virtual environment. However, this transition has posed significant challenges, especially in contexts where technological infrastructure is limited or where teachers have not received adequate training in digital skills.

Furthermore, the results show that, while ICTs provide significant benefits to the English teaching-learning process, their effective integration requires solid pedagogical planning. Simply using technological tools does not guarantee meaningful learning; they must be aligned with clear educational objectives and a student-centered methodology.

Another relevant finding is that traditional English teaching methods, such as the grammar-translation approach, are less effective in virtual environments if they are not complemented with more communicative and interactive strategies. In this sense, task-based, project-based, and collaborative learning approaches prove to be more appropriate for enhancing communicative competence in a foreign language.

Finally, it is confirmed that learning English online also promotes interdisciplinarity, as it incorporates tools from other areas (video editing, graphic design, social media, gamification, etc.), expanding the skills developed by both teachers and students.

## Conclusion

Virtual learning, more than an emerging solution to the health crisis, has established itself as a structural component of the contemporary education system. In the case of English language learning, its incorporation has generated new, more dynamic, interactive, and student-centered teaching methods.

Virtual environments offer significant advantages such as independent learning, accessibility to diverse teaching materials, and the strengthening of communicative competence through the use of digital tools. However, they also pose challenges that must be addressed, such as teacher training, methodological adaptation, and the need for adequate technological infrastructure.

It is essential that educational institutions promote ongoing development for English teachers, not only in the technical use of ICTs but also in their pedagogical integration. The success of virtual English learning will depend on teachers' ability to design meaningful experiences that respond to their students' interests, backgrounds, and needs.

In short, the impact of virtual learning on English is undeniable: it has transformed roles, methodologies, and educational spaces. Proper use of virtual learning can strengthen the development of students who are more independent, critical, and communicatively competent in a foreign language, which represents a key value in 21st-century university education.

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