Online Specialized English Subjects in the Modern Language Program at Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo (UASD)

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Abstract

This research was carried out in the "Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo (UASD)", which has an over population of more than 200 thousand students with 51% of the population in the central branch. Through the virtual modality, subjects are offered to more than eight thousand students. However, the Language School only has three specialized English subjects, focusing this study on these subjects. The research design is exploratory and descriptive, following a qualitative approach, using focus groups for data collection. Advanced Students of the English program will participate in this research, since they have chosen or not to take the specialized subjects offered in the Modern Languages course. The purpose of this research was: (a) To identify the English students' perception about the specialized subjects offered through the virtual modality (b) Present the technological devices used by the students; (c) Inquire the frequency with which they use the Internet for pedagogical purposes; and (d) Show the factors influencing students not to take the specialized subjects offered through the virtual modality in the English program. The research outcomes show that the virtual modality was valued as innovative, positive, dynamic and flexible since it allows them to study at night and work during the day. Another important fact is that students have access through their cell phones, three or more times per week. The students who did not take the virtual classes emphasized that they did not know about this online offer.

Key words: Virtual Classes- qualitative research-focus groups-advanced English-EVA

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Chapter I: Introduction

The growing development and advances of information and communication technologies in education (ICT) offers a large number of teaching resources through the ICT galaxy (Cabero, 2016, p.34), which helps teachers develop subjects, exercises and practices in English classes to online English course development. According to Pearls (2013), by 2018, 63% of workforce jobs will require a college education. Given the pace of modern society, online learning is the appropriate way to solve this need.

This possibility of online teaching resources helps to strengthen students' language skills; thus, giving greater reinforcement to learners' English language communication skills, when teachers use these means in a manner concomitantly with the instructional objectives and content. Therefore, involving students in the training process is very important both in online instruction and in traditional instruction. The challenge is to develop appropriate participation methods for online users. It is essential that interaction be incorporated into this training. Therefore, some research show that the course satisfaction depends on its interaction and not due to computer use, since it does not ensure interaction (Brunet, 2011).

Teaching forms have evolved around the world with the technologies applied to English teaching, giving way to new methodologies that allow students to integrate knowledge into their repertoire effectively and meaningfully. Online instruction presents universities with a way to provide an asynchronous education, which takes teaching beyond space and time, allowing students from different parts not only of the same country, but also of the world to access a university career.

The Autonomous University of Santo Domingo (UASD) currently has a super population of more than 200 thousand students, with 18 regional centers. 51% of the students are at the headquarters (UASD SEDE). This university has entered into these new virtual teaching paradigms. This new modality of instruction is quite remarkable, since it offers 100 clusters to more than eight thousand students from all over the country virtually taught (Autonomous University of Santo Domingo, 2018). Therefore, the possibility of using online classes can reduce the overpopulation that affects the instructional process in this university, which makes learning English difficult for students (Santana, 2016).

The School of Languages at the Humanity Faculty is no exception to this trend. This

consists of almost three thousand students nationwide and has entered into this modality with a curricular offer of three specialized English subjects, where students can enroll regardless of which university branch they belong to.

In this sense, the university virtual courses are an invaluable resource for students to take their subjects online without commuting from different provinces to Santo Domingo (central branch), in some occasions the subject offer do not open because they have few students or there are no faculty members available. The English program has about three thousand students across the country.

The purpose of this research was to: (a) Identify the students' perception of the specialized subjects offered through the virtual modality (b) Present the technological devices used by the students; (c) Inquire the frequency in which students access the Internet for pedagogical uses; and (d) Show the factors that influenced students not to take the specialized subjects offered through the virtual modality in the English program in the Modern Languages career at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo.

Significance of the Research

Today's teaching methodologies focus on a different educational context, based on ICT. Therefore, this research focused on the specialized online subjects offered in the university's English program. Currently three subjects are taught: IDI-228 English Composition, IDI-331 History of English Language and IDI-233 English Phonetics.

The research motivation is to identify the perception of the students who have taken the online specialized subjects, as well as to inquire about the factors that have caused the students not to take these subjects online. This type of research is one of the first in the virtual context of this university, due to its short time offering virtual subjects, there have been few or no studies related to the students' perception about their experience, and it is the first research related to subjects dedicated to English teaching training.

Although, there have been many studies that indicate that there is no significant difference between online and traditional courses in terms of their effectiveness in imparting knowledge. Studies have determined, however, that different teaching strategies are needed for effective teaching (Dasher-Alston & Patton, 1998). Online course providers should encourage more interactions to help students achieve learning objectives and establish peer networks, while

conducting assessment studies that compare the performance of online and face-to-face courses, such as achievement of student learning to gain deeper knowledge in specific areas of improvement for online courses. (Kim, Welch, & Nam, 2016). The results produced by this study will improve the online subject offer, as well as understand what factors prevent that students do not take these subjects in the virtual modality. Thus, these data will serve so that universities under the same conditions can improve their virtual class offer.

Objetives

1. Identify the students' perception about the specialized subjects offered through the virtual modality in the English program in the Modern Languages career at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo.

2. Present the technological devices used by the students in the specialized subjects offered through the virtual modality in the English program in the Modern Languages career at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo.

3. Inquire the frequency with which the online specialized subject students access Internet for pedagogical uses in the English program in the Modern Languages career at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo.

4. Show the factors that influenced students not to take the specialized subjects offered through the virtual modality in the English program in the Modern Languages career at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo.

Research Questions

1. What is the students' perception about the specialized subjects offered through the virtual modality in the English program in the Modern Languages career at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo?

2. What type of technological devices are used by the online specialized subject students in in the English program in the Modern Languages career at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo.

3. How often do the online specialized subject students access Internet for pedagogical uses in the English program in the Modern Languages career at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo.

4. For the students who answered that they did not take the online specialized subjects in the English program in the Modern Languages career at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo, what factors influenced their decision not to do so?

Chapter II: Research Methodology

Research Design

This research is exploratory and descriptive, following a qualitative approach. Citing McMillan & Schumacher (2005) "exploratory research is usually done in new areas of study." These authors also express that "Qualitative exploratory studies often examine phenomena that have not been studied before" (p.118).

This research is also descriptive, since Hernández-Sampieri, Fernández-Collado, and Batista-Lucio, (2014) show that "descriptive studies seek to specify the properties, characteristics and profiles of people, groups, communities, processes, objects or any other phenomenon that is subjected to an analysis "(p. 92).

According to Creswell (2014) one of the main reasons for conducting a qualitative study is that the study is exploratory. This generally refers to the fact that not much has been written about the topic or the population being studied, and the researcher seeks to interpret the participants and build up an understanding based on what is heard.

According to this author, qualitative research is an approach to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem. The research process involves emerging questions, the data that is generally collected in the environment of the subject to be investigated, the data analysis is constructed inductively from particular topics to general topics, and the researcher makes interpretations of the meaning of the data.

Instruments

This research used, for interviews, focus groups with advanced level students in the English program. "Focus group interviews consist of six to eight participants in each group.These interviews involve unstructured and generally open questions that are few in number and intended to obtain views and opinions of the participants" (Creswell, 2014). The research questions were used for the instrument.

Participant

Only advanced level students in the English program participated in this research, since these are the ones who have taken or not the specialized subjects offered in the Modern Languages career. These students must have from a B2 language level to a CI level when taking the eighth term subjects. That is, students with this level can understand the main ideas of complex texts on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in their field of expertise. In addition, they can produce clear and detailed texts on a wide range of topics and explain a point of view on a topical topic that offers the advantages and disadvantages of various options (European English Language Reference Framework, s.f.)

In Santo Domingo UASD, there are eight advanced English levels: IDI-224 Advanced English I (three clusters), IDI-323 Advanced English II (three clusters) and IDI-324 Advanced English III (two clusters). A cluster in each level was taken randomly. Therefore, there were three focus groups with eight participants in each group of those students who were or had taken online subjects, for a total of 24 participants. As a control group, three focus groups were taken as a sample with those students who had not taken virtual subjects for a total of 24 participants. Therefore, the sample had a total of $N = 48$ participants.

Procedures

The principal investigator requested permission from the director of the Modern Languages career. Upon obtaining approval, he went to the advanced levels, where he explained the research purpose to the advanced level teacher. Upon obtaining permission and signing the informed consent, the principal investigator explained to the students the research objectives

The inclusion protocol in this study, only advanced level students who wish to participate in the focus groups participated. For the selection, the first eight participants who volunteered were taken, after explaining resarch purpose and that their identities will not be revealed.

Limitations of the Research

This research interpreted the participants in the focus groups. These focus groups were obtained randomly; For this reason, a random cluster was taken from each level and from this section a focus group was formed with eight students who volunteered. An experimental group was formed with the students who were or had taken virtual subjects and a control group with students who had not taken the virtual subjects. After obtaining permission to implement and

explaining the research purpose, those eight students who first volunteered were used as an inclusion method. At the focus group meeting, they were presented an informed consent for the participants who want to be part of the focus group to sign it. Therefore, in this investigation there may be certain limitations, which are:

1. The sample obtained from the three focus groups belonging to the clusters that had taken virtual subjects and three focus groups of those who had not experienced the online classes. The focus group was composed of eight participants, which will give a total of 24 students as an experimental group and 24 students as a control group (N = 48).

2. The study presented an exploratory and descriptive qualitative approach. This may yield results that will depend on the interpretation capacity of the principal investigator, and these results may have some subjectivity.

3. Quantitative or mixed studies should be carried out to provide results that reach the explanatory level, which allow to generalize.

4. The results are only representative for populations that are under the same conditions as the study participants.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Research on University online English Programs

The use of technological aids such as computers, smartphones, and tablets has become an important feature in the English language, in classrooms and in teaching. Teaching materials such as recorders, VCRs and projectors were used in classrooms for effective teaching until some time ago. However, during the recent past, effective teaching and strategies have moved to web-based learning. The use of technology-enabled strategies is made possible through computer management. There is no doubt that the use of cyberspace for language teaching occupies the central role in ELT. (Coiro, 2003). Therefore, virtual education typifies the promise for higher education systems worldwide that strive to meet the growth and change needs of student populations (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009).

Pasupathi (2012) tells us that the generation of the 21st century continues to grow with technology and with the students of this generation who can use new technologies so easily. The use of cyberspace has changed people's abilities to access information and has had a great impact

on students' learning skills. There are many technological tools that could be used in classrooms to improve English, as well as students' technological skills. He argues that the use of technological media in English classrooms, especially for students of this language as a foreign language (LE), has many advantages. Students can improve communication, listening, reading and writing skills. It allows students to communicate worldwide through the Internet, search for information online, use software to learn and evaluate skills, publish their work and read texts. In addition, he points out that the integration of the web into language classes changes the behavioral approach to a constructivist approach.

The types of virtual environments are in number a great variety, some with more functionalities than others, but in the end, everyone wants to fulfill a teaching function. Here we will highlight some of these environments, but we will focus on those that best suit this study. The virtual learning environment (VLE) are very diverse, which have different types of tasks and activities that are developed in relation to the needs of the educational institution. "There are several content distribution portals, such as: work environments in groups or collaboration, content management systems (CMS), knowledge management systems LMS or also called in English VLE" (p.6). But the most important types of virtual environments are VLE or LMS because they allow access in password protected areas, use web 1.0 and 2.0, systematically integrate the contents and activities, monitoring and evaluation of students is much easier and they incorporate resources that can also be used in the classroom (Belloch, sf).

According to Cabero (2016), everything we do in this communication society revolves around ICT. The concepts of time and space are affected and constantly changing due to the high speed with which information advances. It does not matter the location we have or where we are currently, since the space has also been transformed being able to move to any part of the world without any impediment. Unlike our ancestors from previous centuries who did not have that facility we have today.

It is well known that ICTs create specific environments on the web that can be more charming and with more advantages than those we usually use in a pre-existent manner. But that scope and great value of the technologies will not depend on the mere use of these, if not the link they have with the curriculum, the objectives and contents in a space where they can be intertwined and applied with the specific didactic strategies (Cabero, 2016). For this reason,

recently there has been an emerging trend that dedicates an increasing amount of pressure on educational organizations to use ICTs to improve their capacity in order to respond to the needs of the internalization process. (Alkharang and Ghinea, 2013).

The "integration" of ICT in education is considered as an asset to stimulate technological growth. Its use not only changes traditional forms of teaching, but also requires tutors to be more creative in adapting and customizing their own instructional materials and techniques to encourage students to adapt this new form (Alyya, & Gary, 2017). These authors found that, based on the results and conclusions in this research work in Kuwait, different factors were found that influenced student attitudes towards the implementation of ICT in their daily study. Apart from the model suggested by them, following are the few recommendations that could improve the position of ICT in learning English:

1. The peer learning factor at the university level must be reinforced, providing ICT facilities and an environment equipped with modern ICT, where university students can exchange their ICT experiences, skills, knowledge and activities in both universities (public and private).

2. The tutors of the public university of Kuwait should encourage their university students to use ICT in their English version to improve their language skills.

3. The tutors of both Kuwaiti universities should be motivated to use ICT in university students. learning, providing training sessions and workshops on the use of the Web. This will develop their experience and skills in ICT, and they will feel more secure when used for undergraduate student learning.

4. An important lesson for educational institutions that make curricular decisions is that they should place emphasis on culture specifications, as well as the main language followed, in their particular institutions, rather than just adopting a standard e-learning framework.

According to Alyya and Gary (2017), it was evident through this research, peer learning has an important role in fostering positive attitudes of students towards ICT. In the same terms Agbo (2015), expresses that the factors that regularly affect university students of private and public universities are the type of university, the language studied and the support of technology they have. This author found that they have a strong impact on the attitudes of university

students in the use of cyberspace tools in learning.

D'Antoni, (2006) also recommends that through ICT students develop autonomous learning and an active role in the instructional process. Therefore, the implementation of ICT in instruction and the intention to obtain a positive impact on the quality of teaching as well as learning is evolving rapidly in the last two decades. ICTs are fundamentally changing interaction in higher education and throughout society, as today's students must have the means to interact in the learning process (Obi, Okumo-Bigambo, & Lumala, 2010).

In this same order Hong (2016) presents that the role of teachers is relevant for the integration of ICT, because its use in the classroom depends on the attitudes of teachers towards the new educational paradigm. In other terms, for a successful implementation of ICT, educators must have a positive attitude. Therefore, the training of ICT teachers is essential to encourage teachers to see ICTs in a positive way. However, in order to develop such skills, training, opinions, concerns and needs of teachers on ICT management must first be identified.

Corroborating this, Macharia, & Pelser (2014) conclude that previous studies have shown that, in the higher education sector, ICT provides "the impetus for change from traditional teaching and learning concepts, as well as the main motivation behind the change in academic and professional activities "(p.7). "This underlines the importance of ICT in higher education to achieve the objective of providing flexible teaching and learning environments." These authors mentioned in their study that the findings show that environmental, technological, organizational and individual factors play an important role in the dissemination of ICT. It was also observed that the effects of some factors, such as availability, access to the web and the characteristics of the director of the educational institution, play a fundamental role in the dissemination of new technologies in the university context of a country in process of developing.

According to Boukary (2017), the experience of educators in cyberspace has a direct, positive and significant impact on the specific use of ICT. While it can negatively impact if educators do not receive support from the higher institution, this can have a negative impact, which can discourage teachers. The conditions provided by the University can have a very significant negative effect on the use of ICT, when the support offered by the university and the technology infrastructure is very low, university teachers can develop a very bad perception of it, by therefore, a negative reaction to using ICT. In this study, however, age was not a factor that

had a directly significant effect on the use of ICT. In conclusion, the integration of the Web requires both technological and pedagogical skills, therefore, an important investment to provide access to new technologies.

Majed-Gharmallah (2017) expresses that the ICT provision for teachers and university students is essential to offer them more effective learning environments. The findings indicate that the supply of technological equipment seems to be adequate, which could be due to the recognition of its importance, but that training in its use is necessary for academic staff and students. They seem to be using ICTs unequally with different levels of skills and experiences that vary from one university to another across the country. The findings also indicate that the learning style, the predominance of traditional learning and the universal pedagogical demand are probably some of the reasons behind the need for combined learning.

According to Popova & Nenasheva (2016) many Russian institutions of higher education support the introduction of technologies and actively use them in the instructional process. In the teaching of foreign languages at the university, the change to the new instructional model implies the need to actively implement innovative concepts and practices aimed at ensuring that students reach the maximum level of English language proficiency as specified by international standards and Russians The authors of the article conclude that the use of an Internet environment in a foreign language for foreign language learning (LE) both in self-learning and in the classroom provides a powerful tool that allows university students Not only do they train in LE training, but they can obtain skills both in the virtual environment and at the same time communicative skills.

Chapter IV: Results

Research Question I

What is the students' perception about the specialized subjects offered through the virtual modality in the English program in the Modern Languages career at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo?

In the first focus group, students expressed that this modality is innovative and provides them the opportunity to move forward and achieve their goals. In addition, they expressed that it helps them, since they did not have to travel to the university, which is very distant from their homes. This helped them both economically and on time, since through this modality they can study at night and work during the day. Valuing the modality effectively.

In the second focus group with the students who took the virtual class, they expressed that the methodology is flexible in relation to the schedule. In addition, that through the virtual modality they can study without spending money, since the study material is provided, and they can study from anywhere in the country and at any time. They also expressed that they learn more and have direct contact with the teacher that motivates and explains them. They emphasized that they could decide on the schedule they wish to study, since the classroom is always available giving support. Therefore, this modality is successful for them because they fulfilled their expectations. Another student mentioned that this modality encourages self-taught and autonomous learning, giving them freedom and flexibility in the schedule, helping them to be more responsible. In conclusion, they expressed that it is a good way to learn and their learning will depend on the effort of each one, in addition, that it provides a way to finish the university faster, since many of them had to withdraw subjects because the schedule of the Face-to-face classes sometimes did not suit them.

In the third group they expressed that it is a tool that helps low-income students a lot, since they did not have to move from very isolated areas and could study at the time that was most convenient for them. Emphasizing that the modality saves time and money. One of them mentioned that the virtual modality is excellent, expressing that among the advantages it finds is how easy it is to use. They also mentioned that this modality helps them to be self-taught, making it easier for them to work and study at the same time.

Research Question II

What type of technological devices are used by the online specialized subject students in in the English program in the Modern Languages career at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo.

In the first focus group, students who took the virtual subject said they used the laptop and smartphones for access. Only one of them used his home computer, as this was the only way of access.

In the second focus group, students who took the virtual subject expressed that everyone had access through the laptop and smart cell phones or Smartphone. One of these said that he also had access through his home computer.

In the third focus group, the eight students had access through laptops and two of them

said they also had access through their smartphones.

Research Question III

How often do the online specialized subject students access Internet for pedagogical uses in the English program in the Modern Languages career at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo.

Students in the three focus groups unanimously expressed that they accessed the platform three or more times a week. Which helped them keep up and learn more about the knowledge that was discussed in the units

Research Question IV

For the students who answered that they did not take the online specialized subjects in the English program in the Modern Languages career at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo. What factors influenced their decision not to do so?

In the first focus group, students in advanced subjects, who did not take the online subjects, five of them expressed that they did not know that this modality existed. The remaining three said they did not have equipment to access the platform.

In the second focus group, students who did not take virtual subjects offered in the English progrma said they did not have the information. Seven of these students rated the virtual offer as positive and one of them expressed that he prefers the face-to-face modality. They emphasized that talks should be given so that everyone knows that this modality exists.

In the third group of students who did not take online subjects, one of them expressed that he did not take them because he prefers face-to-face subjects. Another student expressed ignorance of this modality. Seven of the students rated the modality as positive. They stressed that more information should be given about the existence of this offer.

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Chapter V: Discussion

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Discussion of Research Question I

Among the results that this question shows is that the virtual modality is innovative and dynamic, since it provides low-income students with the opportunity to move forward and achieve their objectives, in order to obtain a university degree, which will allow them to access a better standard of living through their training. The public university in which the study was

carried out has extensions in 18 provinces of the country. However, the vast majority of students are of low economic resources (Santana, 2016), which means that these students in the classroom have to spend on transportation tickets. Therefore, the students found that this modality helped them a lot economically, since they did not have to commute to the university. This confirms that virtual education typifies the promise for higher education systems worldwide that strive to meet the growth and change needs of student populations (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009).

The flexible way presented by the online subjects' modality was valued as effective and excellent, since through this modality they can study at night and work during the day. Valuing the modality effectively. This flexibility in the schedules allowed them to select the study schedule. Reaffirming that ICT in higher education achieves the objective of providing flexible teaching and learning environments, playing a fundamental role in environmental, technological, organizational and individual factors (Macharia, & Pelser, 2014).

Another resource presented by the virtual modality is that students have access to teaching materials, which allows them to study without having to use their scarce resources. They also expressed that this style encourages self-taught and autonomous learning by helping them to be more responsible, corroborating what was stated by D'Antoni, (2006) who recommends that through ICTs students develop autonomous learning and an active role in the process training.

In conclusion, they expressed that it is a good way to learn and their learning will depend on each one's effort. In addition, it provides a way to finish the university faster, since many of them had to withdraw subjects because the schedule of the Face-to-face classes did not suit them. Finally, another factor that students found is the usability of the platform, which they find easy to use and access. Therefore, ICTs have a strong impact on the attitudes of university students in the use of cyberspace tools in learning (Agbo, 2015). The use of an Internet environment in foreign language learning in both self-learning and in the classroom provides a powerful tool that allows university students who not only train in FL training, but they can obtain skills both in the virtual environment and at the same time communicative skills (Popova & Nenasheva, 2016).

Discussion of Research Question II

In this study it can be seen the great impact that m-learning has, since all students had access to the virtual platform of the university through Smartphones. It can be seen that only one of the students in the focus groups had access only through a tower computer in the house. Therefore, the "integration" of ICT in education is considered as an asset to stimulate technological growth (Alyya, & Gary, 2017).

Discussion of Research Question III

The flexibility of the virtual environment allows students to access at the time they have available. They unanimously expressed that they accessed the platform three or more times a week. Which helped them keep up and learn more about the content knowledge that was discussed in the units. This corroborates what Stevie (2018) expressed, since one of the advantages of this methodology is that it can be adaptable to any type of learning, speed, time and space.

Discussion of Research Question IV

Most students who did not take the online subjects rated their implementation as positive. However, this study showed that the university should give a better advertising to the online offer in the English program, since the vast majority emphasizes that they were unaware of this offer. It can also be inferred that lectures, seminars or workshops are needed for students to know the advantages of virtual teaching models, since one of the students who was unaware of the advantages of ICT in higher education was found. This confirms what was mentioned by Boukary (2017) who expresses that the conditions provided by the university can have a very significant negative effect on the use of ICT, when the support offered by the university and the technology infrastructure is very low. Therefore, a very bad perception can be developed when using ICT.

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