



CHALLENGES POSED BY VIRTUAL EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE OPPORTUNITIES OFFERED BY COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN COSTA RICA

ESTUDIANTE

Valeria Navarro Céspedes

APROBADO POR

Firmado por JUAN PABLO ZUÑIGA VARGAS (FIRMA)
PERSONA FISICA, CPF-04-0182-0569.
Fecha declarada: 25/09/2021 01:38 p. m.

Tutor del TFG
M.Ed. Juan Pablo Vargas Zúñiga

RITA MARIA ARGUEDAS VIQUEZ (FIRMA)
Firmado digitalmente por RITA MARIA ARGUEDAS VIQUEZ (FIRMA)
Fecha: 2021.09.27 18:39:52 -06'00'
M.Ed. Rita Arguedas Viquez
Coordinadora
Maestría en Educación, CIDE



Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica

Centro de Investigación y Docencia en Educación (CIDE)

División de Educología (DE)

Sistema de Estudios de Posgrado

Maestría en Educación con Énfasis en Aprendizaje del Inglés

Final Graduation Project

Tutors:

Juan Pablo Zúñiga Vargas

Irán Barrantes León

Student:

Valeria Navarro Céspedes

Challenges Posed by Virtual Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Opportunities Offered by Communicative Language Teaching in Costa Rica

Valeria Navarro Céspedes¹

National University of Costa Rica

Costa Rica

valeria.nc.11@gmail.com

Abstract

Since the COVID-19 started, the education field has been forced to adapt to the new reality to continue with the learning process of students. However, this virtual process took a lot of effort and patience from all the parts involved. Teachers had to find new ways to teach their students, to catch their attention and to make the learning process possible. Using different tools such as the communicative language teaching approach, the development of 21st century skills, and the technological tools can improve the language learning process. By applying these aspects in the class, students can improve not only in their language micro and macro skills but also to prepare for what the future holds for them. After seeing the results, a year later in this virtual experience, it is clear that the COVID-19 changed the education field, and it is not going back to how it was.

¹Bachelor's Degree in English Teaching. Teacher at Centro de Estudios de Inglés Conversacional at UNA and teacher at Santa Maria de Guadalupe High School.

Current teachers now must adapt to the way education will be seen from now on. Additionally, since the education field has changed, there will be many more classes and courses that will follow this line of virtuality and it is important to prepare for this change to give the best possible options for students to learn and prepare for the world.

Keywords: communicative language teaching, challenges posed by virtuality, foreign language teaching, online resources, technological tools, twenty-first century skills.

Resumen

Desde que comenzó el COVID-19, el campo educativo se ha visto obligado a adaptarse a la nueva realidad para continuar con el proceso de aprendizaje de los estudiantes. Sin embargo, este proceso virtual requirió mucho esfuerzo y paciencia de todas las partes involucradas. Los profesores debían encontrar nuevas formas de enseñar a sus alumnos, captar su atención y hacer posible el proceso de aprendizaje. El uso de diferentes herramientas como el enfoque comunicativo en la enseñanza del inglés, el desarrollo de habilidades del siglo XXI y las herramientas tecnológicas pueden mejorar el proceso de aprendizaje del idioma. Al aplicar estos aspectos en la clase, los estudiantes pueden mejorar no solo sus micro y macro habilidades lingüísticas, sino también prepararse para lo que les depara el futuro. Luego de ver los resultados un año después en esta experiencia virtual, está claro que el COVID-19 cambió el campo de la educación y no va a volver a ser como era. Los profesores actualmente tienen que adaptarse a la forma en que se verá la educación a partir de este momento. Además, dado que el campo de la educación ha cambiado, habrá muchas más clases y cursos que seguirán esta línea de virtualidad y es importante prepararse para este cambio para brindar las mejores opciones posibles para que los estudiantes aprendan y se preparen para el mundo.

Palabras clave: desafíos planteados por la virtualidad, enseñanza de una lengua extranjera, habilidades del siglo veintiuno, herramientas tecnológicas, método comunicativo, recursos electrónicos

Introduction

COVID-19 appeared in the world and surprised everyone. No one was ready for the reality we were about to start living. Moreover, every aspect of our lives had to be changed, and education was not exempt from this. The education field was forced into a reality that it was not prepared for. Due to the recent pandemic, several changes had to be made to the curriculum to fit the new teaching reality happening throughout the world. Some educational institutions were able to adapt faster to this change, and others are still adapting to it. The fact is that from this moment on, education will be seen in a different way. This change started ever since technology became more accessible to everyone. Hussain (2019) mentioned that technology has been used in education, and it has modified how to teach and learn. Technology has changed the way we live, work, and learn.

Thanks to the accessibility of technology when COVID-19 started spreading, teachers were able to adapt the classes to a virtual setting. In Costa Rica, virtual classes were not very popular. Only a few institutions had embarked on such a big challenge. Some did a very good job transferring to the new modality, but others did not. Moreover, some families were reluctant to the virtual modality. For instance, Jones (2020) conducted a survey applied to the families in Wisconsin that showed that only 33% of the families were satisfied with the remote learning since this modality requested a higher level of responsibility from students and parents to be

more involved in the process. Hussain (2019) described how imparting virtual classes can be greatly beneficial. He listed several advantages, such as the removal of geographical barriers, the facility to record the session, and the use of activities that may reduce anxiety and enhance motivation. Virtual classes have many upsides and downsides, but in this context, they give us the possibility to continue with the educational process.

I have been teaching in this modality with my then-seventh, now-eight graders of Advanced English at Santa Maria de Guadalupe (SAMAGU) high school² and also with adults from different ages at Centro de Estudios Inglés Conversacional (CEIC)³. After my experience teaching in this modality for several months, it is true that it has several aspects that enrich the learning process, for example, the use of different tools for learning, easy access to classes and communication with the teacher, the development of technological tools, and finally, shy students' comfortability to participate in the classroom. However, some aspects that need improving have come to light and have shown the challenges that we are still facing. Moreover, due to the pandemic the world is going through, there have been many challenges teachers have had to face, but the use of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the development of 21st century skills such as creativity, leadership, and communication can provide many improvements to the learning process of students' English language acquisition in virtual learning modality.

² Santa Maria de Guadalupe High School, located in Santo Domingo de Heredia, Costa Rica.

³ Centro de Estudios de Inglés Conversacional, located in Heredia downtown. This center is in charge of the English language courses offered by Universidad Nacional to the public in Costa Rica.

Challenges Possessed by Virtuality

The virus took us by surprise, and the adaptation process to teaching virtually was hard. Yadav (2016) expresses that the use of the Internet has created significant changes in educational models as well as in communication tools that are adapting quite easily with learning methods. The education field has changed remarkably since the internet started influencing our everyday lives but ever since the pandemic, the influence it had over the field is humongous and depending on the methodologies applied the outcome may or may not be beneficial.

As I mentioned before, I work at SAMAGU High School. This high school is a semi-private institution that offers many opportunities to students. Therefore, it is a very well-known high school. The population of the school is extremely broad. Each grade has around 10 groups, and each group has from 34 to 36 students. Since the groups are so large, it becomes a difficult task to conquer. In this virtual setting the only skills that were able to be studied and evaluated were grammar and reading since that was what the high school was letting teachers do. This made the classes very monotonous for both teachers and students. Moreover, due to virtual security, students were prohibited from turning on their cameras. The frustration suffered by the teachers would rise since many of the students would just say “present” when attendance was taken, and then they would leave the class. Every time the teachers asked about anything, no one would answer. All of this made the teaching and learning process extremely hard.

On the other hand, while I was teaching at the SAMAGU, I was also teaching at CEIC. Through the possibility of working in the two institutions, I was able to see the big difference between the two methodologies applied. CEIC is a center where teen and adult students are able

to learn the language with five hours of class a week. Since this center is part of Universidad Nacional (UNA), it gives teachers the liberty to plan classes and use the tools they believe will enhance the learning process as long as it focuses on CLT. Moreover, most of the students are there because they have a big disposition to learn. Likewise, the groups are not bigger than 20 or 23 students; most of them are between 10 and 16 students which makes it easier for the teacher to focus more on their needs.

While teaching virtually in two different settings, I was able to see a huge difference between them. In high school, I am forced to teach in a specific way, and the possibilities in the class are very limited. However, at CEIC, as I mentioned before, I have the liberty to use the tools I see pertinent as long as I use CLT. By working in both environments, I have been able to see how much students can benefit from this language teaching approach.

Communicative Language Teaching Approach

The Oxford Dictionary defines lingua franca as “a shared language of communication used between people whose main languages are different” (n. d.). Nowadays the interactions between people from all around the world are very frequent; therefore, the need to communicate between languages made people resort to a common speech that currently is the English language. As Seidlhofer (2005) stated: “English as a lingua franca has been defined as a contact language between persons who share neither a community tongue nor a common culture, and for whom is the chosen foreign language for communication” (p. 59). English has become one of the most important languages in the world since it acts as a bridge language to help the trade between countries and cultures.

Moreover, the need to teach this language to current and future generations has been in high demand for the last twenty years and it will continue rising in the following years. Richards (2005) stated that “the worldwide demand for English has created an enormous demand for quality language teaching and language teaching materials and resources” (p. 1). This is the reason why several academics have tried to find better and faster ways to master the English language to a high level of accuracy and fluency. There have been many strategies to teach a language but one of the approaches that has given many positive results is the CLT.

This approach centers on the students and aims to recreate a more realistic setting such as the one the students will face in the real world. Denkci and Coker emphasized the importance of the communicative approach: “The communicative approach aims to give learners more control and autonomy of their own learning via student-centered group work activities and the chance to control the content of the classroom instruction” (2016, p. 82). As they mentioned, one of the most important aspects this approach offers is the capability to change the students’ role from a passive to an active one.

In addition to this, the teacher’s role changes to help students take charge and becomes a tool for the students to use. Isakova (2018) stated that “The fact that classes in communicative approach are student-oriented does not rule out the importance of the teacher, who, in this case, is defined as a facilitator of language learning and an independent participant within the learning-teaching group” (p. 2). The idea of using this approach in my classroom is to give students the independence needed to take charge of their learning. If students do so, the abilities that they develop in class will help them with the skills needed to be productive members of society.

The positive outcomes that could be developed by the application of CLT in our classes are endless. Isakova (2018) discussed that:

The Communicative competence is one of the basic characteristics of professional competence and professional training. Communicative competence is a synthesis of the social, perceptive, reflective, auto psychological, psychological and pedagogical competences, and related skills. The high level of development of the competence allows communicating effectively in a team of professionals in order to achieve their goals. (p. 2)

Communicative competence is one of the most important skills in the language learning process because without it, communication would not be possible. Therefore, using CLT in class would benefit the students in the practice of communication outside of the classroom and in the real world.

By giving students the space to practice among each other and others, they can see what it is like being outside trying to communicate. Additionally, as Alamri emphasized:

In second language learning environments, learners work cooperatively on a language learning task by achieving the goal through the communicative use of the target language. Therefore, teachers need to connect the class activities to the learners' daily lives by referring to the content within the textbooks. (2018, p. 134)

In other words, students need to connect the learning that takes place in class with their daily lives; otherwise, it will be harder for them to apply what they study in the real world. Moreover,

they will develop different skills that will give them more opportunities to succeed and comply with the society's needs. They will learn much more than a language.

Development of 21st Century Skills

Nowadays, there are several skills students must develop to be considered for different job positions. Those skills expected from students are critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity. These skills are now requested due to the 21st century. Students need to be given spaces where they are able to express opinions, analyze situations, solve problems and speak up. Boholano (2017) stated that "Education in the 21st century highlights globalization and internationalization. Any advancement of technology presents theoretical constructs and realistic insights in the development and enhancement of knowledge, skills, and attitudes among students and teachers" (p. 22). This century came with many changes and education was not an exception. As a result of the many improvements in technology and how reachable it has become; students must be formed in a way that helps them develop 21st century skills.

Moreover, teachers are requested to take all those aspects into account to develop these very important skills in the classroom. This way, when students graduate, they will be able to comply with what is requested from them in the real world. Furthermore, CLT enhances these developments. When students are having spaces to communicate with each other, the teacher can also give them generating questions or situations in which they can practice their communication but also their 21st century skills. A combination of CLT and 21s century skills will open many doors for our student's futures. As Andronova (2018) mentioned:

The communicative approach unites all up to date tendencies and global community requirements and helps to learn the target language from the elementary level gradually coming to the advanced one and to give each learner an opportunity to achieve one's own goal in foreign language study. (p. 105)

Moreover, applying the communicative approach will give students more opportunities to grow professionally. This could be achieved by applying activities in which students are able to analyze, think critically about what is happening globally, communicate and be creative.

CLT is one of the methodologies that best applies and develops the needs the world demands from students (Andronova, 2018). Society is demanding much more from our students as time goes on. If we as educators do not provide these opportunities to develop 21st century skills, our students will not be as successful as they could have been. It is important for teachers to remember that our goal is to give students all the possible tools at our reach to help them grow. If we as teachers include this type of activities and also involve the well-known 21st century skills, the abilities our students will develop will open many doors for them. Isakova affirmed that by using different activities that help students prevent, resolve, and manage conflict situations will give the learners a whole new set of tools to obtain better outcomes in the world when interacting with other people (2018).

Technological Tools Used to Improve the Learning Process

Greener and Wakefield (2015) mention that “The pervasive presence of technology in everyday life has driven higher expectations among learners for digital approaches to learning and teaching” (p. 206). During this world crisis, the technological demand increased

exponentially. Several aspects in the language teaching had to improve or change imperatively; classes had to adapt to continue. Many teachers had feared the use of technology in a class. As Arranz and Alonso (2014) mentioned:

This incorporation of ICT in the classroom has led to all kinds of reactions, from people that defend it because they think it can be an immensely powerful tool for the teaching and the learning process, to those that say that its only purpose is to distract students in the teaching / learning development. (p. 20)

Moreover, due to the pandemic, there was no other option than to apply the technology in the classroom as effectively as possible.

Furthermore, teachers had to use all tools available at their disposal to achieve the language learning process. I considered myself a technological teacher. Prior to the pandemic, I would apply many technological tools for my students to achieve learning and to create a sense of enjoyment towards the class. Especially since I am a hyperactive teacher, I need interactive classes in which we all can enjoy and learn. Otherwise, students and I get bored. Ever since virtuality started, I had to adapt technology into my planning even more. During this process, I discovered many tools that enriched my classroom and helped my students as well. Some of those tools were the creation of websites, Canva, Jamboard, Genial.ly, Gimkit, Google earth, and many more that are considered a bit more basic in a classroom such as YouTube, online practices, Liveworksheets, Quizizz, and Kahoot.

Creating websites for the students is a tool that takes the learning into another level. There is a speculation around this since teachers tend to think that creating a website is too much work and kind of an impossible task to achieve. After finishing these task myself, I can assure it

is not as impossible as it seems and the possibilities are endless. The teacher can customize the website to the specific needs of the students. Usually, teachers use several things from different websites that they like, however, by creating your personal website, all those aspects you like from different websites can be in just one. On the students' side, they can access all the information to study and practice on the same platform. For this website I decided to develop the simple present tense with many different grammar explanations as well as games, quizzes and speaking activities. The application of this website in the class was very enriching since it had all the separated aspects I would use in a class all together in the same website and visual aspect.

Another of the tools that my students ask for every time they can is Gimkit. No matter the age, all students enjoy it. Even the teachers have fun while using it. This website has thousands of question games for students to play. All the game questions cover many different topics from grammar to vocabulary and more. Moreover, there are several game modes you can select. The core idea of the page is for students to answer questions about any topic the teacher may want. Furthermore, the teacher can create its own question game for it to complement perfectly the topics seen in class. Additionally, the modes give an extra spice to it. Students can earn money, with the money they can buy insurances, bonuses to earn more money, and the favorite of my students, attack their classmates. It turns the game into a bloodbath that they enjoy enormously and do not even realize they are learning the topic developed in class. There are many more modes, such as humans vs. zombies, The floor is lava, the infinity stones (Marvel lovers), Trust no one (inspired by the among us game) and many more. I have tried this game in many different grammar and vocabulary topics, in all of them it shows later on the learning acquisition obtained from the activity. Students and teachers really enjoy this type of educational games since the motivation is awakened.

Teachers have endless possibilities of different tools to use with the students. The web is full of ideas that can improve the language learning process. Greener and Wakefield (2015) mentioned that “Many technical education teachers show great concern about how they can use virtual learning environments to their full potential, to properly manage their courses and reinforce student learning” (p. 22). Technology may be scary sometimes, but it is impossible to avoid. Teachers should embrace that curiosity regarding technology to improve our lessons and help our students grow. This world pandemic took us by surprise, but it helped us open our eyes to the endless possibilities technology gives us. Moreover, the learners will appreciate the effort the teacher is putting into making the learning process better.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there has been a big challenge teachers have faced in their professional career since this world pandemic started. At the beginning, everything had been chaotic, but teachers worked through it since education cannot just stop. In this process of trying to achieve the learning process, the many ways in which learning could be improved have been shown. Even in the setting we are forced to work with now, virtuality does not tie our hands to teach only grammar and vocabulary, it essentially opens a new set of doors that seem very exciting for education worldwide. Depending on the approach selected to develop the class in, there are many positive outcomes that can come from it.

Using CLT can enhance language learning since the use of it requires speech, linguistic, social, and cultural, educational, and cognitive, and other competences, which means that “learners while learning the target language develop four speaking activity skills as speaking, listening, reading and writing” (Andronova, 2018, p. 102). Additionally, by also implementing

recent technological and pedagogical techniques, that prepares the students for tomorrow's world: participation in negotiations, seminars, workshops, conferences, making reports, symposiums, conducting scientific project work, reading foreign literature and many more.

CLT gives infinite possibilities to teachers when planning a class, and it can give better learning opportunities for the students. When I have applied tools with my students, I seem more accessible to them. They feel like they can share with me. When they feel this comfortable the class runs smoothly. If we as teachers include this type of activities and additionally involve the famous 21st century skills, the abilities that our students will develop will open many doors for them, which would make a huge difference in the formation of the eighth graders and adults of my English classes.

Moreover, the application of different technological strategies not only will give the possibility for students to be more familiar with technology and develop 21st century skills. It will help them achieve language learning in a way that is welcoming to the learners. There are thousands of technological tools to use in our classes that will make the class more pleasurable. Technology can enrich our classes and it is not hard to apply in a virtual or face to face class.

Recommendations

Now that I have experienced what teaching virtually is as an emergency measure to continue the educational process. I believe I have developed new abilities to improve my classes virtually. There are several aspects that must be considered when teaching in this modality. The attention span students have is quite short, especially since they are logged in a computer all day.

Moreover, there are much more distractions in the house than in the classroom which makes the process much harder as well. Therefore, teachers must be prepared with different tools to maintain the attention of students. Additionally, the motivation of the students is quite low since they are not able to interact with their classmates and also all the stress they are going through in their personal lives. It is important as teachers to carry all those aspects in mind when planning the classes. Furthermore, there are many tools available online for teachers to use in class and one must invest time to research on the different tools to apply in our classroom and improve the motivation and attention of the students. It is important for us to achieve enjoyment towards the subject. Students should enjoy the class since that way the learning will be achieved easier, and time will pass by faster.

References

- Alamri, W. A. (2018). Communicative Language Teaching: Possible Alternative Approaches to CLT and Teaching Contexts. *English Language Teaching, 11*, 132-138. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v11n10p132>
- Andronova, E. (2018). Communicative Approach to Foreign Language Teaching Within the Frames of Global Community Integration. *Periodyk Naukowy Akademii Polonijnej, 27*(2), 101-105. <http://dx.doi.org/10.23856/2711>
- Boholano, H. (2017). Smart Social Networking: 21st Century Teaching and Learning Skills. *Research in Pedagogy, 7*(1), 21-29. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17810/2015.45>
- Denkci, F., & Coker, B. (2016). The Use of Communicative Approach in 9th Grade EFL Classes. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research, 65*, 71-90. <https://dx.doi.org/10.14689/ejer.2016.65.05> <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/ejer/issue/42412/510594>
- Greener, S., & Wakefield, C. (2015). Developing Confidence in the Use of Digital Tools in Teaching. *Electronic Journal of E-Learning, 13*(4), 260-267. <https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/developing-confidence-use-digital-tools-teaching/docview/1697674577/se-2?accountid=37045>
- Hussain, M. (2019). Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of Virtual Classes and the effectiveness of Virtual Classes in Enhancing Communication Skills. *Arab World English Journal, 1*, 223-240. <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/efl1.16>
- Isakova, A. (2018). Communicative Approach to Interactive Foreign Language Lesson

at University. In *SHS web of conferences* (Vol. 50, p. 01071). EDP Sciences.

Jones, C. (2020). *Suggestions from Wisconsin Families for Improving Home/Remote*

Learning. <https://uwm.edu/sreed/wp-content/uploads/sites/502/2020/08/Perceptions-of-Wisconsin-Families-about-Distance-Learning-August-2020.pdf>

García, O. A., & Secades, V. A. (2014). Teaching Strategies to Apply in the Use of

Technological Tools in Technical Education. *Multidisciplinary Journal for Education, Social and Technological Sciences*, 1(2), 19-32.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4995/muse.2014.3264>

Oxford. (n. d.). Lingua franca. In *OxfordLearnerDictionary.com*. Retrieved April

14, 2021, from <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/lingua-franca>

Richards, J. C. (2005). *Communicative language teaching today*. SEAMEO

Regional Language Centre.

Seidlhofer, B. (2005). English as a lingua franca. *ELT Journal*, 59(4), 339–341.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/cci064>

Yadav, G. (2016). Reflection on virtual classes: Spirit of the time. *International Journal of*

Advanced Research, 4(4), 1162-1167. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/333>

DECLARACIÓN JURADA

Yo, Valeria del Carmen Navarro Céspedes , cédula de identidad 116110542, estudiante de la Universidad Nacional, declaro bajo fe de juramento y consciente de la responsabilidades penales de este acto, que soy autor intelectual del Trabajo Final de Graduación Titulado **“Challenges Posed by Virtual Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Opportunities Offered by Communicative Language Teaching in Costa Rica”**, para optar por el grado de Maestría en Educación con énfasis en Aprendizaje del Inglés.



Firma

Heredia, a los 09 días del mes de Septiembre del año 2021.

Refrendo

Los abajo firmantes avalamos el Trabajo de Graduación de la estudiante Valeria Navarro Céspedes, cédula 1 1611 0542, que lleva como título **Challenges Posed by Virtual Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Opportunities Offered by Communicative Language Teaching in Costa Rica**, dado que cumple con las disposiciones vigentes y la calidad académica requerida por el posgrado.

Firmado por JUAN PABLO ZÚÑIGA VARGAS (FIRMA)
PERSONA FÍSICA, CPF-04-0182-0569.
Fecha declarada: 16/09/2021 08:56 a. m.

M.Ed. Juan Pablo Zúñiga Vargas
Tutor
Maestría en Educación con énfasis en Aprendizaje del Inglés

RITA MARIA
ARGUEDAS
VIQUEZ (FIRMA)

Firmado digitalmente
por RITA MARIA
ARGUEDAS VIQUEZ
(FIRMA)
Fecha: 2021.09.15
19:08:27 -06'00'

M. Ed Rita Arguedas Víquez
Coordinadora
Maestría en Educación