

UNIVERSIDAD VERACRUZANA



MAESTRÍA EN ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA

Students' struggles to cope with the demands of an English programme

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Xalapa - Enríquez, Veracruz

2013

Agradecimientos

A mis padres que siempre me han impulsado a ser mejor en todo ámbito, sin ustedes no sería la persona que soy. Gracias por guiarme y apoyarme en todo proyecto. A mi compañera de aventuras, desvelos y mi guía mayor, mi hermana. Gracias por ser el mejor ejemplo que pueda tener.

A mi esposo, Fernando, por estar siempre conmigo en todo momento. Gracias por tus consejos, tu amor y paciencia, pero sobre todo gracias por el pedacito de ser que hemos creado juntos y que viene en camino a nuestras vidas, nuestra hija Amélie.

Al Dr. Cecilio López, por su paciencia, tiempo y buenos consejos para poder realizar y terminar este trabajo.

A mis compañeros de la Maestría por siempre estarnos motivando y por tantas risas y buenos ratos que pasamos juntos durante estos dos años.

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Abstract

This research was the first step of an action research aimed to identify the learning problems of a General English class of second semester students of the Faculty of Biological and Pharmaceutical Chemistry from the Universidad Veracruzana. Considering that there are different factors that may affect positively or negatively the students' learning process, concepts such as motivation, affective factors, self-theories, teacher roles were important to consider. Since students took in-house and online classes, the definition and implications of these two modes were also taken into consideration. Grounded Theory within the Qualitative Paradigm was employed to carry out this project. Therefore, in order to collect data, seven university students were interviewed. The results made evident some of the issues that second semester students of the BSc in Biological and Pharmaceutical Chemistry go through and that need to be taken into account when planning this course.

Key words: motivation, affective factors, self-theories, teacher's roles, in-house and online learning.

Introduction

The concept of *learning* implies different things to different people. If you think about it you may imagine a teacher, students, a school, a classroom, a subject, books, materials, etc. But what happens if some or several of these elements are missing? The question is then, whether the absence of one or some of them may prevent students from learning.

Nevertheless, learning apparently takes place at any place at any time. Learning can be formal (at a school) or informal (at home, in the street). According to the Longman Dictionary of Teaching and Applied Linguistics the word *learning* refers to “the process by which change in behaviour, knowledge, skills, etc., comes about through practice, instruction or experience and the result of such a process (Rigby, Deci, Patrick, and Ryan, 1992:166)” said about *learning* broadest sense. They added that:

...refers to a life-long process in which organisms make contact with and assimilate their environment. Learning is thus among the most natural of psychological processes in the sense that the tendency to explore and to assimilate is an endowment of the human being.

Learning is an intrinsically process. Research in language learning focuses on many topics. Horwitz (2008) says that teachers are interested in the differences that their learners have because they want to help them to find ways to be more successful. As a teacher, this particular inquiry focuses on students’ struggles to cope with the demands of an English programme: what they consider to be their problems of learning; what positive aspects of learning they found to overcome problems in learning; and considering they have in-house and online classes, what class they prefer to learn the foreign language. This issue seems to occur in different contexts. Therefore,

The impact of learning environments in relation to learning outcomes has constantly been explored by researchers of education. (Ya Ni, 2013: 200).

In order to carry out this research, concepts such as motivation, affective factors, self-theories, teachers' roles, and inhouse and online learning were explored to have an idea about what authors say about these factors influencing learning. Considering that students are the actors of the learning process, and their opinion was crucial to this research, the use of interviews was necessary to know their thoughts and feelings about what problems they coped when they got involved in the process of learning a second language.

Many educators feel that helping students become better language learners is essential so that they can become more autonomous and extend their language learning beyond the classroom (Horwitz, 2008: 4).

In addition, teachers usually expect their learners to learn, but students will probably experience certain difficulties to do so if they face problems. It is well-known that teachers need to know their students, their likes and dislikes, what activities they prefer, what makes them feel anxious and hinders learning, what activities and dynamics they enjoy more for learning. Teachers also need to be aware of the importance of creating a positive atmosphere in the classroom to make students feel confident to participate. When settings of the class are different, in-house and online, teachers would also need to be aware of the way students feel about their classes. They need to notice whether one mode or both, help students learn and practice different skills. All of this will be discussed along this paper.

1. Context and focus

The importance to defining the context in which this research was carried out is to give the reader an idea of where the inquiry took place. In this case, the research was carried out in Xalapa, Veracruz at the Universidad Veracruzana.

The educational superior services are offered mainly by the Universidad Veracruzana. The Rectoría is in Xalapa as well as several other administration buildings. Besides having all the educational services in Xalapa, the Universidad Veracruzana is present in five regions in 28 towns all along the State of Veracruz. The educational programs given in the Universidad Veracruzana place it as one of the universities with most diversification in educational offerings. There are currently 61, 298 students in the 314 formal educational programs: 170 in bachelor and 133 postgraduate studies. There are other 12,316 students in informal educational programs in Art workshops, language centre, self-access centre, induction to music in children, language department, foreign language school and Continuing Education, which in total there are 73,614 students registered in the Universidad Veracruzana (Guevara, 2013).

1.1. Problem

This research is carried out at the Universidad Veracruzana with second semester students from the BSc in Biological and Pharmaceutical Chemistry learning English as a Foreign Language. There are currently seven students taken the subject English II, which is a subject of what is called the basic area. This means that this subject is mandatory for all students. The conditions of teaching have not been adequate and in spite of this, students are still willing to learn English, no matter the conditions.

1.2. Objective

General Objective:

- To identify the learning problems of the educational experience English II from a group of second semester students of the Faculty of Biological and Pharmaceutical Chemistry from the Universidad Veracruzana.

Specific objective(s):

- To characterize the students from the group.
- To contrast the functionality of in-house classes and online classes from the educational experience English II from the group of the Faculty of Biological and Pharmaceutical Chemistry from the Universidad Veracruzana.
- To describe the process of learning from the group in relation to the online classes.

1.3. Research question

- What are the problems that students from the second semester of the BSc in Biological and Pharmaceutical Chemistry from the Universidad Veracruzana may have as they get through the English II subject?

2. Literature Review

This section describes concepts which are pivotal to the understanding of the research work. Such concepts are *motivation, affective factors, self-theories, teacher's roles, and in-house and online learning*. The affective factors' section include also concepts like *the affective filter hypothesis, self-esteem, inhibition, risk taking, anxiety and empathy*, which all are involved in the learning process. In the section of *self-theories*, it will be only described the *self-determination theory* because it was considered to be more related to this research. The teacher's roles section describes some roles that teachers in different moments to help students learn. In the section of in-house and online learning these concepts are defined for better understanding of this project.

2.1. Motivation

Motivation is a factor that affects positively or negatively the learning process. The word *motivation* refers to "a force in any situation that leads to an action" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002); therefore, an individual who is motivated is somebody who is moved to do something; a person who is not feeling inspired or finds no reason to do something is considered to be unmotivated. Chen and Jang (2010:741) said that:

...past studies have shown that learner motivation associates with a variety of important learning consequences such as persistence (Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992), retention (Lepper & Cordova, 1992), achievement (Eccles et al., 1993), and course satisfaction (Fujita-Starck & Thompson, 1994).

In the field of second language learning, motivation "involves the learner's reasons and attempts to acquire the second language, but precisely what creates motivation is the crux of the matter" (Arnold, 1999). This motivation gives the learner an energized behaviour and direction towards his/her learning.

Not all motivation is the same. Individuals have different amounts and kinds of motivation. The *level* of motivation can vary, that depends on how much motivation they have. Also, the *orientation* of motivation can change, according to the type or the nature and focus of the actions (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For instance, a student that is highly motivated to do a science project because he/she wants to prove to be the best in class or for the approval of his/her parents; or a student who is motivated to study for an exam to have a good grade to prove him/herself that he/she could do it.

According to Gardner and Lambert (1972, in Arnold, 1999), motivation is divided in two orientations: integrative and instrumental. *Integrative motivation* refers to the willingness to learn the language in order to become part of the members of the target culture. *Instrumental motivation* is more practical, in the sense that the learner wants to learn the second language to be promoted or to pass an examination. Integrative motivation includes orientation, positive attitudes and commitment to learn the target language (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

Motivation has many theories focusing on the quality or quantity. The former one refers to how much motivation a person has, whereas quality of motivation could be internal or external. Other theories divide motivation in extrinsic (external) motivation and intrinsic (internal) motivation. We will focus on this distinction.

2.2. Enhancing affective factors

There are several factors that affect positively and/or negatively in language learning. One of these factors is *the affective factor* in the learner. This may facilitate or hinder learning. Atmosphere in the classroom is important to relieve tension from students and allows them to take the chance and practice the language they are learning. If the learner feels at ease with the teacher and classmates, this learner will learn; if he/she

feels the opposite, he/she will not learn. Among the affective factors we found: the Affective Filter Hypothesis, inhibition, risk-taking, anxiety, and empathy.

2.2.1. The Affective Filter Hypothesis

According to Krashen, there are five central hypotheses in second language acquisition: the acquisition-learning distinction, the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the input hypothesis, and the affective filter hypothesis. He says that learners with low affective filters may:

...have a positive disposition towards the target language: high motivation, low anxiety, lack of negative stereotypes, and the like, and are therefore receptive to language input when they encounter it (Horwits, 2008:32).

On the contrary, if the learners have a high affective filter, their motivation is low, they feel more anxious and they do not take input because they are not open to the foreign language.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis shows that the emotional factors strongly affect the learners' input and how much input is converted into intake (Ni, H., 2012:1508).

2.2.2. Self-esteem

Coopersmith (1967) defines this concept as

a personal judgement of worthiness that is expressed in attitudes that the individual holds towards himself... and indicates the extent to which the individual believes in himself to be capable, significant and worthy (in Andrés, 2002).

This means that if the individual feels good about him/herself, then he/she is more likely to succeed. Judgment about the self plays an important role in here. In language learning this could be interpreted as if the learner is confident enough in learning the language he/she will succeed; if he/she feels the opposite about him/herself, then, he/she will fail.

2.2.3. Inhibition

Inhibition is like the negative aspect of self-esteem. If the learner is inhibited, then he/she does not have confidence about him/herself; therefore, the learner might feel embarrassed and finds difficult to learn the foreign language. What he/she must understand is that

Language learning implies a great deal of self-exposure as it necessarily involves making mistakes. Due to the mechanisms outlined above, these mistakes can be experienced as threats to the self (Andrés, 2002).

The teacher must be aware when this situation appears in the classroom to help students to be more confident and notice their weaknesses and focus more on their strengths to overcome inhibition.

2.2.4. Risk-taking

Risk-taking is defined as

A situation where an individual has to make a decision involving choice between alternatives of different desirability; the outcome of the choice is uncertain; there is a possibility of failure (Beebe, 1983 in Burgucu et al., 2010:2).

In language learning risk-taking is a good strategy for learners willingly to take risks to learn the language and interact with others. In order to facilitate risk-taking, the teacher should set a positive and a non-threatening atmosphere in the classroom. In this way, learners feel relaxed and they overcome anxiety (Brown, 2000 in Burgucu et al., 2010:2).

2.2.5. Anxiety

For some people, the mere act of learning a language can make them feel anxious.

Some language learners become anxious when they cannot “be themselves” when speaking in the new language (Horwits, 2008:9).

The act of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the second language may also feel anxious to some students if they find difficult to understand it. Language anxiety is

...a distinct complex of self-perception, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language, learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process (Horwitz & Cope, 1991 in Mihaljević Djigunović, 2006:9).

There exists a debate whether anxiety produces poor performance or the other way around, if poor performance causes anxiety. Mihaljević Djigunović (2006) says that anxiety is the consequence of poor performance in foreign language learning and not the cause of it.

2.2.6. Empathy

According to Richards & Schmidt (2002), empathy is

... the quality of being able to imagine and share the thoughts, feelings, and point of view of other people. Empathy is thought to contribute to the degree of success with which a person learns another language (p. 179).

This affective factor has relationship with the person's social-ability, and it has an important role in language learning. Using the foreign language, a person may understand the context and culture of the other, and accept or tolerate the other people. Moreover, even their way of speaking has to deal with empathy.

2.3. Self Theories

In general terms, the definition of *self* is "an aspect of PERSONALITY that consists of a person's view of their own identity and characteristics (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). In the field of motivation, the *self* refers to "characteristics within individuals that cause them to be motivated" (Bohlin, Durwin & Reese-Weber, 2009) There are several theories of the self. For example, some of them are the *self-efficacy theory*, the *self-worth theory*, and the *self-determination theory*. All of these theories seem to focus on the competence and the individual's motivation. However, as the individual's desire for carrying out a task has been discussed with more emphasis so far, the self-determination theory will be the only one to be discussed next.

2.3.1.1. Self-determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) of motivation considers quality of motivation to be more important than quantity and describes a continuum for quality motivation (Ryan and Deci 2000 a, b in Kusurkar, Ten Cate, Vos, Westers, & Croiset 2012). As humans we feel the need to be *autonomous* or *self-determined*, *competent* and to be *related* to others in order to have choices in our actions to do something, instead of being controlled by somebody else. In the words of Niemiec et.al. (2005:762):

Self-determination theory's view of socialization (Deci & Ryan, 1985) emphasizes an inherent orientation towards growth and development, energized and sustained, in part, by the fulfillment of the psychological needs for autonomy (deCharms, 1968), competence (White, 1959), and relatedness (Harlow, 1958).

In the field of education, what this theory attempts for students is a promotion of interest in learning, to value education and to be confident and secure of their own abilities and capacities (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991). Self-determination theory makes a distinction between actions or behaviours that are intentional or motivated. On the one hand, a person's motivated actions "are self-determined to the extent that they are engaged in wholly volitionally and endorsed by one's sense of self" (Deci & Ryan, 1991 in Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991:326). On the other hand, controlled actions or behaviours are forced by an external power. That is, when behaviour is self-determined is because of choice, whereas when it is controlled it is compelled. In order to develop self-determination, the student needs to go to the process of internalization, that is "moving from less self-determined (more extrinsically motivated) to more self-determined behaviour (Grolnick et. al., 1997 in Bohlin, Durwin, & Reese-Weber, 2009: 305).

Self-determination theory divides the motivation of a person between *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* motivation and *amotivation*. Self-determined behaviours are intrinsically motivated. When students are intrinsically motivated they are interested and engaged with the activities they like, without feeling forced or compelled to do them, for no rewards as an exchange. Extrinsic behaviours are more instrumental, that is, they are not self-determined. However, this does not mean that one is positive and the other is negative. There are different types of extrinsic motivation and they all vary in their degree. Amotivation refers to the lack of motivation to do something. These motivations are shown on a continuum of self-determination theory in the following Figure 1 proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000:61):

INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC MOTIVATIONS

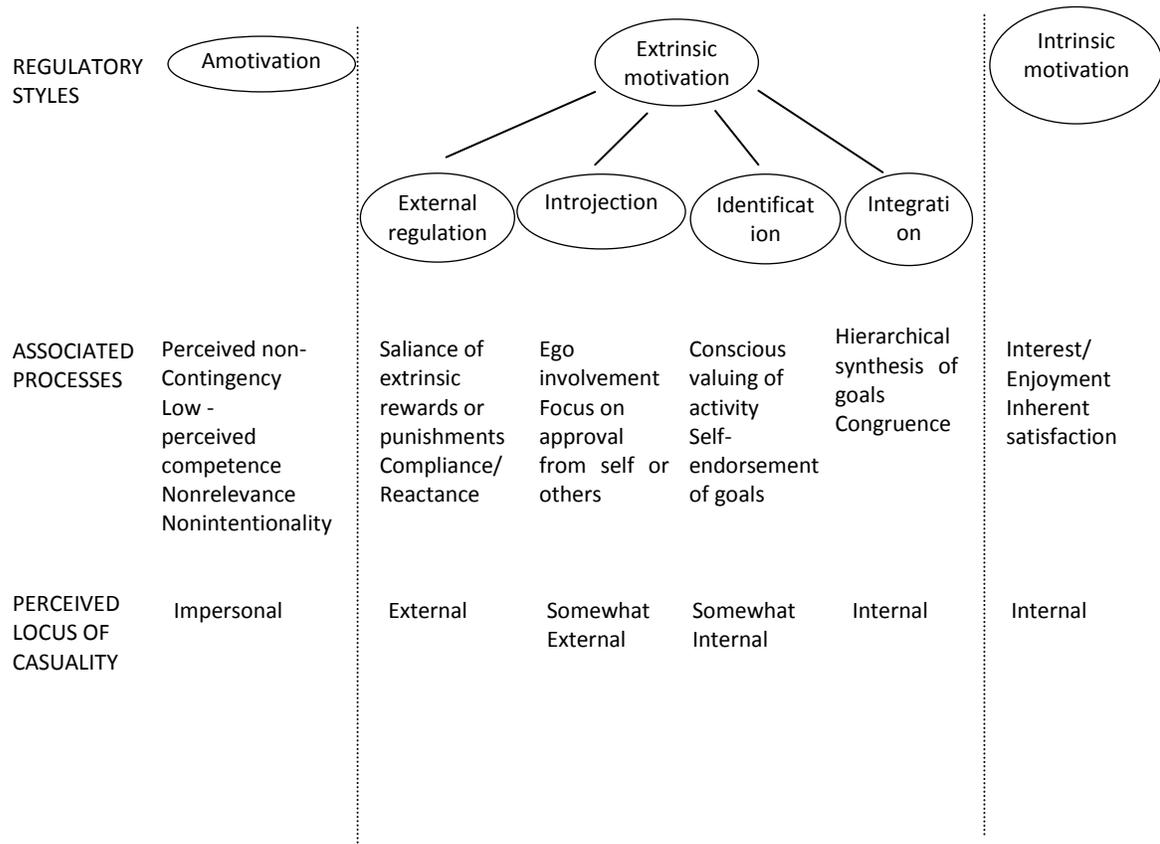


Figure 1. A taxonomy of human motivation.

As we have mentioned before, *amotivation* is the lacking of motivation. Amotivation is a non-self-determined behaviour; there is no intentionality at all. Some of the reasons for this may be:

- Not valuing an activity (Ryan, 1995),
- Not feeling competent to do the activity (Bandura, 1986), or
- Not expecting the activity to yield a desire outcome (Seligman, 1975)
-

(Bohlin, Durwin, & Rees-Weber, 2009). According to self-determination theory, from amotivation to introjections may result negative results, while from identification to

intrinsic motivation may have more positive results. Therefore, intrinsic motivation involves completely a self-determined behaviour.

2.3.1.2. Extrinsic Motivation

In general terms *extrinsic motivation* focuses in something external of the activity. Richards & Schmidt (2002) said that extrinsic motivation is driven by different external factors, like pressure, expectations from others or academic requirements as a desire to get a reward or avoid punishment. Deci & Ryan (2000) distinguish four different types of extrinsic motivation: external, introjected, identified, and integrated regulations. They are organized in a continuum according to the degree of self-determinations, from the least to the most.

External regulation “describes behaviours that are regulated by contingencies overtly external to the individual, like the promise of a reward or the threat of a punishment” (Rigby, Deci, Patrick, & Ryan, 1992:169). It completely lacks of autonomy of extrinsic motivation since it always implies an action conditioned by a reward. For example, a student who participates in a project only because of the reward is a certain amount of money.

Introjected regulations involve “internalized rules or demands that pressure one to behave and are buttressed with threatened sanctions (e.g. guilt) or promised rewards (e.g. self-aggrandizement)” (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991:329). For example, a student who studies for an exam before going to the movies with his/her friends just to not feel guilty of going without studying. This type of regulation is still regulated by other forces rather than self-determination.

Identified regulations are a form of extrinsic motivation that occurs when a behaviour is adopted to comply with external pressure. It results when they have “identified with

the underlying value of the activity and accepted its regulation as their own. It occurs as they begin to incorporate the value and regulation into their sense of self” (Rigby, Deci, Patrick, & Ryan, 1992:170). In this regulation, the individual is more willingly to participate in the activity in an autonomous way. For instance, a student who is studying physics outside school because he/she believes it is going to help him/her to improve and be better in class. It is extrinsic because still the interest is to be better instead of being interested on the subject itself.

Finally, *integrated regulations* are more advanced extrinsic motivation almost autonomous behaviour. Ryan & Deci (2000:62) mentioned that these regulations occur when “identified regulations have been fully assimilated to the self. This occurs through self-examination and bringing new regulations into congruence with one’s other values and needs”. Identified regulations begin to approximate to intrinsic motivation. However, it is still extrinsic

“because behaviour motivated by integrated regulation is done for its presumed instrumental value with respect to some outcome that is separate from the behaviour, even though it is volitional and valued by the self (Ryan & Deci, 2000:62).

An example of this regulation is a teacher who is considered to be authoritarian but also friendly to his/her students. These roles may conflict each other, but once they are integrated they allow the teacher to care for his/her students and guide them as well as set limits in class to have order and respect.

This former regulation represents “the endpoint of internalization and is indicative of the most mature regulation style” (Rigby, Deci, Patrick, & Ryan, 1992:170). The first two forms of regulation of extrinsically motivation are still controlled, whereas the two later ones are more integrated, and according to the self-determination theory “an integrated regulatory style is the most volitional, autonomous form of extrinsic

motivation” (Rigby, Deci, Patrick, & Ryan, 1992:171). These two regulations along with intrinsic motivation are the basis of the self-determination theory. Even if extrinsic and intrinsic motivations are different, they both represent forms of autonomy and self-determination of the individual.

2.3.1.3. Intrinsic Motivation

In a general sense, intrinsic motivation refers to do something because of the simple pleasure of doing it, for interest and enjoyment. According to Ryan & Deci (2000:56) intrinsic motivation is defined as “the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separate consequence”. Fig. 1 shows that this kind of motivation associates processes like interest, enjoyment, and inherent satisfaction. This means that intrinsic motivation does not need a reward; the reward is the experience itself. “Intrinsic motivation is in evidence whenever student’s natural curiosity and interest energize their learning (Deci & Ryan, 1985:245 in Arnold, 1999)”.

In addition, Bohlin, Durwin and Reese-Weber (2009:306) mentioned that school contexts that support students’ individual “needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness – called autonomy-supportive contexts – can facilitate internalization and encourage intrinsic motivation (Grolnick et. al., 1997; Ryan & Deci, 2000)”. Also, if parents are supportive and interested in the school life of their children and if the teachers they may have develop motivation in those same children and let them have choices as well as solve their problems and have initiative, then these children may benefit of autonomous motivation in (Bohlin, Durwin and Reese-Weber 2009:306):

- deep, meaningful learning (Vansteenkiste, Lens, Dewitte, De Witte, & Deci, 2004);
- greater creativity (Koestner, Ryan, Bernieri, & Holt, 1984); and
- enhanced well-being (Levesque, Zuehike, Stanek & Ryan, 2004).

If autonomy-supportive learning is encouraged from very young in a learner, especially in hard times like adolescence, puberty, the search of identity, and the transformation from a school level to another, where there are a lot of changes in the person as well as in the school life, then the learner may have developed socio-cognitive strategies. Therefore, in words of Rigby, Deci, Patrick, & Ryan (1992:174):

... social contexts that support competence and autonomy are predicted to promote intrinsic motivation and, in turn, high-quality learning... social contexts that support relatedness and autonomy are predicted to promote integrated internationalization and in turn high-quality learning.

Self-determination theory is specifically framed in terms of social and environmental factors that *facilitate* versus *undermine* intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000:58). For example, studies by Reeve and Jang (2006 in Chen & Jan, 2010) showed that teachers who support autonomous behaviours, such as “allowing choice, providing rationale, and offering informal feedback that enhanced students’ perceived autonomy, engagement, and performance” foster individual self-determination and motivation and may be applicable to different settings, even in online learning. Therefore, the teacher needs to be aware of what supports student’s own desire for carrying out a task as well as what motivates them.

2.4. Teacher’s roles

Every day people have different roles in different situations. For example, a person can be a mother/father, a daughter/son, a sister/brother, a colleague, or according to the profession. People act in different roles in distinctive ways. In the field of learning, the teacher also plays different roles in the class. Thanasoulas (1999) says that teacher’s roles are related to the assumptions of the content and the level of approach to language learning. This author also mentions that

teacher roles in methods are related to the following issues: the types of functions teachers are expected to fulfill (e.g. practice director, counselor, model), the degree of control the teacher influences over learning, the degree to which the teacher is responsible for determining linguistic content, and the interactional patterns assumed between teachers and learners (Richards, 1994 in Thanasoulas, 1999:50).

Teacher's roles are best described in the form of a metaphor, for example, the teacher as a controller, the teacher as director, the teacher as manager, the teacher as facilitator, the teacher as a resource, etc. There are some authors that even talk about twelve roles of the teacher, as we can see in Figure 2 proposed by Harden & Crosby, 2000.

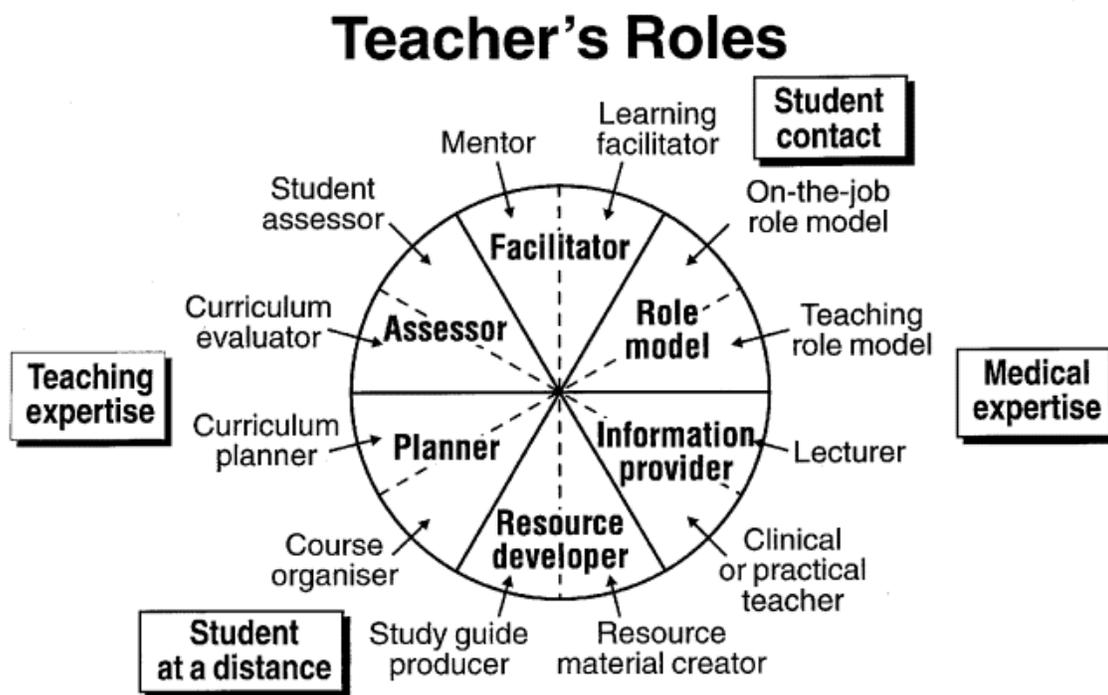


Figure 2. The twelve roles of the teacher

Different studies, like the one of Delaney (2009) who carried out a research to find out what were the characteristics of a teacher that high school students prefer. In this inquiry he found out that students prefer a teacher who is knowledgeable, humorous,

respectful, patient and organized. Ralph (2003) carried out another study but with university students to discover what attributes students consider are better in effective instructors. Five attributes were emphasized: commitment to learners; knowledge of material; organization and management of the environment; desire to improve; and collaboration with others (in Delaney, 2009). Therefore, according to the purpose of the study, we can resume that students prefer certain roles and attributes in instructors that they consider teacher's need to be a good one.

2.5. Inhouse and online learning

Learning can be taken in different places at different settings, not only in inhouse-classrooms. Internet now, places an important role in learning. There are several names for this learning: E-learning, Web-based learning, online learning, and distance learning. Several authors have different definitions for these concepts. Even though all of these concepts involve the use of a computer and Internet or intranets, the definition of each one varies. After revising the meanings and implications of these kinds of learning, it was decided to use the term *online learning* for this research. But in order to understand it, the definition of distance learning is needed. This concept means access to learning for those who are distant.

The instructional delivery included an instructor who was physically located in a different place from the learner, as well as possibly providing the instruction at disparate times (Moore, J. L., et al., 2010:129).

Based on this, some authors say that online learning is a more recent version of distance learning, but improving the access to learning opportunities non-traditional and disenfranchised (Benson, 2002 and Conrad, 2002 in Moore et al., 2010). Other authors express some advantages of online learning in terms of accessibility, flexibility,

and the ability to encourage interactions (Ally, 2004; Hiltz & Turoff, 2005; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005, in Moore et al., 2010).

Social and communicative interactions in inhouse learning between student and teacher, and student and students are important and fundamental to develop some abilities and express opinions and points of view from the part of students. Ya Ni says that

it is often through conversations, discourse, discussion, and debate among students and between instructors and students that a new concept is clarified, and old assumption is challenged, a skill is practiced, an original idea is formed and encouraged, and ultimately, a learning objective is achieved (Ya Ni, 2013:201).

In other words, in-house classes imply more interaction for students to practice the language, to clear doubts and concepts with the help of the instructor and the other students. On the other hand, online learning requires adaptations and adjustments made by the teacher; the interaction between student-teacher and student-students is different than in inhouse learning.

Online courses often substitute classroom interaction with discussion boards, synchronous chat, electronic bulletin boards, and e-mails (Ya Ni, 2013:201).

Even though there may be a sense that there is no companionship, the instructor must design interactions between students, so that they experience a:

“sense of community”, enjoy mutual interdependence, build a “sense of trust” and have shared goals and values (Davies & Graff, 2005, Rovai, 2002, in Ya Ni, 2013: 201).

3. Methodology

This section describes the methodology used to carry out the inquiry. First, the “Research design” describes the kind of research used in this paper, defining it as a qualitative study in action research. The second part is the rubric of “Context”, where there is a detailed explanation where this inquiry taking place and in what moment, as well as a description of the participants in it. The third part is defining the “Instruments”, in this case, defining the interviews. Finally, the last rubric in this section is the “Research procedure”, which is basically the process of how this research was carried out.

3.1 Research design

According to Nunan (2010:3) research is a systematic process of inquiry consisting of three elements or components: (1) a question, problem, or hypothesis, (2) data, (3) analysis and interpretation of data. If any of these elements is missing in a research, then, it is classified as something else than research. Writers on research traditions have argued between a distinction of *qualitative* and *quantitative research*.

Quantitative research

A distinction has been made between *qualitative* and *quantitative* research. It is said that “*quantitative research* is obtrusive and controlled, objective, generalisable, outcome oriented, and assumes the existence of ‘facts’ which are somehow external to and independent of the observer or researcher” (Nunan, 2010:3). Sampieri (2010:4) defines this type of research as

usa la recolección de datos para probar hipótesis, con base en la medición numérica y el análisis estadístico, para establecer patrones de comportamiento y probar teorías.

Quantitative research's focus is linear and needs to follow a regular sequence without skipping any step. It starts with an idea and once it is delimited it follows the objectives and the research question(s), the researcher constructs the literature review. The hypothesis is derived from the research question(s) as well as the variables. The instruments for the research are designed to collect data and then analyze it to make the findings, and the conclusions about the hypothesis.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research, on the other hand, assumes that all knowledge is relative, that there is a subjective element to all knowledge and research, and that holistic, ungeneralisable studies are justifiable (an ungeneralisable study is one in which the insights and outcomes generated by the research cannot be applied to contexts or situations beyond those in which data were collected).

(Nunan, 2010:3)

One of the differences between quantitative and qualitative research is that in the latter the research question or hypothesis could be developed before, during or after the data collection and the analysis of data. It is a circular process instead of a linear one, like in the quantitative research. Qualitative research may start in different steps according to the objective of the research.

Research paradigms appear within qualitative and quantitative research. According to Nunan (2010), paradigm 1 is the 'exploratory-interpretative'; paradigm 2 is the 'analytical – nomological'. In the first one non-experimental methods are used to yield qualitative data providing an interpretative analysis of that specific data. The second paradigm also called "analytical-nomological" paradigm, uses experiment to collect

data and yield quantitative data for statistical analysis. There are other six mixed forms paradigms, but we are not focusing on them. Therefore, this research is “exploratory-interpretative”, since it is pure qualitative.

Action research is a kind of research which

...is carried out by practitioners (for our purposes, classroom teachers) rather than outside researchers;... it is collaborative; and,... it is aimed at changing things” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988 in Nunan 2010:17).

The purpose of Action Research is to change the system.

In the same sense of collaboration, Berg (2004) also defines Action Research as a collaborative approach providing researchers with the means to take action to solve problems, encouraging them to reflect on the problems affecting them or to the society, motivating them to develop strategies to resolve those problems. According to Berg (2004) Action Research has four stages:

(1) Identifying the research question(s), (2) gathering the information to answer the question(s), (3) analyzing and interpreting the information, and (4) sharing the results with the participants (p.197).

Kemmis & McTaggart (1988 in Berg, 2004) also describe Action Research as a spiral process in terms of plan, act, observe, and reflect. Other authors suggest that this kind of research is somewhat the same activities, and the purpose of this research is to improve or to change something.

This research is considered to be, besides a qualitative study, also Action Research, since the problem was identified in the classroom and the research intends to solve this situation after studying and analyzing the complications of it. However, because of time constraints, the research does not include all the steps of Action Research; it only

includes the first step according to Berg (2004), which is identifying the research question, in this case, to identify students' struggles to cope with the demands of an English programme. In order to do this, it was necessary to know students' problems, so that later on, some strategies could be developed to improve and change this situation. Taking this last step into consideration, certain aspects of Grounded Theory were also acknowledged.

Nunan (2010:230) defines Grounded Theory as

... the practice of deriving theory from data rather than collecting data with the aim of supporting or refuting a theory. The term refers to the fact that theory is grounded in descriptive data from real life situations.

Strauss and Corbin (1994 in Cohen et. al., 2007:491) remark that grounded theory is "a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed". Grounded theory generates a new theory from the data obtained in the research. Grounded theory methods are flexible guidelines that allow the researcher to focus the data collection and develop theories through data analysis and conceptual development (Charmaz, 2005). In addition, grounded theory focuses on real aspects of life, and after collecting data of the detected problem, new theories emerge based on this information.

Cohen et al. (2010:491) mentions that grounded theory is also

... a systematic theory, using systematized methods... of theoretical sampling, coding constant comparison, the identification of a core variable, and saturation.

Cohen et al. also affirmed that this theory start with the collection of data, then this data is analyzed and reviewed to generate categories. After this, coding is the next

stage in grounded theory, and by coding we mean that the categories are analyzed again for new information. When there is nothing else to add, then it is said that the category is saturated. The next step is creating theory from what was obtained. In grounded theory, the literature is emergent, which means that it is not known what to investigate until the data is collected. Therefore, the literature is emergent (Soneira, 2007).

Moreover, Charmaz (2005) states that coding helps the researcher to set action in the data statement. She also mentions that grounded theory is

a comparative method in which the researcher compares data with data, data with categories, and category with category (2010:517).

Coding can help the researchers to see their assumptions and their participants; researchers can ask themselves how and why they decide to develop certain codes. As for the evaluation criteria of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967, Glaser, 1978 in Charmaz, 2005: 527) criteria for evaluating grounded theory include fit, workability, relevance, and modifiability

... the theory must fit the empirical world it purports to analyze, provide a workable understanding and explanation of this world, address problems and processes in it, and allow for variation and change that make the core theory useful over time. The criterion of modifiability allows for refinements of the theory that simultaneously make it more precise and enduring.

3.2 Context

As mentioned before, this research was carried out at the Universidad Veracruzana with second semester students from the BSc in Biological and Pharmaceutical

Chemistry campus Xalapa, learning English as a Foreign Language. The programme of the BSc pretends that students have certain knowledge of the foreign language, and English is a mandatory course, without it, students cannot graduate from the BSc. Therefore, it is suggested to take English I and English II in the first and second semester.

In their first semester there were twelve students taken English I. They did not take classes as a regular group; their classes were held in a Research Institute far from their Faculty with specialized teachers, most of them were Doctors. They were an “experiment” group because these students were from the bottom-up candidates accepted to the BSc in Biological and Pharmaceutical Chemistry at the Universidad Veracruzana. There was a decision to take out this group from the faculty and facilitate and assess students in a more personalized way to see if they did not abandon the BSc.

Their classes were from 7 a.m. to 2 or 3 p.m. from Monday to Friday. Two days a week in the afternoon they took English I and two other different days in the afternoon they also took computer classes. English I was a subject in which they had two different teachers. The first teacher taught them for a couple of months, and around mid-October I was in charge of the group. This teacher left the group because of some problems of timing. Then, I took the group, supposedly we had to meet two times a week, but we only met on Mondays for 3 hours and the other 3 hours they had to work at home with homework and some exercises I left them to do, because I could not go any other day of the week to have a presence class.

During the afternoon, the institute of Ciencias Básicas at the Universidad Veracruzana lent a room for students to take classes. However, they depended from the janitor to open the classroom and unfortunately he did not work on Mondays. Therefore, we had a lot of problems to have the classroom available for the English class. Sometimes it was given in the garden until the sunlight let us work. Not all of the students assisted

regularly to classes, even though they were all enrolled in the subject. These thirteen students know the consequence on failing the educational experience. However, despite the facilities some of them kept on going to classes.

The second semester started on February, and their classes were now at the Faculty of Biological and Pharmaceutical Chemistry, which is in the Faculty of Engineering. English II was still a class they have to take in the afternoon, two days a week for 2 and half hours per day. However, several problems were presented during the first month of classes. Me, as the teacher, had a surgery and I was not able to work for a month. Therefore I met the group at the beginning of March, and we lost a lot of time. Nevertheless, they worked with some activities I send them to continue practice English. When I met them on March we did not have an available classroom to take classes. Another Faculty lent us a multipurpose room, but again, we did not have the key of the room and nobody else could open it because the janitor did not work in the afternoon. We took our first classes somewhere in the faculty, again, until the sunlight let us work. The following week, two students had the key of the multipurpose room and we finally could take classes properly.

3.2.1. The participants

The participants of this research were seven students studying the second semester of the BSc in Biological and Pharmaceutical Chemistry. There were three women and four men; their ages were ranging from 18 to 20 years old. Three of them are from Xalapa, one of them from the North of the State, another one from a town near Xalapa and two of them from a different State. They all were students from the first semester and they wanted to continue learning English in the second semester. Considering that they were few students and that they all were willing to participate in this inquiry, the interviews were carried out to all of them.

3.2.2. The classroom

The conditions of the classroom were good, we had a whiteboard, the size of the room was big so we could move around and do some activities. However, we did not have a CD player, nor a T.V., DVD, neither a computer, and the Internet does not reach the classroom.

Students suggested having a presence class at the Faculty and the other class online. Therefore we cover the two classes per week. Both classes are 2 and half hrs. per day. In that way they can develop different skills and be autonomous, which are some of the objectives of the MEIF (Modelo Educativo Integral y Flexible) at the Universidad Veracruzana. Despite these conditions, seven students from the BSc in Biological and Pharmaceutical Chemistry continued learning English as a Foreign Language.

3.3. Instruments

In this case, all the participants were used for this study, considering they were few and they were all willing to participate. The research techniques for this inquiry were oral interviews. One of the characteristics of the qualitative interview is that it is more intimate, flexible and open (King and Horrocks, 2009 in Sampieri, 2010). The interview allows the communication between the interviewer and the interviewee(s) to exchange information through the use of questions and answers of a particular topic, the one that is researched. According to Kvale (1996, in Cohen, 2007:349), an interview is

an exchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest, sees the centrality of human interaction for knowledge production, and emphasizes the social situatedness of research data.

This type of instrument allows the participants to discuss the interpretations of what they think about a topic, it lets them express their points of view. Manion and Morison (2000, in Griffe, 2012) also remind us that the interview is not just a data collection exercise, but also a social and interpersonal encounter.

Interviews can be distinguished according to their degree of formality, from unstructured through semi-structured to structured formality. An unstructured interview is “guided by the responses of the interviewee” (Nunan, 2010:149), rather than from the researcher. This type of interview is unpredictable, since the researcher has little or no control of the direction of it.

In semi-structured interview, the interviewer has a general idea of where he or she wants the interview to go, and what should come out of it, but does not enter the interview with a list of predetermined questions (Nunan, 2010:149)

What determine the course of the interview in this case are the topics or issues that appear during the interview. In the formal or structured interview, the researcher has a set of questions in a predetermined order.

Creswell (2009 in Sampieri et. Al., 2010:418) suggests that qualitative interviews should be open

... sin categorías preestablecidas, de tal forma que los participantes expresen de la mejor manera sus experiencias y sin ser influidos por la perspectiva del investigador o por los resultados de otros estudios.

Nunan (2010) suggests that the type of interview the researcher decides to use will be determined by the degree of control that he/she wants. Even though grounded theory is open to use several different instruments to collect data, the interview is the one of

the priority interest. In this particular research the type of interview used to collect data was semi-structured with open-ended questions. These questions are

... those that supply a frame of reference for respondents answers, but put a minimum of restraint on the answers and their expression (Kerlinger, 1970 in Cohen, 2010:357).

The only condition restricted on the content of the questions is the nature of the topic or problem that is investigated. Some of the reasons why these types of questions were selected for the interview are their flexibility, the chance to go more in depth or to clear some misunderstanding, the rapport they help to establish with the interviewee, the chance to confirm what the respondent really thinks and believe, and the unexpected responses or hypotheses.

3.4 Research procedure

The first step to carry on with this research was to talk to the participants, if they were willing to participate in this inquiry. Since there was no authority to address with, this was not an obstacle, and there was no one to ask for permission. Then, the questions for the interview were designed, but there was trouble to find a place to do the interviews. Finally, a laboratory of the Faculty was able. The conditions were not as expected, there was too much echo and sometimes we were interrupted by other students who were looking for some teacher. However, the atmosphere and the rapport with the participants were good enough for them to feel comfortable and relaxed during the interviews.

4. Findings

This section is divided into *Data analysis* and *Description of Findings*. The first section describes in general the categories that burst out from the interviews. In the second section there is an explanation in detail of each category supported by the participants' voices.

4.1 Data analysis

In this chapter, I will present the ten categories that emerged from my data. The first category *Students' preferences* refer to students likes regarding their learning of a second language. The second category *Students' dislikes* refers to the bad experiences they had during the learning of English as a second language. The third category *Interesting dynamics* concerns the dynamics used in their English classes that they prefer the most during the learning of the language. The fourth category is *Learning problems*, which refer to the problems they had or have had during their learning experience of the second language. *Difficulties inhouse and online learning* is the fifth category concerning the problems, pitfalls or inconveniences they present in inhouse and online classes, what they consider as problematic in their learning process. The sixth category is *Help from classmates* refers to whether the students think their classmates help them or not in their learning and in which way they are helpful. The seventh category is *Online class experience*, where students share how was their experience with online classes, if they liked them or not, if they had some problems. The eight category *Looking for more information*, gives us an idea of the frequency students look for information when taking the online class, and what kind of information they look for. The ninth category *Inhouse class experience* concerns students' experiences when taking inhouse classes, whether they like them or not. Finally, the last category, *Preferable class* concerns to what class students prefer, inhouse or online, and the reasons of their preference.

4.2 Description of findings

4.2.1 Students' preferences

The following extract is about the fact that students enjoyed learning with realia, because it seems interesting for them. In addition, they apparently prefer activities that are more informative and connected to the real world.

001

My classes were more didactic than theoretical. I mean we worked with drawings, images and all that... I think I can memorise better in this way.

002

My teacher made us play with verbs like lottery.

Besides realia, it seems that they enjoyed the class more when their teacher takes part in a situation and interacts with them, not only in a formal way but also informally.

005

I liked how the teacher explained to us, for example, if we were working with a story, the teacher played the character or if we were working the topic of toys, the teacher asked us to bring some to class and we worked with them.

It is helpful when teachers bring to class material that is real, attractive and interesting for students; in this way students could be more motivated, it catches more their attention and maybe students are more willing to learn the second language. But besides material, it is important for students that teachers are more involved in the class, that they do not only focus on theory and grammar, but also that they create a fun and interesting class by participating in an informal way, like playing with students

and making jokes. By doing this, students could feel motivated and maybe they learned better.

4.2.2 Students' dislikes

This second category is the contrast of the first one, in here students express what they disliked about their English classes. Most of their comments were related to what they think is difficult for them to understand and therefore, to learn.

003

I think it is difficult for me to change a sentence into different tenses, for example from past simple to another tense, it is hard.

Students may have some difficulties learning the structure of English. They seem to prefer more practice when they learn a second language. The following student apparently connects the grammatical side of a language with learning theoretical issues.

007

I don't like theory.

In the first two extracts what they dislike about their classes is grammar; in the following extract exams, especially oral exams are what the student dislike about their English courses. It seems that these two reasons cause in learners a lack of self confidence.

005

I don't like the exams, especially the oral exams.

Moreover, translation is another factor that students dislike in their classes. They expressed that how they can translate a sentence into Spanish if they do not understand it in English. Again, grammar played an important factor in here.

002

I don't like reading and writing because I don't understand well English, and the teacher made us translate and it was difficult for me to work with the verbs.

4.2.3 Interesting dynamics

As a teacher it is important to plan activities that are attractive for students and that could be carried out in the classroom. However, teacher must consider students' interest, likes, dislikes, and be able to catch more their attention and make a class fun and pleasant.

003

It is interesting to listen to a song and complete the lyrics, also when we participate and write on the board and word order.

Some activities are more interesting for students because they enjoy them and feel they learn better.

005

It is interesting when you write on the board because the teacher makes you participate in class and you feel more involved by trying rather than just be sitting

In addition,

006

It is interesting working with songs when you have to listen and complete the lyrics with the appropriate word and make it coherent.

Also,

007

I find interesting the activities related to songs, or word-search puzzles, for example, those types of activities made me focus more and I pay more attention.

Students like activities involving the listening skill; therefore the use of songs is pleasant for them because they learn new vocabulary and practice grammar structures. But besides songs, they like to participate in the activities, not only work on the books or worksheets; they prefer to be involved in the dynamics of the class by writing on the board or with games, like puzzles. Games, no matter the age of the students, these are activities that all learners enjoy. They learn while having fun.

002

It is interesting to work with games like bingo or mimicry because I learn better.

Moreover, some students do see the relevance of well-planned games as they may learn in an agreeable atmosphere.

004

Games are interesting because you learn while playing and they catch more your attention, besides you have fun and you learn.

4.2.4 Learning problems

In the following extracts the students express what their difficulties have been or problems they had during the learning of the second language.

002

I can't learn the verbs or some words, so if I don't understand them, I can't tell what the sentence mean.

Besides,

003

Change a sentence into different tenses.

Also,

005

Verbs are difficult, especially in the past.

What has been difficult for them during their learning of the second language is grammar, specially the verbs. The problem is that they have not learned the conjugation of the verbs; therefore they do not understand how and when to use certain verbs for making sentences in different tenses.

006

I have problems working with verb tenses: inflections.

4.2.5 Difficulties inhouse and online learning

In the following extracts students expressed the difficulties or problems they had during inhouse and online classes during the semester.

002

In online classes sometimes I count on the help of a cousin of mine; in inhouse classes I think we all help each other and I like it better in this way.

There are several issues that contribute to have problems in their learning, for example, in online classes, internet may be not working and they may have problems to be online.

005

Sometimes internet is not working.

Besides technical difficulties, the fact that the teacher is there in the classroom is very comforting in case they have doubts, then the teacher would clear those doubts and questions students may have.

006

Maybe if we have doubts in online classes is difficult to make them clear, it's not the same if the teacher is there explaining you in a better way; but I think online classes are ok.

The learners expressed that although the online class is good and they like it, that part of clearing doubts is not the same when they are taking inhouse classes, sometimes when the class is online they still have questions that nobody answers.

007

In inhouse classes we have the advantage of having the teacher there to clear our doubts and he/she can explain to you better; in online classes sometimes you don't clear your doubts and you don't know what to do, it's not the same.

4.2.6 Help from classmates

In this category, students explain if they consider that their classmates help them in their learning or not, and if they do so in what ways they are helpful.

001

Sometimes my classmates help me to know the definition of certain words or how to structure a sentence or a question.

In addition,

003

If I have a doubt I can ask my classmates and we try and solve the doubt together.

These students consider important the role of their classmates in their learning process.

006

For example in online classes if I have a doubt I can ask somebody for help and we work on it together.

Furthermore,

007

We help each other, that is what classmates do, so if anyone has a doubt we figure out how we can help.

Most of them expressed that their classmates are very helpful to clear some doubts they might have, and they come to a solution altogether. Vocabulary and grammar structures are the most common doubts that students need to clear and therefore they ask each other about them, sometimes without asking questions to their teacher. Only two students said that they do not need the help from their classmates.

4.2.7 Online class experience

Online classes were a new experience for the students. In the following extracts these students express their opinion about them. The following informant makes evident her/his preference for online courses. He/she underlines the fact that online classes can be dynamic and motivate him/her as he/she learns with songs.

001

Online classes caught more my attention when we worked with songs and lyrics.

Nevertheless, there were also those students who do not only feel motivated by using technology and online classes, they also do not seem to have any problem with in-house programmes. They are self-determined to succeed.

004

Well, I learnt that it is not necessary to just be sitting in a class as long as you want to learn, you can do it anywhere, inhouse, online...

Another example of a self-determined student would be the next informant.

005

My experience was that by any means you can learn English.

However, the role of the teacher becomes essential to help student notice the benefits of on-line courses.

006

It was interesting, I had never took an online class, so the first classes were weird, but then I realized it was not that complicated, I think that the only inconvenient is that sometimes you didn't clear your doubts.

Once again, the activities carried out in online classes are as important as in inhouse classes; students like dynamics of listening and through online classes there are many ways in which they can practice this skill. Besides this, at the beginning they felt the differences between inhouse and online classes, but little by little they got used to them and realized they were not so complicated. The only important issue to highlight is the fact that they need to get used to a different way to clarify doubts. Some of these students mentioned that, as long as you want to learn the language, in this case English, you can do it by any means, the important aspect is that they are willing to learn it.

4.2.8 Looking for more information

The purpose of this category was to check if they look for information to clear their doubts, what kind of information they search and where, whether it was online or in books.

003

Sometimes if I don't understand I look for some examples.

Nevertheless, not all students only seem to look up meanings or examples, some of them also want to know the context in which they can apply it. They would certainly would not do so if they were not motivated enough.

006

If I don't understand, I look for the subject and find out how to use it.

Most of them used technology to look for some examples and therefore to have a better idea of why they are confused.

007

Yes, I look in web pages for the meaning of words or in some translators.

Other students still look for the help of their classmates to overcome those doubts. They need their classmates support to feel confident. However, they do show desire for acquiring knowledge.

002

If I don't understand, for example the past simple or something, I look for it or I ask my classmates.

Only one of them expressed to look for information in books.

005

I look in my old books of English that I had in past courses if there is something there to help me.

The information they investigate is related to grammar and vocabulary, as mentioned before, when students took online classes they used internet for this means. However, some of them asked their classmates when needed and only one of them used his/her old English books to solve his/her problem.

4.2.9 In-house class experience

Students stated their opinions about inhouse classes in the following extracts.

001

It is easier to participate because we are few people in class; you have the chance to talk.

Besides,

006

Since we are a small group I think it's better; in bigger groups you get more distracted and some teachers give up and tell us if you want to learn good, if not, too bad, therefore since we are very few we always paid attention, although sometimes we took a break.

The fact that they were few students in class helped them to have more opportunities to talk and practice the language. Distractions were also less than in bigger groups. That was important for them because they felt more self-confident to express themselves, not only to clear their problems, but also to learn from the teacher as well as from their classmates, as mentioned in the extracts ahead.

003

I felt more self-confident, it is easier to express the doubts you have than typing them.

Moreover,

007

You feel more confident because you have the teacher and your classmates in case you have any doubt and that is very helpful.

In these extracts, the importance of the role of the teacher becomes evident, however, to what extent students should depend on their teacher? At the end, students should be given the choice the mode of their preference.

4.2.10 Preferable class

Evidence shows that students seem to prefer in-house classes over online classes. The main reason they said is that interaction between teacher – student and student - student is crucial for them in their learning process.

001

I like in-house classes better because it is easier the approach between teacher and students, and because we can clear our doubts, it is easier to ask and have a response back.

In addition,

002

I prefer in-house classes because of the interaction with the teacher, if I have a question I can ask. In online classes I have to read and sometimes I don't know how the pronunciation is whereas with the teacher I can notice the pronunciation of certain words.

Furthermore, students count on their classmates, this may lead to develop teamwork.

003

I prefer in-house classes because in that way we can all help each other, if somebody asks me for something and I don't know maybe my classmate knows the answer and I can notice my mistake rather than typing it.

Besides,

006

I think I like both of them but maybe in-house classes are always going to be better because you have the help from the teacher, you can interact with others. I prefer to read and talk and in inhouse classes you get the chance to do both.

Doubts, problems, questions, etc. are easy to solve as a group, as they mentioned. Therefore, help from the teacher and students are always needed. In inhouse classes they have all this that in online classes do not have. Also, there are certain skills that are practiced more in inhouse classes, like speaking, listening, and pronunciation. In online classes, students feel they do not have enough practice. In addition, it is easier for students to understand a topic in inhouse classes because the teacher is there to explain to them as many times needed.

Additionally,

007

I'd rather have inhouse classes because I like listening to others and I think that is the way I learn better, it is not that I don't pay attention, but if I'm listening, even if I'm distracted, I learn better; and if it is online classes even though it is comfortable, this time I couldn't be there always.

Perhaps students feel that in inhouse classes they can practice more skills through different activities, and since they like to participate and write on the board and read, they can do this in inhouse classes. Also, because students have different learning styles maybe they learn better through the dynamics the teacher brings to class.

5. Discussion and reflections

After analysing and reviewing the findings, it is noticed that there are problems that learners have during their learning process. Among the ten different categories found in the data analysis, we can categorize them into three more general ones: *negative aspects of learning that cause problems*; *positive aspects of learning that may help to overcome problems*; and *students' preference between in-house and online classes*. In this section, we will discuss them in depth according to what students said.

The first one, *negative aspects of learning that cause problems*, include the categories of students' dislikes, learning problems, and difficulties in inhouse and online classes. What students said is that grammar, oral exams, the use of translation in class, unknown vocabulary, and inflections have always caused them problems in their learning. When taking the online class, doubts that are not cleared, and external help from others and not from the instructor or the classmates, are present and sometimes hinders learning.

All these aspects, which are not preferable for the students, have affected negatively in their learning; this might be an influence in discouraging them in learning the language or lose some interest in it. Also, these factors affect the learners in their motivation. As we have seen previously, aspects like anxiety, inhibition, the self-esteem and the affective-filter hypothesis influence in the process of learning of the individual in any learning setting he/she is involved. In the case of testing or evaluating, Du (2009) says that

...the pressure to perform well on exams is a great motivator unless it is so extreme that it becomes irrational. Perfectionism and feelings of unworthiness provide unreasonable goals to achieve through testing situations (Du, 2009:163).

Besides this, if the learners lack self confidence, they will lose chances to practice the language because they are afraid of making mistakes in front of the rest of the group. When the learners are not motivated enough, when they have the sense of failure, then all the negative factors affect their emotions and learning becomes more difficult. Schumann (1975) discusses the importance of learner attitudes towards the success in language learning. Among different attitudes, he says that language stress is one of them.

He views in implicitly psychoanalytic terms, as a matter of affront to one's own narcissism because of a perceived deficiency in language, which commonly functions as a source of narcissistic gratification (in Dickinson, 1987:25).

In other words, even though students may have problems in their learning process, what can be helpful is their attitude towards their learning. It may balance the negative aspects of it and students can overcome those problems by finding solutions by themselves or with the help of others, like teachers and/or classmates.

The second general category corresponds to *positive aspects of learning that may help to overcome problems*. This category includes students' preferences, interesting dynamics, help from classmates and looking for more information. These aspects influence positively in students to learning, since they might make them feel motivated and encourage them to learn English.

If students are to learn desired outcomes in a reasonably effective manner, then the teacher's fundamental task is to get students to engage in learning activities that are likely to result in their achieving those outcomes. It is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does (Shuell, 1986, in Harden & Crosby, 2000: 4).

If the teacher sets a friendly and harmonious classroom setting, then students could little by little overcome their barriers for learning. Dickinson suggests that if empathy is developed in a group of learners, it reduces the centrality of the teacher

This is likely to increase the empathy between the teacher and learners, and this may have the effect of strengthening the bonding of a group or learners, reducing competition within the group, and increasing co-operation (p. 26).

All the above is what students say they feel with their classmates, that they feel empathy towards them and this help them to be confident enough to ask the other to clear a doubt, for example. In class, students may feel afraid or ashamed to ask for something they do not understand because of being criticized by others; but if the setting of the class is relaxed, then they may take a risk and ask for what they do not understand without feeling embarrassed. Therefore, there is a companionship among them.

The role of the teacher plays an important one in this category. As a role model, the instructor should model and exemplify what learners should do or what it should be learned in class, since students learn from observation and imitation as well. Students learn also from the skills, abilities and attitudes that teacher exhibits. In this role, teachers influence learners' attitudes and even big decisions in their lives. Another role that the informants consider important and that they like in teachers is that of resource material creator, since students consider that the activities and dynamics done in class are important for them to catch their attention, and if they like them, students feel they learn better. Working with books and worksheets is not enough. The teacher should consider also the use of technology for creating and implementing different activities in class. Harden and Crosby (2000) say that

...as developers of resource materials, teachers must keep abreast with changes in technology. An investment in the further development of computer based learning material is needed. The use of computers in education is expanding and some schools make the purchase of computers by students compulsory (p. 13).

Finally, the last of the three categories is that of *students' preference between in-house and online classes*. In this one, aspects as online and in-house experience, and preferable class among these two were considered. Students prefer in-house learning because they consider that the role of the teacher as a consultant, role model, facilitator and resource material creator are very important in their performance and in risk-taking. The atmosphere that the teacher creates in the classroom is crucial to make learners feel confident enough to participate in the activities provided. Besides this, Rogers (1969) argues that

Where the teacher is empathic, liking and affection are more evenly diffused around the group, and every student tends to feel liked by all the others – to have a more positive attitude towards himself and towards school (in Dickinson, 1987:26).

Students find important the interaction and the rapport of teacher-student and students-students. They consider that in in-house classes their participation is important and if teachers let them do it, they feel more part of the class and of their learning. The fact that there were few students in the class, facilitate their companionship and their self-confidence to take part in the class. They also said that the use of materials is important, especially when realia is brought into the class.

Consequently, the content of materials for classroom use as well as classroom practices should be compatible with the affective variables influencing learners (Papaefthymiou-lytra, 1993, in Thanasoulas, 1999:55).

In online learning, students say that even if the content of the class is the same, they feel different and still prefer in-house classes. Technology is useful for learning, and it is used more frequently in classes. It has its advantages and disadvantages. Taking this into consideration and put it in the context of learning, some authors suggests that in online learning there are certain barriers that are eliminating providing flexibility, currency of material, customized learning, and feedback over inhouse experience (Hackbarth, 1996; Harasim, 1990; Kiser, 1999; Mathews, 1999; Swan et al., 2000 in Ya Ni (2013:201). Opponents to this point of view consider that in an online class, students

... may feel isolated (Brown, 1996), confused, and frustrated (Hara & Karling, 2000) and that student's interest in the subject and learning effectiveness may be reduced (R. Maki, W. Maki, Patterson & Whittaker, 2000, in Ya Ni, 2013).

Authors in favour of online learning suggest that interaction in this setting promotes student-centred learning and encourages their participation as well as discussions than in in-house classroom setting (Ya Ni, 2013). However, in this particular research students opinion was the contrary. They found that in online class, their interaction is not the same as in in-house class, and they feel they participate more in the latest than in online. Students in this inquiry feel more confident and prefer the interaction face-to-face than typing on the computer.

6. Conclusions and implications

This research aimed to identify the learning problems of the educational experience English II from a group of second semester students of the Faculty of Biological and Pharmaceutical Chemistry from the Universidad Veracruzana. In order to do this, it was necessary to ask them about what they consider to be their problems in learning, how they try to transform these problems into positive aspects, and finally what was their preference between in-house and online classes, considering that they took in-house and online classes as an opportunity to use technology.

It was found that some student issues when learning English as a foreign language deal with aspects of the language itself in terms of grammar and unknown vocabulary, as well as anxiety in exams and difficulties in being proficient in certain skills that could hinder the chance to learn the language. Considering the difficulties in in-house and online learning they responded that Internet was not always available and there are certain technical difficulties that held them up to do the activities proposed. All these aspects are considered in literature over the title of Affective Factors that can affect students' motivation towards the language. However, students' attitudes may help them to overcome these situations.

The positive aspects that students consider to be important in their learning are the dynamics the teacher proposes to do in class, such as games and the use of realia; the companionship they feel they have with their classmates that helps them to overcome certain doubts or problems; and the roles of the teacher, which makes them feel confident enough to participate and have a positive interaction with the teacher as well as with the other students.

In-house and online classes were taken during the semester. The decision of taking online classes was because sometimes the classroom was not open and therefore we

needed to use another classroom of the Faculty, taking the risk that there were none available. Even when the topics of the classes were the same and that in online classes they have the comfort to take it in their home, more relaxed and without the pressure of being late because of transportation, or getting wet because of the weather conditions, students prefer to take in-house classes, especially because of the interaction teacher-student and student-student. Therefore, despite the facilities that technology may have, in-house classes have more advantages for this particular group in terms of better learning and the chance to participate and practice different skills to learn the second language.

There is no better way to know your learners than asking them about their preferences and problems they face in learning. My first thoughts, as the instructor and researcher, were that their problems were about the difficulties we experiment to have a classroom and the necessary resources to use in class to practice different skills, since sometimes we did not have a classroom and that they had to take the class in the cafeteria of the Faculty, and sometimes the noise and the weather were not on our side. However, it was a surprise to know that these did not affect them in their learning, and that they prefer that the teacher takes the pace of the class. Therefore as teachers, we must not forget that a teacher's task is

...that of an orchestra conductor, who tends to fly into higher spheres, and has a tendency to fly and pull himself and the other above everyday's problems towards a more creative reality (Papaconstantinou, 1991 in Thanasoula, 1999:55).

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8. Appendixes

Example of the Interview grid guide

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Introductory questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is your name? - How old are you? - Where are you from? | |
| <p>What are the previous experiences (positive and negative) of the informant when learning English as a Foreign Language?</p> | <p>¿Cuáles han sido tus experiencias previas en el aprendizaje del inglés? ¿Dónde y cuándo te lo han enseñado? ¿Por cuánto tiempo? ¿Qué te parecieron?</p> <p>¿Qué es lo que más recuerdas de tus clases? ¿Qué es lo que más te gustó? ¿Por qué? ¿Qué es lo que menos te gustó? ¿Por qué?</p> <p>¿Qué dinámicas/actividades en tus clases de lengua te parecen más interesantes? Por ejemplo, aprender con canciones, juegos, películas. ¿Otras? ¿Por qué?</p> |
| <p>What are the problems that the informant may have during the learning process?</p> | <p>¿Qué problemas has tenido en tu aprendizaje en particular con el inglés? ¿Tratas de superarlos? De ser así, ¿de qué manera?</p> <p>¿Qué dificultades encuentras entre las clases presenciales y en línea? De enfrentarlos, ¿cómo lo haces? Por ejemplo, en relación con tu maestro y/o compañeros.</p> <p>¿Tus compañeros te han ayudado en tu aprendizaje del inglés? ¿De qué manera te ayudan?</p> |
| <p>What is the functionality of in-house and online classes?</p> | <p>¿Qué experiencia te ha dejado tomar clases de inglés en línea? ¿Cómo tomas la clase? ¿Buscas información?</p> |

| | |
|--|--|
| | <p>¿Te ayudas con tus compañeros o con alguien más?</p> <p>¿Qué experiencia te ha dejado tomar clases de inglés presenciales?</p> <p>¿Te sientes mejor con tu maestro presente y compañeros?</p> <p>¿Te sientes en confianza para participar?</p> <p>¿Sientes que aprendes mejor?</p> <p>¿Qué clases te han ayudado más a aprender inglés, las presenciales o en línea?</p> <p>¿Por qué?</p> |
|--|--|