

Student-Centered Strategies in Online English Teaching: Freelance Teachers' Perceptions in Virtual Learning Environments

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Abstract

This study proposes student-centered strategies that enhance active participation in English language learning within a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The research addressed common challenges in online language education, particularly low participation and limited student interaction in virtual classrooms. A qualitative case study design was employed focusing on six freelance English teachers in Colombia.

Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and non-participant classroom observations and were analyzed inductively using ATLAS.ti and methodological triangulation. The results showed that the design of the tasks, the relevance of the material, and the emotional climate of the classroom had a big impact on how involved the students were. Specifically, student-centered strategies linked to learners' personal and professional environments encouraged more significant communication, participation, and involvement. Participation in virtual learning environments was still influenced, though, by outside distractions and few chances for peer contact.

The study found that using student-centered strategies in online English courses helped students develop autonomy, interaction, and drive, as well as promote more meaningful virtual learning experiences. These results could help to improve our knowledge of online language teaching and offer direction for teachers operating in virtual English teaching settings.

Keywords: Student-centered learning, Virtual learning environments, Interaction, Learner engagement.



Resumen

Este estudio propone estrategias centradas en el estudiante para fortalecer la participación activa en el aprendizaje del inglés dentro de un Entorno Virtual de Aprendizaje (EVA). La investigación abordó desafíos comunes en la educación de idiomas en línea, particularmente la baja participación y la limitada interacción entre estudiantes en aulas virtuales. Se empleó un diseño de estudio de caso cualitativo centrado en seis docentes freelance de inglés en Colombia. Los datos fueron recolectados mediante cuestionarios de respuesta abierta y observaciones de clase, y posteriormente fueron analizados de manera inductiva utilizando ATLAS.ti y triangulación metodológica. Los resultados mostraron que el diseño de las tareas, la relevancia del material y el clima emocional del aula tuvieron un gran impacto en el nivel de involucramiento de los estudiantes. Específicamente, las estrategias centradas en el estudiante vinculadas a los entornos personales y profesionales de los aprendices fomentaron una comunicación, participación e involucramiento más significativos. Sin embargo, la participación en entornos virtuales de aprendizaje continuó viéndose influenciada por distracciones externas y por las escasas oportunidades de interacción entre pares. El estudio encontró que el uso de estrategias centradas en el estudiante en cursos virtuales de inglés ayudó a los estudiantes a desarrollar autonomía, interacción y motivación, además de promover experiencias de aprendizaje virtual más significativas. Estos resultados podrían contribuir a mejorar la comprensión de la enseñanza de idiomas en línea y ofrecer orientación para docentes que trabajan en contextos virtuales de enseñanza del inglés.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje centrado en el estudiante, Entornos virtuales de aprendizaje, Interacción, Participación del estudiante.



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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted education in Latin America and the Caribbean. Some measures to confront the health emergency and control the virus's propagation were to close schools and suspend in-person education from 2020 to 2022. Under this, Latin America and the Caribbean experienced the most prolonged school shutdowns, with 70 weeks from February 2020 to March 2022, exceeding the global average of 41 weeks. Therefore, adopting virtual education was a chance to transform educational practices and ensure the continuity of the teaching and learning processes (The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2022), making students the active protagonists of their teaching-learning processes.

This phenomenon was also observed in Colombia, where the pandemic forced many educational institutions to shift rapidly from in-person to virtual learning. "In 2020, 789 new digital programs were registered, representing a 17% increase compared to the previous year" (Universidad del Rosario, 2023, own translation). During this period, many students also turned to virtual education as a practical and flexible alternative that allowed them to continue their studies despite lockdowns, mobility restrictions, and economic uncertainty. According to Ahmed et al. (2024), students were attracted to virtual learning due to its accessibility, flexible scheduling, and the opportunity to balance their academic and personal responsibilities. Consequently, the practice of teaching English in virtual learning environments increased, particularly among English freelance educators who embrace this modality.

The creation of virtual environments was considered an alternative educational solution implemented during the pandemic in 2020 and 2022 (Cedeño et al., 2023). Many independent English teachers opted to offer this new teaching format, which continued persisting in Colombia

today. Nevertheless, research indicated that online college programs in Colombia had much higher dropout rates than traditional in-person programs. Around 67% of students in online courses did not complete their studies, which was more than double the dropout rate of students attending classes in person (El Tiempo, 2020). Unlike face-to-face classes, interaction in virtual environments did not occur spontaneously, requiring the implementation of approaches that foster collaboration and meaningful learning (Carchi et al., 2024).

To address these issues in the mentioned setting, student-centered course design was crucial for learners to develop autonomy and take an active participatory role in the learning process of a foreign language (Costa, 2023). The student-centered learning (SCL) method has been proven to enhance students' overall learning experiences. As noted by Kerimbayev (2023), “student-centered approaches and modern technologies play an important role in distance learning. They contribute to active student participation, educational individualization, and the development of necessary skills” (p.18). Hence, using technology and focusing on learners helps make online learning more engaging, personalized, and skill-building.

In another way, when virtual learning environments (VLE) are not structured to promote exploration and learner autonomy, students may become passive participants. According to Ghafar (2023), when students are not encouraged to investigate, discover, and develop their own knowledge, this may lead to limited active participation, disengagement, and even loss of motivation. Similarly, Fonseca (2018, as cited in Regino et al., 2024) states that “education in Colombia tends to emphasize a teacher-centered approach, where teachers play a central role in guiding students' learning” (p.4). This tendency might be also reflected in some freelance English practices in online learning, where teacher-centered strategies may restrict the pupils' involvement in the teaching-learning process (Regino et al., 2024).

Therefore, learners seemed to be uninterested in taking part in their learning process actively, and these factors had brought up the need to make effective changes in virtual classes, English mastery, and the perspective of a positive learning experience with the English tutors. A critical challenge observed among freelance English teachers who deliver virtual classes was that, despite offering personalized lessons tailored to learners' needs and interests, there was a lack of student-student interaction, engagement, and participation, especially among learners aged 18 and older, who generally demonstrate an English proficiency level between A1 and C1.

These teachers often work with students from different parts of the country in the online modality, which was the learning context of this project. Accordingly, proposing student-centered strategies in virtual learning environments is essential because they can provide meaningful opportunities for collaboration, promote learner autonomy, and encourage active participation in virtual environments. As Costa (2023) explains, when online lessons are intentionally designed to prioritize students' needs and voices, motivation and engagement increase significantly, allowing learners to play a more active role in their own learning process.

In compliance with the above-mentioned, the following question and objectives arise in this research project:

What student-centered strategies enhance active participation in English language learning within a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)?

General Objective:

To propose student-centered strategies that enhance active participation in English language learning within a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).



Specific Objectives:

1. To identify student-centered strategies and their purposes in the context of virtual English classes.
2. To analyze freelance English teachers' perceptions regarding the factors that influence learner autonomy, participation, and engagement in virtual English classes.

Literature Review

This chapter presents the main constructs, such as student-centered methods, virtual learning environments, interaction in virtual language learning, participation in online classes, and meaningful learning. Moreover, this includes a compilation of several research projects conducted in both local and international contexts, focusing on student-centered methods and learning as an instructional strategy.

Bilingualism

Bilingualism can be perceived as having some proficiency in a language beyond one's native tongue, allowing communication in additional languages. This concept includes both cognitive and social aspects of language use (Gómez, 2020). Pursuant to Ospina & Muñoz (2023), Bilingualism in the Colombian setting is a national precedent that reflects the country's commitment to fostering cultural and economic progress. Consequently, the National Bilingualism Program (NBP) presented by the Ministry of Education, intends for all Colombians to achieve proficiency in English along with Spanish, one of the country's official languages (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, n.d.).

In Colombia, bilingualism among its population has evolved over time thanks to a series of national initiatives promoted by the Colombian Ministry of Education. According to the Ministry of National Education (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, n.d.), these include the National Bilingualism Program (2004–2009), which marked the first structured attempt to promote English language teaching at all educational levels, followed by Colombia Bilingüe (2014–2018), which emphasized teacher training and communicative competence. Subsequently, the National English Program 2015–2025 sought to align English language teaching with international standards and foster inclusion through technology and innovation in language

education. These initiatives reveal how bilingualism in Colombia is not only a linguistic objective, but also a social and economic strategy to overcome educational gaps and improve national competitiveness by increasing global opportunities for all learners. As highlighted by Corredor et al., (2022) bilingual education in virtual contexts also challenges teachers to rethink their strategies and practices, fostering empathy, adaptability and the humanization of learning in increasingly digital environments.

Student-Centered Method

For this project, the student-centered method is defined as an approach that prioritizes students rather than the teacher. In this model, the teacher assumes a distinct role, acting as a facilitator who guides students through the learning experience. In contrast, “the students are active participants in the learning process,” allowing them to become the main actors and more engaged in the learning environment (Emaliana, 2017, para. 9, p. 61). In other words, the teacher is no longer the primary speaker but instead serves as a supportive guide throughout the learning journey. Emaliana (2017) emphasizes the importance of understanding students’ needs in order to plan more effective lessons and select appropriate classroom materials. The article suggests incorporating real-world topics, such as economic, technological, and political issues, to motivate students and encourage greater participation.

Additionally, Tang (2023) defines student-centered learning as a teaching and a learning approach. However, he highlights that the concept remains somewhat unclear and can be confusing, similar to the principle of constructivism. Student-centered learning is recognized as a powerful method that enhances students' educational experiences by fostering active, participatory, and collaborative engagement. Nevertheless, we support Tang’s (2023) observation that the concept can be difficult to interpret, as different teachers implement it in

various ways. Some grant students complete autonomy, while others maintain close guidance. Like constructivism, it is appealing in theory but presents challenges when applied in real classroom settings.

Similarly, Wanyi Liang (2024) supports the idea in her project that student-centered method constitutes a vital pedagogical approach, as it shifts the focus from the teacher to the learner, placing students at the center of their knowledge construction. Accordingly, Liang (2024) emphasizes the implementation of this approach to enhance learners' motivation in English language classes, since motivation plays a crucial role in encouraging students to engage in language-related tasks, persist through challenges, and actively seek improvement.

Moreover, the study *The Effects of Student-centered Teaching Methods on the Motivation of English Language Learning* highlights the use of digital tools as a fundamental element in promoting collaboration, participation, and engagement within the learning process. In this regard, the article offers practical suggestions, analytical insights, and pedagogical guidance for applying student-centered teaching strategies. It underscores the significance of selecting appropriate instructional methods and integrating technology to create a more interactive and collaborative educational environment.

The research is centered on English language learners at Chinese universities, uses questionnaires to collect the data, and explores the impact of teaching methodologies on student motivation. While the present study shares common ground with Liang's research, namely, the promotion of student-centered environments and the incorporation of digital tools, several distinctions are evident. Our investigation focuses on learners who take classes with freelance teachers in online settings. Furthermore, unlike Liang's study, which does not specify the age

range and English level of participants, our research clearly defines these variables to facilitate the development of age-appropriate tasks.

To strengthen the discussion on student-centered learning in virtual contexts, the study *Learner-Centered Online Instruction* by Barbara L. McCombs (2015) offers an essential theoretical foundation. As a conceptual, not empirical study, it argues that success in virtual learning depends not only on technology but on pedagogical design that acknowledges learner individuality, agency, and autonomy. McCombs emphasizes that student-centered approaches make virtual classes more dynamic, inclusive, and interaction-oriented, supporting engagement, motivation, and self-regulation. Her framework also highlights the importance of adapting instruction to students' characteristics and empowering them as active participants.

McCombs' work does not use interviews, surveys, or classroom observations; instead, it draws on prior research, psychology, and educational policy to build a model for applying learner-centered principles online. While her study provides broad theoretical insights, the current research focuses specifically on online English classes taught by freelance teachers in Colombia, examining student interaction through observation and analysis. This context-specific approach distinguishes the present study from McCombs' general model, even as both agree that student-centered design improves participation and reduces passivity in virtual learning environments.

Additionally, to reinforce the concept of student-centered methodologies; three sub concepts were aligned to expand the importance of student-centered methods and exemplify the relevance it takes in virtual settings; these sub concepts were: Task-based learning, gamification and communicative approach.

Task-Based Learning

Lizarazo (2021) defines task-based learning as a methodology that consists of performing different tasks advocated by the teacher to boost the target language. In this methodology, learners usually listen to or read something to carry out tasks and use the language they are learning. The teacher's role is to observe how students work and learn during the task. Finally, the facilitator provides feedback to aid students in understanding what they did well and what they can improve.

To support this, Sholeh et al. (2020) also define task-based learning as an educational approach in which students learn by doing real-world tasks, using the target language. This approach permits students to develop tasks and use the language more naturally, motivating and engaging students to be participative and owners of the teaching and learning process. We concur that this educational approach goes beyond improving skills, since it helps students to participate and interact in a real scenario with a good implementation of the tasks.

Besides that, it fosters skill-oriented instruction, enhances student motivation, and stimulates creative thinking. Ellis (2003) and Willis (1996), as cited in Sholeh (2020), support this argument by stating that this is a powerful approach that creates a supportive teaching context and motivates learners to use the target language often.

Following the lead, Spoken Interaction in a Virtual Task-Based Language Learning Environment, conducted by Lizarazo Rueda (2021), examines how Task-Based Learning (TBL) supports communication and interaction in online English classes. According to Lizarazo, TBL can be used for various purposes, including language development, skill improvement, and fostering interaction in virtual settings. The research observed through student work, teacher notes, and group discussions, how students communicated while completing real-life tasks in

English. The findings indicate that real-life tasks encouraged more natural spoken interaction and helped improve students' English skills.

Both studies share similarities and differences that allow for a comparative understanding of the use of task-based learning to promote interaction and foster a more student-centered environment. One key similarity is that both are contextualized in virtual settings and involve small groups of students. Furthermore, both follow a qualitative research design, with the shared aim of exploring authentic interaction using digital resources and structured tasks.

On the other hand, there are notable differences, such as the participant population. Lizarazo (2021) worked with students aged 10 to 11 with an A1 English proficiency level, whereas our group consists of learners aged 18 to 20 with varying levels of English proficiency. Additionally, English classes in the school context are mandatory, while in personalized classes enrollment is voluntary. Finally, the previous project focused primarily on promoting speaking skills, when in fact our project aims to go beyond language skills by concentrating more on the overall learning environment.

Gamification

Gamification in education refers to the use of game design elements such as points, levels, badges, and leaderboards within non-game contexts to enhance student engagement and motivation. Li, Ma, and Shi (2023) describe gamification as a pedagogical strategy that increases students' interest and persistence when combined with meaningful learning tasks, fostering participation and goal-oriented learning. This method aligns closely with student-centered learning, as it empowers learners to take an active role, self-regulate their progress, and reflect on their achievements. Similarly, Shen et al., (2024) highlight that the effectiveness of gamification, as explained through Self-Determination Theory, depends on satisfying learners' psychological

needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which ultimately strengthens intrinsic motivation and engagement in online learning environments.

Furthermore, recent meta-analyses have demonstrated that gamification promotes positive emotional and behavioral engagement in both in-person and virtual contexts. For example, Li et al. (2023) found significant increases in students' motivation and enjoyment in online courses, although the impact on performance depends on the quality of implementation. Likewise, Al-Khresheh (2025) identified that leaderboard-based gamification improved learner achievement and participation in formative online assessments. However, as Zhang et al. (2023) describes, long-term sustainability requires ongoing novelty and purposeful design, since repetitive or superficial use of game mechanics may reduce motivation.

Thus, in virtual English language learning contexts, gamification transforms instruction into an interactive and participatory experience where learners engage through digital missions, collaborative challenges, and visible progress tracking. In line with this, Roseni and Muho (2024) emphasize that gamified learning platforms substantially improve learners' engagement and linguistic performance by turning traditional exercises into enjoyable, goal-driven tasks. Therefore, gamification serves as a catalyst for sustained engagement, autonomy, and meaningful learning within student-centered virtual environments.

Communicative Approach

To begin with, the Communicative Approach (CA), or Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), is a learner-centered methodology that emphasizes interaction, negotiation of meaning, and the development of communicative competence over rote memorization of grammar. Qasserras (2023) describes CLT as an approach that situates learners as active participants who construct meaning through authentic communication. Teachers act as

facilitators who create opportunities for meaningful interaction, feedback, and collaboration, aligning the method with the principles of student-centered learning.

Expanding on this perspective, recent research has revisited CLT through the lens of multilingualism and task-based learning. East and Wang (2024) explore how CLT and translanguaging practices can coexist in virtual and hybrid classrooms, promoting inclusion and intercultural awareness. Similarly, Ho (2020) found that CLT-based instruction significantly improved undergraduates' confidence and communicative competence in domain-specific English, such as tourism, by integrating authentic, goal-oriented tasks. Additionally, Hui and Yunus (2023) demonstrate that CLT implementation in ESL contexts improves fluency and reduces language anxiety, highlighting the importance of contextual adaptation and teacher support.

Consequently, in virtual learning environments, CLT encourages learners to engage in real communication through synchronous and asynchronous tools, such as video calls, discussion forums, and online role-plays. The digital format allows for flexible interaction and collaborative problem-solving while requiring strong scaffolding and teacher facilitation. Alfares (2025) claims that scaffolded autonomous learning schemes have been shown to significantly improve learners' self-efficacy and confidence in language tasks. Additionally, according to Narayanan and Kumar (2019), scaffolding remains crucial in CLT settings to support learners in processing language beyond their current competence (Narayanan & Kumar, 2019). Thus, CLT remains a foundational approach for student-centered pedagogy, supporting autonomy, linguistic confidence, and meaningful communication in online English classes.

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs)

Dillenbourg and Schneider (2002) define a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) as a deliberately designed information space where educational interactions occur, going beyond a simple website. In these environments, students actively contribute to the development of online space. VLEs integrate various tools, blend physical and digital contexts, and enhance learning in distance education and face-to-face settings. However, technology alone is not enough; success depends on the purposeful design of meaningful, student-centered interactions. This perspective underpins our research by framing VLEs as socially dynamic spaces where student agency is central, reinforcing the need for thoughtful pedagogical design, an essential focus of our investigation.

Caprara and Caprara (2022), aligning with previous perspectives on digital learning environments, define Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) as interactive systems that support both teaching and learning processes. Unlike static web pages, VLEs enable students to complete tasks, engage in discussions, and receive teacher feedback, fostering more interactive and participatory classes. This positions VLEs not merely as platforms for content delivery, but as dynamic spaces that encourage active student engagement and collaboration.

The study *Exploring the Impact of Virtual Learning Environments on Student Engagement and Academic Achievement* by Petare et al. (2023), supports the idea that virtual spaces must be intentionally designed to foster learning. Although it does not focus on language teaching or contexts like Colombia, it offers useful insights for creating virtual environments that connect with students and improve participation, interaction, and motivation. Both Petare et al.'s work and the present research highlight low engagement in virtual classes and stress the need for student-centered design to promote interaction and autonomy. While the authors take a broad,

general approach, this study focuses specifically on online English classes taught by freelance teachers, emphasizing how virtual environments influence student participation. This specific context distinguishes the project from a broader perspective in Petare et al.'s study.

Interaction in Virtual Language Learning

Virtual language learning interaction is the effective exchange of messages, meanings, and actions with the support of digital platforms. Muñoz-Basols and Fuertes Gutiérrez (2025) define interaction as the way tasks and participants relate in face-to-face, hybrid, or fully virtual contexts, in both synchronous and asynchronous formats. In addition, they point out that for communicative competence and engagement to take place among students, teachers, peers, and content in general, thoughtful interaction design must make clarification, collaboration, and understanding effective. They also reveal the importance of varied opportunities to encourage student-centered and authentic communication in virtual English classes.

De León (2022) adds that virtual environments can effectively promote participation when appropriate strategies are used. However, the author notes that emotional and motivational barriers, such as fear of mistakes or low confidence, can hinder learners' involvement. This means that fostering interaction requires intentional planning, empathy, and continuous support.

That aligns with the theory of Hrastinski (2009) that online participation involves both visible actions and internal engagement, important features of meaningful learning and autonomy. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001) also note that deeper learning occurs when students cognitively and emotively engage, and thus instructors have to build learning communities. Finally, Nikou and Maslov (2021) establish that emotional factors and low motivation often reduce participation even when the platforms are well-designed, and remark that low participation could mean classes are either irrelevant or self-expression is not allowed.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to conduct an in-depth analysis of freelance English teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding student-centered strategies in virtual classes. The purpose was to propose effective approaches that foster active participation in English language learning within a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). According to Abad et al. (2021), this methodology focuses on understanding social phenomena from the perceptions of the people involved. Therefore, it collects narrative descriptions of participants' experiences and behaviors in detail instead of numerical or statistical data. Thus, the qualitative methodology was the most suitable for this research paper to capture the richness and complexity of teachers' voices in online learning contexts.

In addition, this paper utilized a case study design by focusing on a profound analysis of a specific educational context: a group of 6 freelance English teachers who work entirely online. This research design is especially valuable when it is necessary to gain a thorough understanding of a specific issue, event, or phenomenon within its actual, real-world environment (Coombs, 2022). Specifically, with freelance teachers serving as the context to analyze and collect data on the broader issue of teachers' perceptions of student-centered strategies. That means, the teachers themselves are not studied for their uniqueness, but as a context to gain insights into the phenomenon. Yin (2017) states that studying a case in detail helps the researcher fully understand the specific issue they are concerned about (as cited in Coombs, 2022). Moreover, Robert K. Yin (as cited in Felden & Wenzel, 2017) establishes six phases of conducting case study research (See figure 1).

Figure 1.

Phases of the Case Study Research Process

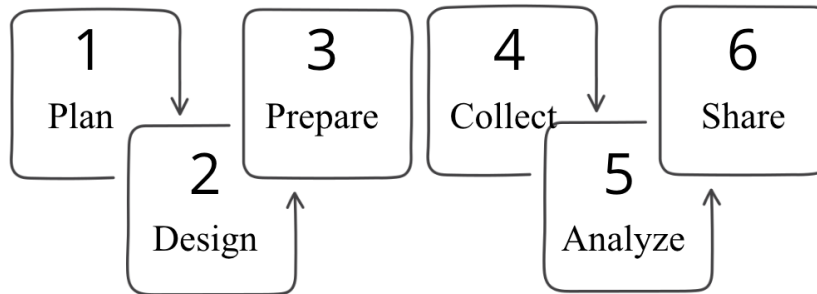


Figure 1. Phases of Conducting Case Study Research; Adapted from Yin R.K.: Case Study Research: Design and Methods. Sage Publications Ltd., Los Angeles 2014, as cited in Felden & Wenzel, 2017.

This diagram shows the six stages Yin (2014) suggests helping to conduct a case study: planning, design, preparation, data collection, analysis, and dissemination. At the planning stage, the researcher clarifies the research focus, aims, and research questions. The design stage involves selecting the type of case, methods, and instruments to be used. During preparation, data collection instruments are prepared, and ethical considerations are considered. In the data collection stage, the focus is now on collecting data through instruments such as questionnaires, interviews, or classroom observations. The analysis stage involves organizing and interpreting data to identify key patterns and insights. Finally, the last stage consists of sharing the findings and reflecting on their implications and relevance.

Through each stage of this process, each phase ensures that the research is methodologically coherent, from stating a question to the process of concluding and reporting findings. For the purposes of this project, those six phases guided the procedure of selecting and designing instruments, collecting data from self-employed English teachers, and analyzing how

student-centered strategies impact student interaction and participation in the context of online classes (as cited in Felden & Wenzel, 2017).

On top of that, the nature of this case study is exploratory-descriptive as interaction in virtual English classrooms with freelance teachers is still a phenomenon that has not been studied deeply. The aim is to portray or describe how participation happens (or does not happen), identifying key features, opportunities, and barriers, rather than establishing causal relationships (Hernandez et al., 2010).

Context of the Study

This study focused on the work of 6 independent English teachers in Colombia who specialize their classes to students worldwide through online platforms such as Zoom, Meet, Teams, among others; besides, these teachers also had at least one year of experience and conducted their classes independently in their own parameterized schedules depending on pupils' needs. Although this modality offers greater flexibility, these teachers face recurring challenges when teaching students at basic or intermediate proficiency levels. In this context, understanding the teachers' perspectives was essential, as they could reveal which student-centered strategies had worked for them in managing these situations, and served as a guide for strengthening participation and making a real difference in keeping students engaged in their online classes.

Participants

All participants contributed meaning to the study; therefore, it was important to clarify why they were chosen and who they were. According to Hernandez et al. (2010), the population refers to all individuals who share common traits, while the sample is the specific group that participates in the study. The participants in this project are exclusively independent English

teachers who conduct their classes virtually. The study focused only on this group because they provide continuity to the teaching process and offer valuable insights into which student-centered strategies are effective in fostering participation and engagement in online learning.

Consequently, a purposive sample was selected, comprising 6 teachers with direct experience in implementing student-centered strategies in online classes; in these sessions teachers usually have between one to five students in group-paced sessions or personalized sessions. Additionally, teachers dedicate at least 30+ hours per week to different freelance platforms or institutions that link students directly with the teachers. Moreover, selecting the population by common traits or similar characteristics deliberately allows deeper insights into complex issues (Tajik et al., 2024). In this connection, it guides the selection process, ensuring that English teachers working in the virtual modality meet the following criteria: (a) A minimum of one year teaching English in online environments, (b) being familiar with or having applied student-centered methodologies, and (c) demonstrating willingness to participate voluntarily.

Instruments

In order to collect reliable data for the study, an amalgam of instruments are employed to gather the information: Questionnaires and class observations; the combination of these tools strengthens the inquiry design since each instrument balances the limitations of the others; besides, these tools offer meaningful insights to this study. The collection of data encompasses one of the most important stages in a study; Salmia (2023) stated that meaningful data collection techniques must be applied to ensure that the collection process quality goes well and answers the question accurately. Therefore, the observation sessions are chosen to pile up meaningful evidence to illustrate the teachers' perspective around students' participation in virtual classes.

Consistent with the aims of the study, these instruments were designed to describe how

interaction took place in online lessons, to analyze how teachers interpret and apply the student-centered strategies, and to identify the challenges they encounter when encouraging students to participate and be engaged.

The first instrument used to develop the project is the following:

Questionnaire

The instrument employed was an open-ended questionnaire designed to gather teachers' perceptions and knowledge about the students' interaction through the methodology implemented in classes. According to Abdullahi (n.d., p.4), "it gives the respondent an open opportunity to answer a question based on his own understanding and explanation; the respondent is not restricted to certain options of answer type". This flexibility allowed us, through the questions implemented, to obtain detailed answers regarding the student-centered strategies applied by freelance English teachers in virtual classes.

It contained 4 sections that guide teachers to reflect on their experiences, practices, and perceptions of student motivation and engagement in online environments.

Table 1.

Questionnaire structure

Section 1	Details: Purpose, Target population, estimated duration, ethical notes, and general instructions.
Section 2	Participation in virtual classes.
Section 3	Student-centered strategies.
Section 4	Teaching challenges and reflections.

This questionnaire comprises 10 open-ended questions designed on Google Forms in order to identify Online English teachers' perceptions of the use of student-centered strategies in virtual classes. It aims to understand how these strategies influence learners' interaction, participation, and autonomy, as well as the challenges and opportunities that emerge in these educational settings. Additionally, it had an estimated duration of 15 to 20 minutes, during which the responses were presented anonymously, and the results were used solely for academic purposes.

The complete questionnaire can be consulted in [Appendix A](#).

The anonymized responses collected through Google Forms were exported and are available in [Appendix B](#) for data analysis transparency.

Class Observation

The instrument consists of a structured observation protocol designed in an Excel format to record the dynamics of virtual English classes taught by freelance teachers. It follows a non-participant observation approach, which allows the researcher to document, in a detailed yet empathetic way, how student-centered strategies are applied and how they influence learners' participation and interaction, without interfering in the natural flow of the class. As Cohen et al.(2017) point out, non-participant observation provides researchers with an objective perspective of classroom processes, enabling them to capture authentic interactions and contextual details that might otherwise be overlooked.

According to Richards and Farrell (2012), classroom observation allows researchers and educators to gain a deeper understanding of teaching practices and students' behavior, promoting reflection and professional growth. The tool includes specific categories related to teaching

strategies, teacher roles, and students' interaction patterns, allowing observers to identify meaningful moments and reflect on the effectiveness of the practices observed.

This instrument was directly aligned to analyze how these strategies contribute to promoting engagement and collaboration in virtual learning environments. The complete observation protocol, which guided the analysis of the observed classes, can be found in

[Appendix C.](#)

Data Collection

Data Collection is a fundamental stage in this qualitative case study, enabling an in-depth understanding of freelance English teachers' perceptions regarding student-centered strategies in virtual learning environments. Therefore, this research paper implemented two complementary data collection instruments: A questionnaire and a class observation to ensure rigor and obtain meaningful data. The combination of these two instruments permitted the active participation of freelancers and observation of evaluators in the teachers' natural setting for the collection of highly accurate data (Taherdoost, 2021).

Table 2.

Overview of Data Collection Instruments

Instruments Definition	Purpose	Data Collection Schedule
<p>Class Observation: Frechtling (2002) highlighted the class observation as an appropriate technique to assess teaching methods within an educational setting (as cited in Taherdoost, 2021). Appendix C</p>	<p>To identify student-centered strategies and their purposes in the context of virtual English classes.</p>	<p>Intervention T1: November 15th, 2025. Intervention T2: November 18th, 2025. Intervention T3: January 14th, 2026 Intervention T4: February 20th, 2026. Intervention T5: February 20th, 2026.</p>



		Intervention T6: February 26 th , 2026.
<p>Questionnaire: According to Taherdoost, (2021), the questionnaire is a potent instrument for congregating the information needed for the study through different kinds of questions directed at a specific population (freelance teachers). Appendix A.</p> <p>The anonymized responses used for analysis are available in Appendix B.</p>	<p>To analyze freelance English teachers' perceptions of the use of student-centered strategies in virtual classes, identifying how these influence learners' interaction, participation, and autonomy, as well as the challenges and opportunities that emerge in these educational settings.</p>	<p>Pilot testing: November 18th, 2025. Response T1: December 6th, 2025. Response T2: December 8th, 2025. Response T3: December 17th, 2025. Response T4: February 10th, 2026. Response T5: February 12th, 2026. Response T6: February 17th, 2026.</p>

Data Collection Procedure

A data collection process was followed, which is characterized by a systematic and ethically grounded sequence:

1. Potential respondents were contacted via personal contacts and social networks.
2. Participants were fully informed of the purpose, procedures, and potential ethical concerns of the study.
3. Informed consent was obtained from participants before their participation.
4. The questionnaire was distributed digitally and responded asynchronously.
5. Participants' virtual classroom observation sessions were scheduled according to their time availability.
6. The observations were conducted synchronously in the teachers' natural instructional settings.

7. Field notes were recorded using the structured observation protocol.
8. All data was kept safe for further analysis.

The investigation into self-reported data combined with observational evidence facilitated completeness of the understanding of the studied phenomenon.

Pilot Study

To assess the clarity, relevance, and functionality of these instruments, a pilot study was conducted, and the feedback gathered from the participants in the pilot study was useful in improving the wording of the questions and ensuring that the researchers were on the right track with respect to the goals and objectives of the research.

Timeline

To guarantee an organized and systematic development of the study, the following timeline summarizes the main phases, activities, and expected deliverables of the research process. Each stage has been planned according to the academic semesters established in the master's program, ensuring coherence between objectives, methodology, and final outcomes.

Table 3.

Project Timeline per semester

Project Timeline			
Semester / Period	Main Activities	Expected Deliverables	Notes



<p>First Semester (Completed)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Definition of the research topic. - Formulation of general and specific objectives. - Drafting of the introduction. - Development of literature review (theoretical framework). 	<p>Preliminary project draft (objectives, introduction, and literature review).</p>	<p>This stage consolidates the theoretical foundation of the study and serves as the basis of the next phases of the study.</p>
<p>Second Semester (Ongoing)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development of the methodology chapter. - Design of three data collection instruments (questionnaire and class observation). - Preparation of ethical approval documents (CEBIC). - Pilot implementation of at least one instrument. 	<p>Draft of methodology chapter designed instruments, ethical approval documents, and pilot data.</p>	<p>Ethical approval through CEBIC is mandatory before data collection.</p>
<p>Third Semester (Final)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Full application of instruments. - Data collection and analysis. - Drafting of findings, discussions, conclusions, and recommendations. - Final editing and submission of the thesis. 	<p>Final thesis and project defense.</p>	<p>This semester concludes the research process with the production of the final report and the oral defense.</p>

	<p>- Oral presentation of the project.</p>		
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Note: CEBIC refers to the Comité de Ética de la Facultad de Educación, which must authorize the use of instruments prior to data collection.

Data Analysis

This qualitative research used an inductive approach to analyze the data, which is a core element in interpreting data and generating codes, categories, themes, and findings. Inductive analysis involves carefully reading data and allowing codes, patterns, and themes to emerge, which are then interpreted and supported with theory and literature (Saldaña & Osmata, 2017; Miles et al., 2014). Although the study was guided by theoretical frameworks related to student-centered and virtual language instruction, the coding process was not rigidly predetermined; instead, categories were constructed progressively during analysis in response to participants' answers and virtual teaching practices (as cited in Bingham, 2023).

To ensure a systematic and organized coding process, the qualitative data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti, which is a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). The software enabled rigorous analysis of teachers' perceptions and virtual classroom practices by managing, coding, and categorizing data from open-ended questionnaires and non-participant classroom observations with freelance English teachers. Using an inductive coding process, key excerpts on student-centered strategies, participation, and interaction were organized into

emerging patterns and themes. ATLAS.ti facilitated and enhanced the rigor, coherence, and traceability of this case study (Ñañez-Silva et al., 2024).

Coding Process

Triangulation was integrated into the overall inductive analytical process rather than conducted as a separate stage to strength the authenticity of the findings. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe triangulation as a strategy that involves comparing multiple sources of data to enhance the credibility and richness of qualitative findings.

In this study, methodological triangulation was implemented by first analyzing and coding the questionnaire data and classroom observation data independently using ATLAS.ti. This separation allowed each instrument to generate its own emerging patterns without premature comparison, maintaining coherence with the inductive approach.

During this phase, open coding was used, which involves breaking the data into smaller fragments and looking for recurring themes and patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Subsequently, all the codes from both datasets were examined within the same analytical framework to identify convergences and complementary insights. The integration of narrative responses and observed teaching practices enriched the interpretation of student-centered strategies, interaction patterns, and participation dynamics in virtual English teaching contexts.

Through this integrative process, the study ensures the coherence, credibility, and trustworthiness of the case study findings. From there, the codes were grouped according to their conceptual similarities to create initial clusters that reflected broader patterns in the data.

Based on these groups, subcategories were created to provide a more organized and comprehensive understanding of the information. These subcategories were organized into a mind map using Lucidchart to enhance visualization and facilitate the analytical process.

This visual representation helped identify relationships between categories and supported their emergence through both the grouping of codes and their organization within the mind map. Furthermore, it helped to provide a more complete understanding of the data (see [Appendix D](#)).

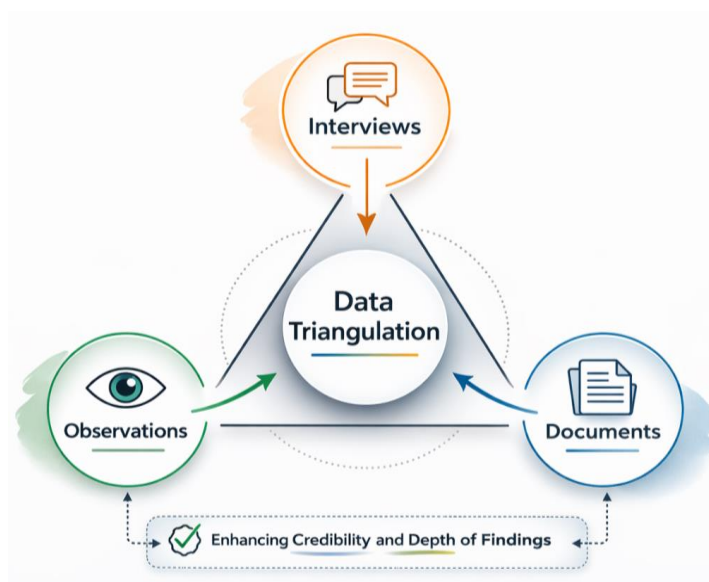
The categorization is constantly being improved in this phase of the study through an iterative process in which codes and categories were continually examined and adjusted to guarantee congruence and accordance with the aims of the investigation.

Because it allows for a better and more flexible understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), this iterative nature is a fundamental characteristic of qualitative data analysis. By examining and organizing subcategories in an external document, coherence, clarity, and congruence with the research objectives are ensured. The adaptive and recursive nature of qualitative data analysis is manifested in this constant improvement.

The triangulation process applied in this study is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

Data triangulation process



Note. Own elaboration inspired by Abbadia (2023).

Following the data analysis process described above, a set of categories emerged from the integration and interpretation of the data. These categories reflect key patterns related to student engagement, interaction, and learning dynamics in virtual English classrooms.



Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the results of the study organized into three main categories: Student Engagement in Virtual Classrooms, Pedagogical Strategies in Virtual English Teaching and Communication Processes in Virtual English Classrooms. Each category includes important subcategories, such as factors influencing participation, and confidence, anxiety, and fear of mistakes; use of digital tools and resources, contextualization of content, and challenges and constraints in virtual learning; interaction dynamics, teacher-centered and student-centered communication and one-on-one and group interaction.

To ensure ethical considerations and protect participants' identities, all teachers were assigned codes (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, and T6). These codes are used throughout this chapter when referring to questionnaire responses and classroom observations.

Category 1: Student Engagement in Virtual Classrooms

This category examines how students participated and interacted during virtual English Classes, with particular attention to their levels of engagement and the interaction patterns that emerged during online sessions. Additionally, the analysis of questionnaires and classroom observations indicates that participation in virtual learning environments is strongly shaped by the way interaction is organized, the emotional climate fostered during lessons, and the perceived relevance of the activities designed by teachers. These results align with Hrastinski's (2009) view that online learning is fundamentally grounded in processes of participation and interaction.

The triangulation of both research instruments showed that students tended to participate more actively when teachers incorporated meaningful topics interactive materials, collaborative tasks, and activities connected to learners' personal interest or professional contexts. Likewise, emotionally supportive environments appeared to foster greater confidence and a stronger

willingness to communicate during virtual lessons. Conversely, participation was more limited in sessions where interaction remained predominantly teacher-centered or where students expressed feelings of insecurity when using the target language.

To provide a deeper understanding of these findings, this category was structured into the following subcategories:

1. **Factors Influencing Participation:** Analyzes the pedagogical and contextual elements that shape students' participation.
2. **Confidence, Anxiety, and Fear of Mistakes:** Explores the emotional factors affecting learners' willingness to communicate in online English learning environments.

Factors Influencing Participation

This subcategory examines the factors that influenced students' participation and interaction during virtual English classes. Hence, analysis of questionnaire responses and classroom observations showed that participation was closely linked to the perceived relevance of the lesson content, students' familiarity with the topics, and their confidence when communicating in English. These findings align with Hrastinski's (2009) view that participation in virtual learning environments depends not only on lesson structure but also on learners' motivation and meaningful engagement. Similarly, Nikou and Maslov (2021) argue that students participate more actively when learning experiences are perceived as relevant and personally meaningful. Overall, the results highlight the central role of affective and motivational factors in shaping interaction patterns in online English classes.

One of the most recurrent factors influencing participation was the degree to which lesson content was contextualized. That is to say, teachers consistently emphasized the importance of connecting classroom activities to students' personal interests, professional goals, and real-life experiences. For example, participant T3 remarked that "connecting the sessions and the topics to the students' real life could be helpful too," while another teacher (T1) underscored the need to "choosing wisely the topics that you think students may use in their daily life". All in all, these perceptions suggest that participation tends to increase when learners perceive classroom discussions as useful and closely connected to their own realities.

Classroom observations provided strong support for these findings. During T1's session, for instance, the lesson content was directly connected to the student's professional context in nursing. That means, vocabulary, activities, and examples were all contextualized around medical situations and common symptoms, which enabled the student to engage actively with meaningful and familiar material. According to the observation notes collected during T1's class, "the activities were meaningful, connected to the student's professional context, and designed to promote active use of the language rather than passive memorization." Likewise, the student remained "motivated, engaged, and responsive in every activity" throughout the session. As a whole, these observations indicated that participation increases when students perceive a clear connection between classroom content and their professional or personal interests.

Similarly, familiarity with the discussion topics appeared to facilitate interaction during communicative activities. In T5's observation, for example, students participated actively in discussions about finances, spending habits, and money management. Although the lesson included grammar practice related to modal verbs, interaction became more spontaneous when students discussed real-life financial decisions and shared personal experiences. In line with this,

the observation notes from the classes of T2, T4, T5, and T6 highlighted that students maintained “spontaneous participation” and consistently contributed comments and opinions throughout the session. These interaction patterns support one participant’s view that students become more engaged when activities enable them to “express their opinions” and connect with topics that are meaningful to them.

Another factor influencing interaction was students’ confidence when using English during the lessons. In T3’s session, for instance, the student occasionally used Spanish to clarify doubts and confirm understanding. Rather than interrupting participation, this flexible use of the first language appeared to support communication and help sustain engagement during the activities. Similarly, participant T2 emphasized that students need opportunities to “feel comfortable with us as teachers and also with the class” in order to participate more actively. Taken together, these findings suggest that reducing linguistic pressure and allowing supportive communication strategies may facilitate participation in virtual learning environments, particularly by fostering a safer and more student-centered atmosphere for interaction.

In general, the triangulation of questionnaire responses and classroom observations indicates that participation in virtual English classes is shaped by multiple, interconnected factors, particularly the relevance of the lesson content, students’ familiarity with the discussion topics, and their confidence when communicating in English. Consequently, interaction seems to become more active and meaningful when learners perceive classroom activities as useful, familiar, and closely connected to their own experiences.

Confidence, Anxiety, and Fear of Mistakes

This subcategory examines how emotional factors influenced students’ participation during virtual English classes. In particular, the analysis of questionnaires and classroom

observations showed that confidence, fear of making mistakes, and language insecurity frequently shaped students' willingness to communicate during online sessions. In this regard, the findings are consistent with Nikou and Maslov's (2021) view that emotional comfort and self-confidence play a crucial role in learners' participation in virtual learning environments.

Teachers' responses indicated that some students hesitate to participate when they feel insecure about their language level or frustrated with their learning progress. For example, participant T5 noted that students sometimes "feel frustrated when they don't see a progress so fast," while teacher T2 emphasized the importance of creating spaces where students "feel comfortable with us as teachers and also with the class". In sum, these perceptions suggest that emotional comfort may directly influence students' participation and their willingness to interact in virtual English lessons.

Additionally, Classroom observations aligned with and strengthened these findings since during T6's session, the student participated throughout the lesson; however, most responses were "short and limited to what was strictly required." The observation notes suggested that this interaction pattern might reflect either limited confidence or a more reserved personality. By contrast, in T2's class, the teacher fostered "a supportive and encouraging" environment in which "making mistakes was part of learning," which appeared to help the student remain motivated and actively engaged during the lesson. Together, these observations underscore the importance of emotional safety and support in promoting participation in virtual English classes.

Collectively, the triangulation of questionnaire responses and classroom observations indicates that confidence and emotional comfort strongly influence participation in virtual English classes. When students perceive the learning environment as supportive and low-

pressure, they appear more willing to communicate and to participate actively during online interactions, which in turn contributes to more sustained and meaningful engagement.

Category 2: Pedagogical Strategies in Virtual English Teaching

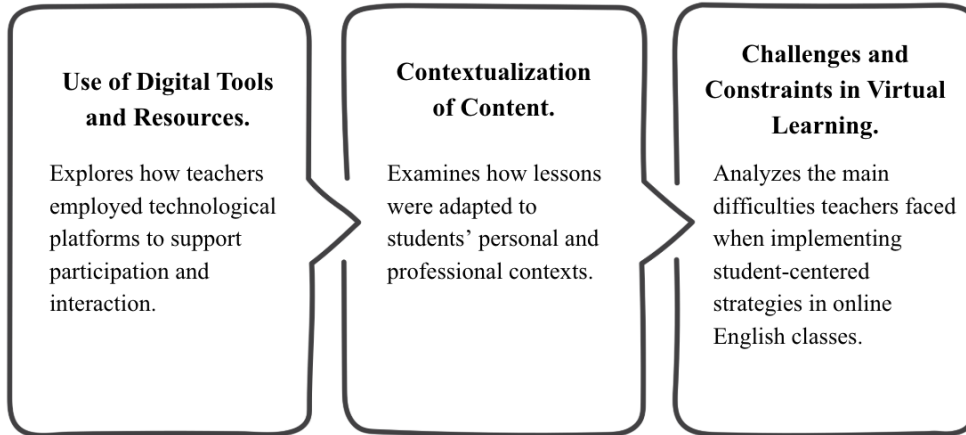
This category examines the pedagogical decisions implemented by teachers during virtual English classes and how these instructional choices shaped students' learning experiences and opportunities for participation. The analysis of questionnaire responses and classroom observations showed that student-centered teaching in virtual environments depends not only on the use of technological resources, but also on the ways in which teachers design meaningful, contextualized, and interactive learning experiences. In this sense, the findings align with the principles of student-centered learning proposed by the OECD (2019), which emphasize the importance of connecting learning processes to students' needs, interests, and active participation.

The triangulation of both research instruments showed that teachers frequently incorporated digital tools, contextualized activities, communicative tasks, and collaborative strategies to promote interaction and engagement in online settings. However, the findings also indicated that the effectiveness of these strategies depended largely on teachers' pedagogical intentions and on their ability to adapt lessons to students' realities and learning conditions.

To provide a deeper understanding of these pedagogical practices, this category is organized into three subcategories:

Figure 3.

Emerging Themes



Note. Authors' own elaboration.

Use of Digital Tools and Resources

This subcategory examines how teachers incorporated digital tools and technological resources to organize virtual English lessons and promote participation during online sessions. The analysis of questionnaires and classroom observations showed that teachers frequently used interactive platforms such as Wordwall, Bamboozle, Miro, Canva, Padlet, Kahoot, and YouTube to support communication, sustain students' attention, and create more dynamic learning environments. However, the findings also suggested that the effectiveness of these resources depended not on the tools themselves, but rather on the pedagogical purposes and intentions guiding their implementation.

Teachers consistently highlighted the importance of using digital resources to create interactive and participatory learning experiences. Participant T6, for example, explained that “interactive games such as Kahoot, Quizziz or Jeopardy work in my classes and generate participation of all the students because students enjoy the quick feedback and the feeling that they are ‘playing’ rather than being tested.” Similarly, teacher T4 remarked that “games are the ones that work better” because they are “catchy and enjoyable” for students. Collectively, these

responses suggest that digital tools can facilitate participation when they foster engaging, enjoyable, and low-pressure learning experiences.

Classroom observations served to confirm these perceptions because in T1's session, for instance, the teacher integrated multiple digital resources, such as Miro, Canva slides, Bamboozle, Wordwall, and a YouTube video to organize and contextualize the lesson. According to the observation notes from T1's class, "the use of these tools kept things interesting and held the student's attention for the full two hours." Nonetheless, the effectiveness of the lesson appeared to depend less on the technological platforms themselves and more on the extent to which the activities were connected to the student's professional context and encouraged active use of the language.

Similarly, in T2's class, the teacher used visual resources alongside an interactive whiteboard activity in which the student followed instructions to draw a city while practicing prepositions of place. According to the observation notes, this activity generated laughter, spontaneous participation, and sustained engagement throughout the session. This finding is consistent with the questionnaire responses, in which teachers emphasized the importance of using dynamic and varied activities to prevent boredom and maintain students' attention during virtual lessons.

Moreover, questionnaire responses also revealed that teachers frequently incorporated collaborative digital resources such as "Padlet, Google documents or a shared Canva board" as well as platforms like "Wordwall, Bamboozle, Miro, Pear Deck, Kahoot" to promote interaction and participation during virtual lessons. These findings suggest that digital tools may support student-centered practices when they are used to facilitate collaboration, communication, and active engagement throughout online activities.

Broadly speaking, the triangulation of questionnaire responses and classroom observations indicates that digital resources can contribute to more dynamic and participatory virtual English classes when they are integrated through clear pedagogical objectives and meaningful learning activities. Consequently, the findings suggest that the effectiveness of digital tools depends not on technological innovation alone, but rather on how teachers use these resources to design engaging, communicative learning environments.

Contextualization of Content

This subcategory examines how teachers adapted lesson content to students' personal, academic, and professional contexts in order to create more meaningful learning experiences during virtual English classes. The analysis of questionnaire responses and classroom observations showed that contextualization played a significant role in supporting participation and communication, particularly when activities were connected to learners' real-life situations, interests, and communicative needs. In this regard, the findings are consistent with the OECD's (2019) view that meaningful learning occurs when students are able to relate classroom content to their own experiences and prior knowledge.

Expanding on this point, teachers consistently emphasized the importance of adapting lesson content to students' communicative realities and practical language needs. In this regard, one teacher described the Communicative Language Teaching approach as focusing on "real-life contexts, rather than merely mastering grammatical structures." These perceptions suggest that teachers viewed contextualization as a pedagogical strategy that promotes more meaningful and authentic language use in virtual learning environments.

Furthermore, the classroom observations reinforced these perceptions by documenting lessons that were intentionally adapted to students' realities and communicative needs. In T3's

session, for example, the teacher organized the lesson around family-related vocabulary and personalized questions linked to the student's own experiences. According to the observation notes from T3's class, these activities enabled the student to practice language through "realistic situations" and "real-life examples." Similarly, in T5's class, the teacher integrated discussions about finances, spending habits, and money management into the practice of modal verbs, allowing grammatical structures to be applied within meaningful communicative contexts.

Contextualization was also evident in the ways teachers connected lesson topics to students' professional goals and communicative demands. Participant T5, for instance, explained that many learners participate actively because they "need to improve their English level because of their jobs." In this sense, lesson adaptation appeared to involve not only selecting attractive topics, but also designing communicative opportunities aligned with learners' academic, professional, and everyday language needs.

By and large, the triangulation of questionnaire responses and classroom observations indicates that contextualization functioned as a key pedagogical strategy in virtual English teaching. Rather than presenting language as isolated grammatical content, teachers frequently organized lessons around familiar situations, communicative purposes, and students lived experiences in order to create more meaningful learning opportunities.

Challenges and Constraints in Virtual Learning

This subcategory examines the main challenges teachers faced while implementing student-centered strategies in virtual English classes. The analysis of questionnaire responses and classroom observations revealed that, despite the use of interactive and communicative approaches, virtual learning environments continue to present limitations related to distractions, time management, uneven participation, and restricted opportunities for extended

communication. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of student-centered strategies depends not only on instructional planning, but also on the conditions under which online learning takes place.

One of the most recurrent challenges identified was maintaining students' attention throughout virtual sessions. Teachers reported that online classes frequently compete with external responsibilities and distractions that affect learners' concentration and participation. For instance, participant T6 explained that students are sometimes "busy during class or have other matters to attend to," while Teacher T4 noted that participation may decrease because learners become distracted by "social media or videogames." These perceptions were reinforced during T4 and T5's observations, where moments of partial disengagement appeared as some students attended the sessions from their workplaces or lost focus when other classmates were participating. Considered as a whole, these findings indicate that virtual environments often require teachers to constantly redirect students' attention and work to sustain participation during the lesson.

Another challenge involved balancing instructional explanations and communicative interaction. In some observed sessions, the time dedicated to explanations reduced opportunities for extended student production. During T6's lesson, for example, the observation notes described moments in which "the teacher spoke much more than the student" while explaining phrasal verbs. In a similar manner, participant T5 identified "time management, especially with bigger groups" as one of the most difficult aspects of online teaching. These findings suggest that organizing virtual lessons requires carefully balancing content explanation with sufficient opportunities for meaningful interaction and active language use.

Classroom observations also revealed challenges related to sustaining deeper communication during online sessions. In T3's class, the observation notes indicated that interaction "did not develop into longer, more meaningful conversations" due to the limited class time available. Likewise, in T6's session, the student's responses were often "short and limited to what was strictly required," which reduced opportunities for more elaborated communication. These patterns suggest that virtual learning conditions may sometimes restrict students' opportunities to produce extended language and engage in deeper interaction.

Generally, the triangulation between questionnaire responses and classroom observations indicates that implementing student-centered strategies in virtual English classes requires continuous adaptation to contextual and instructional limitations. Although teachers incorporated communicative and interactive approaches throughout the observed sessions, external distractions, time constraints, and limited opportunities for extended communication continued to affect the development of richer interactional experiences in online learning environments.

Category 3: Communication Processes in Virtual English Classrooms

This category examines how communication was developed and sustained during virtual English classes, focusing on the interactional structures that shaped communicative exchanges in online learning environments. The analysis of questionnaire responses and classroom observations revealed that communication in virtual classrooms extended beyond simple participation, involving opportunities for learners to exchange ideas, negotiate meaning, and engage in authentic language use. These findings align with Muñoz-Basols and Fuentes Gutiérrez's (2025) perspective that communication in virtual language learning environments depends on meaningful interaction and collaborative engagement rather than isolated responses.

The triangulation of both research instruments showed that communication patterns varied according to classroom structure and the interactional roles assumed by teachers and students during the lessons. While some sessions followed predominantly teacher-directed communication patterns, others allowed more collaborative and multidirectional exchanges among participants. By the same token, the findings revealed that class format significantly influenced the opportunities students had to sustain communication and interact with others throughout the sessions.

To provide a deeper understanding of these communicative dynamics, this category is organized into three subcategories:

Table 4.

Communication Processes in Virtual Classrooms: Subcategories

Interaction Dynamics	Teacher-Centered and Student-Centered Communication.	One-on-One and Group Communication.
Explores the communication patterns that emerged in virtual classrooms.	Examines how communication patterns changed according to the interactional roles assumed by teachers and students.	Analyzes how different class formats shaped communicative exchanges and interaction opportunities in virtual English classrooms.

Interaction Dynamics

This subcategory studies how interaction was organized and what were the communication patterns that emerged during virtual English classes. As argued by Muñoz-Basols and Fuertes Gutiérrez (2025), participation in virtual learning environments is a fundamental component of language learning, as it enables students to negotiate meaning, exchange ideas, and actively use the target language in authentic communicative contexts.

The analysis of questionnaire responses and classroom observations showed that depending on the organization of the lesson and the communicative possibilities given during the sessions, communication patterns often varied. In several observed classes, teacher-centered structure predominated, with teachers leading the lesson, controlling turn-taking, and managing the flow of communication using teacher prompts and individually directed responses. During grammar explanations, pronunciation correction, and directed speaking activities, these interactional patterns were especially clear.

These interactional patterns became particularly evident when comparing individualized and group sessions. Whereas group courses provided more chances for collaborative dialogue and cooperative activities throughout, in one-to-one sessions, communication occurred mostly between teacher and student.

All things considered, the triangulation of the instruments indicates that the organization of interactions within each lesson and the communicative opportunities provided during virtual activities significantly impact patterns of communication in virtual English classrooms.

Teacher-Centered and Student-Centered Communication

This subcategory examines how communication patterns varied according to the interactional roles assumed by teachers and students during virtual English classes. The analysis of classroom observations and questionnaire responses revealed that communication frequently shifted between teacher-centered and student-centered dynamics, depending on the organization of the lesson and the types of communicative activities implemented. These findings support Tang's (2023) view that student-centered learning environments tend to foster more active learner participation and more meaningful communicative interaction.

In several observed sessions, communication followed a predominantly teacher-centered structure in which teachers controlled turn-taking, guided the activities, and managed the flow of interaction throughout the lesson. This interactional organization was particularly common during grammar explanations, pronunciation correction, and guided speaking activities, where communication was mainly structured through teacher prompts and individually directed responses. Along similar lines, questionnaire responses also reflected this tendency due to the fact that one participant, for instance, explained that students often participate by “answering questions or carrying out duties” during virtual lessons, suggesting that interaction may at times remain limited to relatively controlled participation patterns.

In contrast, more student-centered communication patterns emerged during activities that encouraged learners to contribute ideas, exchange opinions, and sustain interaction more independently. During T4's session, for example, communication evolved beyond teacher-directed participation as students began asking questions, sharing information, and responding directly to one another while discussing Colombian touristic places. Unlike the more controlled interaction observed in other sessions, communication in this activity became more collaborative

and multidirectional, involving both teacher-student and student-student exchanges simultaneously.

These interactional patterns suggest that student-centered communication emerges more naturally when learners are provided with opportunities to exchange ideas, respond directly to one another, and sustain interaction beyond teacher-directed participation.

Broadly, the triangulation of questionnaire responses and classroom observations indicates that communication in virtual English classrooms becomes more dynamic when learners are provided with greater opportunities to sustain interaction and contribute actively to the communicative process. While teacher-centered communication may support lesson organization and instructional clarity, more student-centered interactional patterns appear to promote collaborative exchanges and more authentic language use in online English learning environments.

One-on-One and Group Communication

This subcategory examines how different class formats shaped communication patterns and interaction opportunities in virtual English classrooms. The analysis of questionnaire responses and classroom observations revealed that both one-on-one and group sessions generated distinct communicative dynamics that influenced how students interacted and sustained communication during online lessons.

Therefore, questionnaire responses suggested that individualized lessons often facilitate closer communication between teachers and students, allowing greater flexibility and personalized interaction during the sessions. Participant from T6's class, for example, described communication in one-on-one lessons as becoming "natural and effortless." Classroom observations reinforced this perception. During T1's and T3's sessions, communication occurred

almost exclusively through direct exchanges between teacher and learner, which allowed teachers to provide immediate feedback and individualized support throughout the lesson. Nonetheless, the observation notes also indicated that the absence of classmates reduced opportunities for collaborative exchanges and multidirectional communication among learners. Viewed in combination, these findings suggest that individualized lessons may facilitate personalized interaction while simultaneously limiting opportunities for peer communication and negotiation of meaning.

In contrast, both instruments highlighted the communicative possibilities generated through group interaction. Questionnaire responses emphasized the importance of collaborative activities that allow students to “share ideas and work together to solve problems”. In like manner, classroom observations showed that communication in group sessions became more dynamic and multidirectional. During T4’s observation, students interacted not only with the teacher but also with one another by asking questions, exchanging information, and reacting to their classmates’ comments while discussing Colombian touristic places. These interactional patterns suggest that group communication may create richer opportunities for collaborative exchanges and more sustained communicative interaction.

Finally, the triangulation of questionnaire responses and classroom observations indicates that class format significantly shapes communication opportunities in virtual English classrooms. While one-on-one sessions may promote personalized interaction and closer teacher support, group communication appears to facilitate more collaborative exchanges and multidirectional interaction among learners.

Conclusions

This study explored the effects of student-centered methods on participation, interaction, and learner autonomy in virtual English learning environments. The findings revealed that active participation was enhanced when instructions incorporated meaningful tasks, contextualized content, opportunities for interaction, and a supportive emotional climate. Participation was not determined by a single factor but emerged from the interplay between instructional design, classroom relationships, and learners' personal experiences.

On this matter, the results demonstrated that participation in virtual English classes was greatly affected by the relevance of lesson content, students' familiarity with the topic, confidence in using English, and feeling emotionally safe. The analysis showed that learners seemed to be more active and participative when their personal interests, professional background, and life experiences were connected to classroom activities. Similarly, several classes fostered an emotionally supportive environment that encouraged students' willingness to communicate, creating a low-pressure atmosphere in which mistakes were accepted as part of the learning process. For instance, this was observed in more collaborative sessions such as T4, where students showed more engagement, spontaneity, and confidence.

Conversely, participation decreased when learners experienced insecurity, frustration, or fear of making mistakes while using the target language. These results suggest that participation and engagement in online English learning environments depend primarily on emotional and motivational factors.

Meantime, two findings showed that teaching strategies work best when they focus on creating meaningful learning experiences, not just on using digital tools. Platforms like Miro,

Canva, and Wordwall made lessons more dynamic and maintain students' attention, but their effectiveness depended on how well they matched the lesson goals and the students' backgrounds. In this sense, the results demonstrated that contextualized activities, collaborative tasks, and communicative practices encouraged students to join in, especially when they felt comfortable and connected to what they were learning.

At the same time, the findings also revealed important challenges associated with virtual learning environments, including distractions, time constraints, unequal participation, and limited opportunities for extended communication. Consequently, the study suggests that implementing student-centered strategies in online English teaching requires continuous pedagogical adaptation and careful lesson planning.

Additionally, the results revealed that effective communication in virtual classrooms relied not just on how much students participate, but on the quality, communicative roles and style of their interactions. While some sessions fostered more collaborative and multidirectional interaction among learners, other fostered more teacher-centered communication patterns characterized by controlled turn-taking and teacher-directed participation, and yet, teacher-led discussions helped keep things organized, and often held back more spontaneous and collaborative conversations.

On the other hand, when lessons were student-centered, students had more opportunities to share their ideas, ask questions, and interact in a more natural way about something, which was especially clear in sessions like in T4 and T5's. Both individual and group classes brought unique benefits: one-on-one lessons helped boost students' confidence and ease anxiety, while group classes produced richer conversational experiences and more peer-to-peer interaction by

letting students to react directly to one another and engage in more genuine communicative exchanges.

Moreover, there were also some real challenges, like distractions, not enough chances for students to talk with each other (especially in one-on-one lessons), and time limits that made it tough for students to have deeper conversations. These issues highlight that online teaching is not one-size-fits-all, but it takes constant adjustment and thoughtful planning from teachers. In the end, what matters most is not the particular tools or methods used, but how teachers adapt and shape them to fit their students.

Hence, the findings of this study point to the importance of teachers' capacity to establish interesting, engaging, and emotionally supportive learning environments in addition to the use of digital tools in successful online English teaching. Since teachers play a central role in creating relevant lessons, and fostering a comfortable atmosphere for participation, promoting interaction and emotional safety becomes essential for supporting students' communication skills in virtual learning environments.

Futhermore, the study found that student-centered strategies such as contextualized tasks connected to learners' personal and professional experiences, opportunities for meaningful communication, the use of interactive digital resources, and the creation of supportive classroom environments were the practices that most effectively enhanced active participation in English language learning within Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). These findings highlight that participation is strengthened not only through technology itself, but through purposeful pedagogical decisions that position learners as active contributors to the learning process.

Although this research provided valuable insights into student-centered practices in virtual English learning environments, it also opens opportunities for further exploration in diverse educational settings. Future studies could examine students' perspectives more directly, compare different virtual learning contexts, or investigate the long-term effects of student-centered strategies on participation, interaction, and learner autonomy. Expanding this line of inquiry may contribute to a deeper understanding of how meaningful engagement can be fostered in online English language education.

Contributions to Virtual Learning Environments

One of the main contributions of this study is the recognition that active participation in virtual classes is not determined exclusively by the use of digital tools, but by the way freelance teachers design meaningful, contextualized, and emotionally supportive learning experiences. The findings revealed that teachers acted as active pedagogical agents who constantly adapted tasks, materials, and communicative strategies according to students' personal, academic, and professional realities.

This study also contributes to the understanding of participation as a dynamic and multidimensional process that extends beyond oral responses during class. Participation and interaction improve when students are encouraged to take more active roles within the learning process through collaborative communication, opinion-sharing, interaction through digital resources, and contextualized activities rather than through teacher-dominated instruction. In this sense, the study reinforces the value of communicative and collaborative practices in Virtual Learning Environments.

Additionally, the findings emphasize the importance of emotional support and positive classroom environments in online English learning. The study demonstrated that students were more willing to communicate when teachers created respectful, patient, and non-judgmental classroom atmospheres that reduced anxiety and encouraged confidence. This contribution highlights the emotional dimension of participation as an essential component of student-centered virtual teaching practices.

Another important contribution of this research is the recognition of learner autonomy as a gradual process fostered through meaningful participation, interaction, and opportunities for decision-making in online classes. The findings suggest that student-centered virtual

environments can encourage learners to become more independent, confident, and actively involved in their own learning experiences.

Finally, this study contributes to a broader understanding of participation in virtual English learning environments. Participation was not limited to answering questions orally during class; instead, it emerged through collaborative searches, spontaneous questioning, interaction through digital tools, opinion-sharing, autonomous exploration, and contextualized communicative exchanges.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of online English teaching by highlighting the importance of emotional safety, meaningful interaction, collaborative communication, and learner autonomy in Virtual Learning Environments. Based on the findings, this study proposes student-centered strategies that integrate contextualized activities, interactive digital tools, and communicative practices to foster active participation and more meaningful learning experiences.

Additionally, the proposed strategies encourage students' autonomy, confidence, and engagement through practices such as gamification, task-based learning, and collaborative activities. In this sense, the proposal aims to contribute to the transformation of bilingual virtual learning environments into more humanized, participatory, and meaningful educational spaces aligned with current educational needs and with the principles promoted by the master's program in Bilingual Learning Environments ([Appendix E](#)).

Recommendations

Future research could continue exploring participation and interaction in virtual English learning environments by including more participants and a greater variety of educational contexts. Since this study focused on freelance English teachers in Colombia, further studies could examine how student-centered practices function in schools, universities, language institutes, or fully asynchronous online environments.

Further research may also analyze the perspectives and experiences of students in greater depth to better understand how emotional factors, confidence, and interaction affect participation during virtual lessons. Likewise, comparative studies between one-on-one and group classes could provide additional insights into how different interactional formats shape communication and engagement in online English learning.

The results highlight that digital resources should be included with well-defined instructional goals. Interactive platforms and cooperative resources might help participation more effectively when they promote communication, teamwork, and active language use. It is important for teachers to know about their students' context and keep pace with their learning process to achieve better results.

Additionally, future studies could investigate the long-term impact of student-centered and contextualized strategies on learners' autonomy, communicative competence, and retention in virtual English programs. Exploring the role of translanguaging and multilingual practices in online participation could also contribute to a broader understanding of interaction in virtual bilingual learning environments.



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Appendices

Appendix A. ([See appendix A](#))

Appendix B. ([See appendix B](#))

Appendix C. ([See appendix C](#))

Appendix D. ([See appendix D](#))

Appendix E. ([See appendix E](#))