

Indigenous Students' Attitudes towards Learning English through a Virtual Program: A Study in a Colombian Public University

Actitudes de estudiantes indígenas frente al aprendizaje de inglés a través de un programa virtual: un estudio en una universidad pública colombiana

Ruth Elena Cuasialpud Canchala*

Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá

This article reports an exploratory study carried out at a public university in Bogotá, Colombia, with two indigenous students who took a level I virtual English-course during the second term of 2008 and the first term of 2009. The aim was to analyse their attitudes towards the learning of English through the virtual modality. Interviews, observations and questionnaires were used for data collection. It was found that indigenous students felt frustrated taking a virtual English course, and that their motivation as regards the learning of this language is very low. Thus, they need to be motivated and guided along the process. At the end, some recommendations for teaching or tutoring indigenous students, learning English virtually or any of the other modalities of the English program at the university were derived.

Key words: Indigenous students, virtual learning, online English courses, students' attitudes.

En este artículo se reporta un estudio exploratorio que se llevó a cabo en una universidad pública en Bogotá, Colombia, con dos estudiantes indígenas que realizaron un curso virtual de inglés durante el segundo semestre del 2008 y el primero del 2009. El objetivo fue analizar sus actitudes frente al aprendizaje de inglés a través de la modalidad virtual. La recolección de datos se hizo mediante entrevistas, observaciones y cuestionarios. Se encontró que los estudiantes sienten frustración al tomar un curso de inglés virtual, por lo que su motivación hacia el aprendizaje de este idioma es muy baja. Por tal razón, deben ser motivados y guiados en el proceso. Al finalizar el estudio, se produjeron algunas recomendaciones para la enseñanza o la tutoría a estudiantes indígenas a través de ambientes virtuales o de cualquiera de las otras modalidades del programa de inglés en la universidad.

Palabras clave: estudiantes indígenas, aprendizaje virtual, cursos de inglés en línea, actitudes de los estudiantes.

* E-mail: rukita77@googlemail.com

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Introduction

Nowadays the use of new technologies in education is more common than before, although in Colombia there are many people who are still not used to this way of learning. In education, especially in secondary schools, it is considered essential and important to encourage students to learn by using these new technology instruments as eventually they will feel the necessity of using them. In big cities, students have the facilities of using computers and being exposed to the technological advances; even in small towns they may have access to these tools. But what about indigenous students who live in isolated and rural areas of the country? Do they have access to technology the same as students in big cities? To answer these questions we have to take into consideration many social, cultural and even economical factors.

Due to the little or no use of new technologies in their communities, indigenous students face a difficult situation while attending university. In most cases students do not find guidance or assistance so they get tired of trying to learn this way.

As an indigenous student and student of English philology I started to observe with preoccupation the fact that some indigenous students, in some assemblies, expressed no interest in taking English classes at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá campus, where they were doing their undergraduate studies. Moreover, out of 358 indigenous students registered in 2007 at the University, only 10 registered for any of the four virtual English courses offered during 2008. Thus, I started to think about the possibilities for these students' to take an English course in the ALEX Program at the University.

ALEX is a program of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia that aims to promote students' autonomous learning of a foreign language, focusing on communicative competence through reading comprehension (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2008). At first, this program offered the courses

through two modalities: intensive and face-to-face. However, the big demand of students willing to register for an English course led the ALEX staff to create a new modality: ALEX Virtual. This modality has increased its quality and success guiding students' English learning by establishing the courses to be blended. It means that students can learn through a virtual environment but at the same time through face-to-face sessions.

This research document starts by presenting the research methodology, and then I include the objectives and the theoretical framework. There we can find information about the ALEX Virtual Program, the access indigenous students have to higher education, the multilingualism and multiculturalism phenomena we can find in our environment and finally, concepts related to motivating students during a language learning process. Next, I present the findings that arose from the data analysis after having explored indigenous students' experiences in a virtual classroom. Finally, I present the conclusions, further research and implications of the study.

Objective of the Study

The main objective was to describe the English learning experiences of two indigenous students who took part in an English virtual course under the ALEX Program. The specific objectives were the following:

- To identify indigenous students' background in regard to the use of new technologies in their English language learning process.
- To analyze the indigenous students' attitudes towards the learning of English and use of new technologies in the ALEX Program.
- To describe the motivation indigenous students have to take an English virtual course.
- To draw some implications for teachers to bear in mind when teaching English to this population through the virtual modality.

Research Methodology

This study followed the qualitative paradigm. It focused on describing the happenings within a certain group of individuals in a specific context (Wallace, 1998). This specific context has to do with the experiences indigenous students had when learning English through the virtual modality at Universidad Nacional. This description of happenings also follows a micro-ethnographic approach as it collects information through observation and interpretation of certain concerns and perceptions in just one context or with one specific group (De Tezanos, 1998).

Observations, questionnaires, and interviews (see Appendixes 1, 2 and 3) were used to collect relevant information about students' mood and attitudes. The phenomenological interview, which uses open-ended questions primarily, was chosen in order to have the participant reconstruct his or her own experience within the topic under study (Seidman, 2006). The author states that when applying these interviews, people's behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them. Besides, we followed the principles of unstructured interviews (Trochim, 2006).

A questionnaire was also applied to 20 indigenous students and aimed at exploring, in general terms, their English learning background, their use of new technology for learning and studying, and their experience learning English in the ALEX Program (see Appendix 1). The information derived from the questionnaire allowed me to decode the degree of motivation students had for taking an English course based on their experiences. Likewise, I could examine to what extent they would like to take an English virtual course.

Participants

The participants of the study were mainly two indigenous students who took an English virtual

course in the ALEX Program during the second term of 2008. Fernando (Student 1 hereafter), a third semester student of dentistry who came from the Coconucos' Indigenous Community in Cauca, and Omar (Student 2 hereafter), a fourth semester student of vet medicine, who came from Pasto's Indigenous community in Nariño.

There were also 20 other students, all of whom belonged to an indigenous community of Colombia, enrolled in different undergraduate programs such as medicine, economics, engineering and law. Some of them were finishing their majors but others were just starting. In their indigenous communities, many of them isolated, these students had learned little or nothing of English and computers. As a result, when they faced University for the first time, their use of technology tools was poor as well as was their English level. That is why most of them did not want to take an English course and those who did so failed most of the time or just dropped out.

My Role as a Researcher

I belong to an indigenous community located in Nariño, in the southwestern region of Colombia. Therefore, I followed the principles of a participant observer that, according to Trochim (2006), is the one who becomes a participant in the culture or context being observed. In this sense, as an indigenous student and as a student of English philology, I could share similar experiences with students in regard to educational background. First, I talked to the participants and asked for their collaboration. Many said yes, because they wanted to report their point of view about the ALEX Virtual English Program. Also, I used note taking in the discussion assemblies, in which the students expressed several times their wish for not taking an English course in the University, regardless of the modality. These notes were very valuable for the theoretical framework as they showed students' wishes and reflected students' immediate needs because many of them,

who usually participated in the assemblies, were about to finish their majors. This information was written and registered in a database as they created a student group.

In the follow up observations, the two students felt free to express their perceptions of the course. The observations related to online sessions took place once a week for half an hour, and after that we had informal talks about their opinions and self-reflections.

Theoretical Framework

In the following paragraphs I first explain how the ALEX Virtual English Program works. Second, I refer to the access indigenous students have to education in Colombia, and specifically to the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Third, I explore issues connected to multilingualism.

The ALEX Program

ALEX is a program that promotes the autonomous learning of a foreign language, focusing on communicative competence through reading comprehension (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2008). During the first term of 2008, as a consequence of the big demand of students willing to complete the four levels of the language, the virtual modality was created, innovating the traditional learning and teaching of foreign languages in the University. It has also had an impact on indigenous students' awareness of the courses. In fact, some took a virtual course during this stage, but failed or dropped out because the level of English it used was "higher" than the level these students had.

The ALEX Program has three modalities through which the English language is taught: The Intensive modality, in which each level lasts two months and classes are given face to face every day; the face-to-face modality, in which each level lasts one semester and classes are given four hours per

week; and the virtual modality that uses a virtual environment with tools provided in the Blackboard platform, which is equivalent to the virtual classroom e.g. discussion boards and chat rooms, among others. The follow-up of students' progress is made through activities students develop during the week (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2008). The ALEX Virtual was launched in the first semester of 2008 and after being in a piloting stage, it has increased the number of students registered in the different levels which has shown the success of implementing this modality (Cantor, 2009).

The ALEX Virtual English Program

ALEX Virtual is a modality of the ALEX Program that, through the use of internet sources, allows students to learn a new language using a virtual environment. They just need to be connected to the internet and have access to computer tools recommended by the program (headphones, microphone and web cam mainly). These tools and environment enable students to become aware of the autonomous methodology in foreign language learning (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2008). Medina (2009) describes the four components of the ALEX Virtual methodology as follows:

1. *Projects*. Students have the possibility of finding out and analyzing information in the foreign language so they can gather knowledge about either the culture or their discipline in the foreign language. This helps students to develop collaborative work, practical knowledge and language skills.
2. *Cultural and academic meetings*. These meetings include academic, cultural or recreational activities related to the foreign culture, the Colombian culture or different academic disciplines. These activities help students reflect upon the relationships among cultures and disciplines. They can also participate in online

Table 1. ALEX Virtual grading system (Cantor, 2009, p. 110)

Item	Percentage	Final Grade
Activities, participation and quizzes	30%	
Tutorial sessions attendance	15%	60%
Project work and cultural events participation	15%	
Final exam		
(Having stood the two progress tests is compulsory to be able to stand this exam)	40%	40%

meetings through video-chat at the cultural and academic meetings, English learning, and special lectures.

3. *Work at the Resources Center.* Access to the virtual courses and tutoring are the main goals intended there. Traditional resources such as books, videos, and audio material are also kept there for students' independent or assisted study.
4. *Work within the virtual environment.* This is the main novelty of the program. It consists of the tools given by the learning management system Blackboard-online course, discussion boards, online assessment, e-mail, etc. and other tools developed at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia video chat application for online tutoring (Medina, 2009, p. 120).

On the other hand, Cantor (2009) explains in her study the ALEX Virtual grading system through which teachers evaluate students' progress. In consequence, the online sessions represent 60% and the face-to-face meetings represent 30% of the courses' grade (15% attendance for tutorial sessions and 15% cultural events participation), as shown in Table 1.

Indigenous Access to Education

According to a study carried out by the Consejo Regional de Indígenas del Cauca (CRIC) and the Organización Nacional de Indígenas Colombianos (ONIC), the levels of school desertion of indigenous students in Cauca, Antioquia and La Guajira are relevant. They show the following results:

Of 12,243 students registered in 1998 in sixth grade, by 2003 only 1,199 got their degree in high school. The main reasons for this failure are the following (Álvarez, Arbeláez, & Montoya, 2009, p. 18): lack of money, low encouragement as regards studying, family problems, and cultural causes.

In two exploratory studies carried out in Mexico with indigenous students, Schmelkes (n.d.) and Rebolledo (n.d.) found two similar facts as causes for students failure in schools, universities or any other institution of higher education. They agreed that one of the reasons was the economical situation that limits students' chances to get in a university and the other was the low educational quality students receive in their communities. Apart from those, Rebolledo attributes this failure to the fact that the indigenous children are incorporated into countryside activities and labor. He states that more than a million indigenous children between 7 and 13 years old work instead of going to school.

Indigenous Students of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia

A similar case is perceived in Colombia. There are few opportunities for indigenous students to have access to education. However, at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia there is a program that allows or facilitates the admission of indigenous students. This is known as Programa de Admisión Especial (PAES) or Special Admissions Program. In the first agreement known as Acuerdo 022 de 1986, the Consejo Superior Universitario (CSU) of this University approved the creation of the PAES Program. Since then, many indigenous students have benefited, as well as their communities. Nevertheless, 3 years later, the CSU agreed that the best high school students from poor towns should be also admitted to the University through the same program so they also could have equal opportunities as indigenous students did (Acuerdo 093 de 1989). A year later, the best high school students from the country took part in the program, reducing the opportunities for the indigenous students as the admissions percentage was not modified.

Thanks to the benefits of this program, indigenous students at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia are diverse in cultures, traditions and languages. They belong to communities such as Arhuacos, Koguis, Wiwas, Kankuamos (from Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta); ingas and Kametsá (from Putumayo); Coconucos, Paeses and Guambianos (from Cauca); and Pastos (from Nariño), to mention some. Most of these communities are settled in isolated areas so they have kept their traditions and language throughout the years.

Indigenous students have been distinguished from the rest of the population as groups who maintain a different culture such as traditions, clothing style and language. This last feature is the most distinctive among indigenous communities. Living

in isolated areas has benefited the language maintenance as the interaction with “white people” is low. However, it also has affected their educational process as the access to higher education is limited. This poor educational background affects students when they face university work. In the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, for example, many indigenous students have failed due to the level of education and knowledge the University requires or expects a regular student to have.

In the assemblies organized by PAES students in 2008, some changes in some academic statements were proposed in order to guarantee effectiveness in their learning process. In the first general assembly, students referred to our topic of interest on two points:

1. Once admitted to the university, students from indigenous communities should not have to do the documental process through internet but instead by PAES staff personally as many indigenous do not have access to internet in their communities or because the process is difficult.
2. They were conscious that English as a foreign language was a graduation requirement at University. Therefore, they proposed a “curso de nivelación mixto” or a blended Level o English course (OEPAESUNAL-Bogotá, 2008).

Facing Multilingualism

In Colombia, there are about 87 ethnic groups and 710 indigenous communities settled in the 27 departments of the country (DANE, 2005, as cited in Álvarez, Arbeláez, & Montoya, 2009). According to Landaburu (2004, as cited in Álvarez, Arbeláez, & Montoya, 2009), in Colombia there are 66 indigenous languages, but only 50 are spoken. The languages with more native monolingual speakers are Arhuaca, Andoke, Cuiba, Guhaiba y Cubeo. Usually, we have seen in the University students from the Arhuacos communities speaking Iku (the name

of their language in their native language) among them as well as Wayú students who communicate in Wayú, their native language, when they are in groups. This fact maintains the native identity of these students; however, in this multicultural city, they need to communicate in Spanish with the rest of the people. It will probably make them stronger bilinguals for they are adapting their culture to the culture of the people of the city. This way, exchanging culture and traditions can help us indigenous people explore and learn a new language.

Language learning involves the learning of culture. Culture is the context within which we exist, think, feel, and relate to others. It is the glue that binds a group of people (Brown, 1992). When a person is bilingual, he/she has learned two ways of life, the one in which this person has grown and the one to which this person has been introduced. Some indigenous students are exposed to three languages, which mean three different cultures or "ways of life".

Due to the expansion of globalization, some members of indigenous communities are using three or more languages: Spanish, their indigenous tongue and a foreign language (Velandia, 2007). In her study, this author recognizes three main aspects concerning difficulties with the language: first, the way in which the student means to acquire the English language; second, previous low preparation in the language; and third, the student is not used to self-monitoring his use of language.

Figure 1 shows the three language contexts in which indigenous students who study at the University are involved:

When an indigenous student learns Spanish for educational purposes, it implies a cultural exchange. Just learning Spanish with any purpose implies that the student should learn different traditions and customs of the people who speak the language as natives. With the migration of aborigines to big cities, their education is neces-

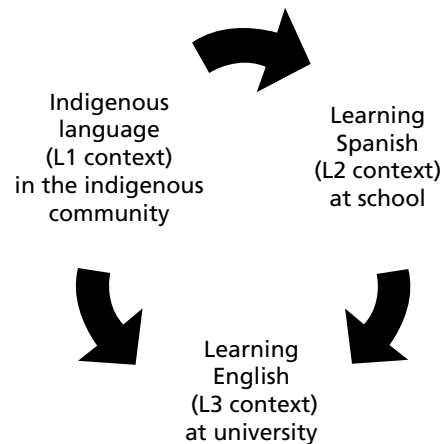


Figure 1. Contexts and languages in which indigenous students are involved.

sary. They need to communicate with others but if they speak only their native language, these others are not going to comprehend a word and communication will fail (Barletta, 2009).

Indigenous students who come from a community in which Spanish is learned as a second language become bilingual. There are usually indigenous teachers who are also bilingual and who are prepared professionally in ethno-linguistics education. However, these teachers are usually not well formed in methodologies and didactics that aim specifically at the teaching of Spanish as a second or foreign language (Álvarez, Arbeláez, & Montoya, 2009), so the level of this second language might be low for this population too.

English as a Foreign Language in the University Curriculum

Based on my own experience as a student of English philology at the Universidad Nacional, it was really hard to start with the English learning process because from the first class I was introduced to the English language. Most of my classmates knew English; some came from bilingual schools and others had travelled to English speaking coun-

tries. Although I applied some learning strategies suggested by my teacher and classmates, it was difficult for me to feel motivated because it seemed as if the course turned more advanced with every class. This is mainly a consequence of the low educational level we receive in our communities.

Undergraduate students are expected to demonstrate proficiency in English, particularly in reading academic texts, or to pass the four levels offered by the University. Fortunately, the PAES program of the University had not forgotten the low educational background of the members of this program. Therefore, they provided tutors in different areas such as mathematics, chemistry, reading comprehension, and physics in order to support students in their learning process. This project is maintained nowadays and many indigenous students have taken advantage of it. Nevertheless, no guidance in English learning was taken into consideration. I was participating in a tutorial session in 2006 as part of a certificate in voluntary service. The sessions were sponsored by the former director of the PAES program and were scheduled for 5 hours per week with the help of a German volunteer who spoke fluent English.

The tutoring sessions were planned for PAES student members. We helped them in the learning of English for 5 months. Through the process I could see that students' interest in learning English depends on their English learning background. Many of them left the tutoring sessions because they felt they were a bit demanding and not a requirement. It was also seen that individual guidance is a better tool to improve the English learning process. Students felt more confident when having a personalized environment or being in a group in which all of them started from the same level.

In connection to this, a study carried out at the University with an indigenous student from Putumayo aimed at improving his speaking skills

through personalized tutorial sessions. It was found that the student could become more confident and progress at his own pace, according to his specific needs (Velandia, 2007). The author also states that, as opposed to the regular classes, the tutoring was a pressure-free activity in which the student did not need to worry about grades.

Motivation

Motivation in the classroom is a key strategy to engage students in learning a foreign language. It is a dynamic and interactive process composed of beliefs, wants, reasons, and goals mediated by socio-cultural and historical conditions to learn a second or foreign language (Bastidas, 2006, p. 154). Motivation is an important quality that pervades all aspects of teaching and learning. As Schunk, Pintrich and Meece (2008) point out, motivated students display interest in activities; motivated teachers feel that they can help students to learn, and motivated administrators facilitate teaching and learning in their workplaces.

As mentioned along this study, indigenous students learn differently, perhaps because they grew in a different context and with different traditions. Therefore, finding a good way to encourage them to learn a foreign language through a virtual course is very demanding. First, because they need lots of motivation regarding the use of the applications of the virtual platform, which are in English, and second, because teachers need to be aware of the students' *needs, demands and wants* (Perren, 1974, as cited in Robinson, 1980).

In a study carried out in 2008 with regular students taking a virtual course in level IV, Medina (2009) points out certain limitations in regard to the use of the Online Tutoring Sessions (OTS). These limitations have to do with the lack of the required tools for the tutoring session such as a camera or a microphone which, according to her,

made communication mainly type-based, whereas the main idea of the OTS is to interact online with the other classmates as in real classrooms. For better foreign language learning through the virtual modality, Medina refers to future tutors in the ALEX Virtual Program and manifests that they should understand how students learn and eventually this understanding would imply a better understanding of students' strengths and weaknesses (2009, p. 133).

We can see that the low accessibility to the materials needed to study with affects students' language learning process. Important aspects of the learning experience are transformed in the distance context, but whereas the tendency has been to focus on technology per se, it is not as important as other factors such as learner motivation, an understanding of the distance language context and the demands it places on participants, the responsiveness of the teacher, the accessibility of the learning context and the overall context of delivery (White, 2003).

Findings

This study focused on exploring indigenous students' feelings towards the virtual modality in the ALEX Program at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. The 20 indigenous students surveyed about the virtual English courses in ALEX (see Appendix 1) expressed their discomfort with learning through the virtual modality. Most of them would feel more comfortable taking a face-to-face course because it

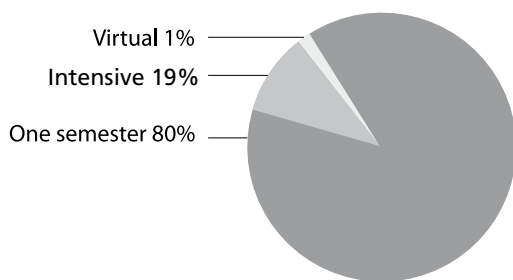


Figure 2. Modality chosen by indigenous students for taking an English course.

was better for learning the language as they knew very little English, whereas starting a virtual course requires students to have previous knowledge of some English vocabulary and basic language structures. This can be seen in Figure 2.

Of the 20 students surveyed, 16 of them were taking a regular face-to-face course (80%); 3 were studying an English course in the intensive modality (19%); and only 2 were taking an English course in the virtual modality (1%). This shows that no interest is given to the virtual courses at the University. According to the students' answers, it is due to the high level of English students find in the materials they must use.

The other two students that were followed up in their learning process showed a similar situation: they would feel more confident taking a face-to-face course. Besides, they manifested their wish for having personalized sessions or being in a group in which all of the students could start from level 0.

Three main difficulties were found as causes of indigenous students' failure when taking a virtual course. These three difficulties affected students' English learning process and also discouraged them and others to take the courses. The difficulties found along the study are shown in Figure 3 and explained in the following paragraphs.

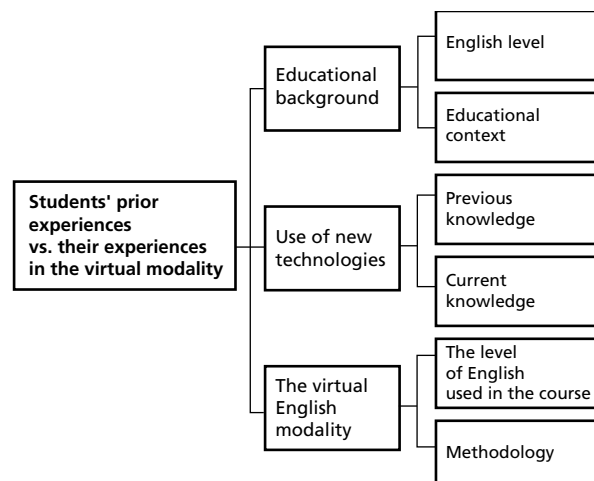


Figure 3. Describing students' experiences.

Students' Prior Experiences vs. their Experiences in the Virtual Modality

The virtual environments entailed in the ALEX Virtual modality posed difficulties for some students. Some of them felt they would lose their shyness for participating in class as nobody was seeing them or making fun of their errors and mistakes. They were afraid of asking questions in English as they did not master the language. If they did not ask during the online tutoring sessions, they were not going to do it during face-to-face sessions unless they were alone with the tutor, which means they preferred having a personalized tutoring session.

Tutoring sessions, according to Correa (2004, as cited in Medina, 2009), can be seen as an educational process in which the main topics are human relationships and interaction among personalities in a spontaneous and educational environment. In this way tutoring involves individualized or group relationship with the students, structures and dynamics of their attitudes, aptitudes, knowledge, experiences in several educational environments, and "collaboration" to sum up both academic experience and daily life (Correa, 2004, p. 45, as cited in Medina, 2009).

Let's start with the motivation students had for taking an English virtual course. When students were asked: *Would you like to take an English virtual course at ALEX Program?*, most of their answers corresponded to a no, and included reasons like the following:

- Some people have told me that this course is very hard because everything is in English, for example the chats, one can never understand them. There is no option of asking questions because the teacher will answer in English so it results even worse in that way. I think the online sessions should be in both languages Spanish and English while we get used to the foreign language.
- The explanations are very confusing and the questions asked are not well answered.

- It is not a comfortable way. I have many doubts and this new modality would not help me to solve them at the right time.
- For a good learning of English it is important for us to have a personalized guidance and face-to-face regular meetings. The use of computers in the class should be used as complementary tools meanwhile.
- Face-to-face classes are better because teacher prepares dynamic activities and workshops that can make you learn better rather than being in front of a computer for long time. (Questionnaires, February 25, 2009)

These reasons corroborate Bello's views (2008) when he affirms that learning a language in a virtual environment might result tiring. Besides, some students considered it a limited learning alternative because if you have a question, the needed answer would not be provided at the right moment or even worse, the tutor would forget to answer that question (Aguilar, 2003). As mentioned along this study, the lack of interest in learning English through this modality can be a result of indigenous low educational background in the language. This fact can be examined in the following paragraphs.

Indigenous Students' Educational Background

During the interviews the two students showed frustration about the level of education they had achieved in their communities, not only in regard to the English language but in general educational aspects. Although they had been good students, they did not experience the same situation when they started university. The level of education in a big city is much better when compared to the education children get in indigenous communities, even in small towns. The following interview shows these students' point of view about the education they received in high school.

Interviewer: Tell me, how did you learn English at school in your communities?

Student 1: At school? Nothing...I attended a school only on Saturdays from 8am to 4pm. I didn't have time to attend a school during the week because I had to work and help my parents. (Interview, September 14, 2008)

The limited learning of English derives from the fact that indigenous students spend their school life among two contexts, school and countryside labor. They are more encouraged by their parents to learn how to write and read and then they have to start working to make the countryside and their lands produce.

The two students who participated in this study were not happy with their educational background and more so when it came to the English language. They both demonstrated knowing very little English when compared with the level they faced in the virtual course. Student 2 answered to the same question as follows:

Student 2: I would say it was bad, very bad. Our teacher of English used to say that we were not going to need the *English* language because indigenous students are not supposed to present the part of English test in the ICFES exam, so we were not interested in learning it. However, when I finished school, I realized that he was hugely wrong. We had to present the English part so I answered randomly because I didn't know. (Interview, September 14, 2008)

This situation has not changed, and so new indigenous students may face similar difficulties when they start university. Here, the motivation teachers and parents give to students is not enough.

The Use of New Technologies

New technology tools have a big influence in students' learning process. If they do not have a good knowledge of these tools they will not be able to manage, as it is wished, the virtual environments. This means that students have to get familiar with this new system. Once they achieved that it would

be easier for teachers to foster motivation and support learning (Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999).

Students showed frustration once again because being in front of a computer for more than one hour was stressful and tiring. The participants manifested during the interviews that they were not used to studying with a computer all the time. Here they expressed that in their communities, having a computer is not a dire necessity and so they just had to worry about working. Students 1 and 2 manifested something similar in regard to the accessibility they had to computers or internet sources in their communities. When asked about the use they gave to these tools in their communities, they replied as follows:

Student 1: I didn't have a computer at home in my community, and when I started university I felt it was a necessity. Now, when I need a computer for typing essays or reports or searching for information in the internet I have to use the computer rooms that the University provides, I do not afford to buy one and I cannot spend all the time in the University so I still do not have much contact with this tools. I have improved my skills here but because it is necessary.

Student 2: As my friend says, it is really necessary. Nowadays everything has to be done in a computer and the internet sources are also important. I have also improved my computer knowledge here; because at home I did not have one and at school the computers were few and we always had to share. (Interview, November 7, 2008)

As the previous extracts show, while being in their communities, they did not have too much contact with computers or with internet sources. Thus, the skills they had acquired with these tools came when they started University. In the ALEX Virtual modality, the basic knowledge they must have has to do with managing the Blackboard platform, for example. However, they got easily lost during the online sessions because the texts were

in English. In some parts, the words or paragraphs that described the activities to be completed were translated into Spanish. We can support this with the following notes:

The student read many times what it said but he understood the texts and paragraphs by associating the words with Spanish or by translating the words in another webpage. He took a lot of time to understand what a certain text meant. However, at the end of the session, the whole idea was not caught as a whole. He took half an hour and at the end, because he did not know the topics he decided not to continue and left it like that, stating that he would continue another day. (Researcher's notes - Online session, November 7, 2008, 10:30 a.m.)

Student 1 also expressed that he felt there was a lack of explanation about the Blackboard platform and the right way of using it from the first class:

Interviewer: How have you gotten along with the use of the platform in ALEX Virtual?

Student 1: Well, bad. First of all, in the induction session you have to go to ALEX. There, they tell you to study the modules and they also show the topics that are going to be seen during the course. However, they never explain to you how to manage the blackboard or the virtual environment. For me the contents are ok, the problem is that when you navigate in the course is very complicated to understand as it is in English. (Interview, October 23, 2008)

Here student 1 shows little motivation from the first day of class. He expressed that the explanation given by the ALEX Program was not enough or the level of English was very advanced. The use of the applications of the platform provided such as the Discussion boards and Online Tutoring Sessions (OTS) is relevant as they are considered to be the main bridges to connect the learning of English with the use of the new technologies, the main feature of ALEX Virtual (Cantor, 2009; Medina, 2009). Regarding this concept, it has to be said that these two indigenous students did not give use to

these tools, although they knew they were part of the course.

Student 1: The participation in the discussion boards was not active. However, they are more understandable, it was just to discuss any topic the tutor puts on the discussion board. (November 15th, 2008)

Student 1 considered the Discussion boards to be more understandable, which is a good aspect of ALEX Virtual methodologies. He liked the idea that the teacher posed a given topic and students could share and exchange their opinions through this virtual application. This definition is also stated by Cantor (2009), who mentions that the Discussion board is an asynchronous tool which allows the exchange of ideas, debates and collaborative learning.

On the other hand, in regard to the OTS, students confessed they gave little use to this tool, mainly because of accessibility limitations:

Student 1: I never used the online tutoring sessions, I don't have access to internet at home, and I don't afford to pay outside, sometimes I go to the university's computers rooms but they do not have the tools I need, e.g. headphones, microphone and webcam. I don't feel comfortable going to the Resource Center.

Student 2: It was difficult to access to the internet resources as my friend states, and also because I could not understand how it worked. (November 15, 2008)

Accessibility limitation mainly affected the two students' motivation and their participation in the OTS. They were busy studying for each one of their majors that they forgot about attending the sessions or they thought it was not going to work. As Medina (2009) points out, one of the limitations of the participation students give to the OTS is the incomplete tools access.

Students' Attitudes towards Studying through Virtual English Courses

During the online sessions I followed up with Student 1, who showed little interest doing the exercises. He also asked me several times for the meaning of some words and sentences. This situation was not very comfortable for him. Thus, in the following online session Student 1 started with the listening and speaking part. There was a set of words with the corresponding pronunciation for students to repeat. He did not do so, I guess, because I was there. So, he felt embarrassed.

The following exercise shows the student's frustration trying to understand an activity of classifying some words given in a square which were related to the house and the university context. While doing the exercise Student 1 applied the association strategy.

Observer: Do you recognize the words?

Student 1: Well, just some. I can recognize these ones. Classroom, reading room, waiting room

[...] and no more, but because I associated them with the word room for which I know the meaning, je, je, je. These words can be easier to understand and classify. (Online Session – Observation, November 22, 2008)

However, at the end of the exercise he did not recognize some words like living room, rest room even though they had the word “room” that, according to him, made the phrase easier to understand. There were about 20 words to be classified in this exercise, and although he could put them in the right boxes through association, he said that in other sessions the vocabulary was more difficult. He took about 15 minutes to do the exercise but it was incomplete because of the words he did not recognize. In addition, he did not know how to check whether he was doing well or not. He did

not know how to find the grading system the program uses in its different modules and exercises.

During an interview the two students complained about the high level of English ALEX Virtual contains. In addition, the attitude students had when facing this virtual environment was not positive; they showed they gave little importance to the learning of English.

Interviewer: Why did you register in the ALEX Virtual English course?

Student 1: I wanted to register the face-to-face course but at that moment it was already full. I had registered only four classes so I thought I would have time to attend another course. Also, because English is required for graduation purposes. (Interview, October 23, 2008)

It seems students did not have enough motivation to register for a virtual course at the University. As seen in the previous extract, they registered for the course because there were not more options. Thus, they were careless about the course they were taking, mainly because the level of English was very complicated. This can be observed in the following extract from the interview:

Student 1: English virtual is very complicated.

Student 2: We know nothing of English; I think teachers should teach us like teaching children. Here, there are a lot of people that know English from primary or secondary school but we do not. (Interview, October 23, 2008)

These two students had serious problems following the grading system of the ALEX Program too. They said it was not easy to follow the modules, again, because the level of English was too high for them. Below we can read some reflections that explain, to a certain extent, how they were doing in the Virtual English course.

Student 2: I have had problems with the last module; the reading exercises are very confusing, they put very advanced readings and they expect you to know a lot of vocabulary. In that part I

have had troubles. Once, I had to search important news, choose one and present it but actually I didn't do it because it demands me a lot of memorization. It was going to take me a lot of time so I preferred not going, I was not prepared.

Student 1: Well, I remember doing well with a reading about muscles, because in my subject (dentistry) we learn about that, but it was just one part of one of the modules. The thing is that if you do not complete one part you will not step ahead to the next part, so you will fail. (Interview, October 23, 2008)

At the end of the course student 1 passed to the next level but he did not want to register for another virtual course; he preferred to wait and see if it was possible to learn English through personalized or face-to-face classes. Student 2 failed the course as he did not participate in cultural events and the progress tests were not good. Another reason was that he was too worried about the exams and works in his major. Both students were not doing so well in their majors either as the knowledge their classmates possessed was better. They admitted they needed to be more dedicated to what they were studying in the different courses –not only in studying English.

Conclusions and Implications

Indigenous students, studying in undergraduate programs at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Bogotá, need to feel motivated and encouraged to learn English as a foreign language. They are conscious of the importance of the English language, but many of them have skipped this requirement by arguing they are already bilingual. Thus, they do not have to learn another language. Furthermore, they always feel afraid of taking English courses even in other modalities different from Virtual English because its level of English is very high.

The ALEX Virtual Program offers indigenous students an alternative way of learning a different language and also of improving their technological skills through the constant use of computer assisted

language learning. Moreover, being a blended modality, ALEX Virtual offers students the chance to have the support they need through online sessions and face-to-face sessions. Nonetheless, students feel they are not able to learn a language through this modality and this is the most relevant limitation that does not allow indigenous students to continue in the courses.

Indeed, indigenous students have many alternative ways and opportunities to take advantage of the courses, not only when learning a language, but also by having tutors of other areas to help them with their subjects. The tutoring sessions aim at increasing the confidence of the tutees (Velandia, 2007). This confidence is what indigenous students need to achieve for them to feel engaged at learning English. As they point out, having the chance to attend tutoring sessions might help them achieve the level of English required for each course. Otherwise, taking a level 0 course, in which all of them have the same level and in which all share similar needs, will be a good strategy for motivating them.

ALEX Virtual is narrowly linked to motivation as it is a relatively new learning/teaching methodology for many students. Therefore, offering more time for face-to-face tutoring sessions for this population can be a good strategy to make them feel motivated.

Further Research and Limitations

As students' attitudes towards the learning of English were very negative, the time spent for data collection in online sessions was not much. They spent maximum half an hour in an online study session; at other times they were busy in class or studying for exams so I could not interview them. Having spent more time with them in online sessions would have allowed a deeper analysis of their English learning progress.

Indigenous students need to be assimilated into the new world; the new technologies are spreading all around and they have to be able to manage them as future professionals. They also need a lot of encouragement that can help them to understand the necessity of learning the English language. It is important to mention that a tutorial program or personalized sessions could be good ways to improve their motivation towards the learning of English not only in the virtual modality but in the face-to-face courses. Future researchers can start here. This research is just an exploratory study but the road to travel is very long.

As we can see from the answers provided in the interviews carried out, these two students do not feel comfortable, though at the beginning of the course they felt a bit motivated for taking English in this new modality offered by the ALEX Program. Motivation is what these indigenous students need in order to be involved in this new project –the learning of English through a virtual course. Here a long way starts, and it is important to continue with the follow-up of students' progress and more regular face-to-face tutoring sessions. It is also relevant to mention that a new course only for indigenous students would be a great deal as a motivation to learn the language. They feel more comfortable learning in an environment in which all have the same level of English and all have some characteristics in common, as coming from an indigenous community or the educational background of such a community.

This exploratory study has done just that, explore, and there are many things left to do for teachers, future teachers and society. They should bear in mind indigenous students' cultural aspects. Every student learns in a different way and indigenous students come from a different context and culture, thus, it is a challenge to discover the best way to teach to them the language, having them

understanding that this does not imply they would lose their identity, another factor contributing to low motivation.

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About the Author

Ruth Elena Cuasialpud Canchala holds a B.Ed. in Philology and Languages - English from Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá. She comes from an indigenous community in Nariño and her main interest is in enhancing the learning of English in the indigenous population of the Universidad Nacional.

Appendix 1. Students' Questionnaire

Dear student,

The following questionnaire aims at getting information, based on your experience, from your point of view about learning English through the ALEX Program at Universidad Nacional de Colombia. This questionnaire is confidential and only intends to collect a set of opinions about the program. Thanks very much for your sincere answers.

Personal Information

Gender: M ___ F ___

Age: _____

Subject: _____

Semester: _____

Indigenous area: _____

Community: _____

Native language: _____

Please answer the following questions:

1. Have you taken an English course in the ALEX Program during the last two years?

Yes ___ No ___

2. In which level of English are you currently enrolled?

Level ___ I have completed the four levels already ___

3. In which modality have you taken the English course(s)?

Face-to-face ___ Intensive face-to-face ___ Virtual ___

4. How many times have you taken the levels of English?

5. Each level once ___ Each level twice ___ Three times or more ___

Other observations: _____

6. Which was the main reason that caused you to take the English course in this modality?

If you have taken an English virtual course, please answer the following questions:

1. Have you experienced improvement in your English level?

Yes ___ No ___

Why? _____

2. What do you think about the level of English used in this virtual modality?

Very high, I don't understand ___ High, it is difficult but I might understand ___

It is ok, I understand what I have to do ___ Easy ___ Very easy ___

Have you taken a virtual course before?

Yes ___ No ___

According to your own experience, feel free to express your point of view about any observation or suggestion you have about the methodology used for the teaching of English through the virtual modality of the ALEX Program

If you have taken an English course in any of the modalities of the ALEX Program please answer the following questions:

1. Did your teachers in high school in your community teach you English?

Yes ___ No ___

2. Did you have computer access and informatics classes at school in your community?

Yes ___ No ___

3. What do you think about your level of English at this moment?

I have a high level ___ I have a good level ___

I have a poor level ___ I do not know English ___

4. Do you have internet access at home?

Yes ___ No ___

5. How do you manage internet and computer tools nowadays?

Very good ___ Good ___ Bad ___ Very bad ___

6. If you have never taken a virtual course, would you do it?

Yes ___ No ___

Why _____

Thank you very much!

Appendix 2. Interview Guide for Students

Name: _____

Community: _____

Native Language: _____

Modality: _____

Subject: _____

Semester: _____

Age: _____

1. Please tell me how your English learning process was at the school in your community?

2. How was the change for you from your community to a big city such as Bogotá?

3. How did you encourage yourself to take a virtual course this semester?

4. How do you feel you have improved? How is it going?

5. How do you feel managing the blackboard/platform?

6. Do you participate in chat sessions?

7. What tools do you use to learn English autonomously? How do you practice the topics studied in class?

8. Do you participate in face-to-face tutoring sessions?

9. Do you have comments in regard to the virtual English courses of ALEX?

Thank you very much!

Appendix 3. Observation Sample

The following information is given by students collaboratively and aims at analyzing data related to students' feelings and attitudes towards the English virtual class.

Date: _____
Name: _____
Community: _____
Native Language: _____
Modality: _____
Subject: _____
Semester: _____
Age: _____

How do you feel you did today?

Observer's comments:

Thank you very much!