

EFL Students' Perceptions about a Web-Based English Reading Comprehension Course

Percepciones de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera acerca de un curso de comprensión lectora apoyado en la red

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Web-based distance education is an innovative modality of instruction in Colombia. It is characterized by the separation of the teacher and learners, the use of technological tools and the students' autonomy development. This paper reports the findings of a case study that explores students' perceptions about an English reading comprehension course in a web-based modality. Findings show that students have different opinions about the course, its content and objectives, its level of difficulty, the time students invested in the course, adults' learning, and the role of the teacher. We perceived that this course represents an academic challenge; it is conducive to learning, and favors students' autonomous use of time.

Key words: Perceptions, reading comprehension, web-based distance education.

La educación virtual es una modalidad de instrucción innovadora en Colombia. Se caracteriza por la separación del profesor y los estudiantes, el uso de recursos tecnológicos y el desarrollo de su autonomía. Este artículo muestra los hallazgos de un estudio de caso que explora las opiniones de los estudiantes acerca de la educación virtual. Se revelan las diferentes creencias sobre el curso, su contenido, objetivos y nivel de dificultad, el tiempo invertido por los estudiantes y el papel del profesor. Encontramos que este curso puede ser considerado como un desafío académico en el que se facilita el aprendizaje y el uso autónomo del tiempo.

Palabras clave: comprensión de lectura, creencias, educación a distancia apoyada en la web.

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Introduction

This research study was carried out at the school of languages, Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia. The study took place in a reading comprehension course in English offered to graduate students of the school of law. We used a case study methodology to explore the different perceptions students had about web-based distance courses. We found six main perceptions concerning the course: its content and objectives; its level of difficulty, the time invested in the course, adults' learning, and the role of the teacher.

Literature Review

In this section of the paper, we will discuss some key concepts for our study which aimed at exploring the students' perceptions while enrolled in a web-based distance reading comprehension course in English. We will define 4 main concepts: distance education, e-learning, online learning and web-based education and we will refer to their characteristics, benefits and drawbacks. Additionally, we will briefly mention the current situation of distance education in Colombia. Then, we will provide a description of the Moodle platform. Finally we will explore what reading in a foreign language entails.

Distance Learning, E-Learning and Web-Based Learning

Distance learning, e-learning, online learning, and web-based learning are terms that are sometimes used interchangeably. They are used as synonyms because of their multiple commonalities referring to the way the instruction is carried out. In this kind of instruction, two agents are involved (a learner and an instructor), it occurs at different times and/or places, and it uses multiple instructional materials (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011)

UNESCO's Distance Learning Resources Network defines distance education as an instructional delivery that does not obligate or require the student to be physically present at the same location as the instructor. Audio, video and computer technologies are now used as delivery modes (as cited in Marcelo, Puente, Ballesteros & Palazon, 2002, p. 21). In addition, King (2002) states that in distance education synchronous and direct interaction are not required during normal day-to-day activities and that communication is available through discussion using e-mail or electronic bulletin boards.

Similarly, Keegan (1996) refers to distance education as an umbrella term for correspondence education, e-learning, online learning, web-based and virtual learning (as cited by Moore et al., 2011, p. 130). Distance learning is one of the most known terms; it refers to the access students have to learn in distant places. These terms are different due to the evolution distance learning has undergone. This evolution makes reference to the valuable role technology has taken on in this kind of instruction (Moore et al., 2011).

Ellis (2004, as cited in Moore et al., 2011, p. 130) mentions that e-learning not only bases instruction on internet, intranet, web-sites and CD-ROM, but also on audio, video, and TV. It is evident that technological tools characterized this modality of instruction, but Tavangarian, Leybold, Nölting, Röser, and Voigt (2004, cited in Moore et al., 2011, p. 130) mention that e-learning cannot be characterized as only procedural but that there is also evidence of the transformation of the individual's experience due to the process the individuals follow constructing knowledge.

Similarly, Online learning is defined by different authors as "access to learning experiences via the use of some technology" (Benson, 2002; Carliner, 2004; Conrad, 2002, as cited in Moore et al., 2011, p. 130). Moreover, Hiltz and Turoff (2005) and

Conrad (2002) argue that online learning is a more recent or improved version of distance education.

Web-Based Education

According to Sampson (2003), web-based education is a mode of delivery which includes learning independently by using self-study texts and asynchronous communication. Keegan (1996, cited in Sampson, 2003, p. 104) states that distance learning is characterized by the following aspects: (1) the separation of teacher and learners, (2) the influence of an education organization, (3) the use of technical media, (4) the provision of two way communication, (5) and occasional face-to-face meetings. Our distance learning course has all the characteristics stated above except for the occasional face-to-face meeting that never took place; therefore, we chose the term web-based education to refer to this modality of instruction along this paper.

King (2002) and Hannay and Newvine (2006) establish a series of benefits and drawbacks regarding web-based distance education. They state that the main reason that people choose these courses is the personal convenience they offer and that participation in the course can take place anytime/anywhere. Distance courses fit the students' busy schedules and the students can access the course from anywhere. However, King (2002) identifies that one of the biggest problems of these courses is their low completion and high dropout rate. He argues that the lack of feedback, feelings of isolation, frustration with technology, anxiety and confusion contribute to an unsuccessful completion of the course. Similarly Carr-Chellman, Dyer and Breman (2000, cited in King, 2002, p. 160) state that slow connections, browser or software interfaces incompatibility and servers going down can generate frustration related with technology. They also argue that frustration with technology will continue to be a factor that will generate problems

in the future, although technology related factors are the main determinants of success or failure in web-based distance education.

Stepp-Greany (2002) also mentions other benefits of web-based distance education in a study that aimed at determining students' perceptions of (a) the role and importance of the instructor in technology-enhanced language learning, (b) the accessibility and relevance of the lab and the individual technological components in student learning, and (c) the effects of technology on foreign language learning experiences. In this study, she found that the role of the instructor was perceived as very important by the participants since the students believed that the instructor provided assistance with language and fostered interaction with them. She also found that the participants' cultural knowledge, their listening and reading skills as well as their independent learning skills were enhanced as a result of the exposition to the technological tools implemented in the program. However, she states that the participants' perceptions of the individual technological components were divided. The participants in her study were first and second semester students of Spanish enrolled in a technology enhanced learning program which included internet activities, CD-ROM, electronic pen pals, and threaded discussions.

Distance Education in Colombia

Facundo (2002) states that e-learning is most popular at the post graduate level in Colombia. However, until 2002 there were no online programs offered at the master's and doctorate level. He also argues that typically, it is professionals who are unwilling to submit themselves to the limitations of a traditional classroom who turn to e-learning alternatives because they offer more flexibility and take less time. Some of the obstacles faced by e-learning proponents in Colombia

are as follows: limited internet access, under-developed tech culture, a shortage of confidence in e-learning, not enough promotion and training for teachers in challenging economic or geographic circumstances. In Colombia the most popular fields where e-learning has been used are education engineering and the health sciences.

Facundo (2002) elicits some recommendations regarding the implementation of web-based education. He states that e-learning can be promoted through institutional agreements, more concern over the spread of pirated material, the creation of open access courses, broader net coverage so that service is cheaper and more accessible, marketing campaigns, and promotion of usefulness of virtual tools in the areas of research and e-learning.

Moodle Platform

Another concept that we want to discuss is the Moodle platform on which the web-based course of the study operates. Moodle stands for *Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment*. Moodle is an intuitive, template-based, open-source system. It allows teachers to manage lessons, assignments and quizzes and also keeps automatic log reports of each student (Brandl, 2005).

Moodle allows the integration of many resources in web-based distance courses. Among the resources that Moodle offers are text-based or html-formatted documents, audio, video, PowerPoint presentations and flash-based applications (Ardila & Bedoya, 2006; Brandl, 2005). Among the testing and assessment strategies, Moodle has the following question types: multi-choice, true/false, matching, short answer, fill-ins and open-ended questions.

Ardila and Bedoya (2006) and Brandl (2005) state that one of the advantages of Moodle as a learning management system is that the teacher can design lessons that take the learner step-by-step in the course and the advancement from one

lesson to the other is allowed only if the learner demonstrates mastery in the topic of the lesson.

Reading in a Foreign Language

Finally, we want to discuss what it means to read in a foreign language. Grabe and Stoller (2002) state that reading goes beyond drawing meaning from the printed page and interpreting it appropriately. They state that reading encompasses several other aspects. For example when you read, you search for simple information, you skim quickly, you learn from texts, you integrate information and, if you need to write, you search for the information needed to write, you critique the texts you read and finally you can read for general understanding. A proper definition of reading must take into consideration the fact that reading implies several processes which make it an active and fluent activity. Therefore, Alderson (2000) and Grabe (1999, 2000) (as cited in Grabe & Stoller, 2002, p. 17) define reading as a rapid, efficient, interactive, strategic, flexible, evaluating, purposeful, learning, and linguistic process that makes reading a fluent activity.

The Study

This was a descriptive and exploratory case study with a holistic and interpretative approach as defined by Creswell (2007) and Yin (2003), which derived from a major study that aimed at exploring the effect of the modality of instruction, (face-to-face and web-based distance learning) on a reading comprehension course in English. The objective of this minor study was to explore the different perceptions students had about an English reading comprehension course in a web-based modality.

Context

The exchange of knowledge with other universities around the world has become an issue for the Universidad de Antioquia (Colombia) and

foreign languages play a key role. As a strategy to accomplish this objective, the university has implemented a certification of foreign language proficiency. Students can certify linguistic competence either by taking a proficiency test or by taking face-to-face or web-based distance courses.

In order to meet the foreign language requirement established by the institution, a group of teachers from the school of languages designed an English reading comprehension course for graduate students in a web-based distance modality. It is a 120 hour completion course. It has 5 modules, the first three modules last 30 hours each, the fourth module lasts 20 hours and the fifth lasts 10 hours. The course explores topics such as words and their meaning, reading strategies, development of reading skills, methods of text organization and critical reading and includes different tools such as forums and chats to discuss course content, videos to provide explanations about the topics and content of the course, questionnaires and links to other websites to provide exercises and practice. At the end of each module there is an exam to check students' learning process.

Participants

The students who participated in this study were from the school of law. We decided to carry out this research study with these students because they were the next to take the reading comprehension courses (web-based and face-to-face) offered by the School of Languages to certify language competence. There were 38 students, 13 men and 25 women registered in the web-based course. Their ages ranged from 23 to 44. They were enrolled in different graduate programs such as criminal law, family law, and administrative law. Their experiences learning English and taking web-based distance courses were very limited. They reported in the interviews, focus groups and questionnaires

that they had studied English in high school and some of them had taken basic English courses in language institutes. Regarding their experience taking web-based distance courses, only two students said they had taken courses in this modality of instruction related to other areas different from learning English.

Data Collection

Through the development of the English reading comprehension course in the web-based distance modality, we gathered data from three different instruments: a questionnaire, two in-depth interviews and two focus groups, in order to carry out triangulation and have saturation of data (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2003). Before participating in the study, we used a consent form in which we informed the students of four aspects: 1) the participation in the study was optional, 2) they could leave the study whenever they wanted, 3) the information gathered would be used for research purposes only, and 4) their participation in the study would not affect their physical, academic and working well-being.

Although the instruments were designed to learn of the students' use of reading strategies, motivation, and perceptions such as difficulties with the platform, time invested material and the role of the teacher, we decided to use only the information regarding to the perceptions the students had about the web-based distance course for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire, the focus groups sessions and the in-depth interviews took place in Spanish in order to make sure that students understood and answered the questions clearly and felt comfortable sharing their perceptions and feelings towards the course. The students' opinions and perceptions were translated into English to be used in this paper as evidence of our research study.

The questionnaire included three types of questions: a Likert scale from 1 to 4 where 1 was strongly agree and 4 strongly disagree, open and close ended questions, and multiple choice questions. The questionnaire was published on the platform of the course, where the students could download it, fill it in, and upload it again to the platform. In other cases, the students sent the questionnaire to the teacher's e-mail address (see Appendix A).

When the course ended, we carried out two focus group sessions with approximately 12 students per session in order to obtain information related to their perceptions of the process: the platform, the teacher, the contents, their motivation, their reading comprehension process, among others. These focus group sessions were guided by a moderator who belonged to the research team. There were also two observers who took notes. These discussions were tape recorded and each of them lasted around one hour and a half (see Appendix B).

Finally, we conducted two in-depth interviews with two students we considered as key respondents (see Appendix C). We selected them as key respondents because the opinions they gave us during the focus group sessions were neither very positive nor very negative towards the course. We used in-depth interviews because we wanted to explore deeply the informants' opinions about the course (Mertler, 2006). The interviews were also semi-structured because we used a guide with themes but if new questions emerged during the conversation they were included freely. The interviews were carried out by one of the members of the research group and they lasted around 30 minutes. The students participated in the focus groups and the interviews voluntarily. The sessions were face-to-face and audio recorded.

Data Analysis

Focus groups and in-depth interviews were tape recorded, then transcribed. We read the transcriptions and the answers from the questionnaire to find patterns. We met once a week with the purpose of comparing the patterns identified previously. We found recurring themes which further turned into broad categories based on the saturation of data and the triangulation of our interpretations (Freeman, 1998; Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 1993).

Findings

As already mentioned, our study focuses on identifying the perceptions or opinions of the students after participating in a web-based distance course. For the purpose of this study, we define perception as the process of attaining understanding of reality by organizing information gathered through the senses. This process helps us understand the world and also helps us recognize objects and events with clear locations in space and time (Pomerantz, 2006, pp. 50-70).

We found six main topics of student perceptions concerning the course: its content and objectives; its level of difficulty, the time invested, the role of the teacher and adult learning. We summarized the findings from our study in Table 1.

Perceptions about the Tools, Activities and Advantages of the Course

The participants in our study reported several perceptions about the tools, activities and advantages that the web-based distance course offered. After taking the course, the students mentioned that the platform has several positive features: it was user friendly and the communication with the teacher was fluid. They pointed out the use of the forum, the chat and the e-mail in order to discuss

Table 1. Main Findings

Aspect	Perception
Activities and Advantages of the Course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • User friendly platform (Moodle) • Use of chats, forums, and instant messages to ensure a fluid communication with the teacher
Level of Difficulty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher than expected at the beginning of the course • Very demanding
Time Invested	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The course is highly time consuming
Teacher's Usefulness and Facilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constant teacher support • The teacher becomes a technical expert and an immediate feedback provider (Muñoz & González, 2010).
Course Content and Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The course was expected to be grammar-based • The readings of the course were expected to be about law • The course was expected to deal with the translation of texts
Adult Learning Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The participants in the course thought their ages would hinder their learning process

topics related to the course content, to share knowledge, to ask questions and to obtain feedback from the teacher and sometimes from other students. However, some students reported that sometimes the e-mail was more effective than the chat for communication. They also highlighted the implementation of tutorial videos to explain the content of the course. For example, Isabel¹, a student of the course, said in an interview: "The course has useful tools: forums, the teacher, our classmates, the Internet and the online dictionary (...)" (In-depth interview, October 2009, p. 4).²

The students pinpointed that the course has several advantages: They indicated that this modality of instruction allows the students to manage their own time, they do not have to go to a specific place to attend a class or any other event, the teaching

process is personalized because it is always available on the internet and there is constant and direct contact with the teacher or instructor. Similarly, King (2002) and Hannay and Newvine (2006) state that one of the primary benefits of web-based distance education is that the student does not have to go to a university campus which represents saving travel time.

Perceptions about the Level of Difficulty

At the beginning of the course the students had the perception that the level of difficulty would be low, but after having taken the course, they realized the level of difficulty was higher than expected. They reported that the number of questionnaires and activities was high.

Although the students perceived the course as very demanding, the participants felt highly motivated to take other courses in the same modality of instruction because of the benefits web-based courses represent, for example, saving time and

¹ We changed the names of the informants in this paper in order to keep confidentiality.

² The interviews, the questionnaires and the focus groups were conducted in Spanish. A translation into English is provided for the purpose of this publication.

money as they did not have to go to a specific place at a specific moment. Pedro wrote this comment on the self-evaluation format: “I thought the course was going to be easier or less demanding and at the end I realized it was not. However, I save time because I don’t have to go anywhere” (self-assessment format, June 2009, p. 3).

The participants said that the level of English expected in the course was high and suggested a previous vocabulary unit to perform well in the reading comprehension course.

Perceptions about the Time Invested

Generally, the students thought that a web-based course would be less time consuming than a face-to-face course. The students reported the importance of working in the course every day; they suggested that the course should have lasted more than six months. For instance, Claudia reported the following in a focus group: “The course was very time consuming. It was necessary to spend a long time [at least two hours daily] in the activities, exercises, and in the personal activities” (Focus group 1, July 2009, p. 19).

The students pinpointed that they invested more time in this course than in their graduate program. They also mentioned that they learned to manage their own time to do the activities and questionnaires and to participate in forums and chats. They suggested this course should last at least one year, to be taken during their graduate studies.

Perceptions about the Teacher’s Usefulness and Facilitation

When facing a web-based course, the students thought that the teacher’s support was insufficient and that they had to work on their own and had to be autonomous. In this course the students

reported the constant teacher’s support that motivated them to do all the activities. For example, Luciana mentioned the following in an interview: “I thought that I would not have very good support from the teacher, but I realized that the support was excellent” (Focus group 2, July 2009, p. 14).

They also mentioned that because the teacher is available to answer the students’ questions, the learning process is perceived as personalized. For instance, María said in one of the focus group sessions:

I could ask for help as many times as I wanted to and the teacher answered as many questions as I asked. (...) in web-based courses you can develop individuality, in face-to-face courses you cannot say that you do not understand the texts because the classmates might get bored... in the web-based course you can have such communication between the teacher and the student. (Focus group 1, July 2009, p. 14)

In connection to this, Muñoz and González (2010) state that teaching in web-based environments represents new roles for teachers; they have to become technical knowledge experts, immediate feedback providers, interlocutors between teachers and students, they have to advise how to manage time and they have to become constant motivators. They also state that these new roles are a challenge not only for regular EFL teachers but also for those who have specific training in the use of learning platforms. Similarly, Zhang and Cui (2010) in a survey study carried out in China found that participants in web-based courses perceived the teachers’ role as consisting of helping learners to learn effectively by offering students help or telling them what to do, discussing their progress and telling students about their difficulties. The teacher is perceived as a key aspect in web-based distance courses, the teacher is responsible for providing feedback.

Perceptions about the Course Content and Objectives

The participants developed different perceptions of what the course and its contents would be about. Some students expected: 1) to learn the verb to be; 2) they believed that the readings of the course were going to be related to law; and 3) some of them expected a translation course. Some of these perceptions remained during and after they finished the course and some of them changed at the end. The students complained because they said they did not achieve their expected objectives in six months, for example, to translate texts accurately; to understand a reading word by word, to acquire listening skills and to learn the language holistically. For example, Martha expressed the following in a focus group:

I could not achieve the objective, we could not! I mean, I learned to read a little, but if I have to do an exam about a text in this moment I can translate it but not quite accurately, just by parts.

(Focus group 1, July 2009, p. 3)

After taking part in this course, the participants' perceptions of the course content and objectives changed because they realized the real focus of the course was reading comprehension, improving vocabulary and providing students with reading strategies not only in English but also in Spanish, instead of translation and the study of grammar. Eduardo expressed in one of the focus group sessions the usefulness of the strategies acquired in the course to read in Spanish: "I must read so many resolutions, so I decided to use scanning strategy to choose what was useful and what was not, so I read quicker. (...) these techniques are helpful for everything you must read" (Focus group 1, July 2009, p. 15). As Baker (1986, in Hannay & Newvine, 2006, p. 2) argues, one of the major drawbacks of web-based distance education is that the separation of the instructor and the

students can cause problems comprehending course information, for example, the content or objectives and course expectations are often not clear.

Perceptions About the Adult Learning Process

Some students who participated in the web-based course had strong perceptions about how age affects their successful performance in this modality of instruction and their learning of English.

They believed their ages were not appropriate to learn English. They felt sure young students and children are more skilled than adults in the process of learning a foreign language. They kept this belief throughout the course.

The students in this course were not comfortable with the results of the process because they thought their ages implied less memory, less reading comprehension abilities and more time consumption to understand something. For example, Gustavo mentioned the following in an interview: "An adult does not learn the English language as easy as youngsters or children" (In-depth interview, October 2009, p. 2).

Regarding these perceptions, Tyler-Smith (2006) states that adult on-line learners have certain advantages and disadvantages over their younger counterparts for learning. Some of the advantages the author mentions, based on Knowles (1984, p. 12), are that adult learners' life experience "becomes an increasing resource of learning"; they also apply what they learn and learn on a problem solving approach. In addition, adults base their internal motivation on "self-development, career advancement and achievement", therefore, their motivation is not based on getting passing grades or qualifications to obtain specific employment.

However, according to the Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller & Chandler, 1994; Sweller, 1999;

and Sweller, Paas & Renkl, 2003, cited in Tyler-Smith, 2006), adult learners could be confronted with some limitations regarding e-learning as “having limited digital literacy experience and being generally far less adept at decoding the multimedia interfaces involved with e-learning than their younger counterparts” (Tyler-Smith, 2006, p. 76). This is also supported by Eshet-Alkalai (2004, cited in Tyler-Smith, 2006), who explains that:

Digital literacy involves more than the ability to use software or operate a digital device; it includes a large variety of complex cognitive, motor, sociological and emotional skills, which users need in order to function effectively in digital environments. (p. 78)

Tyler-Smith (2006), based on Whipp and Chiarelli (2004, p. 6), also highlights that not only adult learners, but every first time e-learner faces multiple challenges such as “technical access, asynchronicity, text-based discussions, multiple conversations, information overload and isolation” (p. 78).

Similar to these authors’ ideas, the participants in our study attributed their difficulties with technology to their ages. They said adults are not accustomed to technology, computers and to web-based distance courses. They believed that a young person who has more technological skills performs better in this kind of modality than someone who is a grown up and is not used to technology at the same level.

We also noticed that students who had negative perceptions about technology did not trust it at all. Although the learners had different sources of communication in the Moodle platform such as chats and forums, some of them continued sending their workshops or their messages to the teacher by e-mail because they were more accustomed to using it in their jobs and in their everyday lives.

Conclusions and Implications

The use of tools such as chats, forums and the use of e-mail as well as the inclusion of video

tutorials built positive perceptions towards the web-based course. On the one hand, the implementation of different tools allows the students to communicate with the teacher, increases the sense of support and decreases the sense of loneliness and abandonment because the teacher and other students can provide feedback and discuss topics related to the content of the course. On the other hand, the use of tutorial videos provides the students with visual, illustrative and graphic explanations of the course content.

Web-based education entails several benefits such as: saving time and money because people do not have to travel to attend classes at a specific time or in a particular place, which motivates them to undertake studies in this modality of instruction. We noticed that people prefer saving time and money rather than paying attention to the course level of difficulty. Similarly, web-based courses are time consuming and they help students develop time management skills and a big sense of responsibility.

Hannay and Newvine (2006) in a study comparing distance learning and traditional learning found that the participants in distance learning courses preferred those courses because they had other commitments that limited their ability to take classes in the traditional format. They also found that the participants in distance courses felt highly attracted to these courses because they save time and money since they do not have to travel to take classes.

Moreover, teacher support is not minimized in web-based courses as students thought at the beginning of the course. The students felt that the teacher was available 24/7 because s/he answered the messages, graded the exercises, and posted messages on the forums to promote students’ interaction and participation on a daily basis.

Therefore, it is paramount for pre-service and in-service teachers to be well-prepared to play the role of constant advisors, to promote the use of

each tool and answer students' doubts to decrease students' anxieties and misconceptions about web-based courses.

For the students to self-assess their performance and measure the level of achievement of their goals, the course content and objectives must be explained and discussed from the beginning. It is important to design an induction unit for web-based courses that can be either face-to-face or web-based distance to make sure students have a concise idea of the course content and objectives. The induction unit can also deal with aspects such as the basic features of the course, the platform and the evaluation proposal. The possible result of the induction program is to lessen students' anxiety and improve their performance in the course.

Although the students thought that certain ages prevented them from learning English in a web-based environment, the Moodle platform is user friendly, is intuitive, and offers multiple tools that allow students to get accustomed to using it very quickly. Besides, the course objective is to provide students with strategies to comprehend written texts in English; therefore, the course can be taken by everybody regardless of age and linguistic background. The main concern was not age, but the fact that it was a new learning experience, both linguistically and technologically. This kind of courses are a new option for students to continue their preparation to better compete in the current global world and to have access to diverse and updated information.

Limitations of the Study

During the development of this research study, we faced different limitations that need to be taken into consideration for further research. The first limitation deals with the need to research the perceptions of web-based distance education of a larger number of students, including students from different academic programs, and taking into account

more than one group. The act of researching only one group from a specific academic program limits the assertions made in the findings.

The second limitation we faced relates to the fact that this study emerged from a major study. The objective of that study was to research the effect of face-to-face and web-based English reading comprehension courses in graduate students at the Universidad de Antioquia. Accordingly, the data collection techniques were addressed to explore students' interaction, motivation, perceptions and strategies used in these two modalities of instruction. Although the focus of the major study was not only to search the students' perceptions about this modality, we decided to conduct this minor study because we observed and could infer the different perceptions the participants had when we collected and analyzed the data. For further research, we considered it necessary to design data collection instruments that directly addressed the subject matter and that could deeply explore students' perceptions about web-based distance courses and how these perceptions change throughout the course.

Finally, we think the fact that students had to take this course as a requirement in order to continue their graduate studies changes their perceptions not only of web-based distance education, but also of English reading comprehension courses. It would be interesting to explore in further research the perceptions students have about this kind of courses in circumstances where they take them voluntarily.

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Appendix A: Motivation Questionnaire

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Questionnaire about motivation

The information you provide in this questionnaire will only be used for the purposes of this study and will not have any effect on the final result of the course.

Please mark from 1 to 4 whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

A. Motivation

	1 Strongly agree	2 Agree	3 Disagree	4 Strongly disagree
1. The course has motivated me to read in English.				
2. I feel motivated when I have a global understanding of a reading.				
3. I read different texts from the ones studied in class.				
4. The readings used in class motivate me to use different reading strategies.				
5. The level of difficulty of the texts used in class motivates me to keep working in the course.				
6. I feel discouraged when I don't understand a reading.				
7. I actively participate in the activities of the course (assignments, workshops, questionnaires, tests).				
8. I follow the teacher's observations and recommendations.				

9. The teacher has motivated me because

10. I feel discouraged about the teacher and about the course because

B. The course

1. Have you had any trouble when using the platform?

2. What kind of problems have you experienced?

3. How much time do you invest in the course every week? (choose 1)

- a. Less than 5 hours_____
- b. Between 5 and 10 hours_____
- c. More than 10 hours_____

4. What resources do you use besides the ones offered by the platform to achieve your objectives

- a. Online resources _____
- b. Help from other people_____
- c. E-mail the teacher_____
- d. E-mail to other participants of the course_____
- e. Dictionary online_____
- f. Paper-based dictionary_____
- g. Online translator_____

5. When you have a question about the topics studied in class, you

- a. Ask the teacher_____
- b. Ask another participant in the course_____
- c. Use the dictionary or the material available in the platform_____

6. When you work in the platform, you

- a. Read the theory, see the explanations first and then you take the questionnaires_____
- b. Take the questionnaires without checking the explanations_____
- c. Follow the order proposed in the course_____
- d. Follow a different order from the one proposed by the course_____
- e. Print the exercises, answer them and later answer the questionnaires in the platform_____
- f. Save them in a Word document, answer them and later answer the questionnaires in the platform_____
- g. Answer the questionnaires in the platform_____

C. Reading strategies

Please mark from 1 to 4 whether you agree or disagree with the following statements

	1 Strongly agree	2 Agree	3 Disagree	4 Strongly disagree
I use the reading strategies studied in the course when I read in English.				
I've improved my reading skills due to the reading strategies studied in the course.				
My vocabulary in English has improved due to the strategies studied in class.				

Appendix B: Focus Group Guide

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Guiding questions

- a. How would you define the experience of taking this Reading comprehension course?
- b. What advantages and disadvantages have you found in this course?
- c. How would you define the role of the teacher in this course?
- d. Do you think your reading comprehension skills have improved after taking this course?
- e. Do you feel motivated to read other English texts different from the ones studied in class?
- f. Do you use the reading strategies studied in class in your graduate program?
- g. What is your opinion of the distribution of the content in the platform?
- h. What would you change about the course if you were going to take it again?

Appendix C: In-Depth Interview Guide

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Interviewer's name: _____

Interviewee's name: _____

Date: _____ **Place:** _____

Recommendation: Let interviewees speak spontaneously. Help them get involved in the activity. Foster a relaxed environment.

Guiding questions

1. Tell us something about your experience learning English before taking this course.
2. What is your opinion of the learning of English after taking this course?
3. What difficulties did you experience when taking this course?
4. What is your opinion of the resources offered by the platform?
5. What would you change about the course?
6. Tell us something about the steps you followed when taking the exams at the end of each unit.
7. How did you use the communication tools offered by the platform? (chat, forums, e-mail, instant messages)