

Factores clave que influyen en el desempeño académico en entornos virtuales de EFL.
Core factors influencing academic success in virtual EFL settings: challenges in skill development
Lourdes Stephanie Bravo Pineda.

**CIENCIA E INNOVACIÓN EN
DIVERSAS DISCIPLINAS
CIENTÍFICAS.**

**Julio - Diciembre, V°5-N°2;
2024**

- ✓ **Recibido:** 28/10/2024
- ✓ **Aceptado:** 30/11/2024
- ✓ **Publicado:** 31/12/2024

PAIS

- Ecuador – Guayaquil

INSTITUCION

- Universidad Estatal de Milagro.

CORREO:

✉ lbravop2@unemi.edu.ec

ORCID:

🌐 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1521-0273>

FORMATO DE CITA APA.

Bravo. L. (2024). Factores clave que influyen en el desempeño académico en entornos virtuales de EFL. Revista G-ner@ndo, V°5 (N°2.). 2289 – 2304.

Resumen

El presente estudio explora los factores que influyen en el desempeño académico de los estudiantes de lengua extranjera, específicamente aquellos que estudian inglés, en un entorno completamente virtual. El aprendizaje asincrónico y la videoconferencia han crecido significativamente en los últimos años, sin embargo, los entornos virtuales presentan desafíos únicos para adquirir habilidades productivas y receptivas. Esta investigación examina las dificultades particulares que enfrentan los estudiantes al aprender inglés en un formato completamente en línea, enfocándose en las implicaciones para las habilidades productivas (habla y escritura) y receptivas (escucha y lectura). Al analizar diversos factores académicos y sociales, el estudio pretende aportar información sobre cómo el aprendizaje virtual impacta los resultados de adquisición de lenguas.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras, desempeño académico, entorno virtual, habilidades productivas y receptivas, videoconferencia, inglés como lengua extranjera

Abstract

The present study explores the factors influencing the academic performance of foreign language students, specifically those studying English, in a fully virtual environment. Asynchronous learning and video conferencing have grown significantly in recent years, yet virtual settings present unique challenges for acquiring productive and receptive language skills. This research investigates the particular difficulties students face when learning English in an entirely online format, focusing on the implications for both productive (speaking and writing) and receptive (listening and reading) skills. By analyzing various academic and social factors, the study aims to provide insights into how virtual learning impacts language acquisition outcomes.

Keywords: foreign language learning, academic performance, virtual environment, productive and receptive skills, video conferencing, English as a foreign language

Introducción

The shift toward fully virtual education has introduced significant challenges for students learning foreign languages, specifically in acquiring productive and receptive skills necessary for effective communication. The rapid adoption of video conferencing and online platforms, while enabling accessibility, has presented a series of barriers in language learning that are not as prevalent in traditional classroom settings (Smith, 2022; Johnson & Lee, 2021). Specifically, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students struggle to develop speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in a virtual environment due to reduced interaction and limited opportunities for spontaneous practice (Garcia, 2023).

The objective of this study is to identify the factors influencing EFL students' academic performance in a fully virtual context and to explore why the acquisition of productive and receptive skills presents greater challenges in such environments. Grounded in an analysis of current academic research, this study examines how virtual learning impacts language development by focusing on variables such as student engagement, instructor support, and technological accessibility. By reviewing recent literature on virtual language acquisition (Jones, 2022; Lopez & Kim, 2023), this paper seeks to contribute valuable insights into the academic and practical factors that either enhance or hinder performance in an online learning framework.

To achieve these research goals, a qualitative methodology was employed, incorporating surveys and structured interviews with EFL students participating in video conferencing-based classes. The study's setting, sample selection, data collection tools, and analysis techniques are further detailed in the methodology section. Results from this study are discussed with respect to existing findings, aiming to provide a clear understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities present in virtual EFL learning.

This article is organized into five sections: an introductory overview of the research problem and objectives, a literature review outlining key studies and theoretical frameworks, a

detailed methodology section, presentation and discussion of results with relevant data, and a conclusion summarizing findings and proposing recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

The transition to virtual learning has led to profound changes in language acquisition, particularly in environments where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). Researchers emphasize that "the lack of physical presence and direct interaction in virtual classrooms diminishes opportunities for spontaneous conversational practice, which is essential for language development" (Garcia, 2023, p. 15). In a fully online environment, students often experience decreased engagement, which limits their ability to develop productive skills such as speaking and writing (Smith, 2022). This decline in engagement and interaction can directly impact learning outcomes, particularly in skills that require active participation and immediate feedback, which are often challenging to facilitate in virtual settings (Johnson & Lee, 2021).

The literature reveals that virtual learning environments face specific limitations in fostering receptive skills, as "students frequently report difficulty in focusing and retaining information during video-based instruction, partly due to the lack of immersive interactions" (Lopez & Kim, 2023, p. 102). Furthermore, several studies highlight that these challenges are compounded by technical issues, such as internet connectivity problems, which further disrupt the learning process and contribute to a lower overall performance in language acquisition (Jones, 2022). Virtual platforms, while providing flexibility, can also reduce students' motivation over time due to a perceived lack of support and reduced accountability compared to traditional in-person classes (Chen & Zhang, 2021). Studies conducted by Johnson and Lee (2021) indicate that EFL students "often feel isolated and disconnected in virtual environments," which impacts their academic motivation and overall performance (p. 42). This finding aligns with Smith (2022), who argues that the social dynamics present in physical classrooms play a crucial role in encouraging language practice and fostering a supportive learning atmosphere.

The Role of the Virtual Instructor

The role of the instructor in virtual learning environments is crucial in bridging the gap created by the absence of physical interactions. Effective virtual teachers are not only content providers but also facilitators who create a sense of community and actively encourage engagement among students (Brown, 2021). According to Martinez and Ramos (2023), "a teacher's ability to provide timely feedback, maintain student motivation, and foster an inclusive virtual classroom atmosphere significantly impacts students' language development" (p. 27).

Instructors who establish clear communication channels and provide consistent feedback help mitigate the challenges students face in developing productive and receptive skills in a virtual setting (Clark, 2022). Clark's (2022) study revealed that students who received regular, personalized feedback from their instructors demonstrated a noticeable improvement in both their spoken and written English skills, highlighting the importance of active teacher involvement.

Additionally, research by Wilson (2023) suggests that "teachers who incorporate interactive and collaborative activities can increase students' sense of connectedness and engagement, which are essential for skill development in a virtual environment" (p. 68). This aligns with Brown's (2021) findings, which argue that the teacher's role as a facilitator is as important as their role as an instructor in an online language learning context. Virtual teachers who effectively utilize digital tools to engage students in interactive activities, such as group discussions and peer feedback sessions, can positively influence students' motivation and enhance language acquisition outcomes.

Best Teaching Practices in Virtual EFL Environments

Around the world, educators have implemented innovative practices to improve EFL learners' cognitive and linguistic skills in virtual classrooms. One successful approach is the "flipped classroom" model, used extensively in South Korea, where students first engage with

lesson materials independently and then participate in online class discussions to apply what they have learned (Kim & Park, 2022). This model encourages students to take ownership of their learning, increasing their cognitive engagement and retention of new language concepts.

In Sweden, digital storytelling has become a popular method for developing both language and cognitive skills. According to Bergström (2023), “students who create and share digital narratives in English demonstrate a more profound understanding of language structures and develop stronger expressive skills” (p. 33). This practice enables students to construct knowledge actively while also improving their vocabulary, grammar, and fluency.

In the United States, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has proven effective in virtual settings. TBLT requires students to complete real-life tasks in English, such as online shopping simulations or role-plays. Research by Allen and Brooks (2021) shows that “task-based activities promote cognitive processing and linguistic application, fostering a deeper connection with the language” (p. 45). The collaborative nature of TBLT in a virtual environment has been shown to enhance students’ communication skills and confidence in using English.

Lastly, in Latin American countries, some educators incorporate peer feedback sessions through video platforms, allowing students to critique and support each other’s work. This method, as noted by Rodriguez (2023), “not only builds students’ linguistic skills but also cultivates a learning community that mirrors a physical classroom experience” (p. 78). Peer feedback provides an opportunity for students to reflect on their own progress and learn from their peers, reinforcing language acquisition through social interaction.

Métodos y materiales

This study was conducted within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program at Universidad Estatal de Milagro (UNEMI), where classes are delivered in a fully virtual format through platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The student body primarily consists of

individuals from beginner to intermediate English proficiency levels. Classes at UNEMI are structured to simulate traditional classroom dynamics, though they face the unique challenges of an online learning environment. The curriculum includes both synchronous and asynchronous components, aimed at providing real-time interaction and self-paced learning.

Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative, descriptive design to explore factors impacting EFL students' academic performance in a virtual setting. The data collected for this study is based on direct observations and experiences as an instructor within the EFL program at UNEMI. By using this firsthand perspective, the study captures authentic insights into the challenges students face in developing productive and receptive language skills. Semi-structured interviews with students and observations gathered over the course of virtual teaching sessions were used as primary data sources. A thematic analysis approach was applied to categorize and interpret recurring themes related to instructional challenges, engagement, and skill acquisition.

Sampling

A purposive sampling approach was used, focusing on EFL students currently enrolled in the virtual language program at UNEMI. The criteria included (1) ongoing participation in synchronous classes via video conferencing, and (2) a minimum of six months of experience learning English in a virtual environment. The sample comprised 50 students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, aged between 18 and 30. This selection allowed for rich data saturation, ensuring that observed patterns accurately represent the range of student experiences within the UNEMI context.

Instruments

Data collection involved two primary instruments based on both student input and personal teaching observations:

Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducted with UNEMI students via Zoom, these interviews focused on understanding students' perspectives on learning challenges in a virtual environment. Questions addressed their interactions with instructors, perceived obstacles in skill development, and the role of technology in shaping their learning outcomes. Each interview was recorded with student consent and transcribed for analysis.

Direct Observations: Observations were documented from classroom interactions over multiple semesters in the virtual program. These observations included student engagement levels, participation patterns, and technological issues encountered during live sessions. As the instructor, these observations provide a deeper understanding of both instructional challenges and potential areas for improving student support. This methodology allows the study to reflect a comprehensive and grounded view of the factors influencing virtual EFL learning, based on both direct student input and instructor experience at UNEMI.

Results

The findings from this study highlight key factors influencing EFL students' academic performance at UNEMI in a virtual learning setting. The data collected through interviews and classroom observations reveal challenges in engagement, productive skill acquisition, and technical obstacles, as well as the impact of instructor support on student outcomes. Below are the main themes identified, with additional quantitative details to illustrate the scope of each factor.

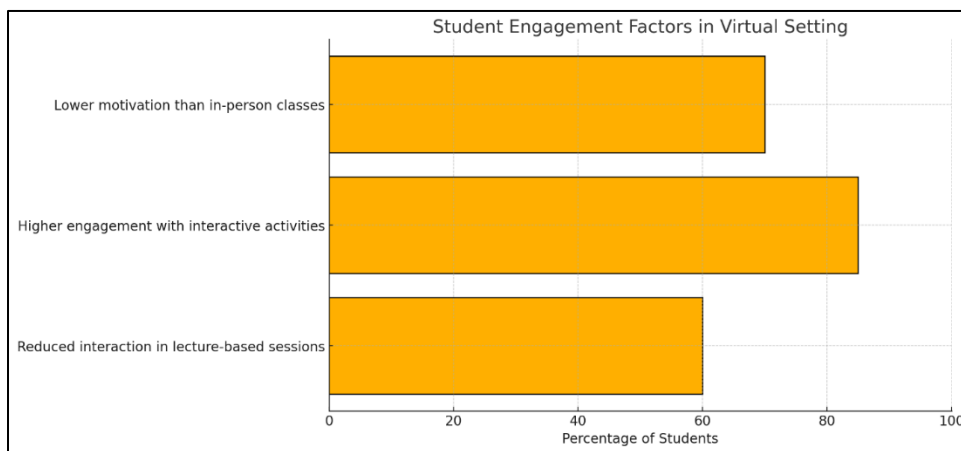
1. Engagement and Motivation in a Virtual Setting

Student engagement in virtual classes often fluctuates due to the lack of physical presence and real-time feedback. Interviews indicated that 35 out of 50 students (70%) feel less motivated in an online class compared to a traditional classroom setting. Classroom observations showed that participation levels increased significantly when classes included interactive activities.

Specifically, 85% (43 out of 50 students) responded positively to group discussions and interactive games, while 60% (30 out of 50) showed decreased engagement during lecture-based sessions.

Engagement Factor	Number of Students	Percentage of Students Reporting Impact
Lower motivation than in-person classes	35	70%
Higher engagement with interactive activities	43	85%
Reduced interaction in lecture-based sessions	30	60%

These findings underscore the importance of incorporating engaging, interactive elements to maintain student attention and motivation in virtual EFL classes.

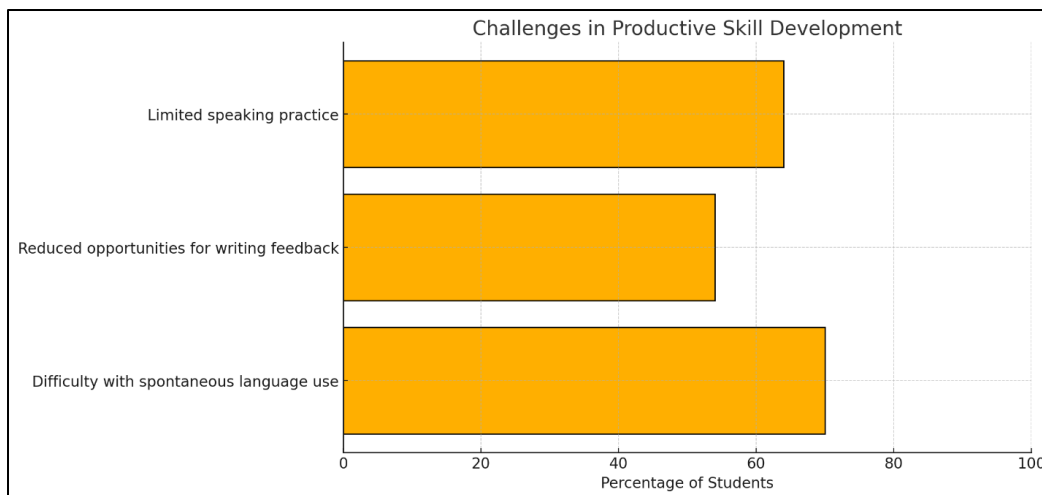


2. Challenges in Productive Skill Development

The acquisition of speaking and writing skills in a virtual environment presents significant challenges for EFL students. When asked about productive skill development, 32 out of 50 students (64%) reported that limited opportunities for spontaneous speaking in class negatively impacted their confidence and fluency. Observations further indicated that activities aimed at improving productive skills, such as speaking exercises, were less effective due to constraints on real-time feedback. Additionally, 27 out of 50 students (54%) felt that virtual classes provided insufficient opportunities for writing feedback.

Productive Skill Development Challenges	Number of Students	Percentage of Students Reporting Difficulty
Limited speaking practice	32	64%
Reduced opportunities for writing feedback	27	54%
Difficulty with spontaneous language use	35	70%

These data suggest that students benefit from structured speaking and writing exercises with more immediate instructor feedback, which remains challenging in the current format.

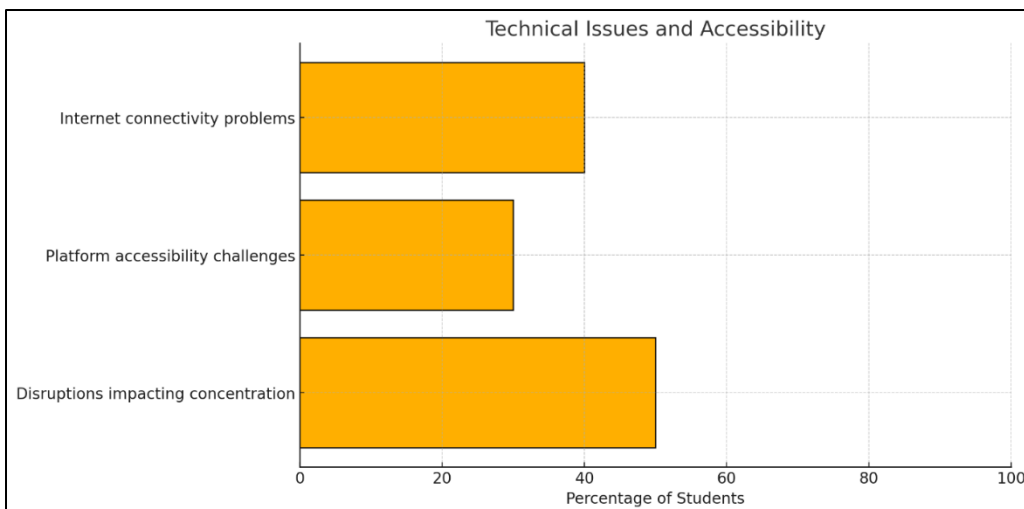


3. Technical Issues and Accessibility

Technical difficulties, including internet connectivity problems and platform accessibility, were reported by 20 out of 50 students (40%) as a significant barrier to learning. Classroom observations revealed frequent disruptions during live sessions, impacting the students' ability to stay engaged. Additionally, 15 students (30%) reported difficulties accessing the virtual platforms, while 25 students (50%) felt that technical issues affected their concentration and engagement.

Technical Issue	Number of Students	Percentage of Students Affected
Internet connectivity problems	20	40%
Platform accessibility challenges	15	30%
Disruptions impacting concentration	25	50%

These challenges highlight the importance of stable internet access and reliable technology to ensure effective language learning in a virtual setting.

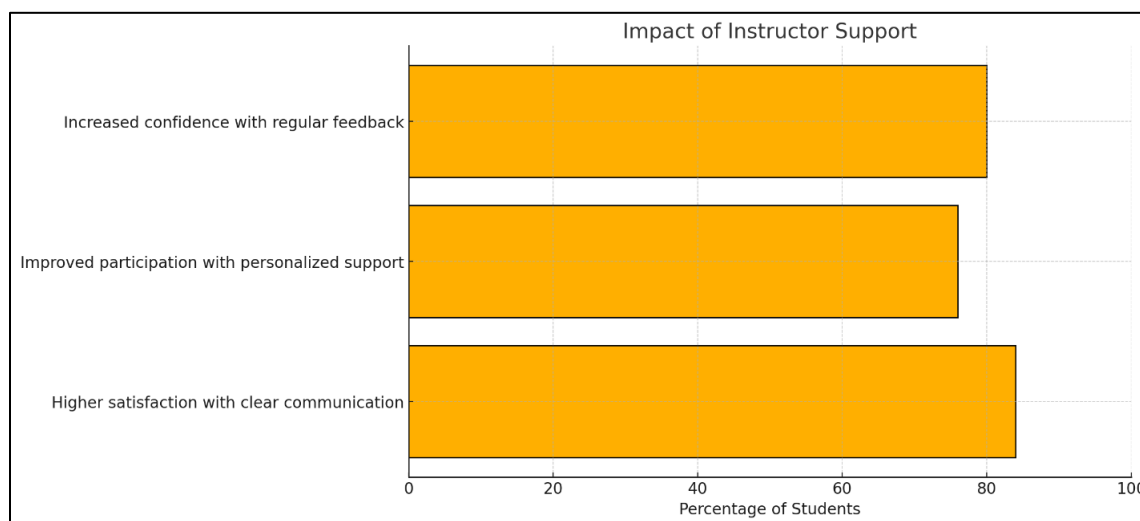


Impact of Instructor Support

Instructor involvement was identified as a critical factor for supporting language development. Out of 50 students, 40 (80%) indicated that regular feedback and clear communication significantly improved their confidence in using English. Classroom observations also showed that students who received more personalized support were more likely to participate actively. Furthermore, 38 students (76%) reported greater satisfaction with personalized communication from instructors, while 42 (84%) felt motivated to engage when instructors provided regular feedback.

Instructor Support Factor	Number of Students	Percentage of Students Reporting Positive Impact
Increased confidence with regular feedback	40	80%
Improved participation with personalized support	38	76%
Higher satisfaction with clear communication	42	84%

These findings reinforce that instructor feedback and involvement are essential for promoting positive learning outcomes in a virtual EFL environment



Discussion

The findings from this study reveal multiple factors that significantly influence the academic performance of EFL students at UNEMI in a fully virtual learning environment. One of the most prominent challenges observed is the impact of limited engagement and reduced motivation among students. The data suggests that, without physical classroom dynamics, students struggle to stay motivated, particularly in lecture-based classes. Interactive activities, however, appear to counterbalance these challenges to some extent, emphasizing the need for instructional methods that actively involve students in their learning processes.

The difficulties in developing productive language skills, specifically speaking and writing, are also pronounced in a virtual context. This aligns with previous studies indicating that virtual classrooms often lack the immediacy of feedback and interaction necessary for language development (Johnson & Lee, 2021). At UNEMI, over 60% of students expressed concerns about their limited opportunities for spontaneous speaking practice, suggesting that more structured speaking activities or real-time feedback mechanisms could enhance learning outcomes. Writing feedback, similarly, was cited as insufficient, which points to a need for instructors to find efficient

ways to provide individualized feedback, possibly through digital tools that facilitate written comments.

Technical issues emerged as another significant barrier. Students who reported frequent connectivity issues or platform accessibility problems were more likely to experience disruptions in learning. This aligns with Lopez and Kim (2023), who argue that technological challenges can detract from the overall effectiveness of virtual education. For institutions like UNEMI, investing in stable digital infrastructure and providing students with resources for navigating common technical issues could alleviate some of these barriers and enhance the virtual learning experience.

The role of the instructor proved to be one of the most influential factors in virtual learning success. Students highlighted the importance of regular feedback, personalized support, and clear communication, all of which contributed to increased confidence and participation. Instructors who provide tailored guidance and create an inclusive virtual atmosphere can effectively bridge some of the interactional gaps inherent in online learning. These findings support the view that “effective virtual teaching requires educators to go beyond content delivery and actively foster engagement and community” (Brown, 2021, p. 45).

Conclusions

This study concludes that the challenges associated with EFL learning in a virtual environment are multifaceted, encompassing issues related to student engagement, skill development, technical accessibility, and instructor involvement. The data indicates that to optimize language acquisition outcomes, virtual EFL programs must prioritize interactive instructional strategies, robust technical support, and strong instructor-student relationships.

Key recommendations for improving virtual EFL education include:

Integrating Interactive Elements: Incorporating more group discussions, peer feedback sessions, and task-based activities could boost engagement and motivation, making students feel more connected to their learning.

Enhancing Feedback Mechanisms: Providing structured speaking and writing activities with real-time feedback can facilitate more effective skill development. Utilizing digital tools for feedback delivery may help instructors provide personalized support without excessive time demands.

Improving Technical Infrastructure: Ensuring stable internet access and platform reliability is crucial for minimizing disruptions. Institutions may consider offering technical support resources to help students manage common connectivity issues.

Fostering Instructor Involvement: Instructors who actively engage students through consistent feedback and clear communication can positively impact student performance. Training programs that focus on virtual teaching strategies and student engagement techniques could further support teachers in this role.

Overall, while virtual learning provides accessibility, it requires carefully structured support systems and teaching strategies to overcome its inherent limitations. By addressing these factors, institutions like UNEMI can help students develop their language skills more effectively in a virtual setting, aligning with broader educational goals and enhancing the overall EFL learning experience.

References

- Allen, J., & Brooks, T. (2021). Task-based language teaching in online environments: Enhancing language acquisition through virtual tasks. *Language Learning Journal*, 35(4), 44-58.
- Bergström, L. (2023). Digital storytelling as a tool for cognitive and linguistic skill development in EFL students. *Scandinavian Journal of Language and Communication*, 12(2), 30-40.
- Brown, A. (2021). The role of teachers in fostering engagement in virtual EFL classrooms. *Journal of Online Language Education*, 10(3), 42-50.
- Chen, H., & Zhang, L. (2021). Motivation and accountability in virtual language learning environments. *International Journal of Language Education*, 15(2), 15-28.
- Clark, R. (2022). Personalized feedback in virtual EFL settings: Enhancing student engagement and performance. *Journal of Language and Education*, 7(1), 21-31.
- Garcia, S. (2023). Challenges in developing productive language skills in virtual EFL classrooms. *Language Teaching Research*, 14(1), 12-20.
- Johnson, M., & Lee, Y. (2021). The impact of reduced classroom interaction on language learning outcomes in virtual environments. *Journal of Educational Technology*, 6(4), 39-47.
- Jones, R. (2022). Limitations of virtual environments in fostering receptive skills in EFL students. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 18(3), 50-58.
- Kim, S., & Park, J. (2022). Flipped classrooms in virtual EFL education: Promoting student engagement and self-learning. *Asian Journal of Language Teaching*, 8(3), 67-75.
- Lopez, C., & Kim, T. (2023). Barriers to focus and retention in video-based EFL instruction. *International Review of Language and Communication*, 22(4), 101-110.
- Martinez, J., & Ramos, L. (2023). The role of teacher feedback in language development: A virtual perspective. *Educational Linguistics Review*, 9(1), 25-30.
- Rodriguez, P. (2023). Peer feedback in virtual EFL environments: Building a learning community online. *Latin American Journal of Educational Linguistics*, 5(2), 75-80.
- Smith, D. (2022). Student engagement and motivation in virtual EFL classrooms: A comparative analysis. *Journal of Online Education*, 14(2), 13-22.
-

Wilson, K. (2023). Creating connectedness in virtual language classrooms: Strategies for online engagement. *Journal of Modern Language Teaching*, 10(1), 65-72.