Beliefs about English Teaching and Learning in the Virtual Learning Environment

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Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to present the result of a research carried out with two students, a student's mother and a teacher at the Language Extension Center at Centro Universitário Unicerrado of Goiatuba, Goiás, Brazil. Participants were interviewed and answered a questionnaire to identify and evaluate the process of teaching and learning English in the virtual learning environment in times of pandemics. The goal was to understand how beliefs and myths influenced this process. The results suggest that, despite the negative beliefs created about online learning, and the fears generated in this teaching modality, they could see positive points in this teaching modality.

Keywords: Teaching. Learning. Remote Regime. English language. Beliefs.

1 Introduction

2020 was marked by one of the biggest health catastrophes the world has ever faced. The emergence of a new deadly virus, called COVID-19, which spread rapidly from China, its country of origin, to the whole world, left a trail of sadness, desolation, fear, anguish, deaths and a series of misfortunes terrorizing the people and changing the lives of many.

According to Carvalho (2020), the wall between the school and the parents has fallen. With their children at home, those responsible faced a new situation, a different way of teaching.

The educational system adopted online education to prevent the school environment from becoming contaminated and ill. This change in Education has generated several fears, uncertainties, prejudices, doubts, etc., leading both parents and students, as well as teachers, to produce hostile speeches in relation to remote online teaching based on their beliefs and preconceptions related to their "experiences" with the distance education system.

The fact is that distance education was already growing dramatically thanks to its more comfortable, flexible, and economical form offered. This modality was one of the fastest-growing in Brazil but still faced many barriers and disapproval by many who believed it was ineffective and associated distance education with remote education, generating a series of concerns based on their myths and beliefs about online education.

The massive difference between remote and distance education needs to be clear and well-defined (FUCKNER, 2020).Although they use similar tools and mechanisms, they are two different modalities that need to be understood. For example, in remote education, classes occur in real time with the same teachers that students were used to have in face-to-face teaching. That is unlike distance learning which, for the most part, are video lessons recorded by different teachers and can be watched by students at other times and days. We can also mention the interaction between students and teachers concerning doubts. In remote education, the student has closer and personalized contact with his teacher through daily interaction, different from distance education that, for the most part, offers a tutor for questions. The flexibility of schedules provided by distance education does not happen in remote education, given that the latter's classes are taught at fixed times and days, just as they were taught in classroom teaching, although some of the lessons might be taught asynchronously.

In this perspective, despite being offered through technological resources and at a distance, remote education has been confused with distance education practiced prior to the pandemic of the new Coronavirus. For this reason, it has generated several uncertainties about the latest teaching modality, insecurities caused in turn, due to beliefs and myths that online teaching is not as efficient as face-to-face.

Based on these assumptions, an in-depth study is necessary to know if beliefs and myths about the remote modality in English language teaching have proved true. It is also crucial to verify if students, teachers, and parents have overcome their beliefs and can perceive the positive points of this new way of teaching. In that case, it is relevant to investigate whether this change has compromised the teaching-learning process.

2 Theoretical Framework

Technology is increasingly present in the school environment. Many teachers have already adopted technological tools as didactic resources in their classes. Given the current global situation, virtual media have been the leading resource for the teaching process.

Practically all branches of knowledge are using technological advances. The discoveries are extremely fast and are at our disposal at an unprecedented speed. The Internet, cable and open TV channels, multimedia resources are present and available in society. Yet, we are always onestep away from any news. In contrast, the global reality means that our students are increasingly informed, updated, and participating in this globalizedworld (KALINKE, 1999, p.15).

Following this reasoning, we need to know that English language students are increasingly connected and thus surrounded by information and diverse content on the Internet that often do not know how to manage productively. As a mediator of these tools, the teacher can help them enjoy the resources more effectively.
Therefore, technology in teaching the English language has always been essential in the learning process. Now more than ever, it is necessary to use this approach to continue the teaching/learning process.

According to Kenski (2004), teaching via networks can be a dynamic and motivating action. That is because they merge in computer networks – in the very situation of knowledge production and acquisition – involving authors and readers, teachers, and students.

In the modern world, children, teenagers, and adults are connected all the time, exposed to a world full of information at the touch of a screen. Using this resource as an essential tool in the educational process makes teaching more dynamic and interactive.
Still, according to Kenski (2004, p. 74):

> The communicative possibilities and the easy access to information favour the formation of interdisciplinary teams of teachers and students oriented to the elaboration of projects that aim to overcome challenges to knowledge. Those teams should be concernedwith the articulation of teaching with the reality in which students find themselves, seeking a better understanding of the problems and situations encountered in the environments in which they live or in the general social context of the time we livein.

We can see that, even though there are still uncertainties and doubts about the effectiveness of online education, authors like Kenski (2004) address positive aspects of using technological resources as something dynamic and motivating. Specialized tools offer immense pedagogical potential. They enable group study, exchange of knowledge and collaborative learning and, given that, knowing the importance of using these communication tools and the advantages of using such resources in favor of education. We will seek to collect data from students, parents, and teachers to demystify and understand beliefs about emergency online education. Even though theories have proved the effectiveness of technology adoption in the teaching process, the fear and uncertainty of the pandemic period raised doubts about the efficacy of this methodology, given the fact that almost all classes were being offered online.

Although we are dealing with a relatively new topic, the advance in research on beliefs has been promising in recent years, especially regarding language teaching, in the field of Applied Linguistics (AL) (BARCELOS, 2001, 2004). We can quote Barcelos (2004, p. 129), who calls our attention to the fact that "the concept of beliefs is not specific to AL". According to the author, other areas such as sociology, anthropology, education, and philosophy demonstrate the concern as to what is "true or false". Therefore, it is necessary to know the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of remote English language teaching.

Some time ago, McLaughlin (1992) also proposed studying "myths and misconceptions" about how we learn a second language. Although the study was conducted more than two decades ago, we can apply some of its myths to current times. According to Mclaughlin (1992, p. 1), "children learn a second language quickly and easily", which is explained

by the fact that children's brains are more flexible than adults, as the author quotes Lenneberg (LENNEBERG, 1967; PENFIELD; ROBERTS, 1959, apud MCLAUGHLIN, 1992). However, Mclaughlin argues that this argument is not entirely valid and that to reduce learning to this is to limit the learning process of adults. Bringing this myth to today, we can compare it to the belief that children do better with technology than adults and that because of this, remote education is more effective for the youngest than for the older.

Some other "myths" are raised during this study, like "all children learn a second language in the same way" (MCLAUGHLIN, 1992, p. 7). Thus, overcoming this myth raised the question of whether all children learn a second language more effectively if remote teaching methodology is applied.

Consequently, there are countless questions for the situation we are experiencing, and few are the answers and the results. Therefore, we have sought to shed light on these issues by understanding the advantages and disadvantages of remote education and its consequences from students', parents', and teachers' views.

2.1 Some beliefs and myths about online teaching

Historical events in health, such as the bubonic plague that afflicted Europe in the 14th century, the Spanish Flu of 1928, or the Swine Flu (H1N1) of 2009, frightened the world and changed the direction of our history. Unfortunately, in 2020, we are experiencing one of the most terrible moments with the emergence of the new Coronavirus (COVID-19), a deadly virus that has spread around the world, changing the way of life of most people.

Classes are taught by online platforms, such as *Zoom, Google Meet, and Whatsapp,* adopted by each institution, in addition to using various technological resources and applications as complementary didactic resources.

Even though we are in a pandemic period and the face-to-face classes are not yet expected to return, many myths and beliefs about the adopted modality have emerged and have not yet been overcome. Many parents, students and even teachers feel insecure about the remote modality and doubt whether it is effective. Freire (1996) stated that diabolizing or divinizing technology is an error.

Given this, analyzing beliefs and myths, making an in-depth study with the educational community and shedding light on questions and doubts about this teaching method can help us understand how far this modality has helped or hindered the English teaching/learning process.

Therefore, with this work, we want to understand some myths and beliefs raised by students, parents and teachers and discuss some topics, such as:

• Remote online teaching is not effective.
• The quality of remote education and of face-to-face study is not the same.
• Students learn better in the classroom than in the remote environment.
• It is not possible to take online classes in the same way in remote education.
• Students are less motivated by taking online courses.
• The collaborative approach is undermined in online classes.
• Parents are not able to help their children with technological activities.
• The interaction process is hampered in remote education.
• Younger students find it easier to learn online than older students because they do better with technology.
• Teachers and students feel more unmotivated by studying remotely.
• The teaching/learning process is hampered in online classes.

According to Belloni (2006, p. 3), "[o]pen and distance education increasingly appears, in the context of contemporary societies, as an extremely adequate and desirable education modality to meet the new educational demands arising from the changes in the new world economic order."

But if online education is increasingly present in our current environment, why is there so much resistance on many peoplewith this type of teaching? Why were parents, students, and teachers so worried and frightened when the country adopted new teaching strategies due to the pandemic?
Will the negative beliefs about online classes be formed in us? Are they the myths that emerged with the advent of technology? Is it backward thinking to believe that traditional teaching is the only efficient?

These questions are fundamental parts in the construction of this work, whose main objective is to understand when beliefs and myths affected English language classes with a focus on the conversation.

In the following sections, methods for data collection and the results of a survey conducted with English students will be presented to see the positive and negative aspects of emergency remote education and how myths and beliefs influenced it.

3 Methods

The research initially included a literature review concerning myths and beliefs in English language teaching, especially now in this pandemic. Subsequently, the analysis included interviews and questionnaires with students, parents, and teachers of the English language at Language Extension Center CEL – UNICERRADO at Unicerrado University Center of Goiatuba – Goiás, Brazil.

Such interviews served as support for proving or overcoming beliefs and myths. Moreover, they helped show the positive and negative points of the remote teaching modality and understand if such ideasinfluenced the teaching and learning process.

For the interview and to fill in the questionnaire, we invited a student of the basic 1 level who never had face-to-face classes, another of the basic 2 level who had had face-to-face and take online courses now, a mother of a student and a teacher from the extension center with experience in both face-to-face and remote teaching. This way, one could have a broader view of how this online modality's teaching/learning process occurred. In addition, this research aims to analyze the beliefs brought by students, parents, and teachers about emergency remote education to understand and reflect on whether the teaching/learning process has been harmed.

Participants took part in an interview with the audio recorded and answered a questionnaire with their personal information (name, age, sex, colour/race, average family income, education level, school, or university where they study/studied, length of experience as a teacher). The questionnaire also contained questions about their experiences with remote education, their doubts, and English language teaching.

3.1 Participants

Four people participated in the research. Each of them was asked to choose a nickname to protect their privacy. The first interviewee, named Larissa, is 23 years old, graduated, and taking an intermediate-level English course. This student was invited, as she has already had experiences with both face-to-face and remote classes. She lives in Buriti Alegre - Goiás, about 47 km from Goiatuba.

The second interviewee, named Mayara, is 29 years old and lives in Goiatuba. She is at basic level two. She has never had contact with face-to-face education, only remote education.

The third interviewee, named Camila, is 30 years old and is the mother of a minor student who we will call Isabel, 15 years old. Isabel is at the intermediate level, and studies at a regular school: a high school student. She also had contact with the two teaching modalities.

And lastly, we interviewed Bruno, an English teacher at the language center who has already taught face-to-face and online classes.

4 Results

Some beliefs and myths that emerged during the interview and the questionnaire will be presented, guided by the following questions:

1) What is your experience with the English language emergency remote teaching?
2) What was your opinion about online teaching before classes?
3) In your opinion, were you and the teaching/learning process harmed in the remote modality?
4) What difficulties did you face in this new teaching modality?
5) What are the advantages of it, in your opinion?
6) In which modality did you adapt better? Why?
7) In which teaching modality do you feel most motivated and why?
8) Do you believe that younger people had fewer difficulties in remote modality? Why?
9) Did you ever feel that you would be unable to learn or teach using online tools? How was the experience?
10) What is your experience with punctuality? Do you think there was a change?
Having collected all the data, the results will be presented in the next topic.

4.1 Online classes are not effective

The first question asked to the interviewees aimed at finding out if they believed that students in online courses learn less than in face-to-face lessons. For that, we asked them about their experience with online classes.

Student Larissa says that it was a great experience and that, in the beginning, she thought it would not work and that she would not learn, but with time and practice using the online resources, she got used to it and could see that she was learning. In the questionnaire, she says: "My teaching experience was great, I think I really learned." (Questionnaire)

Student Mayara comments that she had no difficulties adapting to the remote environment, nor was she afraid that teaching would not work because she had already been a student in distance courses and that she was always very disciplined. She stressed that "discipline is the main tool for online studies, and that was why I was confident that I would learn remotely" (Interview). She also added that: "I prefer online classes because, due to my work, which requires many trips from me, I am able to adapt better to my studies and access classes from wherever I am". (Interview).

When Isabel's mother was asked about her experience with the remote regime, she pointed out that it was not a very different experience from what she was already used to. Her daughter never had problems in researching and going after studies independently. She stated that, at first, she was worried that her daughter would be able to follow the classes on the computer, but that, over the course of the days, she noticed her daughter's evolution and did not notice any significant difficulties. She comments: "It was a good experience; my daughter had no difficulties in adapting. It was very cool" (Questionnaire).

When asked about his experiences, teacher Bruno also gave a testimony similar to that of the majority. At first, he was afraid and felt insecure. He was fearful that the remote classes would not be as practical as the face-to-face ones as hefelt unconfident in using technological resources 100% of the time. However, he also overcame his unease with practice and commented:

"My experience with remote teaching of the English language (as well as with remote teaching itself) started in 2020 due to the pandemic, which led me to adapt my regular classes according to the new reality of remote teaching through the use of technological tools. At first, there was a strangeness and a certain difficulty about the more coherent way of working in the context in question. However, as the classes were happening, it became easier to adapt to the new demands of emergency remote education" (Questionnaire).

All the interviewees' reports suggest that this belief is false. Despite the uncertainties at the beginning, they managed to overcome and learn remotely. That reinforces what Moço and Martins (2009) say: with the results of the 2006 Enade, this idea that students who study at a distance learn less than those who study in the classroom fell to the ground. Pedagogy was one of those fields that performed better in distance learning than in classroom mode. That is, the students learned.

4.2 Beliefs about remote education and online teaching

The second question was asked to collect data on respondents' beliefs about remote teaching. They were asked their perception about online classes before we started the emergency remote period.
Having already had experiences with online classes, student Mayara did not raise any negative beliefs.On the contrary, she said: "I always liked online classes" (Interview).

When asked about this topic, teacher Bruno also did not expose negative beliefs.He just said: "I have always defended the use of technological tools as allies to teaching, not only in the English language but also in any other area of knowledge. We live in a highly connected society, and this factor should be used to improve the teaching-learning process. In this sense, it is up to the student to decide which type of teaching brings him the most benefit, since some opt for 100% online teaching while others give preference to the one that combines the online aspect with the face-to-face" (Questionnaire).

4.2.1 Remote Teaching is not efficient

Student Larissa and Isabel's mother had a similar opinion. The first reports that she believed online classes did not work. Still, since it was already the middle of the semester, she had no choice but to continue the course.
However, she could see over time that her thinking had changed and that she could see she was learning even remotely. She ends by saying: "I used to think that online classes were bad, but now I've changed my mind" (Interview).

Camila reports that, before classes, she thought that her daughter would not have the same income because she always heard that online courses were ineffective. She comments: "At first, I thought it would not work because I thought it would not be the same quality of teaching, but the quality remained the same, and she adapted to the new method."

For Silva (2011), trainee teachers and in-service teachers bring beliefs and clusters of beliefs acquired during their experiences as language learners and sometimes as teachers. In the statements of Camila, Isabela's mother, and Larissa, we can see a belief that has been overcome and has not compromised the learning process.

4.3 Difficulties and Facilities in Remote Education

The interviewees were asked questions to determine if such myths and beliefs positively or negatively influenced the teaching and learning process. In addition, we inquired if the language study was affected and the advantages and disadvantages. Their opinions were similar.

We will start with the negative points. Teacher Bruno, when asked if he thought that teaching had been harmed, says:

"It would be inconsistent to deny that the teaching-learning process has not been harmed in any way with the adoption of remote education mainly because of its emergency nature, since most of those involved in the field of education were caught off guard. In my experience, because I am used to inserting technological resources in the teaching process, I adapted quickly" (Questionnaire).

In the teacher's opinion, the need to take measures quickly and without preparation was a negative factor, but he ends his speech by saying that he managed to adapt fast.
The teacher adds that:

"Remote teaching imposes a physical distance between teachers and students, and this factor can be critical because many students feel the need for a teacher nearby and, also, for the educator, it is easier to identify the difficulties and the points to be improved by students when these are under your face-to-face observation. In addition, some students feel discouraged because they are unable to study independently without the presence of a teacher whose role in mediating knowledge is essential. It is also not possible to talk about difficulties in remote education without mentioning the issues involving Internet connection and lack of knowledge for certain students whose domain of technological resources is limited" (Questionnaire).

In addition to the difficulties mentioned by the teacher, the other interviewees complained that remote education is poor when they do not have a good Internet connection. Furthermore, they stated that they miss the practical classes and human contact that only exists in face-to-face teaching.

Some positive points were also raised. Larissa reports feeling much more comfortable studying from home because, as she is from another city, she does not need to take a bus or drive to Goiatuba to study. The student explains that sometimes she was late because of the traffic, but now she manages to be more punctual. She ends by saying: "we don't need to leave the house to go to the educational institution, and we were able to understand well with the teacher during online classes" (Questionnaire).

Other students also raised the issue of punctuality. Mayara says: "since most of my colleagues work until six o'clock, they always arrive a little late. Now as access might be done from any place, they always arrive on time" (Interview).

And finally, student Larissa said that a positive point in online classes is that she feels more uninhibited. The student stated that she was ashamed to speak in the classroom and that by taking online courses, she feels more confident. And Camila pointed out that she was able to follow her daughter's educational process more closely, as she always listened to her studying.

4.4. Beliefs: to what extent they influence the teaching and learning process

Two questions were crucial in this research. The first one sought to determine if the interviewees felt unprepared and unable to learn or teach in the remote regime. And the second is if younger people had fewer difficulties in remote modality.

Student Larissa's response was worrisome. When asked if she felt unable to learn in this modality, she says: "yes, it was very bad. I felt like a loser" (Interview), and she continues: "In the beginning, I thought that I would not be able to deal with this teaching modality, but then I saw that it was not how I thought" (Interview).
Teacher Bruno also showed some concern before classes started. He says:

"I cannot omit that the pandemics generated an atypical reality never before experienced, which brought uncertainty and a feeling of anxiety to deal with. Consequently, such issues shook my motivation. However, the inspiration soon recovers when you realize the difficult situation of students to adapt to the new and that your role is to assist them in this process" (Questionnaire).

Isabela's mother also showed some fear before classes and said: "In the beginning, I thought it wouldn't work, but she got used to it, and everything was okay (Interview)."

Another myth questioned was that younger students would find learning in the remote regime easier.Larissa was straightforward and said: "I believe so because there are things in the applications that are difficult" (Questionnaire), demonstrating a specific belief that younger people find it easier to deal with difficult things. Isabel's mother had a similar thought. She points out: "Yes because they understand technology better, so it's easier for them" (Questionnaire).

However, more interesting were the responses of Bruno and Mayara. They agree that young people have more facilities with technology, but that it is useless if they do not have discipline. Bruno says:

"Regarding the use of technological resources, younger students did have an advantage for being more experienced with technology. It has been present in their lives for a more extended period, giving them time to get used to it. However, having ease with technology is not the only factor that helps in studies through the remote modality, since many students are devoid of autonomy and discipline to study alone" (Questionnaire).

That reinforces the point of view expressed by Coscarelli (1998, p. 40) when she states: "It is important to make it clear that the good results of the new technology depend on the use of it, how and for what purpose it is being used. You cannot wait for the computer to do everything itself".

Abdi and Asadi (2015) state that investigating language learners' beliefs affects learning. Beliefs can affect motivation, attitudes, effort, proficiency, anxiety, success, behavior, and learning strategies.
Reflecting on the statement above, we can see in comments like Larissa's that she felt unsuccessful based on the belief that online classes would be more difficult, which caused feelings that affected her motivation. However, the practice was able to make her overcome her fears.

5 Conclusion

This study investigated learners' beliefs and some myths concerning English learning/teaching in the pandemics. We could see that all the interviewees brought beliefs that aroused fear and uncertainty in them. Nevertheless, they managed to overcome their beliefs and became more open to a new way of teaching as they became more used to the remote modality.

We realized that positive and negative points were raised with this new modality and that everyone changed their opinions on several aspects. Therefore, we ended this research by making it very clear that all the experiences reported in this work were experiences lived by students who were taking a short course, with classes of forty minutes. All students and teachers had the necessary resources for their studies. We do not want to underestimate or reduce the difficulty of accessing computerization, the Internet, tools and the distinct other factors that prevent many people from having an excellent educational experience.

 Unfortunately, many teachers in Brazil still do not master online tools. Many students have little or no access to a computer or the Internet, full classrooms where remote lessons suffer from noise, very long duration of courses, and others. All these situations lead to a deficiency in the educational process.

There is still much to be improved, both in English language classes and in general education in Brazil. Nevertheless, despite the circumstances, we believe that we have taken a big step towards educational development and growth, learning to use technological means to our advantage. When our lives return to normal, and we can go back to schools and in-situ classrooms, we will be much more prepared to continue cultivating and making dreams come true through education.

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