

From Brick-and-Mortar to Cyberlearning: The Evolution and Impact of Distance Learning on ELT in Colombia

Del Aula al Ciber Aprendizaje: Evolución e Impacto de la Educación a Distancia en la Enseñanza del Inglés en Colombia

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Abstract

This paper investigates the integration of distance learning models and English Language Teaching (ELT) in Colombia through a conceptual reflection on their historical evolution and impact. Over the past sixty years, ELT in Colombia has undergone significant changes, adapting to evolving educational environments. Through a reflective analysis of the literature and historical developments, the paper explores the transition of distance learning from traditional correspondence to AI-enhanced platforms and evaluates its effects on ELT. It critically discusses the challenges encountered throughout this evolution, including issues of equitable access, digital literacy, and maintaining human connection. Despite these challenges, the paper underscores the advantages of distance learning, such as tailored educational experiences and improved access for underserved populations. By reviewing the historical, current, and future contexts of ELT in Colombia, this paper stresses the importance of ongoing innovation and adaptation in ELT methodologies to fulfill the requirements of the digital era.

Keywords: Cyberlearning, digital era, distance learning, English language teaching (ELT)

Resumen

Este trabajo explora la integración de los modelos de aprendizaje a distancia y la enseñanza del inglés (ELT) en Colombia. En los últimos sesenta años, la enseñanza del inglés ha experimentado cambios notables, ajustándose a los entornos educativos cambiantes. Este artículo también examina el desarrollo histórico del aprendizaje a distancia, que va desde los cursos convencionales por correspondencia hasta las plataformas mejoradas con IA, y evalúa sus efectos en el ELT. Asimismo, discute críticamente los desafíos encontrados a lo largo de esta evolución, incluidos los problemas de acceso equitativo, alfabetización digital y el trabajo cooperativo. A pesar de estos desafíos, el documento subraya las ventajas del aprendizaje a distancia, como las experiencias educativas personalizadas y el mejor acceso para las poblaciones desatendidas. Al revisar los contextos histórico, actual y futuro del ELT en Colombia, el artículo enfatiza la importancia de la innovación y adaptación continuas en las metodologías de ELT para cumplir con los requisitos de la era digital.

Palabras clave: Ciber aprendizaje, era digital, aprendizaje a distancia, enseñanza del inglés (ELT)

Introduction

Education, traditionally conceived as a complex interplay between teacher and learner within a physical classroom, has been a cornerstone of human society for millennia. The entrenched paradigm has persisted for centuries, where knowledge transfer and construction occurred primarily in face-to-face settings. However, the last few decades have witnessed an overwhelming shift in educational thought, challenging the notion of education as a purely physical experience (Simonson et al., 2019). While the seeds of this transformation were shown centuries ago, it is only recently that the concept of education transcending geographical and temporal boundaries and limitations has gained widespread acceptance in Latin America (Valdés Montecinos & Ganga-Contreras, 2020). This paradigm shift has been met with some resistance but has opened new doors for learning and contributed to a more open, accessible, and inclusive education.

The emergence of digital technologies has catalyzed an unprecedented revolution in education, accelerating the pace of change at an exponential rate. Within this revolutionary transformation, technology has become an integral part of teaching and learning practices, reshaping the educational landscape. Simulated virtual laboratories, Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), and Virtual Learning Objects (VLOs), among other emerging tools and resources, facilitate the development of skills and competencies, while chatbots powered by artificial intelligence (AI) enhance the learning experience. Similarly, assessment methods now employ big data protection mechanisms as well as geo-localization and sensory and biometric recognition technologies (voice recognition, facial and fingerprint identification) to improve the conditions for ensuring academic integrity and online assessment while serving as a mechanism for promoting learning (Leal Afanador, 2021). The field of English Language Teaching (ELT) has not remained untouched by this transformation. The infusion of digital tools and resources has enriched language learning experiences (Muñoz Fandino & Tulande Rengifo, 2023; Su & Zou, 2022; Tu & Barlett, 2024) and created opportunities for learners to act on new language learning affordances (Acosta-López, 2023; Nocchi, 2018; Richards, 2015).

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in research, particularly after the COVID-19 outbreak, focusing on the relationship between language learning and technology-mediated tools, resources, and platforms. There have also been efforts to conceptualize the impact of new technologies on second and foreign language learning, resulting in the emergence of constructs such as digital language learning (DLL) (Godwin-Jones, 2022; Li & Lan, 2022) and technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) (Su & Zou, 2022). However, a comprehensive understanding of how these elements interact within distance learning (DL) models remains elusive. While these empirical studies and constructs offer valuable insights into technology-mediated ELT, their application to the specific context and characteristics of DL models in Colombia requires further exploration.

The integration of technology-mediated online learning and ELT in Colombia represents a unique case for discussion and research. Organizations such as ASOCOPI have played a pivotal role in shaping the field for over six decades, and *HOW Journal* has consistently contributed to critical discourse and knowledge advancement. This paper aims to contribute to this legacy by examining the historical trajectory—not of online learning or virtual learning, but of the renovated DL model and ELT in Colombia—analyzing the current landscape and envisioning future directions. By discussing the convergence of DL models and the evolving nature of ELT education, this paper seeks to identify challenges, opportunities, and potential pathways for the field’s development.

Historical and Conceptual Overview of Distance Learning in ELT

Today, DL Education is widely supported by a variety of technological resources, platforms, and techno-pedagogical innovations. However, the history of this model traces back centuries, which reveals the long-standing efforts of humanity to shorten distances and transcend geographical and temporal barriers. Knowing its humble beginnings and the conceptual and theoretical tenets supporting the model is relevant to understanding the current state of DL in Colombian ELT. Some researchers suggest that the historical origins of DL go back to the time of the epistles between Plato and Dionysius in 357 BC and 367 BC., or even to earlier times in civilization such as the Sumerian, Egyptian, and Hebrew civilizations with the so-called instructive letters (Alfonso Sanchez, 2003; Peters, 2002). However, the development and evolution of DL Education that are of interest to this discussion are those of more contemporary periods and respond to more conceptual outlooks.

The concept, as we know it, seems to have first emerged in 1728 when a Boston newspaper published an ad that offered self-instructive materials and correspondence tutoring. This early form of distance education was characterized by using mail for sending and receiving educational content, which enabled learners to study remotely. The pioneering work of Isaac Pitman in the 1840s marked a significant development in distance education when he introduced shorthand instruction by mail and established the foundations for correspondence education. Pitman’s efforts culminated in the creation of the Phonographic Correspondence Society, a precursor to more formalized Correspondence Colleges.

Bozkurt’s (2019) historical analysis suggests that by the mid-19th century, language learning by correspondence was beginning to take shape. Charles Toussaint and Gustav Langenscheidt established an institution in Berlin to teach languages through correspondence. This is very likely the first formal attempt at language teaching via distance education. This innovation was followed by further advancements such as Anna Eliot Ticknor’s initiative

in Boston, which promoted home-based study through monthly correspondence between teachers and learners. The success of these programs demonstrated the potential of DL to offer educational opportunities to those unable to attend traditional classrooms due to geographical or social constraints. As DL evolved, so did its reach and accessibility. In the early 20th century, distance education expanded further with the creation of institutions like the International Correspondence Schools. In Sweden, in 1986, Hermod founded what would become one of the largest language distance teaching organizations. This played a pivotal role in shaping global perceptions of distance education. In the United States, some universities, such as the University of Chicago and Moody Bible Institute, started to offer distance education programs (Simonson et al., 2011).

Moving forward, the introduction of radio and television as educational media in the 20th century marked the start of a major transformational wave for the DL model as described by Leal Afanador (2021) and Bozkurt (2019). This was an important leap for distance education since it made it more dynamic and interactive. In Colombia, for example, several radio stations such as Radio Sutatenza were dedicated to educational purposes (Osse Rivera, 2015). In the 1960s and 1970s, distance education expanded globally. The Open University in the UK, founded in 1971, and Germany's FernUniversität in 1975 are examples of the growing institutionalization of this model.

The late 20th century's fiber-optic communication systems revolutionized DL once again by allowing for high-quality live interactions that laid the foundation for modern online learning platforms. By the early 2000s, DL had become a versatile model in Colombia and Latin America (Valdés Montecinos & Ganga-Contreras, 2020), offering both formal academic programs and informal personal development courses. One of the first attempts at teaching English under this model in the country was the BBC's English Multimedia Course, distributed by El Tiempo newspaper with a collection of 30 CD-ROMs.

In the context of ELT, DL has long been seen to reach learners in remote areas or those with limited access to traditional classroom settings. The integration of new technologies and approaches, such as Computer-Assisted Language Learning, CALL (Mirani et al., 2019), Digital Language Learning -DLL (Godwin-Jones, 2022; Li & Lan, 2022), Technology-enhanced Language Learning - TELL (Su & Zou, 2022), and e-learning platforms, have further expanded the possibilities of distance language education. These current outlooks on language teaching and learning have enabled the creation of more interactive, communicative, and learner-centered approaches, which align with contemporary principles of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and foreign language pedagogy as well as the principles of the Distance Learning Education Model marked by its current transformational wave.

Case (2016) and Leal Afanador (2021) argue that this new wave acknowledges the ubiquity of the internet and, with a forward-looking perspective, predicts that companies will

no longer own the internet as we know them today. While all products and services will still require the Internet, it will be tied to the added value of information and communication, through the emerging and flourishing “Internet of Things” (IoT), enabling real-time interconnectivity between devices and people. The exponential increase in data volumes and speeds linked to 5G connectivity that allows educators and learners to interact in ways never seen before; the adapting learning platforms that use algorithms to adjust learning pathways; the use of big data; and the rapid evolution of AI, among other technology advancements, support this new revolutionary wave that looks for a more inclusive and effective model. A model that parts ways from the orthodoxy and limitation of traditional learning environments through a generational and paradigmatic change that uses disruptive technologies that can lead to educational innovations while bridging the digital gaps in global society and reducing learning limitations attributed to the model.

Historically, the limitations of DL in ELT were due to the lack of real-time communication and interaction between learners and instructors. However, these challenges are being mitigated with the rise of language learning approaches and advancements in digital technologies discussed before. Today, DL models in ELT offer real opportunities for meaningful communication, learner autonomy, and collaborative learning—principles that are central to both SLA and modern language teaching methodologies. The evolution of DL, particularly in ELT, reflects broader shifts in education that prioritize flexibility, accessibility, and the integration of technology. This transition from the limitations of language learning common in the brick-and-mortar DL of the past to current advances driven by the prospect of 6G and 7G technology, AI, and cyberlearning sets the stage for understanding the current landscape of DL in Colombian ELT.

The Current Landscape of Distance Learning in Colombian ELT

This section investigates the evolution and present landscape of distance education within ELT in Colombia. It analyzes the predominant learning models —namely, online, blended, and hybrid (Bozkurt, 2022), alongside the key factors driving their implementation, including the pandemic’s influence, institutional guidelines, evolving pedagogical approaches, and current challenges. Furthermore, it discusses pertinent policies and regulations to offer a holistic view of the current state of ELT in the country.

González et al. (2000) highlighted that the origins of DL in Colombia date back to early training and one-way instructional practices. The initial instances of distance education were observed in non-formal education settings, with American International Schools introducing correspondence courses focused on technical training as early as the 1930s. One notable and highly successful DL initiative in Latin America was Acción Cultural Popular (ACPO),

established in 1947, which provided a variety of educational and training programs for farmers through Sutatenza radio. Additionally, in 1967, the Colombian government created the Popular Training Fund to extend educational opportunities to underserved communities. This initiative developed educational programs such as Primary Basic Education for Adults and Baccalaureate on Radio and Cultural Television, using radio, television, and print materials (Maya & Preto, 1988).

González et al. (2000) identify the 1970s as a pivotal decade for the expansion of distance education worldwide, marked by the creation of prominent national DL institutions, including the Open University in England (1971), Spain's UNED (1973), the FernUniversität in West Germany (1974), and Costa Rica's UNED (1978). In Colombia, a key milestone was achieved in 1972 when the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana launched the television program "Educators of New Men" (Arboleda & Rama, 2013). Shortly after, the Universities of Antioquia and del Valle adopted distance education in 1973, followed by Santo Tomás and La Sabana in 1975. Another major development came in 1982 with the establishment of the National Open and Distance University (UNAD) (Arboleda & Rama, 2013; Yong & Bedoya, 2016).

Yong et al. (2017), expanding on the work of Arboleda and Rama (2013), Chacón (1997), and Taylor (1999), describe the evolution of DL in Colombia as occurring in three distinct phases: the first being epistolary education using printed materials, followed by education using audio and video resources, and finally, the integration of online platforms and digital content. More recently, Duarte-Gastélum (2024) points to a new way of interactive education driven by artificial intelligence technologies.

In Colombia, ELT has experienced considerable transformation due to advancements in telecommunications and technology (Mendieta & Barkhuizen, 2019). A 2015 study by the British Council revealed that greater access to technology has reshaped the way Colombians learn English and is expected to further drive growth in the field. With the increase in internet and mobile subscriptions, more Colombians are connecting online and engaging with English-language content at a growing rate.

The British Council's research also showed that many English language learners credit their language proficiency to frequent exposure to English-language media, such as television, movies, and music, all of which are easily accessible through modern technology. Moreover, online resources and social media have been crucial in supporting English learning, especially for those at more advanced levels. The study also noted the widespread use of English language learning apps, with significant downloads of British Council English applications on Android and iOS platforms between 2013 and 2014 (British Council Report, 2015).

In recent years, there has been a notable rise in enrollment for online English language courses. This surge in DL within the English teaching field has been driven by several factors,

such as the increasing digitalization of society and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (González-Lloret et al., 2021). Data from the National Higher Education Information System (SNIES, for its acronym in Spanish) reveals that virtual higher education enrollment doubled between 2019 and 2022. The number of students enrolled in online programs increased from an average of 221,625 in 2019 to 446,063 in 2022.

According to an analysis by the Ibero-American University Corporation (2022), over 2.3 million Colombians are currently enrolled in higher education, with 16% choosing to study through virtual modalities. This represents a 4% increase compared to 2022, when only 12% of students opted for online learning. The report also indicates that Colombia offers a total of 15,077 higher education programs, including 1,186 virtual options, of which 49.8% are at the undergraduate level and 50.1% at the postgraduate level. The regions with the lowest numbers of virtual learners are Vaupés, San Andrés, and Guainía, while Bogotá, Valle del Cauca, and Antioquia have the highest enrollment in virtual education.

To better understand the status of ELT in DL, it is essential to clarify key terms related to online teaching models. *Online learning* allows students to access course materials, engage with instructors and peers, submit assignments, and take exams—all within an online environment. *E-Learning*, an integral part of this educational framework, includes a diverse array of digital resources such as online courses, virtual classrooms, multimedia content, interactive activities, and online assessments. According to Kumar Basak et al. (2018), e-learning offers learners the flexibility to access educational materials and participate in learning activities remotely and at their own pace.

The origins of DL for undergraduate English teaching programs in Colombia can be traced back to the 2000s. Over time, more universities in the country have started to offer bachelor's programs in English through virtual and DL formats, providing greater flexibility for students pursuing careers as English language teachers. According to a study by Morena et al. (2022), while 19.6% of students currently favor in-person English classes, 49.6% indicated that they would prefer online learning in the future. Additionally, 29.1% expressed a preference for a blended model that combines virtual and in-person instruction.

224

Distance education developed as a solution to the accessibility and quality issues faced by traditional educational systems. By catering to a broader student demographic, DL seeks to use the advancements made in teaching, science, and technology by various institutions. This method helps overcome obstacles related to geographical distances and the significant expenses of commuting. As noted by Yong et al. (2017), higher education options in Colombia are classified into distance and virtual learning formats. Table 1 presents data from the SNIES, detailing the bachelor's programs in English available through virtual and DL modalities in 2024.

Table 1. English Bachelor's Programs: Virtual and Distance Learning

University	Location	Bachelor's program	Modality
Universidad Santo Tomás	Bogotá, D.C.	Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras con Énfasis en Inglés	Distance
Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana	Medellín	Licenciatura en Español e Inglés	Distance
Universidad INCCA De Colombia	Bogotá, D.C.	Licenciatura en Español e Inglés	Distance
Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios -Uniminuto-	Bogotá, D.C.	Licenciatura En Lenguas Extranjeras con Énfasis en Inglés	Distance
Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia UNAD	Bogotá, D.C.	Licenciatura En Lenguas Extranjeras con Énfasis en Inglés	Virtual
Corporación Universitaria Adventista – UNAC	Medellín	Licenciatura en Español e Inglés	Virtual
Corporación Universitaria del Caribe – CECAR	Sincelejo	Licenciatura en Inglés	Virtual

Note. Adapted from National Higher Education Information System, SNIES (2024).

Online university programs dedicated to ELT have gained popularity in Colombia, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Virtual education* constitutes a fully online learning environment where interactions between students and instructors occur exclusively through technology platforms (Moore et al., 2011). The authors note that virtual programs provide flexibility, access to up-to-date digital resources, and the ability to reach students in remote areas. However, there are potential downsides, including a lack of face-to-face interaction, reliance on stable internet connections, and maintaining motivation and organization. Moreover, critics argue that virtual ELT environments may undermine the development of integrated language skills and the understanding of socio-cultural and linguistic uses of English in context (Pabón-Romero & Puerto-Cáceres, 2020). They assert that the lack of genuine, face-to-face communication can impede learners from practicing and absorbing the cultural and pragmatic subtleties of the language.

Distance education is characterized by the separation of students and teachers in different physical locations, using technology to facilitate connections and access educational resources. This flexible approach eliminates the need for students and instructors to be physically present together. It opens educational opportunities for individuals who may encounter geographical, temporal, or personal obstacles by harnessing technology. As highlighted by Abuhammad (2020), this mode of learning is particularly beneficial for those with limited access to traditional education.

A *hybrid learning model* integrates the advantages of both in-person and online education. In this approach, students regularly attend face-to-face classes while enhancing their learning through online activities. Another flexible model, known as the *HyFlex Model*, allows students to decide how they want to engage with the course material, whether in person, via live online attendance, or through recorded sessions (Mineshima-Lowe et al., 2023). The shift to online education in Colombia has prompted a reevaluation of traditional teaching approaches. Constructivist and active learning theories, which emphasize student autonomy and knowledge construction through real-world experiences, have gained increased significance. Methods such as Project-Based Learning (PBL) and the Flipped Classroom model are well-suited to virtual environments, enabling students to collaborate on real-world problems and develop critical thinking skills (Inoue et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2021; Sarwa et al., 2021).

Table 2. Virtual Learning Modalities

Term	Definition	Characteristics
Online learning	Education provided through the Internet	Any Internet sources for learning
e-Learning	Teaching technologies for online learning	LMS, synchronous and asynchronous interaction
Hybrid	Integration of online and face-to-face learning	Face-to-face and online interaction
Hyflex	Flexible model for learning	Students can choose to attend virtually or in person
Virtual and distance education	Colombian main learning modalities	Virtual: e-Learning Distance education: hybrid

Note: Adapted from Mineshima-Lowe et al. (2023), Moore et al. (2011), and Yong et al. (2017).

Table 2 shows that technological advancements have been essential in enhancing modalities of education in ELT in Colombia (Mineshima-Lowe et al., 2023). Language Management Systems (LMS) like Moodle, Canva, and Blackboard offer a range of tools for developing interactive content, enabling both synchronous and asynchronous communication and assessing student learning (Swerczenski, 2021). Additionally, video conferencing applications such as Google Meet, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams have simplified language learning interactions between teachers and students, even from remote locations (Dhouha, 2024). Nonetheless, the adoption of these technologies encounters obstacles, such as the digital divide, which restricts internet access and device availability in certain areas of the country, such as in the departments of Vaupés, Vichada, and Chocó, with access rate of 10.6%, 4.6%, and 14.6%, respectively (Zapata, 2023). Moreover, the quality of internet connections can significantly affect the learning experience, especially in rural regions or places with limited coverage. Low academic performance and lack

of teacher training in using these tools can further impede the effective implementation of DL models (Aguirre, 2021; Pineda & Celis, 2018).

According to Jacobus et al. (2022), it is crucial to recognize that the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development -OECD, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization -UNESCO have advocated for the adoption of distance education and the privatization of higher education in developing countries. For instance, Brazil has welcomed international suggestions and removed barriers to corporate investment in education, including allowing publicly traded companies to participate. The entry of for-profit enterprises into the market has certainly played a significant role in Brazil's notable increase in distance education enrollment. Conversely, nations like Chile and Colombia have faced internal resistance that has hindered the extensive distance education and the privatization of education. For instance, in Chile, student movements have opposed the commodification of education, leading to widespread manifestations against policies that favor privatization and neglect public education. Similarly, in Colombia, concerns about educational equity and quality have sparked opposition to privatization efforts.

National educational policies have played a key role in the regulation and promotion of distance education. The Ministry of National Education (MEN, for its acronym in Spanish) has implemented regulations that facilitate the integration of technology in education, such as the National Digital Education Plan, which aims to incorporate digital tools into teaching and learning practices. Additionally, Law 115 of 1994 establishes the legal framework for education in Colombia, ensuring that education is accessible and flexible, thus supporting DL models. The Ministry's guidelines on using digital platforms in higher education have also motivated institutions to create language teaching programs that use distance methodologies (Pineda & Celis, 2018). Moreover, the initiatives and measures adopted by higher education institutions to modernize teaching methods and integrate digital media have resulted in a transformed educational landscape that encompasses hybrid models and various modalities recognized by Decree 1330 of 2019. MEN has put in place regulatory frameworks to monitor the performance of different learning programs provided by higher education institutions.

Despite these progressions, research on the quality evaluation system for virtual education in higher education remains limited (Yong et al., 2017). Thus, the absence of specific regulations for distance education in language learning can hinder the standardization of teaching quality. Therefore, educational policies need to continue evolving to guarantee that distance education in ELT is not only accessible but also of high quality and relevant to the Colombian context (Cruz Arcila, 2017).

This represents a vital area for further investigation concerning students' teaching and learning processes in this model of education, as well as the resources being used. Ultimately, despite its rapid expansion, virtual education in Colombia still trails behind both face-to-face

and distance education in terms of enrollment figures. Even with government efforts to promote the virtual modality, face-to-face enrollment continues to be the predominant trend in the Colombian higher education system (Jacobus et al., 2022). As of 2023, only 16% of higher education students were enrolled in virtual programs, compared to the majority who still prefer in-person modalities (Portillo et al., 2023). This disparity might be attributed to limited internet access in rural areas, concerns over the quality and recognition of virtual degrees, and a cultural preference for traditional classroom settings.

Impact of Distance Learning on ELT Learners and Teachers

The interplay and synergies between DL and ELT in Colombia have impacted both learners and teachers as well as traditional educational practices and dynamics. For learners, on the one hand, DL has brought to the table greater flexibility and access to English language education, particularly for those in remote and poor areas (Huamán et al., 2022). Using digital platforms, multimedia resources, and interactive tools has also fostered increased autonomy, allowing learners to take more control over their language acquisition process (Herrera Bohórquez et al., 2019). On the other hand, teachers are navigating new instructional paradigms that require them to adapt their pedagogical approaches, embrace technology, and often transition from being central figures in the classroom to facilitators of online and blended learning environments while engaging in ongoing teaching and language training.

Efforts made by MEN, for example, the “Talkativ-E Conversation Program” for teachers and the national policies and projects to bridge the gap in terms of accessibility for learners, and current academic discussions in recent studies (Acosta-López, 2023; Munoz Fandiño & Tulande Rengifo, 2023; Ricardo et al., 2020) suggest that technology and distance modalities have become increasingly crucial in Colombian ELT, especially in recent years.

One such impact is the increasing number of online English programs, especially since the government established regulations for online educational systems in 2010 (MEN, 2010). In 2015, Colombia already had 15 online programs specifically focused on preparing teachers to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and to fulfill the government’s goals by making Colombia the region’s best-educated country by 2025, it adopted the Foreign Languages Competencies Development Program (PFDCLE), formerly named the National Bilingual Program launched in 2004, to leverage Colombia’s human capital via language learning. Similarly, DL has positively impacted learners since it has increased access to English learning opportunities, especially for students in rural areas or those unable to attend traditional in-person classes. Although there is no exact data on the number of students and/or teachers who have benefited from this model, a good

indicator could be Colombia Aprende's clubs, launched in 2020, that have attracted at least 12,000 learners, of which around 4,500 are primary and secondary school teachers from all over the country. Likewise, the Global Classroom project brought together more than 400 Colombian classrooms with peers abroad to promote international educational projects and the practice of English.

One of the educational institutions that has had an overwhelming impact on ELT learners and teachers in the country thanks to its language teaching programs through the distance education model is the Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia (UNAD), the biggest university in Colombia with a range of 150.000 learners of which around 10.200 are foreign language learners. UNAD's Virtual Institute of Languages (INVIL) offers a wide range of language courses, including UNAD English, UNAD Kids, UNAD Bilingual, Business English, and French courses, among others. It has 70 regional centers throughout the country and a technological and academic infrastructure capable of serving more than 260,000 learners, and the availability of learning resources 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In addition, UNAD offers free virtual workshops without pre-registration, allowing students to practice and reinforce their language skills on an ongoing basis.

Furthermore, DL has allowed for more flexible learning options, catering to adult professionals and older students. According to the website of Colombia Aprende and MEN, teachers have greatly benefited from DL English programs, such as a 120-hour training process that was implemented for secondary and high school English language teachers. The program sought to directly impact teaching directors of Official Educational Institutions and train them in the formulation of institutional bilingualism plans. The DL model has led to a reconceptualization of the traditional face-to-face model and the binomial teaching-learning, as two differentiated but complementary processes that focus on how people interpret and use materials to understand and transform their environment.

According to Aretio (2020), distance education has traversed a "semantic forest" encompassing several distinct concepts. (i) Distance education by radio and television, defined as a system relying on these media to transmit educational content, provides access to students in remote or underserved areas. (ii) Online education, conducted entirely through the Internet, uses digital platforms and tools to facilitate interaction between students and teachers (Moore et al., 2011). (iii) Virtual education, a digital teaching-learning process, leverages information and communication technologies (ICTs) to create interactive environments without requiring physical presence (Sangrà et al., 2012). (iv) Digital education integrates technology into every aspect of the learning process, fostering digital competencies and enhancing the educational experience (Gisbert et al., 2016). (v) Open and distance learning, as exemplified by the UNAD, operationalizes principles of open education that

enable individuals to engage in self-directed learning, supported by systematic materials and diverse media (Reid García et al., 2021).

Despite the above, the advancement of distance education for language teaching continues by leaps and bounds. It has impacted teaching approaches, as teachers have had to adapt their skills to incorporate new technologies and distance teaching methods since there has been an increased focus on using technology in education, with virtual environments and educational informatics becoming more prevalent in English teaching.

Challenges and Opportunities in Distance Learning for Colombian ELT

There has long been discourse around the efficacy of DL for language acquisition. Certain scholars, such as Pulker and Kukulska-Hulme (2020), firmly endorse its abilities, whereas Jabeen and Thomas debate (2015) its one-size-fits-all suitability for varied learners and elements of linguistic development. Jabeen and Thomas (2015) contend that a hybrid approach, merging online and in-person instruction, frequently provides the most advantageous learning environment for many studying a new language. It is undeniable that the integration of DL in ELT in Colombia presents both challenges and opportunities for learners, teachers, and institutions. As the country continues to modernize its educational landscape, particularly in response to technological advancements, the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need to bridge the sociocultural and economic gaps, examining both sides of this shift is crucial to understand its full implications.

One of the primary challenges faced in DL for Colombian ELT is the digital divide, which disproportionately affects students from rural or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. In 2022, the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE for its acronym in Spanish) published a staggering report on the levels of accessibility during the year 2021. The report revealed that only 60% of Colombian households had access to the Internet at the national level; however, in rural areas of the country, Internet accessibility only accounted for 28%. This percentage presents, without a doubt, a persisting digital divide in the country, which poses a challenge for DL models. Additionally, for those who belong to 60%, there is the issue of low digital literacy, which can significantly impact learning performance (Hillier, 2020) and, therefore, the learners' opportunity to develop communicative competence.

Low levels of digital literacy are not attributed only to learners; teaching digital literacy is also a concern for distance and online learning. In this model, teachers are expected to achieve optimal levels of digital skills to undergo a true paradigm shift, ultimately combining appropriate language learning methodology, educational strategies, and technology-mediated environments (Sánchez-Cruzado et al., 2021). However, while the transition to DL has been

swift for some teachers in response to the pandemic, many teachers have struggled with the integration of digital tools into their instructional methods.

Similarly, from an instructional perspective, language teachers may also face significant challenges in transitioning to digital platforms. This challenge involves the adaptation of traditional ELT principles, methodologies, and approaches to online environments (Choi & Chung, 2021). Considering that language learning often relies on dynamic, interactive exchanges that emphasize speaking, listening, and real-time feedback, especially in communicative approaches, these inequalities in accessibility, low digital literacy, and difficulties adapting current ELT principles to online environments can significantly affect student success and contribute to a widening achievement gap.

In addition, market-driven educational policies and their impact on teaching and learning have raised concerns about the commodification of ELT in Colombia. Neoliberal educational policies have resulted in the standardization and marketization of English teaching, compelling institutions to provide courses and certifications that align with global market demands, which shapes ELT practices and often marginalizes local pedagogical approaches (Guerrero-Nieto, 2018; Guerrero-Nieto & Castañeda-Trujillo, 2024). Similarly, Truscott de Mejía (2006, 2016) also addressed the commodification of English in Colombian education. She critiques the emphasis on English-Spanish bilingualism driven by economic and market considerations, arguing that such policies often overlook the country's linguistic diversity and the importance of including indigenous languages. Furthermore, she argues that teacher education programs should empower educators to navigate and challenge the market-driven demands placed upon them. This market-oriented approach presents additional challenges for ELT in distance learning models, as online programs frequently depend on standardized curricula and assessment tools designed for broad applicability. Such reliance can further marginalize local pedagogical approaches and cultural contexts, potentially neglecting the specific language learning needs of Colombia's diverse communities.

Another key factor in successful language acquisition is sustained motivation and engagement. In the distance and online learning models, where autonomy and self-regulation are not only desired characteristics of learners but fundamental pillars that support them, promoting intrinsic motivation and maintaining students' sustained persistence can become a challenge. Research suggests that academic self-efficacy, teaching presence, and perceived usefulness directly impact learning engagement, while perceived ease of use, among other factors, may influence learning persistence and motivation (Jung & Lee, 2018). The absence of immediate feedback, physical personal interactions, and paper-based activities that mirror traditional face-to-face environments can challenge learners' autonomy and motivation to succeed.

The lack of institutional support or training programs to bridge these gaps and obstacles can further compound these challenges. The poorly premeditated shift of some institutions to offer English language courses and programs online without having the necessary installed structural technological and pedagogical resources, especially during the Covid-19 Pandemic, revealed that an adequate infrastructure covering multiple systems—a metasystem or system of systems— that can support both teachers and learners is required to ensure successful online learning (Valdés Montecinos & Ganga-Contreras, 2020). Institutions must cope with the financial and logistical demands of developing and maintaining robust online platforms. However, the traditional systems of some educational institutions may have little capacity to respond to the evolution of challenging environments such as those posed by the Knowledge Society, the Learning Society, and the Information Society in the digital era (Leal Afanador, 2021).

So far, we have discussed several challenging areas of learning and teaching English online. However, this paper argues that although online language learning, language learning through digital environments, and distance language learning share many similarities, distinguishing between them is important. While most online teaching and learning practices can be considered part of the DL model, not all should or can be categorized as such. Unlike the traditional model that tends to be a little orthodox, conditioned, and unidirectional, in distance education, motivation and individual effort to learn, know, and improve oneself hold great value. Learning to teach, which has been closely associated with face-to-face education, can certify teaching skills but does not guarantee learning. At the core of DL models is the idea of “Learning to learn”, or “Active learning”, which allows the students to design their own learning paths and set their own pace (Leal Afanador, 2021). This requires a higher level of commitment and discipline from the distance learner, but also from the institution that offers this educational model. Despite the challenges discussed earlier, DL presents numerous opportunities to enhance ELT in Colombia.

One key opportunity is the increased accessibility that DL offers (Ali, 2020; Bozkurt, 2019; Choi & Chung, 2021; Leal, 2021; Ricardo et al., 2020). For learners in rural or remote areas where access to quality English instruction may be limited, DL offers a distinct opportunity. This not only improves the reach of ELT programs but also creates a more inclusive educational environment by ensuring that all students have access to the same resources and allowing them to access English instruction without the constraints of geographic location.

The shift to digital English learning also presents an opportunity to redefine pedagogical approaches (Engeness, 2021). DL models enable teachers to build their digital identity while enhancing students’ capacity for self-directed learning. New technologies such as text-to-speech software and Augmented Reality can help teachers design assignments that engage both themselves and their students as active participants in digital environments. With

the availability of multimedia tools, interactive platforms, and real-time communication technologies, teachers can implement more dynamic, learner-centered methodologies.

Additionally, the focus on learner autonomy is one of the most significant opportunities provided by DL. Although research has suggested that some Colombian students in virtual English courses might initially display high dependence on instructors and low self-confidence, relying on external help for assignments, which indicates a focus on course completion and the obtaining of certificates without much effort rather than engaging in genuine learning (Bedoya, 2014), autonomous learning is one of the most important pillars that support distance language learning. Simonson et al. (2019) argue that in traditional education, learners tend to rely heavily on teachers for guidance, with students often playing a passive role. However, in DL, the gap between teacher and student requires students to take greater responsibility for their own learning, fostering learner autonomy as they actively manage their educational progress.

Another significant concern among both teachers and learners in online or distance language learning is the perceived lack of opportunities for real interaction and communication, which are fundamental aspects of communicative approaches. However, research on DL models has demonstrated that emerging technologies such as cloud-based collaborative learning systems, Virtual Classroom Management Systems, Speech Recognition Technologies, and 3D Multi-User Virtual Worlds, among others, can enhance collaborative language learning (Su & Zou, 2022). In their review, these researchers identified 10 theoretical frameworks, nine types of technologies, and 11 benefits of technology-enhanced collaborative language learning. Incorporating cutting-edge technologies, such as AI-powered platforms, machine learning, and virtual reality (VR), offers even further opportunities to transform language teaching.

Despite the challenges in implementing DL in Colombian ELT, such as the digital divide, teacher preparedness, and pedagogical adaptation, the potential for innovation and improvement, as well as the impact of current and prospective technologies like 6G, are substantial and outweigh the obstacles. Addressing the digital divide through investment in infrastructure, offering targeted teacher training, and promoting flexible, blended learning models can add to the potential of DL in ELT. With the capacity to overcome these challenges and a metasystem framed in the renewed learning paradigm of “learning to learn”, consubstantial with the dynamics of a new era of humanity, in which knowledge becomes more fluid, more meaningful, and of immediate applicability and evolution, due to the intensive and accelerated development of technologies, DL models can become a powerful tool for expanding access to quality English education across Colombia while fostering greater equity and inclusivity in the process.

Future Directions for ELT and Distance Learning

This paper has attempted to provide a comprehensive overview of the evolution of DL educational models, revealing the deep and substantial transformations driven by technological innovations and the current shift in the educational paradigm, one that challenges the conventional face-to-face learning environment and the traditional nature that often characterizes some language teachers who cling to orthodox practices. The title of the article, “Brick-and-Mortar to Cyberlearning,” clearly reflects the overwhelming revolutionary waves that have shaped the renewed concept of DL. As we analyze the rapid evolution of ELT in the DL model, it becomes clear that these transformative waves are inherently linked to the exponential growth and advancement of technology and the efforts of ELT practitioners and researchers to keep up with the disruptive technology-driven transformations that reshape society and education.

The future of DL seems bright and full of possibilities for ELT in Colombia. The potential of emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR), and Augmented Reality (AR) can further transform the language learning experience in online learning environments by providing enriched, meaningful, and immersive environments that can better simulate real-life contexts for language use (Chng et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2023; Koumpouros, 2024; Kuddus, 2022; Lampropoulos, 2022; Qiu et al., 2023; Schmidt & Strasser, 2022).

In Colombia, where geographical and socio-economic disparities present many challenges to education, these technologies offer new avenues for inclusivity. AI can provide personalized learning experiences by adapting content to meet individual student needs. VR and AR can immerse learners in authentic language environments by offering rich, interactive experiences beyond the limitations of traditional classroom settings. Furthermore, the continued expansion of 5G and beyond will enhance connectivity, making these innovations more accessible, even in remote areas. We must consider, however, that as these technologies evolve, Colombian ELT practitioners will need to develop new pedagogical strategies too. This will ensure that teachers and learners can fully exploit the potential of these tools.

234

To ensure that Colombian ELT practitioners and institutions can adapt effectively to these technological shifts, it is essential to develop pedagogical strategies grounded in five key areas. First, sustained professional development must be prioritized in the country to help teachers gain practical skills in using AI, VR, and AR in language instruction (Fakhar et al., 2024). Second, institutions must foster collaborative innovation through communities of practice and academic events to promote the sharing of best practices, and where ELT can co-create local solutions to tech-related challenges in online education. Third, efforts must be made to align technological tools with curricular goals to ensure meaningful

integration. Technologies should not be used in isolation but woven into communicative and culturally relevant language learning tasks (Pang & Cai, 2023). Fourth, Leal Afanador (2021) highlights the importance of infrastructure and accessibility. Only when institutions invest in expanding their tech-infrastructure will they ensure that these innovations reach diverse learners, particularly in underserved regions. Finally, conducting research and constant evaluation to assess the effectiveness of new pedagogical strategies and technologies is paramount. Research and accurate evaluation can inform how these technologies are being used in context and how they can be improved to support equity and quality in online ELT across Colombia.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have traced the evolution, transformation, and resignification of DL to understand how this model has contributed to ELT in Colombia over the years. From its humble origins and roots to the current revolutionary wave driven by the most recent technological and educational advancements, it has become clear that the shift in educational thought regarding online and DL is reshaping the landscape of language learning and teaching in the country. Despite limitations and challenges such as the digital divide, low digital literacy in learners and teachers, difficulties in transitioning to digital platforms, and financial and logistical demands for institutions, the potential of DL to make education, including ELT, more inclusive, flexible, personalized, and learner-centered cannot be underestimated.

In this regard, it is suggested to design and apply public policies that guarantee connectivity and devices for students and teachers, especially in vulnerable and rural areas, and foster partnerships between educational institutions, governments, and the private sector for technological innovation in English teaching. It is also imperative to support the constant training of teachers in specific digital skills for teaching English in virtual environments, so they can integrate adaptive learning platforms and digital resources in their classes that might respond to different students' learning styles and rhythms. Furthermore, the promotion of learners' autonomy and self-efficacy is important as well, as these are central to meaningful engagement in online English learning. When students take ownership of their learning process, they are more likely to go beyond minimal course requirements and develop lasting communicative skills. Fostering these capacities also helps resist the growing trend of treating English learning as a quick and transactional path to certification, rather than a deep and contextualized process of language development. Additionally, it is crucial to continuously evaluate and adjust distance education programs based on feedback from educational stakeholders, educational research findings, and learning data analyses.

For the field of ELT in Colombia, the future holds tremendous possibilities with the continued growth and advancement of emerging technologies and resources supported by a learning model that emphasizes a “learning to learn” approach and promotes learning autonomy, collaborative learning, and meaningful learning. Cyberlearning is no longer a futuristic and elusive term; it is a transformative paradigm that challenges orthodox models in an ever-evolving digital era that pushes the boundaries of traditional education and ELT practices. This shift towards a more fluid, technology-driven environment encourages adaptability and fosters innovation in educational policy and teaching methodologies, which can ensure inclusive and equitable access to high-quality English language learning.

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