

Enhancing learners' speaking competence in EFL: An investigation using Gather Town

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Abstract

In the age of the technology and the constant changes upon it, the following research study centres on the impact that the use of a VLO (Virtual learning object), which was designed in the Gather Town platform, has on learners' speaking skills from La Universidad Gran Colombia specifically students from intermediate English taking into consideration the speaking proficiency through different modules that allow them to better understand and practise different topics in order to improve their pronunciation skills and at the same time that they have the possibility to be emerge in to the new changes of the technology and open their minds to know different spaces to be used in their future. This was an action research study with a mixed approach in which researchers collected quantitative and qualitative data so that they could obtain more accurate results about the effects of using the VLO "EFL town Nexus" on learners' speaking performance based on different phases followed during this research (Observing, planning, acting, evaluation and reflecting).

Key words: Gather Town, VLO (Virtual Learning Object), GBL (Game Based Learning), Speaking competence, EFL (English as a Foreign Language)

Resumen

En la era de la tecnología y los constantes cambios sobre ella, el siguiente estudio se centra en el impacto que el uso de un OVA (Objeto Virtual de aprendizaje), el cual fue diseñado en la plataforma Gather Town, tiene sobre las habilidades de habla de los estudiantes de la universidad gran Colombia específicamente el grupo 1 de Ingles intermedio tomando en consideración el dominio del habla a través de diferentes módulos que permiten entender de una manera mejor y practicar diferentes temas para mejorar sus habilidades de pronunciación y al

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mismo tiempo tener la posibilidad de estar dentro de los constantes cambios de la tecnología y abrir sus mentes para conocer nuevos espacios para ser usados en su futuro. El siguiente es un estudio de investigación-acción con un enfoque mixto en el que los investigadores recopilaron datos cuantitativos y cualitativos para poder obtener resultados más precisos sobre los efectos del uso del VLO “EFL Town Nexus” en los alumnos basándose en las distintas fases seguidas durante esta investigación (Observación, planificación, actuación, evaluación y reflexión).

Palabras clave: Gather Town, Objeto Virtual de Aprendizaje (OVA), Aprendizaje basado en juegos, Competencia oral, Inglés como Lengua Extranjera.

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Chapter I: Introduction

In the context of globalization of technological advances and how they get involved in education, this study embarks on a deep study to implement the VLO (Virtual Learning Object) "EFL Town Nexus" designed in the Gather Town platform and observe the effect that it has on learners' English speaking competence in the intermediate English class (group 1) in the bachelor's degree in modern languages at UGC (La Gran Colombia university), since the ability to communicate in English has become essential in the nowadays world either in Academic or Professional fields. The problem identified by the researchers arises from the observations made during their practicum process in the group 1 of the Intermediate English course mentioned earlier when they saw students using Spanish most of the times when the teacher was not looking at them. The purpose of this study is to identify the effects of this VLO on student' speaking performance in the intermediate English course (Group 1).

This study followed a mixed data Action Research design, which allowed researchers to draw significant conclusions about the use of the VLO "EFL Town Nexus" designed in the gather town platform on learners' speaking performance not just in terms of numerical performance but also in terms of participation - interactions during the sessions and use of the language by means of different instruments: Perception surveys, interventions and class observations, and a pretest and posttest. This research aims to provide significant insights about the use of the new technological tools such as the gather Town platform.

Rationale

The project "**Enhancing learners' speaking competence: An investigation using Gather Town**" arises with the aim to address the gaps that intermediate English level learners at

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University La gran Colombia (UGC) have in regards their speaking skill proficiency either because of the lack of vocabulary, fluency aspects seen during class observation work with the participants or the necessity to practise more the speaking performance expressed by learners through a perception survey, where the technological advances there are nowadays, for example platforms like Gather Town, are going to play an important role in order to engage and encourage them in a different, immersive and dynamic practice that helps them work, get confidence and identify what are the learning opportunities to improve their language proficiency in terms of speaking performance.

The current project offers an opportunity for the Intermediate English learners at UGC to participate by the creation of free spaces or modules in a virtual learning object called Gather Town, in this sense, they will have the opportunity to go through different spaces and work collaboratively with other learners, sometimes even with some professors, where students will solve different activities proposed so that they can be able to improve their speaking proficiency by acquiring more vocabulary and different aspects to take into consideration when working on speaking such as the use of the language and collaborative work. The spaces were created in a dynamic way in which they included the design and adaptation of materials and activities focused on enhancing students' speaking proficiency, taking into account the learners' interests in the intermediate English level classes at UGC and real world situations. This space was well-designed for the students to go through different virtual places where the topics are going to vary in order to avoid monotony on its use.

According to Liu, Vadivel, Rezvani and Namaziandost, 2021; Ningsih, 2023 one of the most common factors why it is difficult for learners to improve the speaking competence is the

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lack of motivating and innovative teaching strategies which can inspire learners and make them feel more comfortable and confident with the language they are learning.

In this sense, this project which is an investigation that seeks to empower EFL learners from the intermediate English level group 1 in the bachelor's degree in modern languages third semester at La Gran Colombia university and assist them to improve and get confidence with their English communicative competence, is going to provide an innovative and immersive platform of practice for students to be comfortable with, favouring their knowledge acquisition and collaborative work, taking into account the advantage that technology offers that is the access to it at anytime and anywhere so that they can learn, complement and practise what is being learned during the classes, even being able to be used during class time or/and out of class time, facilitating the students' learning process and helping them to be on the level they are supposed to be and progress.

Statement of the problem

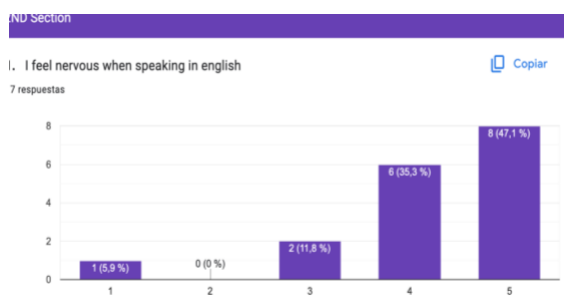
Over time, the EFL (English as a foreign language) educational field has been in constant updates in regards to language teaching and learning around the world. During this process technology has appeared impacting a lot of fields including the educational one. In this field it has been implemented as an aid in order to develop learners' skills. With the new changes, observation and research, it can be noticed that students from intermediate English level from La Gran Colombia University have different aspects to improve taking into consideration their speaking proficiency such as pronunciation and vocabulary.

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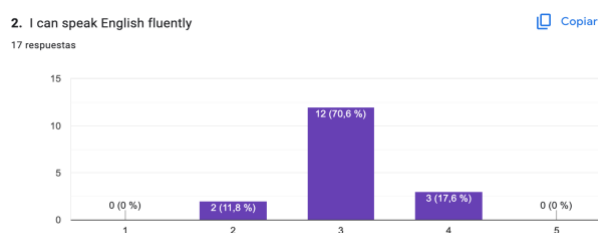


Graphic N 1: Question from the perception survey applied with participants at the beginning

From a perception survey carried out during a need analysis where for the 76.5% of the participants grade their speaking skill proficiency between 2 and 3 points out of 5 points, and 52.9% think that speaking is one of the most complex skills, pre-test and observing exercises carried out in the course, it can be said that speaking is one of the most difficult skills to acquire for them and the main reason is because there is not always the vocabulary required, for the use of the grammar based on the results of the pre-test applied where learners had difficulties with different grammar structures and the use of some vocabulary, or even for the confidence they have when speaking since during the survey, there was a question where learners were asked if they felt nervous when speaking in English and 35.3% of the participants agreed with the statement and other 47.1% strongly agreed with it.



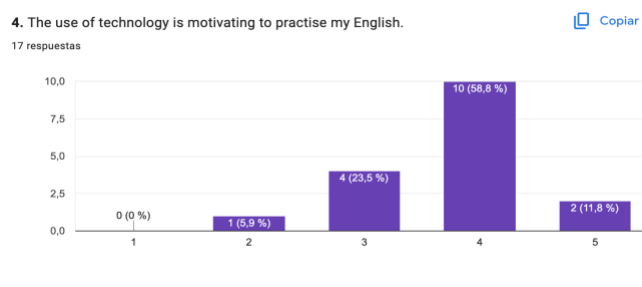
Graphic N2: Question 1 from the first perception survey with participants



Graphic N3: Question 2 from the first perception survey applied with participants

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Therefore, with this analysis it can be pointed out that first, students find it hard to develop these skills because they face different challenges mentioned before such as the lack of vocabulary, shortcomings in grammar coupled with fluency aspects and the need of practising more time that they have in order to get confidence with the language, which does not allow them to get to the point they are expected to be. Additionally, in the perception survey when they were asked about aspects to be taken into account when trying to improve their speaking competence, according to the participants, there is another important aspect that can be taken into consideration as a way of helping them to improve their speaking proficiency, and it is the use of different tools, which can be technological ones since they may motivate them based on their opinion (graphic below), and tasks in which they can emerge through motivating speaking activities so that they can be better involved and encouraged in this process and they can engage in both grammar practice and speaking exercises



Graphic N4: Question 4 from the first perception survey with participants

In this sense, implementation of Game Based learning, which is understood as the implementation of games either they are virtual or non-virtual into the classes as a learning experience itself with defined results for learners (Plass, Homer et Kinzer, 2015), can be considered an excellent dynamic for classes since it allows learners to go through the learning

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process in a different, motivating and engaging way linked to learners' interest to achieve the goals set. (Gee, 2003).

Therefore, this research has a main focus on the development of three learning modules in a VLO (Virtual learning object) called "EFL Town Nexus" by means of the Gather Town platform in which students are able to use technology in a different and innovative way for learning purposes leading to the questions "What are the effects of using a VLO in the development of intermediate English students' speaking skills at UGC?". Aimed at getting deeper in the effects it has on the learners' speaking skill proficiency and the benefits and challenges of using it, taking into account the learners' needs identified in a diagnosis test and perception survey applied to the students. The design of materials and activities linked to real life situations was carried out, to be subsequently implemented with them by using the Gather Town platform. In order to get the final results, a final speaking proficiency post-test was conducted at the end along with a perception survey where students gave their final perceptions of the use of Gather Town in their learning process.

Objectives

General objective

To identify the effects of a Virtual Learning Object (VLO) in the development of students' speaking skill from Intermediate English level at La Gran Colombia University.

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Specific objectives

- 1.** To determine the current intermediate English learners' speaking skills proficiency level and perceptions through a survey and a diagnosis test following the PET speaking exam rubric.
- 2.** To implement a virtual learning object designed by using modules in the Gather Town platform.
- 3.** To describe the effects of the implementation of the VLO "EFL Town Nexus" modules designed on the Gather Town platform, on learners' speaking competence

Literature Review

This chapter corresponds to the literature review where the researchers mentioned the background of the use of Game based learning, VLOs (Virtual learning objects) in education, Game Based Learning, Materials design and Speaking competence. It includes recent studies made in the international, national and local context involved in the field.

International

To begin with, Liu, Vadivel, Rezvani & Namaziandost (2021) carried out a study named "Using games to promote English as a Foreign Language Learners' Willingness to communicate: Potential Effects and Teachers' Attitude in focus" where they wanted to explore the role that games had on promoting students' communication skills and their willingness to do it. The methodology used by the researcher was the management of control and experimental groups. Games and activities were designed and applied with the experimental group during language classes. The data collection tools used were a questionnaire, pre-test and post-test; they were

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applied to assess learners' performance coupled with an interview where it was said that games have a positive impact or effect on human life behaviour, showing as a final result that the games play an important role in improving the EFL Learners' willingness to communicate.

In the same line, Ningsih (2023) explored the benefits and effects of game-based learning for elementary children in the 21st century learning in Indonesia through a systematic review, for this study, the researcher took 7 journals and subsequently they were analysed. The researcher found that Game Based Learning is a meaningful experience for learners since it makes them feel comfortable when learning. Finally, it provides a different environment where learners can have fun and learn at the same time fostering motivation in them.

Similarly, AlSaleem (2023) carried out a study which was aimed at collecting and analysing Jordanians learners' perceptions about the use of metaverse platforms during their learning process and their efficacy either to use it currently or in the future. This investigation was made between the academic periods of 2021 and 2022 with a sample of 50 students. The methodology used to carry out this study was a case study mixed approach where quantitative and qualitative data was managed, in this sense, data was collected by means of different instruments such as surveys and interviews. The results shown that the use of the technology, specially the use of metaverses can make the learning process more joyful for students based on their perceptions, however there are some factors to take into account about the use of multiverse platforms and they are: First, the availability of resources at the moment of using these kind of tools and second, some learners expressed the necessity of knowing how to use these space effectively since it can be a distractor for them affecting their learning process.

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In addition, Fitria (2021) led a study whose main goal was to stimulate the use of the platform called Gather town as a Gamified alternative to traditional video conference apps such as Zoom or Google meet, to simulate real situations for students. The methodology used by the researcher was qualitative descriptive where instruments like observation works and interviews were carried out to collect students' perceptions and feelings in Indonesia about using Gather town during virtual classes in comparison with other types of video conferencing platforms mentioned above. The findings showed that for learners it was not attractive to use normal video conferencing platforms for classes such as zoom and/or Google met, they felt bored, distracted and not motivated. By means of the use of Gather town, it was possible to address learners' low performance and change bad perceptions about virtual classrooms since the experience they had through this Gamified platform was engaging, improving the interaction among the class and their oral production.

In the same way, Purwanto, Danielson, Flawrenxius, Anderson and Sari, (2022) conducted a mixed study where qualitative and quantitative data was taken into account, it was aimed at testing students' learning experience in regards two virtual platforms (Zoom meetings and Gather Town), in order to obtain the results they selected 50 learners and let them use both platforms, subsequently they applied a questionnaire from which the learners' perceptions were collected and analysed getting to the conclusion that gather town platform was engaging for learners at the moment of using it, although at that moment the app was still being developed and for that reason it had some limitations, such as the unavailability of the computer app, reason why it had to be used by means of two specific browsers: Google chrome and Firefox.

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Additionally, it has some benefits on learners' interactions in different tasks such as group work, discussions, brainstorming among other activities.

National

Additionally, Parra (2022) made a qualitative action-research study aimed at analyzing public high school students' perception in Bucaramanga, Colombia about how creating virtual learning objects can help them develop skills in information and communication technologies and at the same time improve their English language proficiency. In order to get the insights and the results data was collected through different instruments like direct observation and semi-structured interviews with participants. After analysing the data, it showed that the creation of virtual learning objects and the use of them is helpful for learners to develop their skills in terms of management of information and communication technologies and social interaction, since it offers a different way of learning by means of engaging and motivating activities to foster their learning process including English language.

Furthermore David, W., & Aguilar-Cruz, P. (2023) conducted a research study aimed to design and assess the effectiveness of virtual learning objects (VLO) to foster English for specific purposes, the study was carried out with 139 participants who were students from Software Engineering, Journalism, Bachelor of Arts in Natural Sciences and Nursing taking the English course at a public university in Colombia, they were in the levels III and IV. The methodology used during the development of the research was a Design-based Research focused on quantitative approach where instruments like surveys for teachers and students before and after the implementation of 4 VLOs were important to gather the perceptions and feelings of the participants. The results showed that effectively the design and use of VLOs can enhance the

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English learning process of students since when they were designed it took into consideration learners' likes, dislikes needs and context which made students' experience engaging when learning, however due to the fact that some limitations were encountered during this research such as the pandemic situation which affected the semester of students, it is suggested by the authors to conduct more research to follow up learners' products when they are exposed to VLOs.

Local

In addition, Yetssing Bimelet Portilla et Edna Mayrely Lozada (2023) led a study at Agustiniano school about the use of learning environments through the use of video games, this research includes a mix approach in which they collected data either numerically or non-numerical “the perception of the participants’ voice”. Therefore, they handled a type of research called “Systematization of experiences” which is more critical and participatory for teachers in charge and students. During the study the students were divided into two groups (sample and control), additionally, Game Based Learning was applied throughout didactic units which were focused on improving communication skills, in this study it was found that 66.7% of the participants asserted that Game Based Learning helped them to improve however in terms of writing only 28.6% of the participants accepted. On the other hand, talking about students' perception, participants mentioned that they prefer to work in groups because it makes them feel self-confident. Finally, according to the researchers Game based learning is good, however, distractions around spaces can be a bad factor in the results.

Moreover, a study carried out by Angie Yuliana Jaramillo Arias (2021) in which was used an exploratory action research approach that was intended to promote oral skills through the

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use of board games through Game Based Learning. The researcher used a diagnostic test in which the student's difficulties were found. On the other hand, a qualitative approach was taken into consideration which allowed her to see insights of the reality of the participants. With this study it was found that learners had a problem in terms of speaking skills and the reason was that they do not speak among themselves and when they interacted it was evidenced that they used the mother tongue. Finally, the researcher found that the use of Game Based Learning in the design of the activities not only helped learners to use more the foreign language they were learning (English) but also to socialize and collaborate more with other partners in the classroom, increasing motivation.

Besides, Laura Stephanie Sánchez Gordillo (2022) conducted an investigation and pedagogical proposal in Bogotá, Colombia whose main goal was to create a Game called "Dante" as a cooperative tool for the enhancement of speaking skills for eleventh-grade students at a public institution by focusing on the real use of the foreign language (English) and providing opportunities of practice. This study implies use of qualitative data since it is divided into 6 phases of design where students were asked about different interesting and catchy topics for them so that the game can be engaging for them. Finally, it was found that education, especially in Colombia, needs new perspectives with the use of didactic classes that help learners to boost their speaking skills.

The last research studies provided valuable information to the researchers in order to carry out this research project, they provided ways in which the design process of the modules in the "EFL Town Nexus" VLO could be done and additionally the phases to keep into account every detail, from learners' perceptions to class interventions and evaluation processes.

Theoretical Framework

1. Speaking competence proficiency

When it is talked about speaking competence, it is seen as one of the most difficult abilities for EFL (English as a foreign language) learners to develop. It is essential in order to achieve the main goal of language that is communication in different contexts. But what is the definition of speaking? Fan and Yan (2020) say that "Speaking is a crucial language skill which we use every day to communicate with others, to express our views, and to project our identity" (Page. 1), in the same way, (Burns 1998; Nguyen et al, 2022) add that speaking is the way speakers use their voice to express thoughts, feelings by using certain features of the act of speaking, due to the fact that speaking skills have certain characteristics or features that other skills do not have at the moment of being performed such as the combination of the voice, intonation in order to convey meaning and emotions, pronunciation, lexical and grammatical aspects of the language, it is considered more demanding and complex at the moment of being taught, learned and assessed than other language skills.

Taking into consideration this perception of speaking, its definition in terms of proficiency can be taken as the ability to use the language effectively in oral communication, on this basis, and seeing the characteristics mentioned before, having a good proficiency of the speaking skills implies that the learners must demonstrate mastery of sub skills or competencies involved at the moment of speaking in any context. In this sense, Torcky (2006) talks about 4 main sub competencies or sub skills:

- "Linguistic competence: This includes the following skills:
 - Using intelligible pronunciation.

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- Following grammatical rules accurately.
- Using relevant, adequate and appropriate range of vocabulary.
- Discourse competence: This includes the following skills:
 - Structuring discourse coherently and cohesively
 - Managing conversation and interacting effectively to keep the conversation going.
- Pragmatic competence: This includes the following skill:
 - Expressing a range of functions effectively and appropriately according to the context and register.
- Fluency: This means speaking fluently demonstrating a reasonable rate of speech." (Page. 19)

When working on the development of speaking competence, there are some issues that affect learners' performance and may be taken into account at the moment of addressing the learning process in the hope of helping them to improve their speaking proficiency. For that reason, Thornbury (2005) provided three main difficulties in the learning process: **knowledge factors**, where the learners have a lack of knowledge of the features of the language in order to produce or to communicate effectively, likewise, there are the **Skills factors** where the learner has not automated enough the knowledge to get fluency on it; and finally the **affective factors**, where learners may face difficulties in terms of lack of confidence and self-consciousness, which can affect how fluent is the student at speaking. (P. 39)

Making a relation with this point, it is important to mention that the ability to speak fluently has to do not only with knowledge of the language in general but also, the ability to

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process information of the language. (Harmer, 2007). It is not just related to knowing everything about the language but processing this information in order to have the ability to express themselves in a better and understandable way, is for that reason that it has to be taken into account each one of the factors above and work together since this is going to be a help so as to develop and let the learners improve in the aspects they need to work on.

On the other hand, the lack of vocabulary can make learners feel lost at the moment of performing a speaking activity taking into consideration that if they do not have the enough vocabulary to talk, they are not going to be able to perform it well. Although learners are the main subject in the moment of learning, there is something that also is going to be important and it is the use of materials for them to feel comfortable with it and acquire the necessary vocabulary for speaking. (Burgoyne et al., 2009).

When working with speaking skills, it is necessary to take into consideration the standards that can measure learners' performance based on the level they are supposed to be. In this sense, the Council of Europe gives some descriptors in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) of what a person in each level (From A1 to C2) should be able to do taking into account each one of the skills. As this research is focused on speaking performance, it is taken into account the descriptors for learners' speaking performance in B1 English level. From this perspective, The Council of Europe (2020) shows the following descriptors in the CEFR.

LEVEL B1	DESCRIPTION
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<p>Sustained monologue: describing experience</p>	<p>Can clearly express feelings about something experienced and give reasons to explain those feelings.</p> <p>Can give straightforward descriptions on a variety of familiar subjects within their field of interest.</p> <p>Can reasonably fluently relate a straightforward narrative or description as a sequence of points.</p> <p>Can give detailed accounts of experiences, describing feelings and reactions.</p> <p>Can relate details of unpredictable occurrences, e.g. an accident.</p> <p>Can relate the plot of a book or film and describe their reactions.</p> <p>Can describe dreams, hopes and ambitions.</p> <p>Can describe events, real or imagined.</p> <p>Can narrate a story</p>
<p>Sustained monologue: giving information</p>	<p>Can explain the main points in an idea or problem with reasonable precision.</p> <p>Can describe how to do something, giving detailed instructions.</p> <p>Can report straightforward factual information on a familiar topic, for example to indicate the nature of a problem or to give detailed directions, provided they can prepare beforehand.</p>
<p>Sustained monologue: putting a case (e.g. in a debate)</p>	<p>Can develop an argument well enough to be followed without difficulty most of the time.</p> <p>Can give simple reasons to justify a viewpoint on a familiar topic.</p> <p>Can express opinions on subjects relating to everyday life, using simple expressions.</p> <p>Can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions, plans and actions.</p> <p>Can explain whether or not they approve of what someone has done and give reasons to justify this opinion.</p>
<p>Addressing audiences</p>	<p>Can give a prepared presentation on a familiar topic within their field, outlining similarities and differences (e.g. between products, countries/regions, plans).</p> <p>Can give a prepared straightforward presentation on a familiar topic within their field which is clear enough to be followed without difficulty most of the time, and in which the main points are explained with reasonable precision.</p> <p>Can take follow-up questions, but may have to ask for repetition if the delivery is rapid</p>
<p>Overall oral production</p>	<p>Can reasonably fluently sustain a straightforward description of one of a variety of subjects within their field of interest, presenting it as a linear sequence of points.</p>

Table 1. Speaking performance Adapted from: Council of Europe (2020), *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*.

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In this sense, taking into account table 1 adapted from the Council of Europe (2020) speaking performance descriptors, it says that in terms of speaking those learners which are in B1 level should be able to express themselves about familiar topics or topics of interest, giving explanations, opinion and arguments about different situations.

After having explored the characteristics, sub competencies to take into consideration and the different difficulties that learners have at the moment of speaking either for the lack of vocabulary or the lack of knowledge when expressing something. Following this and based on technological advances in the educational field, The researchers are going to talk now about a possible help that teachers and learners may have through gamified platforms at developing speaking skills. The concept of Game based learning and VLO (Virtual learning object) are going to be introduced, and the way in which they can help learners to improve their ability of speaking.

2. Virtual learning object (VLO)

With the rise of technology throughout time, many advances such as the creations of platforms have appeared which can contribute to the improvements of the educational field. One example of this situation is the integration of technology in the creation of learning objects called VLO (Virtual Learning Object). But where does it come from? Everything started when Wayne Hodgins (2002) adopted the term "Learning Object" based on a learning experience they saw in his children where they interacted with LEGO blocks and surprisingly these objects matched the way in which both children used to learn or their styles. Taking into account the rise of technology this term was mixed and appeared the VLOs (Virtual Learning Objects) which is defined by el Ministerio de Educación Nacional (MEN) 2005 as a structured material which can

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be accessed by students through internet and is designed taking into account students' needs and their learning process (cited in Morales et al, 2016.) In the same way, Callejas et al (2011) states that VLOs are an important factor nowadays for students since it promotes learners' autonomy, by means of online learning and different tools linked to ICTs (Information and communications technology).

On the same basis, Arias Soto, Buitrago Escobar, & Pineda Báez (2011) state that a VLO is an important virtual tool which can be considered a mediator for learning since it allows the use of authentic material for students and expose them to real language in the world in an innovative, dynamic and engaging way. From this perspective, VLOs offer an opportunity to contribute in the teaching and learning process (Milano Falcão Vieira et al. 2016) this is mainly because students are able to enter the spaces created which will allow them to participate and practice what they have learned and also get to know new aspects that are going to be important in their process. When talking about VLOs it is necessary to mention one example that is starting to take hold and it is the Gather Town platform.

2.1 Gather town



Image N1 gather presence inc (2023): The Gather town platform virtual office features (www.gather.town)

It is a video-conference platform that allows students to have an avatar in a space where they are able to interact with other people while participating in different activities proposed for

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the course. This allows the students to be fully engaged and as well as motivated since they can participate and learn while doing tasks and interacting with other people and seeing each other with the camera options that connect all the participants of a meeting in a more realistic way. The most important aspect to take into consideration is that these kinds of virtual spaces can help to create virtual learning communities in which learners can improve their oral proficiency (Mitchell, 2021) cited in (Zhao, McClure, 2022). Additionally, The Gather Town platform allows the creation of different types of activities for English learning by means of the possibility to create links between different websites and the Gather Town platform through embedded links which helps to insert the games in the virtual space created.

3. Game Based Learning

In the course of time, technology keeps advancing and it offers several innovative ways to get learners better involved in the learning process by turning it engaging to enhance learners' abilities. In this sense, Game Based Learning emerged as a powerful approach in the educational field. To get deeper into the Game Based Learning approach it is necessary to know what a game is. Therefore, among several definitions Zimmerman & Salen (2004) state that a game is “a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome” (Page. 11). In the same way, Gee (2003); Krath, Schürmann & Korflesch (2021) agree that a game can be considered as a play made by means of a structure in which it includes different types of rules to achieve objectives or goals set. Additionally, Sun, Kangas, Ruokamo & Siklander (2023) say that games provide that innovative enjoyable factor to the learning process which makes learners be engaged when acquiring and developing learner's knowledge and skills. On this basis, by means of different games it is possible to keep learners

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engaged in different motivating moments which will favour their learning process going beyond in the construction of knowledge which makes games an important factor when learning (Plass, Homer & Kinzer, 2015).

Knowing what a game is and the benefits it can have on learners, an approach in education appeared called Game Based Learning which is defined as the integration of games and learning into one process or in other words learning from games either they are virtual (video games and virtual platforms) or non virtual to achieve a specific or desired learning objective or goal (Chowdhury, Dixon, Kuo Donaldson, Eslami, Viruru & Luo, 2024). Video games can promote the “learning by doing” and leave behind the stereotype that they only work for entertainment since they can allow the creation of different virtual worlds connected to learners' interests where they can interact with different people favouring the social aspects getting to the point of having opportunities to conform learning or practice communities (Shaffer, Squire, Halverson & Gee, 2005), it is important to mention that gamification and game based learning are both designed in order to help learners to live an experience through technology in a didactic way in which they can learn any subject, elements or other aspects. However, they are different, on one hand Gamification, whose main goal is to enhance participation and improve motivation at the moment of learning, implies a goal to be achieved, additionally elements from games such as badges, rewards or points are included in contexts not related at all with games (Flores, 2016). On the other hand, Game Based Learning needs to be considered with game rules and the appearance of how the game looks, in other words it is the game itself, which also implies motivation and helps the student be involved in a dynamic way to participate in it (Howell,

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2022). With this, it is important to mention that the game with the motivation will enhance the learners to better understand and improve their abilities in order to see important results later on.

In this sense, it is important to consider games and the factors above in order to create more engaging spaces for learners since in a classroom, students need motivating activities which can take them beyond just the theory, also motivate them to participate and use the language they are learning during the process linked with their interests' and real contexts so that they can feel more comfortable with the language and keep a constant improvement of their English speaking skills.

4. Materials development

When we talk about materials, it can be a word that contains a lot of information and more nowadays with the rise of technology, it has been developing different materials that can be included either or not in different spaces. The main focus on this part is the use of technological materials that can be acquired for the learners to improve their speaking proficiency skill. Which brings the question, what is a material? The word material(s) can be taken as something teachers use in order to facilitate the learning process of the learners, it means that it is something created for someone in order to give aid and facilitate students' progress with different resources and knowledge with a learning purpose (Tomlinson, 2011). It is necessary to mention that there are different types of materials important to highlight, as it was worked with communication, it is crucial to take into consideration communicative language teaching materials, in this part, it is important to include authentic materials, Defined as materials that are not created or designed with the purpose of teaching in a course or classroom but are created for producing real communication in society, it means that it is going to include different activities such as

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podcasts, magazines, newspapers and some other linked to real world communication with just one purpose that is generating new or the necessary knowledge for them to be able to communicate in a proper way (Moncada, 2006; Fitria, 2022).

It is crucial to keep in mind the role of the teacher at the moment of managing these kinds of materials, he or she is going to be able adapt them in order to favour the learners' progress in the language proficiency, in this sense, Navarro (2015) states that the teacher, as a materials designer, has to make a reflection on the context in which the students are, the purpose of learning, the time they are willing to spend learning the language, likewise the materials or resources they have available to use during their learning process among other aspects, so that the teacher can have accuracy in the materials used for them, additionally to this reflection there are some characteristics or principles that can be taken into consideration when adapting or creating materials so that they can make learners feel more comfortable and engaged when learning, for instance, every material should be catchy and achieve an impact on learners, coupled with the fact it should always have and show a purpose to be used, in the same way, it is proposed that the material should provide opportunities to the learners to have exposure to real or authentic use of the language, the one is used in the real world; to produce outcomes and use the target language to achieve communication which is the main goal of the language (Tomilson, 2011).

In conclusion, after having discussed all the factors mentioned above and the concepts of speaking skill, VLO (virtual learning Object), Game Based Learning, the importance of materials development and see how they can benefit students' learning process, it is important to get deeper and know how the use of the VLO "EFL Town Nexus" can enhance specifically learners'

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speaking competence. The current framework has provided different characteristics of the strategies and tools to be used and to take into account at the moment of designing virtual spaces for students as well as a suggested criteria to develop the proper materials to be included in the creation of the virtual learning object in the Gather Town platform.

Chapter II: Methodology

Methodology

In the current students' English as a foreign language (EFL) learning process at UGC (Universidad La Gran Colombia) this research seeks to identify the effects of the implementation of the VLO called "EFL Town Nexus" derived from Game Based Learning in the improvement of intermediate English students' speaking competence, therefore this research employs an action research design linked to a mixed approach where qualitative and quantitative data are going to be important in order to get deeper and go beyond on the effects that the designed VLO has on students, giving importance even to the learners' voice involved in the process, for instance by means of perception surveys, and fostering a deeper understanding of this study with the different perspectives presented during the whole process at UGC so that it can reach more contextualized and rich insights of the effects of the EFL Town Nexus modules in EFL at La Gran Colombia university. In addition, this methodology is rooted in a constructivist paradigm in which knowledge is perceived as a social construction taking into account the perspective of the people who are involved in the process. Through this chapter it is shown and explained step by step the methodology used in order to design the phases of the study, the type of instruments applied in order to collect the target data, the categorization of it and the analysis of the

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information obtained from the surveys applied and the intervention made with the VLO made by using the Gather Town platform.

Mixed approach

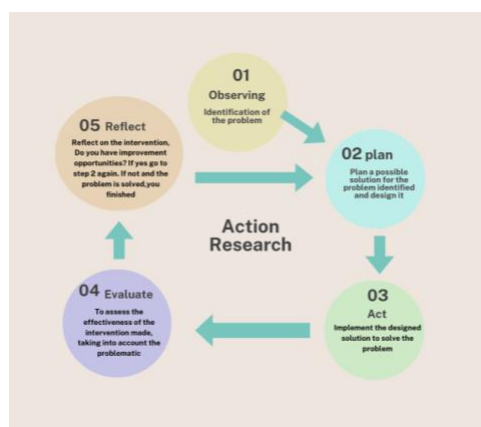
This research study was approached with a mix method which combines quantitative and qualitative methods. This allows a deeper understanding of the research by collecting and analysing data taking into consideration numerical and non-numerical information (Dawadi et al., 2021). On one hand the quantitative analysis was made taking into consideration a pre-test and post-test that let the researchers collect numerical data. On the other hand, the qualitative approach allowed the investigators to explore experiences using the "EFL Town Nexus" with the perspective of the participants, therefore for the researchers a combination of both approaches is suitable to know learners' English speaking proficiency level and their experience using this VLO.

Action Research

This research study adopts an action research approach to delve into the implementation thoroughly. This design is chosen because it involves action, evaluating and reflecting. Besides, knowledge is created through action and application that will allow learners to learn and then put in practice later with different activities. Clark et al (2020). Furthermore, researchers can gather evidence to implement possible changes that can occur during the implementation of the "EFL Town Nexus" modules to collect student's improvements in their speaking proficiency from the intermediate students of La Gran Colombia University. This study is aiming to implement modules in which learners are able to improve their speaking proficiency through activities that will allow them to practice. The qualitative approach seeks to implement and later on with their

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voices start analysing possible changes that can occur during the implementation so that later on we can make changes and then implement again. throughout this chapter, researches will explain the methodology used, the information collected and analysis of the information got from the instruments used to collect this information



Graphic N5. Adapted by the authors. Graphic about the phases suggested in the action research approach during an investigation

Constructivist paradigm

The constructivist paradigm is defined as a theory which implies observation and scientific study that has a relation with how people learn, and in addition “an approach that asserts that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences” (Honebein 1996 as cited in Adom et al 2016). In this sense, it is conducted by their own understanding. Therefore, this study was carried out with a constructivist paradigm as it addressed an experience using the VLO "EFL Town Nexus" and reflected on its own process. The investigation carried out implication in the language education, being more specific in the context of foreign language (EFL) learning

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through the experiences of the VLO recognizing different stages and answering different activities that allow them to reflect how they were developing their speaking skills.

Scope and Purpose

The scope of the action research is centred on understanding the different experiences that allow learner to improve their speaking skills, this is going to be suitable so that they can access in the platform and they start solving different activities proposed by the researchers in order to help them see a clear effect on their skills taking into consideration the speaking competence. The scope encompasses the qualitative and quantitative methodologies to capture a deeper understanding of the improvement of the (EFL) English as a foreign language. The purpose of this study is to provide a clearer picture about the use of the EFL Town Nexus modules in the learning context of the bachelor's degree in modern languages at UGC, which will permit the use of the platform Gather Town at the university as a way of teaching where learners will have access not just in class hours but also out of classes in order to practice and be more involved with the language, taking into consideration that not all the students have the same possibilities because of working hours and other activities they have. The three modules were planned for them to use extra time to practice, so that learners can improve their speaking proficiency by means of practice, furthermore, allowing participants a better preparation for their future and profession.

Population and sample

The population and sample for this study considered were twenty (20) students enrolled in the program of Modern languages from the group (1) of the intermediate English course at third semester at La Gran Colombia University, which is located at La Candelaria district in the

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downtown of Bogota DC in Colombia. The selection of this specific group was because one of the researchers was doing his practicum process in this group and noticed some English speaking aspects to be improved by students. In order to carry out this research 20 students from the group were chosen randomly to participate in the study, due to one of the participants who couldn't attend to the post-test stage because of personal problems, the researchers made the decision of not taking into account that student's results in the final analysis after the post-test conducted with learners.

Organisation by Action Research phases

As an action research study, it is aimed at finding solutions to real problems or issues, gaining insights and identifying the effects of applying the VLO "EFL Town Nexus" during EFL classes on learners' speaking competence. This research was divided into three stages which consist of 5 phases: Observing, planning, acting, evaluating and reflecting which were a key part of the design of the three modules in the VLO. It is important to mention that every phase (Observing, plan, act. evaluate and reflect) was carried out in a cyclical way in each stage for the design of each one of the modules so that each subsequent module took into account the improvement opportunities found during the process.

- **First stage**

In this stage the researchers started with the first design of the modules and intervention, the researchers applied some instruments of data collection, which will be explained in this section, in order to carry out each phase of this first stage of the first session.

Observing

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The observing phase was crucial since it consisted on collecting information about the specific issues that learners' presented when speaking in English, in this sense, as mentioned earlier a perception survey and a pre-test following the speaking section of the PET international exam was applied to 20 students from the intermediate English level course group (01) in the bachelor's degree in modern languages at La Gran Colombia University. The objective of the pre-test applied was to identify exactly the previous knowledge of the learners and their performance when speaking so that the researchers could gain a better understanding of the students' speaking level at that moment. The researchers could find first, that students were not at the speaking English level they were supposed to be at that moment, additionally some specific mistakes such as the use of the third person in English and second students expressed through the perception survey that they needed extra activities to practice their speaking performance so that they can have a constant improvement of it, by exploring the data collected during this phase the subsequent phases were carried out.

Planning

In the planning phase, taking into consideration the results and data obtained in the previous phase, the researchers designed an action plan in order to address the problem. In this sense, the design of the first module were made during this part of the process, sequences of the modules were thought based on each part of a class bearing in mind the ESA format proposed by Jeremy Harmer in 1998, each room represented each section of the ESA lesson plan (Annex 2, page 13)

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Image N2. Picture about the room 1 / **Image N3.** Picture about the room 2 / **Image N4.** Picture about the room 3



Image N5 Picture about the room 4

- Room 1: **Engage:** This part was focused on introducing the topic for the lesson and catch learners' attention.
- Room 2: **Study focus:** In this section the topics were explained to the students and there were a few activities integrated to the explanation so that students could interact as well.
- Room 3 **Study practice:** During this section learners had the opportunity to practice the topics seen.
- Room 4: **Apply:** In this stage learners had the space to apply the knowledge acquired by means of a final product based on what was seen during the class.

The ESA format allowed to organize the classes in a way that the participants were able to acquire the necessary knowledge step by step providing a practice space to check the topics seen but additionally, students were able to apply what they learnt by means of a production, always taking into account what they had to learn according to the curriculum of the course, in

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addition, the modules were thought to address the speaking aspect of language through different interactive spaces for learners. In the same way, at the beginning of the first module the researchers designed an instructive infographic in order to give the context to the learners and what they had to do throughout the module.



Image N6. : Extract from one of the infographics made by the researchers to give instructions to the students at the beginning of each module

Acting

During the acting phase, the implementation of the designed module was made, for starters the researchers made a brief tutorial about the app so that students could have a better understanding about how the EFL Town Nexus modules worked and how they could control the characters in the game before getting started. Next, observation work was carried out in order to analyse students' attitudes towards the modules presented and gather important information so as to gain deeper insights about the use of the modules during the class but also to capture some limitations noticed by the researchers such as the internet connection in some devices which affected the experience of some users and the delayed the development of some activities. The use of a research journal was key in order to save and keep track of the perceptions in the classroom towards the use of the first module, additionally, the information in it was classified

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into 2 parts; The first one was positive aspects and the second one limitations observed and possible improvement opportunities.

Evaluation

The evaluation phase provided important data to verify how the development process of the activities presented in the modules by students was, therefore, information collected during the previous phase was important. The information, which was classified into good aspects and limitations that could be improved, was analysed in order to identify the aspects to be improved from this first module. During this phase, the researchers noticed in the analysis of the research journal made that the module needed some adjustments in order to engaged better the students' interaction:

1. Revision of some activities which affected the user experience due the fact that they required a better internet connection than the one learners had at the moment of the session
2. The possibility of changing the computer room or identification of devices which are not working in optimal conditions so that each of the learners are able to practice in the best way.
3. The arrangement of some virtual rooms, at the beginning some students got a little lost because it was the first time using the app, and the subdivisions in the room were not enough to clarify the areas of each activity.

Reflecting

Finally, the reflecting phase was focused on the analysis of the information obtained from all the previous stages, during this stage the researchers could identify that the action plan and

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implementation of the first module had some improvement opportunities such as the arrangement of the virtual spaces and the interferences that some of the websites had at the moment of implementing the first module, therefore, they started to think how the limitations could be addressed in order to make the virtual spaces more significant for participants and they could take more advantages of it, finally the researchers reflected and saw that the EFL Town Nexus modules could address the problem stated at the beginning of the study taking into account potential improvements for next interventions

- **Second stage**

In the second stage the researchers started to work on the second intervention with the design of the second “EFL Town Nexus” module, in order to carry it out, the researchers followed the same phases such as the first stage: Observing, planning, acting, evaluation and reflecting

Observing

In the second stage the observing phase was carried out with the information collected during the implementation of the first EFL Town Nexus module, different aspects to be improved in the development of the modules such as: the visual aspects and subdivisions of the virtual spaces or rooms, the type of activities used and the interaction among students observed during the first session were analysed in order to identify the steps to be followed in the planning phase of the second stage to achieve a better design for learners, reason why the information saved in the research journal was utilised.

Planning

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During the planning stage of the second module the design of it was carried out bearing in mind the aspects to be improved found during the observing phase and the complete first stage. Virtual spaces were redesigned, additional walls were added in the rooms in order to make clearer the spaces that corresponds to the different activities proposed throughout the module, likewise, some different embedded games were thought to be included since the researchers realized in the first intervention that some websites had some inconveniences because of the speed connection of some computers in the room. Finally some additional alternative apps were taken into account so as to present the activities to the participants. The second module continued with the ESA format for the sequence of the activities, since it was observed that students could move through that sequence of activities and was not confusing for them during the first intervention.

Acting

In this phase, the intervention was carried out with the second EFL Town Nexus module designed taking into account the necessary adjustments, in the same way, during this phase, observation work was developed through the use of the research journal to keep recording students interaction with the new module, to analyse participants' reactions to the new adjustments and additionally to gain insights of possible aspects to continue constant upgrades of the EFL Town Nexus VLO, in the same way, such as in the first stage the researchers used the research journal and divided the information in the same two parts (Positive aspects and limitations - improvement opportunities) in the classroom they noticed that the internet connection was better which favoured the development of most of the activities, however three students had to change the computer they were working on the module because of some

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problems with the devices, after the change students continued successfully doing the tasks, in addition, the researchers could notice that combining listening activities with communicative ones was interesting for learners since they maintained the interactions in English based on the information seen and heard during listening moments.

Evaluation

During the evaluation phase of the second module the information and observations obtained during the intervention were analysed, taking into account how the information was divided (positive aspects and limitations), here the researchers verified the complete information, compared it with the information obtained from the first module. They could see that development of the activities improved, the user management of the modules was better taking into account that the internet connection in the computer room was optimal which favoured the participants' experience, additionally the new adjustments in the structures and more private zones in the virtual spaces were good in order to encourage in a better way learners to participate and interact.

Reflecting

In the reflecting phase of the second stage all the data collected was analysed in order to identify the aspects to be improved in the next and last module, some limitations such as the internet connection and the speed of some devices during the second phase in this stage affected the user experience of some participants when developing some of the activities proposed, therefore there are different possible sceneries to take into account for the next session such as the possibility to use another computer room in which computers can be faster than the current one and the connection may be more stable.

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- **Third Stage**

During the third stage the researchers worked on the third intervention, they took into account the previous interventions when developing the phases of this last stage, it is necessary to mention that the phases carried out were the same as the ones used in the first two stages.

Observing

In this phase of the last stage observations from all the last sessions were taken into account so that the researchers could identify additional aspects to take into account when developing the last module so as to have learners engaged during the session and create a more proper experience for them, additionally some different websites and apps were analysed in order to add them into the last designed module in order to discard possible incidences that learners could have experienced due to the lack of speed connection or the characteristics of some computers.

Planning

During the planning phase of the third stage the last module was planned and designed. this module took into consideration the observations made, the design of the embedded activities was carried out taking into account the internet connection speed that participants had in the last session and tasting process made during the observation phase aiming at providing a better user experience in the development of the activities, likewise the topics presented in the curriculum were included and adjustments were made to the map so as to provide a more engaging visual aspect of the map. Finally, the same sequence of the last two modules was followed by the third

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“the ESA format class” which provides a good opportunity for learners to check the topics but also to practice it in an integrated way which favours learners' participation

Acting

After having planned and designed the last “EFL Town Nexus” module, the last intervention was carried out with the participants of the study, in the same way as in the last phases the researchers continued using the research journal in order to capture perceptions and observations from the last intervention so as to draw some conclusion about the adjustments made to the third module and if it provided a better user experience for students during the session and the development of the activities. During the session it was noticed that learners were interacting in English and were focused talking about what the task required, although in some short moments they tried to use Spanish to correct some parts of their speech. However, a good sign the researchers observed was that they used Spanish a little bit less than in the last 2 interventions.

Evaluation

In the evaluation phase of the last stage the researchers assessed the interventions made, during this process learners compared the information saved in the research journal in order to contrast the different perceptions and information analysed, here the researchers could evidence that the adjustments made across the three modules were accurate and the participation during the sessions increased. In the same way the time in which they used Spanish as an aid was reduced. Although something that investigators noticed was that some devices and internet connection were not completely stable during the three interventions which was a limitation at certain moments since in some computers, participants were able to go through the modules,

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getting to the idea that if the modules are applied with better devices and web connection the user experience could increase to a greater extent. (Annex 4, page 41) Finally, the researchers applied a post-test following the same structure as the pre-test so as to know learners' performance and verify possible differences between the pre-test and post-test to be subsequently in a quantitative analysis taking into account the score in both tests aiming at assessing participants' speaking skills improvement

Data Collection

Instruments

Within the scope of this research, different types of instruments were applied so as to collect both types of data; quantitative and qualitative, which helped to provide a deeper understanding of the effects of the designed VLO in Students, and make a rigorous analysis of it. In this sense, pre-test and post-test were applied so that the researchers could obtain more accurate information about learners' speaking performance in English before the use of the VLO "EFL Town Nexus" in their learning process and the performance made by the students after the intervention. To carry out both tests it was taken into account a speaking rubric adapted from the speaking section of the PET international English exam (**annex 3.1, Page 20**). Additionally, a research journal and a survey with the participants after the intervention made were important in order to get deep insights and understanding of learners' experience and opinions about the VLO in which they interacted, in the same way the creation of a matrix was crucial so as to organize the information gathered and ease a systemic classification of the significant data taking into account the goals of this study, contributing to a more objective interpretation of both types of data managed "numerical and non-numerical"

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Data collection analysis

During this section the researchers will show, analyse and talk about the data collected by means of the different instruments used during the study in order to show the results taking into account each of the objectives of this study (general and specifics). At the beginning of each objective analysis, you will find a matrix which was used in order to classify the objectives and the instruments used for each one of them.

1st Specific objective: To determine the current intermediate English learners' communicative competences proficiency level and perceptions through a survey and a diagnosis test following the PET speaking exam rubric.

The following table corresponds to the matrix from the first specific objective. In it, the researchers socialise the instruments used to collect the data needed for this objective and additionally how they helped to reach it.

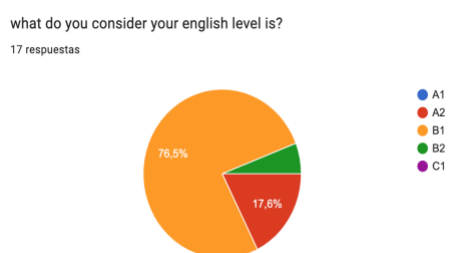
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Table 2 Matrix first objective data collection.

OBJECTIVE	Instrument	Category	Theory	Interpretation
1st Specific objective: To determine the current intermediate English learners' communicative competences proficiency level and perceptions through a diagnosis test following the PET speaking exam rubric.	Pre-test	Students' speaking competence	The first instrument used was a pre-test, which is considered a kind of test, is involved in collecting information about the participants prior to starting a course so as to measure previous knowledge or variables of a research before an intervention (Gouldthorpe & Israel, 2013).	The implementation of the pre-test and survey are useful in order to collect learners' information and current speaking performance or English level.
	Perception survey	Students' speaking performance	When conducting surveys it is important to recognise the importance they have due to the fact they help to shape participants' perceptions and beliefs. Linking and analyzing the results from the pre-test and the survey making a relation among the information helps the researchers to interpret the data in a more accurate way	It helps to clarify the specific difficulties that learners have at the moment when talking in English. This pre-test is designed taking into account the rubric of the PET speaking exam.
	Statistical Analysis	Students' speaking performance	A matrix with the results obtained from the pre-test was created in order to classify participants' speaking performance according to the items of the rubric used to evaluate them, through this analysis the teachers could confirm learners' speaking performance at the beginning of the study	In this sense, data obtained from both instruments can provide a deeper understanding of learners' performance in EFL speaking context. They provide detailed information about participants' speaking competence from two perspectives, students' speaking performance and their beliefs.

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The implementation made at the beginning of the study of a perception survey during a class with the group was crucial in order to capture learners' perceptions in regards their EFL (English as a foreign language) learning process and their speaking skills (**Annex 1.1, page 2**) it allowed the researchers to identify the perspectives that learners had in regards their English learning process.



Graphic N6: English level Question from the first perception survey (annex 1.1, page 2)

In the results from that survey in the question “what do you consider your english level is?” the researchers could evidence that most of the learners considered themselves to be at the English level they were supposed to be (B1) , however in the survey they also expressed the need of working more on speaking since they felt that the speaking skill needed to be more practiced since it is one of the most difficult coupled with listening, in order to do it they mentioned that technological tools could be an excellent way to provide motivating spaces of practice for learners which can engage them in the use of the language.

Additionally, a pretest, which is involved in collecting information about the participants prior to starting a course so as to measure previous knowledge or variables of a research before an intervention (**Gouldthorpe & Israel, 2013**), was important so as to identify the previous knowledge and the speaking performance that learners had in English at the beginning of the process. In this sense, both instruments (pre-test and survey) were useful to collect learners'

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information and their current speaking performance or English level. It helped to clarify the specific difficulties that participants had at the moment of talking in English. This pre-test was designed taking into account the rubric of the PET speaking exam.

Part 1 pre test: Students were organized by couples randomly. Each learner compared a set of two pictures they received. The time to speak was 2 minutes for each participant. They had to keep in mind the question at the top of the picture when they talked.

Part 2 pretest: It was shown a wheel of fortune to each couple. In the wheel of fortune there were three statements. The couple had to make a discussion depending on the statement that the wheel gave, they had to say if they agreed or disagreed with it and why.

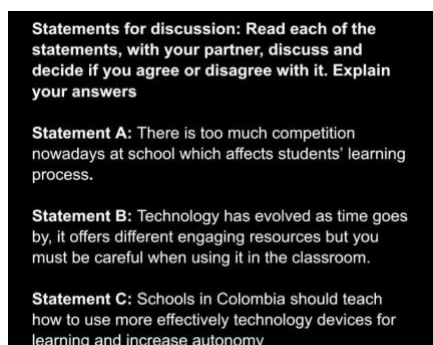


Image N7 Statements for the speaking pre-test

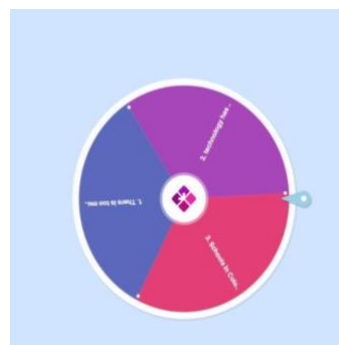
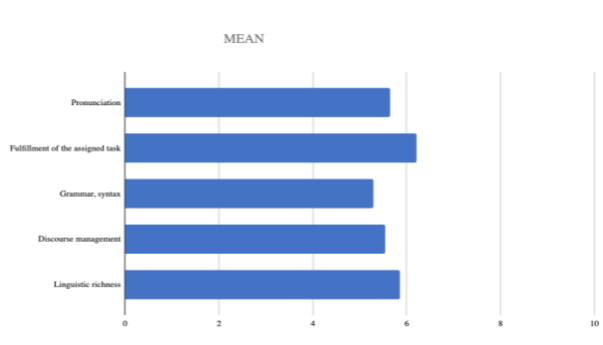


Image N8: Wheel of fortune with the statements for the pre-test

The information obtained from the pretest was divided into items contained in an evaluation rubric (**Annex 3.1, page 20**) in order to give a score to the participants' English speaking performance, those items from the rubric were taken into account to design an evaluation matrix so that the researchers could identify the main problem of participants through a statistical analysis contrasting all the students involved in the pre-test conducted. (**Annex 3.2, page 22**).

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The results of the pre-test, in which each item was graded from 0 to 10 to give a total of 50 points for the whole test (**Annex 3.1, page 20**), showed that effectively learners had some problems when speaking in English, which also confirmed some perspectives expressed by some students in the perception survey applied at the beginning of the process about the need to practice more in order to improve their speaking performance in English.



Graphic N7: Mean of each item of the evaluation speaking pre-test rubric

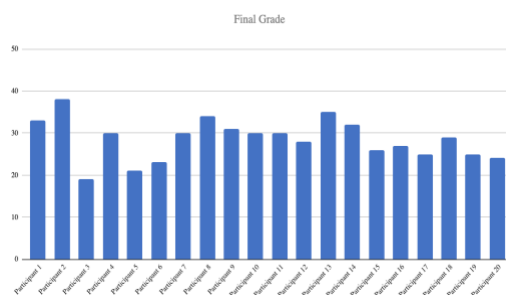
In order to get deeper, the researchers classified the score taking into consideration each item of the rubric, getting a mean per item for the whole group. In this part, the researchers noticed that the lowest scores for the course were specifically in the use of some grammar structures. for instance the third person of the verbs or inversion of the adjectives in some cases, pronunciation and discourse management, as an example during the pre-test, in the second section, talking about the statement: “There is too much competition nowadays at school which affects students’ learning process” (**Annex 3.2.4, page 25**)

“**Participant 3:** emmm okay emm I We thinks is complicated because ee when you students competition in the process learning eee you can emm unmotivate your process and no ee they no eem interest in the class”

The participant 3 in one part of the answer was confusing the third person form of the verb think “we thinks” additionally it can be taken into account the lack of use of some auxiliary

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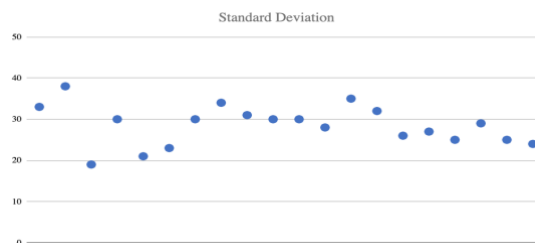
verbs when trying to use negative structures “they no ee interest in the class” and the correct use of the word “unmotivate” when perhaps the participant wanted to use the word “discourage”.



Graphic N8: pre-test results per each participant

Finally, with the results of the pre-test (**Annex 3.2, page 22**) the researchers could evidence that many of the participants from the intermediate English class group (1) were not at the necessary speaking English level they were supposed to be at that time, which was B1 Level, without taking into account some participants who passed the tests successfully and others who passed with the minimum score “30”, which were in total 10 out of the 20 participants.

Additionally, It could be noticed that most of the students were almost at the same level based on the results, except for 1 participant that got a much better score than the rest of the learners and 2 participants that got lower scores as it shows the standard deviation in the graphic N9.



Graphic N9: Standard deviation participants' pre-test results.

2nd specific objective: To implement a virtual learning object designed by using modules in Gather Town platform.

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The following table is the matrix utilised in order to analyse the data collected in regards the specific objective number 2, It contains the instruments used in the process, their description and how they contributed to achieve the objective.

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Table 3 Matrix second objective data collection

OBJECTIVE	Instrument	Category	Theory	Interpretation
<p>2nd Specific objective: To implement a virtual learning object designed by using modules in the Gather Town platform.</p>	<p>Research journal</p>	<p>VLO (Virtual learning objects) GBL Speaking Competence</p>	<p>VLO is defined by El Ministerio de Educación Nacional (MEN) 2005 as an structured material which is digital and could be accessed through internet and it is created with a learning with a learning purpose (cited in Morales et al, 2016.). In this sense the research journal provided the opportunity for researchers to capture participants' reactions towards the use of a VLO in the classroom.</p>	<p>The integration of Game Based Learning into VLOs creates excellent opportunities to give learners' ways of learning which can be more interesting and catchy for them, encouraging the participation during classes, additionally, by means of the research journal it was possible to observe learners perceptions and interactions during the interventions made with the three EFL Town Nexus modules</p>
	<p>Design of the modules " EFL town nexus"</p>	<p>VLO, GBL (Game based learning) materials design, speaking competence</p>	<p>When designing a VLO it has to take into account the goal of easing the students' learning process and their engagement in the process, therefore GBL, which is defined as the integration of games into the learning process. Chowdhury et al (2024), is an excellent option to bear in mind when creating materials and VLOs since the integration of games can make the learning experience more joyful for students</p>	

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After knowing the speaking performance that learners had, the design of 3 modules in the Gather Town platform started, taking into account the topics in the curriculum of the course. To design modules, first the lesson plans were created in order to have every part of the game well organised, each module had 4 levels(rooms) and each level was one part of the **lesson plan (Annex 2, page 13)**, the three modules as mentioned earlier followed the sequence of a class “ESA” proposed by Jeremy Harmer in 1988.

The use of a research journal was crucial since it helped the researchers to record the data collected during the intervention process. They created a format to save the information in 2 categories to be analysed subsequently: positive observations and factors to be improved (**Annex 4, page 41**). This data included good aspects seen during participants' interactions with the EFL Town Nexus modules, such as the time the used English while developing and interaction with their classmates, which incremented when using the platform, but also the improvement opportunities in the arrangement of the designed virtual spaces and the limitations found such as the internet connection speed and the conditions of some devices available during the sessions carried out with the modules, since at some moments, learners' experience was affected because they had to wait some time while the games and spaces loaded in some cases, getting to the point of having to change the computer so that they could continue working and the potential adjustments that could improve the user experience when interacting in the modules such as the arrangement of the virtual space and its aesthetic features.

Finally, after collecting and saving the data mentioned before, it was classified and utilised, good aspects observed were taken into account in order to keep the good development of

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the modules, additionally, the researchers divided the aspects to be improved into 2 subcategories: Modules and design, and technical issues with devices so as to make improvements and the necessary adjustments in the design of the subsequent EFL Town Nexus modules aiming at improving the user experience during the sessions carried out with participants, throughout the next sessions the adjustments were made and additionally the devices who had issues were identified, therefore learners could have a better user experience and develop the sessions in the "EFL Town Nexus" modules, however the researchers noticed that it could be good to have better devices to exploit the complete features and uses of all the games and apps used in a more seamless way.

3rd Specific Objective: To describe the effects of the implementation of the VLO modules designed on the Gather Town platform, on learners' speaking competence.

The next table corresponds to the matrix of the third specific objective, in the same way as the last ones, it includes information about the instruments used to collect the information in order to reach the specific objective, additionally, it contains some descriptions of them and their functions in the process.

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Table 4 Matrix Third objective data collection

OBJECTIVE	Instrument	Category	Theory	Interpretation
3rd specific objective: To assess the use of Gather Town platform on learners' speaking skills by means of a speaking posttest and perception surveys with participants	Post-test	Speaking competence	In order to measure students' speaking performance at the end of the process, the researchers applied a speaking post-test which followed the same dynamic as the pre-test and had the same goal of collecting information about the students' speaking skills but not just the prior knowledge but the performance after the use of the designed EFL Town Nexus modules.	The implementation of the post-test to the participants and the perception survey applied was a good way for the researchers in order to go deeper and get insights about participants' perceptions of the EFL Town Nexus modules and additionally assess the effectiveness of their use in an EFL classroom with Intermediate English Learners (B1). the results obtained from the post-test linked with the pre-test results and the survey carried out provided more accurate data to the researchers so as to draw conclusions
	Perception Survey	VLO and Speaking performance	At the end of the interventions the researchers applied a perception survey, which is an instrument aimed at collecting participants' opinions about the use and interventions made with the EFL Town Nexus modules. This instrument is seen as a way of interviewing participants but not necessarily recorded face to face but they can be made in paper taking into account open and closed questions Singh, 2006; Kothari, 2004	
	Statistical Analysis	Speaking performance	Finally, the researchers made a statistical analysis which allowed them to compare and contrast participants' speaking performance before and after the intervention.	

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The implementation of a post-test was made, it was aimed at collecting the same information as the pre-test, however, as Gouldthorpe & Israel (2013) states, it is applied at the end of the process or after an intervention in research with the purpose of being compared. In this sense, Pratt, Mcguigan & Katzev (2000) clarify that it is necessary to be careful when using this kind of test since it has to be aimed at collecting the same information and work on the same variables as the pre-test. Therefore, this instrument was key during this research, since it allowed us to collect the necessary information to compare learners' speaking performance in English before but also after the intervention with the VLO "EFL Town Nexus" in the classroom. It provided the necessary insights to analyse the effects of the platform on participants' learning process. The post-test followed the same dynamic as the pre-test, the first part also followed a picture description of two images for each participant, likewise, the second part was as in the pre-test, a discussion between two participants about a statement given randomly.

In the same way, a final questionnaire was conducted with 9 of the participants after the intervention made with the three modules in order to collect different learners' opinions and perceptions about the use of the gamified virtual platform in their learning process and to identify possible challenges from learners' perspective of using this VLO. To understand this instrument better, It is necessary to define what a questionnaire is. On one hand, Kothari (2004) states that a questionnaire is made of a set of questions based on the information researchers want to collect, depending on the purposes the questions are sequenced. On the other hand, questionnaires are defined as "a form which is prepared and distributed for the purpose of securing responses; it may be seen as an interview on paper that follows the same patterns of construction as an Interview" (Singh, 2006).

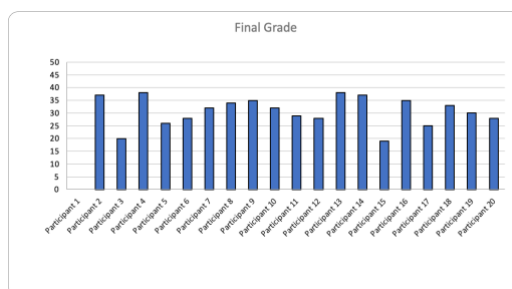
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When designing a questionnaire, it is important to mention some characteristics to be taken into account, for example, the types of questions you can use, since they can be either close questions where respondents answer yes or no, or open questions where participants can have free response (Singh, 2006; Kothari, 2004). In this sense, the use of the questionnaire allowed the researchers to get deeper insights about the use of the VLO during the interventions made in classes from the participants' perspectives, who are the ones who lived and experienced the "EFL Town Nexus" modules.

A data analysis was made by means of the information obtained from the pre and post-test, linked to the participants' answers in the final perception survey mentioned before, the researchers could get more accurate results about the experience learners had when using the "EFL Town Nexus" modules and their speaking performance, highlighting that according with some students' opinions in the final survey conducted, for example to the question "Do you think the Gather Town platform was useful for your learning process? why?" Many participants had similar opinions in regards to the use of the "EFL Town Nexus" modules, as an example a participant answered the following: "I think it was useful taking into account the activities and the different possibilities inside the platform like characters, videos and presentations, also the possible interactions with my partners" . (**Annex 1.2, page 12**)

Therefore, the researchers were able to see that learners could feel good interacting while navigating through the modules, however, based on the observations made and some comments left by the students in the survey some technical aspects such as the devices and the internet connection must be taken into account in order to make a much better experience for learners.

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Graphic N10: post-test results per each participant

Finally, apart from the survey applied, the researchers carried out an analysis of the speaking post-test conducted, in which it was evidenced that from the 19 students who presented the speaking PET post-test, 11 students approved demonstrating a B1 English speaking level but it is necessary to take into account that it was not with an excellent score, since 4 participants approved with almost the minimum grade, their score was 30 - 33 out of the maximum score which was 50, and the remaining 7 participants approved with a score between 34 - 38. While the other 8 students out of the 19 could not approve the speaking post-test, and therefore they could not demonstrate a B1 English speaking proficiency at the end of the intervention process. Some of the problems observed were some mistakes in grammar structures and vocabulary. For instance, one participant answered the following when he was asked to answer the question “Why are people communicating in this way?” based on a picture: **Participant 8 said** “...I think could be she is working I can look a meeting and she is relaxing on the bed...” “Extract taken from participant 8 speech” (**Annex 3.3.4, page 34**)

In this part, participant 8 at one moment of his speech inverted some structures when he was talking “I think could be she working” instead of saying “I think she could be working” in the same way, the participant said “She is relaxing on the bed” when he wanted to see that “She is relaxed on the bed”. In the same way, in some cases the use of the article “the” was a problem

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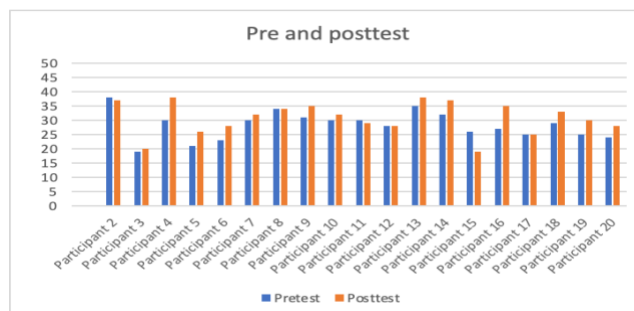
for participants, for example, participant number 7 was asked to discuss the following statement “People think that when they are beautiful, they are happy “with another participant. In the discussion at a certain point the participant 7 said the following: “...I think that the womans are the most complicated...” Extract taken from participant 7 post-test answers (Annex 3.3.4, page 34)

In the response, participant 7 said “The womans” when she meant “women” in this part the participant did not use the correct plural form of the word “Woman” but also the participant used the article “The” to talk about women in general when it should not.

Chapter III: Results and conclusions

Findings

In this section the researchers will describe the findings of using the VLO “EFL Town Nexus” modules during classes by showing the complete results of the analysis of the data obtained from the instruments employed in this investigation: pretest - posttest, observation work (Research journal), and the initial and final perception survey carried out with participants taking into account the goal of this study.



Graphic N11: Comparative graphic of learners' pre and post-test scores.

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Based on the post-test results (**Annex 3.3, page 30**), researchers carried out a statistical hypotheses analysis also taking into account participants' pre-test, they managed two hypotheses, one, the "H0" null hypothesis which represents a no change on participants' speaking performance and second the alternative hypothesis "H1" which represents a significant statistical change on students' speaking performance. It is important to mention that the null hypothesis is rejected if the p-value is less than 0.05, bearing in mind this statistical analysis, it can be pointed out that effectively there was a change on learners' speaking performance since the P-value obtained was 0,0072 (**Annex 3.3.5, page 41**) (which rejected the "H0" and implies that for some participants there was an improvement (**Graphic 11**), similarly, the pretest mean score was 28.26/50 meanwhile in the post-test the mean for the complete group of participants improved and was 30.73/50 showing around 2 points more in comparison with the pre-test.

Consequently, it was noticeable that some of them could manage in a better way some of the ideas they wanted to express. For example, in terms of structures. In the pre-test the researchers got from participant number 5 the following answer to the question "do you spend much time outside? Why yes or no? Participant 5: "...I like walk for outside my home for example when I emm have time the last semester I walk to station Policarpa to my home amm I walk like 30 minutes or 1 hour...". (**Annex 3.2.4 page 25**), during the pretest the participant had some problems when expressing the ideas, one of them was at the moment of using gerunds after verbs such as: like, love, enjoy, etc. "I like walk" instead of "I like walking or I like to walk", however, during the post test, although the student had mistakes, at some moments of the speech, the participant was able to use the gerund in that kind of expression, for example, Participant 5 said: "emm yes, I enjoy cooking. I think this aa one thing that aa I enjoy amm..."

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(**Annex 3.3.4, page 32**). In this part of the participant's answer, the student could correctly use the gerund form after the verb enjoy "I enjoy cooking" which was not noticed during the pre-test performance of that participant. Therefore, the researchers were able to notice some positive aspects of using the VLO "EFL Town Nexus" on students' speaking competence.

Additionally, after analysing the observations made during the sessions saved in the research journal (**Annex 4, page 41**), the researchers found that the modules could motivate students to try to interact in English and decrease use of Spanish during class time, since at the beginning learners used Spanish at some moments while interacting among them, for example from the class observation work made during the first session, it was possible to hear in a mini group a student saying "Dele click ahi y veamos que tenemos que hacer en esta parte" in order to clarify in groups what they had to do, however at the end of the same session most of the students were talking in English, for example, in the same mini group one of them said "Let's see in the computer on the table to see the final activity". In the same way, in the subsequent sessions, learners tried to maintain every interaction in English, even when they tried to socialise what they had to do, decreasing the use of Spanish language.

In the same way, learners confirmed the perspectives seen by the researchers through the final perception survey (**Annex 1.2, page 11,12,13**) where they expressed that the use of the platform was helpful for them since the "EFL Town nexus" modules were interesting because they provided opportunities to interact among the participants during the sessions in a different way, being a departure from traditional teaching and learning strategies.

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On the other hand, findings also reveals that although the VLO “EFL Town Nexus could demonstrate that it can engage students at the moment of speaking English during the classes, it also may cause some moments of confusion, disappointment or stress because of different factors such as the divisions of the virtual spaces, or some technical issues whether with the devices or the internet connection which at some moments affected learners' experience while using the game and developing some of the activities, such as one of the participants said when he asked if the platform was useful for him “ Si, con un buen internet y computadores que tengan un buen rendimiento es fácil y divertido de usar, lo que ayuda al proceso de aprendizaje” (**Annex 1.2, page 13**)

Conclusions and recommendations

The use of the VLO “EFL Town Nexus” effectively implied some positive effects on participants from intermediate English level group 1 at La Gran Colombia university, but also some improvement opportunities which allowed the researchers to answer the research question proposed for this study: What are the effects of using a VLO in the development of intermediate English students' speaking skills at UGC? In this sense, the participants expressed that the VLO helped them in order to practise more the use of the language and clarify different topics seen across the semester, which was a positive aspect to highlight about the implementation of the modules by using the Gather Town platform and games, in the same way, students highlighted the VLO as a motivating and engaging strategy.

To this learners' position, Gee (2003); Krath, Schürmann & Korflesch (2021) contribute by asserting the importance of the use of Game Based Learning. According to them it provides students with excellent opportunities to go beyond in the learning process by letting them

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experience different learning moments away from traditional education, which was also confirmed by learners who said that it was a different and interesting experience.

In the same way, the findings also underscore the importance of taking into account the innovative tools people have nowadays in the design of different classes and activities when teaching and learning a language, since they can trigger interest in practising and using the target language to learn such as it was evidenced during observation work and from participants' opinions.

In terms of performance, after using the VLO "EFL Town Nexus" participants showed an improvement on their speaking competence proficiency taking into account their performance at the beginning and at the end of the implementation which provides a better understanding on how the use of the Gather Town can have effects on students' learning process taking into account that this implementation consisted of 3 modules.

Simultaneously, the researchers can draw the conclusion that the use of the platform Gather Town has positive effects such as the ones mentioned before but also it has some effects on students or limitations such as the internet connection available or the kind of devices used that can be improved in order to provide a better user experience when using of the Gather Town platform in classes, which brings the crucial point that if there are no the proper conditions and devices in the place to carry out a complete session with the Gather Town platform it can lead learners to feel stressed, disappointed or to lose willingness to participate and interact, having bad effects on students' learning process.

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Based on the findings and conclusions of this study about the effects of the VLO “EFL Town Nexus” on learners' speaking competence some recommendations can be made in order to enhance the effectiveness of this platform in future studies:

1. It is important to verify the resources available in the places where the platform will be used such as internet connection speed during the sessions, the type of computers and the condition in which they are in order to adapt the proper virtual games for those devices so that students can have an excellent user experience.
2. Teachers and students may find difficult to design or use the platform during the sessions, therefore It is crucial to make sure that students know how to use the platform from the very beginning, a tutorial class such as the one carried out in this study to teach the controls of the game is a good option for students to get familiar with it. However, the creation of a tutorial video can be a better option in terms of efficiency, taking into account students who may not attend the first tutorial class.
3. The design of the virtual spaces should have the necessary demarcations and signage to enable learners to navigate through the space without any confusion and take advantage of it from the very beginning.
4. Bearing in mind that during this study three modules were applied and students showed some improvements, it is suggested that in the future some investigations can be carried out with a longer period of implementation which could be for a complete semester (6 months) or a complete year.

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By implementing these recommendations in future studies, they could make the Gather Town platform more beneficial for learners and demonstrate a more significant improvement on students' English speaking competence and reach a complete engagement in every moment of a class without any interruptions.

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