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Online Language Learning in Colombian Graduate Education: Students' Perceptions from a Survey Study[1]

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Abstract
This survey-based study investigated graduate students' perceptions of online skills-based English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. A survey gathered data from 181 participants. Descriptive and inferential statistics, as well as content analysis, were used to analyze the data. Findings revealed a favorable perception of the online learning modality, tutors' teaching practices, and assessment processes, with students valuing flexibility, accessibility, and structured course design. In contrast, students' perceptions of language learning were lower, indicating a need for more interactive and relevant materials. While students reported gains in autonomy development, challenges such as lack of motivation and limited tutor guidance were also observed. The study suggests integrating discipline-specific authentic tasks, enhancing tutor training, and balancing synchronous and asynchronous interactions to improve online EAP learning.
Keywords: online language learning; graduate education; student perceptions; survey study; EAP.
Resumen
Aprendizaje de lenguas en línea en la educación de posgrado en Colombia: percepciones de los estudiantes a partir de un estudio tipo encuesta

[1] Artículo de investigación

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Este estudio por encuesta investigó las percepciones de estudiantes de posgrado sobre cursos de inglés con fines académicos (EAP, por sus siglas en inglés) en línea y basados en habilidades. Se recopilaron datos mediante una encuesta que obtuvo 181 respuestas válidas. Para el análisis de datos se utilizó estadística descriptiva e inferencial y análisis de contenido. Los hallazgos revelaron una percepción favorable de la modalidad de aprendizaje en línea, las prácticas docentes de los tutores y los procesos de evaluación. Los estudiantes valoraron la flexibilidad, la accesibilidad y el diseño estructurado de los cursos. En contraste, la percepción de los estudiantes sobre el aprendizaje de la lengua fue más baja, lo que indica la necesidad de materiales más interactivos y pertinentes. Si bien los estudiantes reportaron avances en el desarrollo de la autonomía, también se observaron desafíos como la falta de motivación y la orientación limitada por parte de los tutores. El estudio sugiere integrar tareas auténticas específicas de cada disciplina, fortalecer la formación de tutores y equilibrar las interacciones sincrónicas y asincrónicas para optimizar las experiencias de aprendizaje de lenguas en línea en contextos EAP.
Palabras clave: aprendizaje de lenguas en línea; educación de posgrado; percepciones estudiantiles; encuesta; EAP.

Résumé

Apprentissage des langues en ligne dans l'enseignement supérieur en Colombie : perceptions des étudiants à partir d'une enquête

Cette étude par enquête a examiné les perceptions d'étudiants de master et de doctorat concernant des cours en ligne d'anglais à visée académique (EAP, pour *English for Academic Purposes*) axés sur le développement de compétences. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen d'un questionnaire ayant obtenu 181 réponses valides. L'analyse des données a combiné des statistiques descriptives et inférentielles, ainsi qu'une analyse de contenu. Les résultats ont révélé une perception favorable de la modalité d'apprentissage en ligne, des pratiques pédagogiques des tuteurs et des processus d'évaluation. Les étudiants ont apprécié la flexibilité, l'accessibilité et la structure des cours. En revanche, leur perception de l'apprentissage de la langue elle-même s'est révélée moins positive, mettant en évidence un besoin de matériaux plus interactifs et pertinents. Bien que les étudiants aient indiqué des progrès dans le développement de leur autonomie, des défis tels que le manque de motivation et une orientation limitée de la part des professeurs ont également été signalés. L'étude suggère d'intégrer des tâches authentiques propres à chaque discipline, de renforcer la formation des professeurs et de mieux équilibrer les interactions synchrones et asynchrones afin d'optimiser les expériences d'apprentissage des langues en ligne dans les contextes EAP.
Mots-clés : apprentissage des langues en ligne ; enseignement supérieur ; perceptions des étudiants ; enquête ; EAP.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, online courses have gained popularity across higher education institutions in Latin America and Colombia (Hernández et al., 2024). Their flexibility, scalability, and capacity to reach diverse learners have positioned online courses as viable options for undergraduate and graduate programs, especially as institutions adapted to emergency remote teaching during pandemic-related lockdowns (Takona, 2023). Online language teaching is no exception to this trend, with an increasing number of courses delivered online in multiple formats, both in the international context (Blake, 2013; Hurskaya, 2024; Tao & Gao, 2022) and in Colombia, where online learning offerings were expanded by public policy and institutional efforts during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Castañeda-Trujillo & Jaime-Osorio, 2021).

In graduate education, online language learning is often described as both flexible and professionally relevant, supporting students' academic and workplace communication needs. Studies suggest that graduate students generally perceive online language instruction as effective, particularly when it incorporates interactive tools, authentic tasks, and structured feedback (Daniel et al., 2016). Nevertheless, students' experiences are not uniform. In the international context, Anuradha and Hymavathi (2024) reported challenges related to technological accessibility, pedagogical adaptation, and student engagement in online higher education in India, while Aloka et al. (2023) identified psychological barriers to adapting to online teaching and learning, as well as inadequate e-learning resources and technical difficulties in South Africa.

Within the Latin American context, most studies report positive outcomes for students enrolled in online courses, including moderate learning gains (Stanley & Montero Fortunato, 2022) and high levels of satisfaction among students enrolled in graduate programs compared to face-to-face learning (Bazán-Ramírez et al., 2020). Few studies, however, have documented challenges associated with online education in the region. For example, Estrella (2023) reported that Ecuadorian undergraduate students held negative perceptions regarding the usefulness of learning English online.

In Colombia, Castañeda-Trujillo and Jaime-Osorio (2021) reported that teachers require additional preparation in the use of technologies to promote autonomous learning processes among students and highlighted the need to adapt teaching practices to contemporary educational demands. These findings align with Segovia-García and Said-Hung (2021), who identified factors such as the quality of technological infrastructure, content and information quality, and institutional service quality as critical determinants of student satisfaction in e-learning. Despite this growing body of research, few studies have focused specifically on graduate students' experiences in online English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. The present study aims to address

this gap by examining the perceptions of graduate students enrolled in online skills-based EAP courses at a Colombian public university.

This survey study examined graduate students' perceptions of online skills-based English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses at a Colombian public university, using quantitative statistical analyses and qualitative content analysis. The findings provide evidence of how graduate students experience online EAP instruction, offering insights applicable to similar higher education EAP contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on four interrelated theoretical constructs that inform the assessment of online language courses: online language learning, tutors' teaching practices, assessment, and learner autonomy.

Online Language Learning

Online language learning environments have developed into multimodal spaces that support interaction, collaboration, and self-paced study, facilitating academic and professional language development through access to digital resources and learning communities (Blake, 2013; Samara et al., 2023). This development is particularly relevant in EAP contexts, where learners are expected to develop both general academic and discipline-specific communication skills (de Chazal, 2014).

At the graduate level, EAP instruction requires specialized discourse competencies aligned with research and professional communication needs. Studies comparing face-to-face and fully online graduate EAP instruction indicate that well-designed online courses can achieve comparable academic outcomes, albeit through different pedagogical approaches and with distinct challenges (Stanchevici & Siczek, 2019). Digital technologies further support personalized instruction, authentic language use, and learner autonomy, addressing graduate students' need for flexibility alongside their academic and professional commitments (Kessler, 2018; Samara et al., 2023).

Tutors' Teaching Practices in Online Environments

In online language education, the tutor's role extends beyond content delivery to include facilitation, motivation, and learner support. Salmon's (2011) e-Moderation model provides a well-established framework for conceptualizing tutor practices in online environments, emphasizing the management of communication processes to establish teaching presence (Garrison, 2007). Through progressive stages that support access, interaction, knowledge construction, and learner development, the model underscores the importance of scaffolding, timely intervention, and the creation of a supportive online learning community (Anderson, 2008; Salmon, 2011).

Assessment in Online Language Learning

Assessment in online language learning is conceptualized as a continuous and formative process aligned with communicative and disciplinary goals. Transparent assessment criteria and well-designed rubrics support learners' understanding of expectations and promote engagement with assessment criteria throughout task completion (Miknis, 2020). Formative assessment, supported by timely and dialogic feedback, enables learners to monitor progress, regulate learning strategies, and reflect on achievement, particularly in online contexts where asynchronous and multimodal feedback can enhance learner engagement (Carless et al., 2011; Ebadi & Dadgar, 2024; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Effective online language assessment further requires constructive alignment among learning objectives, content, task demands, and assessment activities to ensure appropriate cognitive and linguistic challenge (Biggs, 1996). When aligned with learning goals, technology-mediated assessment practices can support the development of linguistic and intercultural competencies while fostering learner autonomy, academic integrity, and reflective engagement (Boud, 2007; Espitia & Cruz, 2013).

Autonomy Development in Online Language Learning

Learner autonomy, which involves learners' capacity to set goals, regulate strategies, and evaluate progress, is both a prerequisite for and an outcome of effective online language learning (Holec, 1981). Online environments can foster autonomy by granting learners greater control over learning processes and by providing tools for self-monitoring and self-assessment (Benson, 2011). However, autonomy development also depends on pedagogical scaffolding, including tutor support and task design that promote reflection and strategic learning (Little, 2007; Reinders & White, 2011; Salmon, 2011). For graduate students, autonomy is particularly important for sustaining lifelong learning and participation in academic and professional communities, even when learners enter EAP courses with relatively high baseline autonomy (Stanchevici & Siczek, 2019).

CONTEXT

This study was conducted at the Universidad de Antioquia, a public university in Medellín, Colombia, where foreign language competence is required for graduate admission and completion (Universidad de Antioquia, 2015). To address this requirement, the School of Languages developed five online EAP courses for graduate students from different disciplines.

The courses share a pedagogical framework based on Task-Based Language Teaching and Salmon's (2011) e-Moderation model, with an emphasis on learner autonomy. They were designed using the ADDIE model and delivered through Moodle,

with institutional support for tutor training and technical assistance (Pineda Hoyos & Tamayo Cano, 2016; Pineda et al., 2021). The courses differ in objectives, duration, skill focus, and the balance between asynchronous and synchronous activities.

Two courses introduced in 2014 focus on oral skills: Development of Listening Skills (DLS; 80 hours, 13 weeks), which is fully asynchronous, and Development of Oral Skills (DOS; 64 hours, 13 weeks), which combines asynchronous and synchronous activities equally. Development of Writing Skills (DWS; 2016; 64 hours, 13 weeks) emphasizes academic writing and is predominantly asynchronous (90%). Development of Communicative Competence (DCC; 2017; 89 hours, 14 weeks) integrates the four skills and includes the highest proportion of synchronous interaction (60%). Development of Reading Skills (DRS; 2020; 89 hours, 14 weeks) focuses on reading comprehension strategies and is mainly asynchronous (80%).

Across courses, common features include authentic academic materials, formative assessment with feedback, peer interaction, and support for autonomy development. Table 1 summarizes the course characteristics.

Table 1. *Description of the online skills-based EAP courses*

Course	Objective	Launch Year	Duration	Skill Focus	Interaction Mode
Development of Listening Skills (DLS)	To build listening skills for communicative situations in English.	2014	13 weeks, 4 units, 80 hours	Listening	100% asynchronous
Development of Oral Skills (DOS)	To strengthen oral expression of opinions and ideas on diverse topics in English.	2014	13 weeks, 4 modules, 64 hours	Speaking	50% asynchronous and 50% synchronous
Development of Writing Skills (DWS)	To develop writing skills for producing diverse types of English texts.	2016	13 weeks, 5 units, 64 hours	Writing	90% asynchronous and 10% synchronous
Development of Communicative Competence: Integrated Skills (DCC)	To enhance English language communicative competence in academic contexts using integrated e-Tasks.	2017	14 weeks, 5 e-Tasks, 89 hours	All four skills	40% asynchronous and 60% synchronous
Development of Reading Skills (DRS)	To develop reading comprehension of general and specialized English texts.	2020	14 weeks, 5 units, 89 hours	Reading	80% asynchronous and 20% synchronous

METHODOLOGY

Type of Study

This study employed a survey research design (Check & Schutt, 2012; Dörnyei & Dewaele, 2022) with a cross-sectional approach (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). Data

were collected using a self-developed, self-administered electronic questionnaire, a method that enables efficient collection of standardized data from many participants and supports the systematic examination of perceptions at a single point in time.

The purpose of this study was to investigate graduate students' perceptions of online skills-based English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses across six categories and to examine whether perceptions varied by course enrollment. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are students' perceptions of online skills-based EAP courses across six categories: (a) learning modality, (b) learning environment, (c) tutors' teaching practices, (d) assessment processes, (e) foreign language learning, and (f) learner autonomy development?
2. Are there significant associations between specific EAP course enrollment (DRS, DLS, DOS, DWS, DCC) and students' perceptions across the evaluated categories?
3. How do quantitative and qualitative findings integrate to explain graduate students' online EAP learning experiences?

Content validity was established through expert validation (Artino et al., 2014), involving two field experts and a pilot test with 20 students enrolled in the online courses. Feedback from both sources informed item refinement. Internal consistency was examined using Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega, yielding coefficients of .969 and .972, respectively, indicating excellent internal consistency (Table 2).

Table 2. *Internal consistency of the questionnaire*

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	McDonald's Omega (ω)
Values	.969	.972

Data Collection

The study employed a questionnaire comprising **45 Likert-scale items** and **five open-ended questions.** Table 3 presents the sections of the questionnaire. Respondents rated each Likert-scale item on a **five-point scale** ranging from **1 (strongly disagree)** to **5 (strongly agree)**. For the open-ended questions, participants provided **written responses in their own words.**

Table 3. *Description of the questionnaire*

Section	Description	Items	Sources
General Information	Collects students' demographic information.	10	Creswell, 2012; Walker & Fraser, 2005
Learning Modality	Explores students' perceptions of online education and their technological readiness.	5	Blake, 2013; Cabı & Kalelioğlu, 2019; Ferrer-Cascales et al., 2011; Kamaruzaman et al., 2021; Walker & Fraser, 2005; Yeşilyurt, 2021
Learning Environment	Examines perceptions of the online learning environment, communication tools, and cognitive load.	7	Blake, 2013; Ferrer-Cascales et al., 2011; Salmon, 2011; Walker & Fraser, 2005
Tutor Teaching Practices	Explores students' views on tutors' communication, availability, and adaptability in online contexts.	5	Ferrer-Cascales et al., 2011; González-Lloret, 2020; Salmon, 2011; Walker & Fraser, 2005
Assessment	Examines perceptions of assessment, feedback usefulness, transparency of criteria, and learning support.	8	Ebadi & Dadgar, 2024; Espitia & Cruz, 2013; Lee & Michelini, 2025; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Walker & Fraser, 2005
Foreign Language Learning	Examines perceptions of how online courses supported English development for academic and professional purposes.	2	de Chazal, 2014; González-Lloret, 2020
Effects on the Development of Autonomy	Examines perceptions of how online courses supported learner autonomy.	8	Al-Hawamleh et al., 2022; Ferrer-Cascales et al., 2011; Little, 2007; Walker & Fraser, 2005;

			Yemenici & Karakaş, 2023
Closing section	Gathers students' reflections through open-ended questions related to the evaluated categories.	5	Ferrer-Cascales et al., 2011; Walker & Fraser, 2005

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved separate quantitative and qualitative procedures, followed by systematic integration during the interpretation phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Zhou et al., 2024), as described below.

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative analysis was conducted on the Likert-scale items. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participants' responses, followed by bivariate association analyses using the Pearson chi-square test. Mean scores were interpreted using a five-level classification system dividing the Likert scale into equal intervals. All analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 25). Table 4 presents the classification used to interpret the mean scores.

Table 4. *Scale interpretation*

Score Range	Likert Category	Level	Interpretation
1.00 – 1.80	Strongly disagree	Very low	Poor perception
1.81 – 2.60	Disagree	Low	Poor perception
2.61 – 3.40	Neutral	Moderate	Acceptable perception
3.41 – 4.20	Agree	High	Favorable perception
4.21 – 5.00	Strongly agree	Very high	Highly favorable perception

Qualitative Analysis

Open-ended responses were analyzed using problem-driven qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018). An inductive coding approach was adopted to allow themes to

emerge from the data. Following Saldaña (2021), two researchers independently coded the data and reached consensus through collaborative discussion, resolving discrepancies until a final coding scheme was established.

Data segments were coded according to their central ideas, grouped into descriptive categories, and synthesized into three overarching themes representing the main patterns in the data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; Silverman, 2019). Because individual responses often addressed multiple ideas, the number of codes exceeded the number of participants. Category prominence was indicated descriptively by the percentage of respondents mentioning each category, without statistical generalization, and categories were ranked accordingly. Anonymous excerpts are presented in the Findings section to illustrate the identified categories.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Quantitative and qualitative data were integrated at the interpretation stage through a joint display that juxtaposed quantitative results and key qualitative themes by category (Fetters et al., 2013; Guetterman et al., 2015). This comparison enabled the identification of convergence, divergence, complementarity, and expansion across data strands, from which integrative inferences were derived to inform the Discussion section.

Participants

Participants were recruited via institutional email, and participation was voluntary and anonymous. The questionnaire was administered in Spanish to ensure comprehension and reduce response bias. Survey items were translated into English for publication purposes. Skip logic was used to direct participants only to sections relevant to the courses they had completed. The final sample consisted of 181 respondents who completed the questionnaire via Google Forms, representing an approximate response rate of 24% from a population of 755 invited students. Most respondents identified as female (58%). The largest age group was 30–40 years (42.5%), followed by 40–50 years (32.6%). Most participants were enrolled in master's programs (54.7%), followed by doctoral programs (23.2%), with education being the most represented disciplinary area (57.5%). Demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. *Participants' characteristics*

		Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	75	41.4
	Female	105	58.0
	No response	1	0.6
Age Range	20-30 years	25	13.8
	30-40 years	77	42.5
	40-50 years	59	32.6
	50 or more years	20	11.0
Level of Study	Master's degree program		
	In progress	99	54.7
	Completed	39	21.5
	Doctoral degree program		
	In progress	42	23.2
	Completed	1	0.6
Area of Employment	Engineering	12	6.6
	Education	104	57.5
	Health	29	16.0
	Administrative Sciences	14	7.7
	Exact Sciences	9	5.0
	Social Sciences	6	3.3
	Arts	3	1.7
	Environmental and Agricultural Sciences	4	2.2

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the study's purpose and procedures, including data collection, analysis, and reporting processes, as well as the measures implemented to ensure anonymity and minimize potential risks. An informed consent form, presented in Spanish at the beginning of the online questionnaire, explained: (1) the study's purpose and the voluntary nature of participation; (2) the estimated completion time (approximately 20 minutes); (3) anonymity measures; (4) data storage and use; (5) the right to withdraw at any time without penalty; and (6) the absence of direct benefits. Participation proceeded only after participants clicked "I agree to participate."

The study was reviewed and approved by the Universidad de Antioquia's *Comité para el Desarrollo de la Investigación* (Research Development Committee, CODI) (Project

Code: 2015-2822). All procedures were conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for research involving human participants.

FINDINGS

This section presents the quantitative analyses of the Likert-scale items and the qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses.

Questionnaire Results

Learning Modality

Participants reported favorable (78%), acceptable (17%), and poor (5%) perceptions of the online learning modality. As shown in Table 6, all items received high mean scores, ranging from 4.1 to 4.6 on a 5-point Likert scale. Item LM5 had the highest score (M = 4.6, SD = 0.8), indicating strong agreement that the online modality facilitated time management for academic activities. This was closely followed by LM2, LM3, and LM4 (M = 4.5, SD = 0.8), which reflect students' technological readiness, ease of access to the learning space, and satisfaction with time availability.

The lowest mean score was observed for item LM1 (M = 4.1, SD = 1.0), which also showed the highest standard deviation, suggesting greater variability in perceptions of the overall impact of online learning. The Overall Mean Rating (OMR) across all items was 4.4, indicating a generally very high student perception of the online learning modality. Overall, the results indicate that online instruction was positively received, particularly due to its flexibility and accessibility.

Table 6. *Descriptive statistics for students' perception of the online learning modality*

Item Identification	Survey Item	Mean	SD
LM1	Taking the course in an online modality positively influenced my learning process.	4.1	1.0
LM2	I had the necessary technological skills to take the course in an online environment.	4.5	0.8
LM3	The online format of the course facilitated my access to the learning space.	4.5	0.8
LM4	I had no issues with my time availability to access the course.	4.5	0.8
LM5	The online format of the course helped me manage my study time effectively.	4.6	0.8
	OMR	**4.4**	

Note. LM = Learning Modality item.

Learning Environment

Participants reported favorable (71%), acceptable (24%), and poor (5%) perceptions of the online learning environments. As shown in Table 7, all items received relatively high mean scores, ranging from 4.1 to 4.7. Item LE1 had the highest mean (M = 4.7, SD = 0.6), indicating consistent platform functionality. This was followed by LE2, LE3, and LE5 (M = 4.5, SD = 0.8), reflecting students' satisfaction with platform usability, the contribution of course materials to competency development, and the support provided by tasks and activities.

Lower mean scores were observed for LE4 and LE6 (M = 4.1). LE4, assessing the usefulness of forums for learning, showed the highest variability (SD = 1.2), followed by LE6 (SD = 1.1), related to the effectiveness of communication through the platform. These results suggest greater variability in perceptions regarding interaction tools. Item LE7, addressing the appropriateness of course difficulty, received a slightly higher score (M = 4.3, SD = 0.9), indicating general agreement on the balance between challenge and attainability. The OMR for this section was 4.4, confirming an overall positive perception of the learning environment, particularly regarding platform performance and learning materials, while interaction and communication features elicited more varied responses.

Table 7. *Descriptive statistics for students' perception of the learning environment*

Item Identification	Survey Item	Mean	SD
LE1	The online learning platform functioned properly every time I logged into the course.	4.7	0.6
LE2	The online learning platform was user-friendly.	4.5	0.8
LE3	The course materials supported the development of the proposed competencies.	4.5	0.8
LE4	The forums planned for the course facilitated learning.	4.1	1.2
LE5	The activities and tasks supported learning.	4.5	0.8
LE6	The online learning platform enabled effective communication with classmates and the tutor, thereby supporting course achievement.	4.1	1.1
LE7	The course difficulty was appropriate for the competencies to be developed.	4.3	0.9
	OMR	**4.4**	

Note. LE = Learning Environment item.

Tutors' Teaching Practices

Participants reported favorable (71%), acceptable (24%), and poor (5%) perceptions of the tutors and their teaching practices. As shown in Table 8, mean scores ranged from 4.2 to 4.7, indicating a generally high level of satisfaction with tutor performance. The highest-rated item was T5 (M = 4.7, SD = 0.8), showing that students felt respected by their tutor. Item T3, which assessed the tutor's qualifications to lead the course, also received a high score (M = 4.5, SD = 0.8), reflecting student confidence in the tutor's expertise. Similarly, T1 (M = 4.4, SD = 0.9) showed that students perceived the course as being well-organized under the tutor's moderation.

Slightly lower, though still positive, ratings were reported for T2 and T4 (M = 4.2, SD = 1.1), which addressed tutor responsiveness and the provision of supplementary materials. The higher standard deviations for these items suggest more varied student experiences regarding communication and academic support. The OMR for this section was 4.4, indicating generally positive perceptions of tutor's teaching practices.

Table 8. *Descriptive statistics for students' perception of the tutors' teaching practices*

Item Identification	Survey Item	Mean	SD
T1	The tutor moderated the course in an organized manner.	4.4	0.9
T2	The tutor promptly addressed my inquiries as well as those of my peers.	4.2	1.1
T3	The tutor was well-qualified to lead the course.	4.5	0.8
T4	The tutor resolved my doubts and provided me with supplementary materials for completing my assignments or course activities.	4.2	1.1
T5	The tutor treated me with respect.	4.7	0.8
	OMR	**4.4**	

Note. T = Tutor item.

Assessment

As shown in Table 9, participants reported mostly favorable perceptions of course assessment (74% favorable, 22% acceptable, and 4% poor). Mean scores ranged from 4.0 to 4.6, with an OMR of 4.4, indicating a strong level of satisfaction among participants.

The highest-rated items were A1 and A2 (M = 4.6 for both; SD = 0.8 and 0.7, respectively), indicating that students clearly understood the evaluation criteria and perceived strong alignment between assessment activities and course content. Items A5 and A6 also received high scores (M = 4.5, SD = 0.8), reflecting students' perceived autonomy in task completion and timely communication of results. Item A4 (M = 4.4, SD = 0.8) further indicated that task difficulty was considered appropriate for course objectives and level.

Lower, though still positive, ratings were observed for A3 (M = 4.1, SD = 1.1) and A7 (M = 4.0, SD = 1.2). These results suggest variability in perceived usefulness of assessment tasks for real-life English application and feedback impact. Overall, the consistently high ratings across items indicate that assessment was generally perceived as clear, relevant, and supportive of students' learning outcomes.

Table 9. *Descriptive statistics for students' perception of the assessment in the courses*

Item Identification	Survey Item	Mean	SD
A1	The evaluation criteria were clear.	4.6	0.8
A2	The exams, tasks, and other proposed assessment activities reflected the course content.	4.6	0.7
A3	The assessment tasks helped me prepare to use English in real-life situations in my field of study.	4.1	1.1
A4	The difficulty level of the assessment tasks aligned with the course objectives and level.	4.4	0.8
A5	I completed the questionnaires, tasks, and other assessment activities independently.	4.5	0.8
A6	The tutor communicated the results in a timely manner.	4.5	0.8
A7	The tutor's feedback enhanced my learning.	4.0	1.2
A8	The assessment process helped me reflect on and account for what I achieved in the course.	4.3	0.9
	OMR	4.4	

Note. A = Assessment item.

Language Learning

Participants reported favorable (43%), acceptable (30%), and poor (27%) perceptions of foreign language learning. This category showed the lowest favorable responses. These findings suggest that, although students value courses that support language use in their studies, there is notable room for improvement.

As shown in Table 10, both items—LL1 and LL2—received a mean score of 3.9, with relatively high standard deviations (SD = 1.1 and 1.2), indicating considerable variability in students' perceptions. The OMR for this category was also 3.9, the lowest among all categories, highlighting a potential weakness in supporting language learning.

Table 10. *Descriptive statistics for students' perception of language learning in the courses*

Item Identification	Survey Item	Mean	SD
LL1	The course helped me use the foreign language during my graduate studies.	3.9	1.1
LL2	The topics covered in the course were relevant to the context of my graduate studies.	3.9	1.2
	OMR	3.9	

Note. LL = Language Learning item.

Autonomy Development

Participants reported favorable (63%), acceptable (27%), and poor (10%) perceptions of autonomy development, suggesting that students perceived the courses as providing resources that support independent learning. As shown in Table 11, the highest mean scores (M = 4.5) corresponded to AD1 and AD8, indicating that students found course resources useful for autonomy and felt more committed to and aware of their role in the learning process. Item AD6 (M = 4.4, SD = 0.9) highlighted the motivating effect of online courses in helping students manage their time effectively.

Items AD3 and AD7 (M = 4.1) indicated that courses encouraged self-assessment and the pursuit of additional learning resources, while AD4 (M = 4.0) reflected opportunities for exercising control over aspects of learning, such as choosing discussion topics or evaluation strategies. Moderate variability (SD = 1.1–1.2) suggested some differences in how students experienced these autonomy-supportive features.

The lowest-rated items were AD2 (M = 3.7, SD = 1.2) and AD5 (M = 3.9, SD = 1.3), indicating that forum interactions and tutor guidance on independent strategies were less valued. Overall, the OMR of 4.2 signals a positive perception of autonomy development, while highlighting opportunities to enhance peer-to-peer interaction and collaborative elements to further strengthen learner independence and community.

Table 11. *Descriptive statistics for students' perception of autonomy development in the courses*

Item Identification	Survey Item	Mean	SD
AD1	The resources provided by the courses helped me become more independent in my learning process.	4.5	0.8
AD2	Forum interactions allowed me to learn more from my classmates.	3.7	1.2
AD3	The courses promoted strategies that helped me understand my achievements and limitations (e.g., self-assessment).	4.1	1.1
AD4	The course design allowed me to control aspects of learning such as choosing discussion topics or evaluation strategies.	4.0	1.2
AD5	The tutor supported me with strategies to become more independent (e.g., time management tips, self-study websites).	3.9	1.3
AD6	Being in an online course motivated me to organize my time better to complete academic tasks.	4.4	0.9
AD7	I searched for resources beyond those offered in the course to develop the required skills.	4.1	1.1
AD8	Being part of an online course made me more aware of my role and more committed to my learning process.	4.5	0.8
	OMR	**4.2**	

Note. AD = Autonomy Development item.

Bivariate Association Analyses

A bivariate association analysis using the Pearson chi-square test was conducted to identify statistically significant associations between course participation and students' perceptions across the evaluated categories. The results revealed several statistically significant associations.

First, there was a significant association between the DRS course and students' perception of *Language Learning* ($\chi^2 = 12.303$, $p = .002$). Interestingly, students who had

not taken this course reported a more favorable perception of their language learning experiences. Similarly, a significant association emerged between the DLS course and the *Autonomy* category ($\chi^2 = 8.454$, $p = .015$), where students who had not taken the course expressed higher levels of perceived autonomy.

In contrast, participation in the DOS course was associated with a more favorable perception of tutor moderation ($\chi^2 = 6.586$, $p = .037$). Finally, a significant relationship was also found between the DWS course and perceptions of the *Learning Modality* ($\chi^2 = 10.751$, $p = .005$); students who had not taken the course reported a more positive view of the online learning environment (Table 12).

Table 12. *Statistically significant associations between the courses and the categories evaluated*

		DRS		Pearson Chi-square	*p* Value
Language Learning		Took the course	Did not take the course	12.303	.002
	Poor	41 (30.8%)	8 (16.7%)		
	Acceptable	45 (33.8%)	9 (18.8%)		
	Favorable	47 (35.3%)	31 (64.6%)		
		DLS		**Pearson Chi-square**	***p* Value**
Autonomy		Took the course	Did not take the course	8.454	.015
	Poor	10 (20.4%)	8 (6.1%)		
	Acceptable	13 (26.5%)	36 (27.3%)		
	Favorable	26 (53.1%)	88 (66.7%)		
		DOS		**Pearson Chi-square**	***p* Value**
Tutors' Teaching Practices		Took the course	Did not take the course	6.586	.037
	Poor	1 (5.0%)	16 (9.9%)		
	Acceptable	0 (0.0%)	35 (21.7%)		
	Favorable	19 (95.0%)	110 (68.3%)		
		DWS		**Pearson Chi-square**	***p* Value**
Perception of the Learning Modality		Took the course	Did not take the course	10.751	.005
	Poor	4 (20.0%)	5 (3.1%)		
	Acceptable	3 (15.0%)	28 (17.4%)		
	Favorable	13 (65.0%)	128 (79.5%)		

Note. Statistically significant p Value < 0.05

Open-ended Responses

The open-ended responses in the questionnaire were grouped into three main categories through content analysis: *Learning Modality and Environment*, *Foreign Language Pedagogy*, and *Effects on the Development of Autonomy*. These categories are discussed below.

Learning Modality and Environment

Affordances and challenges related to the learning modality and environment emerged across seven sub-categories (Table 13). Students expressed high satisfaction with the *Courses' Instructional Design* (97% agreement), emphasizing clarity in navigation, assessment, and access to resources. They valued the ability to revisit content and manage their own pace. One student noted the "ease of accessing the course," while another appreciated the "possibility of studying at set times and reviewing at other times of the day."

Flexibility in time and location was also frequently mentioned in *Language Learning Opportunities* (95% agreement). A student shared: "It has allowed me to manage my time better and be more autonomous in my learning." However, some participants suggested improvements in content delivery (69% agreement on *Courses' Contents, Resources and Tasks*), preferring multimedia and interactive materials over static documents. Comments included "enrich it with more videos" and "add more interactive content." A notable portion of the coded responses about *synchronous interaction* (47%) reflected a preference for more synchronous interaction in the courses. One participant wrote about the need "to include more synchronous meetings with the teacher." Responses coded under *Language Learning Strategies* (25% agreement) described the use of metacognitive and social strategies, such as self-planning, motivation, and asking for help.

Some students reported gains in digital skills, particularly in platform navigation and the use of online learning tools (9% agreement). Similarly, only a small number of responses (8%) described online learning as a challenge, citing limited experience with online environments, a preference for face-to-face learning, or the perceived absence of tutor presence. Table 13 summarizes the sub-categories, occurrences, and agreement percentages for the *Learning Modality and Environment* category.

Table 13. *Learning Modality and Environment sub-categories, occurrences, and agreement percentages*

Category	Sub-Categories	Occurrences	Agreement (%)
Learning Modality and Environment	Courses' Instructional Design	176	97
	Language Learning Opportunities	172	95
	Courses' Contents, Resources and Tasks	125	69
	Synchronous Interaction	85	47
	Language Learning Strategies	46	25
	Technological Skills Development	17	9
	Learning Online as a Challenge	14	8
	Total Occurrences	**635**	

Foreign Language Pedagogy

Affordances and challenges associated with foreign language pedagogy were identified in seven sub-categories based on open-ended responses (Table 14). Most students expressed general satisfaction with the *Tutor's Moderation* (54% agreement), emphasizing instructional clarity and the technical or academic support received. One student noted: "the tutor provided clear guidance on how to carry out the course." Another stated that "the tutor helped me when I had technical difficulties."

However, a smaller portion of responses (14%) pointed to insufficient tutor participation. Students reported limited messaging and fewer active interventions in forums, as well as limited online presence, describing tutors as "very quiet" or expressing feelings of being "alone" during course activities. Closely related, feedback emerged as another concern: 15% of responses in the *Tutor's Feedback* sub-category indicated limited or delayed feedback. One student expressed, "the tutor's feedback was scarce", while others noted that the lack of timely feedback reinforced perceptions of tutor absence.

Regarding assessment, 34% of responses in the *Assessment Procedures* sub-category highlighted procedural clarity, including well-defined rubrics and clearly explained tasks. One student mentioned that "the objectives and procedures of the tasks were clearly detailed." However, some participants identified outdated or confusing practices such as long questionnaires or disconnection in forum tasks. Along the same lines, some comments viewed assessment as a learning opportunity (12% agreement), emphasizing reflection and improvement. In contrast, a few responses described the assessment merely as a requirement to complete the course (4% agreement).

Table 14. *Foreign Language Pedagogy sub-categories, occurrences, and agreement percentages*

Category	Sub-Categories	Occurrences	Agreement (%)
Foreign Language Pedagogy	Tutor's Moderation	98	54
	Assessment Procedures	62	34
	Assessment as Learning Opportunity	21	12
	Tutor's Feedback	28	15
	Tutor's Online Presence	25	14
	Assessment Instruments	11	6
	Assessment as Requirement	8	4
	Total Occurrences	**253**	

Effects on the Development of Autonomy

Affordances and challenges related to autonomy development in the skills-based EAP courses were identified across five sub-categories based on open-ended responses (Table 15). One of the most frequently cited challenges was time management (55% agreement). Students transitioning from face-to-face learning described difficulties adapting to the autonomy required to organize their schedules in an online environment. As one participant noted, "it implied having a lot of discipline and judgment when approaching knowledge and learning," while another emphasized the need to organize time to devote appropriate space to online study.

Despite these challenges, many students recognized that the online modality allowed greater control over their learning processes (55% agreement in the *Control over Learning* sub-category). They valued continuous access to materials and resources, which enabled planning and studying according to individual pace and responsibilities. As one participant shared, "it has allowed me to better distribute my time and be more autonomous in my learning," and another added, "it was an opportunity to learn and improve based on the possibilities of my schedule."

In contrast, some responses expressed a lack of control, mainly due to tight deadlines and graduate program demands. Students described stress and limited flexibility, which hindered meaningful engagement with course content. A lack of motivation, discipline, or responsibility was also reported. Additionally, some students identified insufficient teacher support as a limiting factor. One student noted that "being little listened to" was a source of frustration affecting engagement and confidence (28% agreement in *the Challenges for Autonomy Development* sub-category).

Regarding *Tutor–Student Interdependence*, many responses emphasized the role of supportive tutor relationships in managing anxiety and academic challenges (47%

agreement). One student explained: "it made learning easier for me, and I felt more confident and relaxed," emphasizing the emotional impact of respectful tutor interaction.

Nevertheless, coded responses showed evidence of emerging autonomous behaviors (52% agreement in the *Autonomy Development Processes* sub-category). Students described planning strategies, routine adjustments, and reflective practices. One participant summarized this as: "an autonomous learning experience facilitated by the course's learning path." Others linked the online modality directly with increased responsibility and self-awareness: "this type of learning allowed me to strengthen the organization of my time in order to complete all the activities."

Table 15. *Effects on the Development of Autonomy sub-categories, occurrences, and agreement percentages*

Category	Sub-Categories	Occurrences	Agreement (%)
Autonomy Development	Time Management	100	55
	Control over Learning	100	55
	Autonomy Development Processes	94	52
	Tutor-Student Interdependence	85	47
	Challenges for Autonomy Development	50	28
	Total Occurrences	**461**	

DISCUSSION

This study examined graduate students' perceptions of online skills-based EAP courses across six categories: learning modality, learning environment, tutors' teaching practices, assessment, language learning, and autonomy development. Quantitative Likert-scale data and qualitative open-ended responses were integrated at the interpretation stage through a joint display (Table 16). This approach enabled the identification of cross-strand patterns that highlighted program strengths and provided insights into areas requiring enhancement.

Table 16. *Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings*

Category	Quantitative Results	Key Qualitative Themes	Integrated Interpretation
Learning Modality	High satisfaction, particularly regarding flexibility and time management.	Instructional design clarity, flexibility and accessibility.	**Convergence:** Both strands identified flexibility and clear course structure as key strengths of the online modality.
Learning Environment	High ratings for platform functionality, with lower scores for interaction-related items.	Platform reliability, need for more interactive and synchronous elements, content quality concerns.	**Divergence:** Quantitative data indicated platform functionality, while qualitative findings highlighted some unmet expectations for interactivity.
Tutors' Teaching Practices	High overall ratings, especially for respect and professionalism.	Some limited tutor presence, delayed or insufficient feedback, unclear moderation practices.	**Divergence:** High quantitative ratings contrasted with some qualitative concerns about tutor presence, responsiveness, and engagement.
Assessment	Positive perceptions of clarity and alignment, with lower ratings for feedback quality.	Clear procedures, feedback perceived as limited or delayed.	**Convergence:** Both strands confirmed assessment clarity, with some qualitative concerns about feedback depth and timeliness.
Language Learning	Lowest ratings across categories.	Lack of interactivity, limited relevance to graduate or disciplinary contexts.	**Explanation:** Qualitative data explained lower scores through limited disciplinary relevance and interaction.
Autonomy Development	Generally positive ratings, especially regarding access to learning resources.	Emerging autonomy processes, time-management challenges.	**Convergence:** Both strands indicated autonomy gains, alongside qualitative

	evidence of ongoing self-regulation challenges.

Note. The "Key Qualitative Themes" column presents synthesized patterns from the detailed content analysis reported in Tables 13–15. Themes were selected based on prominence (agreement percentages) and their capacity to explain or contextualize quantitative findings.

The joint display demonstrates strong quantitative–qualitative convergence regarding the learning modality as a key program strength. Students rated the online modality favorably for flexibility and time management, while qualitative data reinforced these findings by emphasizing instructional design clarity, accessibility, and instructor presence. These findings are consistent with the Community of Inquiry model's emphasis on structured course design and teaching presence and with Salmon's e-Moderation model (Garrison, 2007; Salmon, 2011), as well as with broader research on effective online learning environments (Bolliger et al., 2021; Konstantinidou & Nisiforou, 2022; Wilhelm-Chapin, 2020). This pattern aligns with research showing that flexible online environments support self-paced learning and accommodate diverse learner needs (Blake, 2013; Samara et al., 2023). However, qualitative responses indicated that a minority of students experienced challenges related to limited prior experience or a preference for face-to-face interaction. Requests for increased synchronous interaction suggest that, alongside valued asynchronous flexibility, students seek strategically integrated synchronous elements to enhance engagement and community building. This interpretation is consistent with research emphasizing the need to balance synchronous and asynchronous modalities in effective online learning design (Garrison, 2007; Salmon, 2011; Yamagata-Lynch, 2014).

An integrative pattern also emerged in the *Learning Environment* category. Quantitative results indicated high satisfaction with platform functionality and usability, whereas qualitative data revealed unmet expectations regarding pedagogical richness and interactivity. Students distinguished between technical reliability and instructional quality, expressing a desire for more interactive and multimedia content. Lower quantitative ratings and greater variability for communication tools aligned with qualitative themes calling for enhanced interaction and synchronous opportunities. These findings suggest a potential underutilization of digital affordances that support authentic language use, a key element of effective online language instruction (Blake, 2013; González-Lloret, 2020; Kessler, 2018).

The *Tutor Moderation* category revealed a divergence between students' positive evaluations of tutors' personal and professional qualities and qualitative concerns about limited tutor presence and responsiveness. While tutors were highly rated for respect and qualifications, some students reported insufficient interaction, delayed feedback, or low visibility during course activities. Integration of both data strands suggests that students

differentiated between tutors' professional qualifications and their engagement behaviors. Being qualified and respectful did not necessarily translate into being visibly present or pedagogically responsive. This finding has important implications for tutor professional development, indicating the need to emphasize strategies for sustained online presence, proactive communication, and timely formative feedback. These insights align with research highlighting instructor visibility and facilitation as central to engagement and learning in online environments (Garrison, 2007; Park & Kim, 2020; Richardson et al., 2017; Salmon, 2011).

Assessment emerged as a relative program strength, with both quantitative and qualitative data confirming clarity and alignment of procedures. However, integration revealed recurring concerns regarding feedback depth and timeliness. Although students appreciated transparent criteria and rubrics, some expressed a need for more detailed and timely formative feedback. This finding aligns with research emphasizing feedback as a central mechanism for self-regulation and learning improvement in online contexts (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and reinforces calls for learner-centered assessment practices that leverage digital tools to enhance feedback depth and relevance (Espitia & Cruz, 2013; Lee & Michelini, 2025; Yastibas & Cepik, 2015).

The *Language Learning* category received the lowest ratings across all categories. Qualitative findings provided explanatory depth by revealing students' perceptions of limited disciplinary relevance and insufficient interactivity. Graduate students from diverse fields reported that generic EAP content did not fully align with their specialized academic and professional language needs. Students whose disciplinary contexts were better represented in course materials reported more positive perceptions, while others expressed dissatisfaction. This integrated finding highlights the importance of discipline-sensitive content and authentic academic tasks in graduate EAP instruction and points to the need for greater use of digital affordances to deliver interactive, multimodal, and contextually relevant materials (Blake, 2013; González-Lloret, 2020; Kessler, 2018).

Both data strands also indicated emerging processes of *Autonomy Development*. Quantitative results suggested that course resources supported independent learning, whereas qualitative data revealed that autonomy developed through students' active engagement with challenges related to time management, motivation, and self-regulation. Autonomy thus emerged not as a direct outcome of course design alone, but through a process of supported struggle in which learner agency interacted with instructional scaffolding. Qualitative themes further indicated that limited tutor support in some contexts constrained autonomy development, reinforcing the view that autonomy in online learning is relational and supported through structured tasks, feedback, and guidance rather than being purely individual (Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981; Little, 2007; Salmon, 2011).

Finally, bivariate association analyses indicated that students' perceptions were influenced by course-specific design features. In particular, participation in the DOS

course was associated with more favorable perceptions of tutors' teaching practices. Courses incorporating higher levels of synchronous interaction were associated with more favorable perceptions of tutor moderation, while variations in content specificity and interactivity were linked to differences in language learning perceptions.

These patterns suggest that the balance between synchronous and asynchronous interaction may shape students' perceptions of their language development. Overall, the findings reinforce the integrated interpretation that instructional design decisions—particularly the balance between synchronous and asynchronous activities, content relevance, and material interactivity—play a central role in shaping student experiences across categories. These findings align with research on cognitive load and multimedia learning, which highlights the role of design choices in shaping engagement, comprehension, and learning effectiveness in online environments (Mayer, 2014; Sweller, 2011).

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER DIRECTIONS

This study contributes to research on online graduate EAP education by integrating student perceptions to identify key strengths and areas for improvement. Although the study was conducted in a specific institutional context, the findings offer transferable insights for online EAP program design in higher education, particularly in contexts such as Colombia and Latin America, where virtual learning environments continue to expand. The findings indicate that well-designed online EAP courses with clear structure, qualified tutors, and coherent assessment can support graduate language development and learner autonomy when instructional design, tutor presence, and scaffolded support are systematically aligned.

The analysis highlights four priority areas for enhancement. First, students expressed a need for discipline-specific content and authentic academic tasks aligned with their fields, underscoring the limitations of generic EAP instruction and the importance of systematic needs analysis. Second, despite high ratings for tutor qualifications, qualitative data revealed gaps in visible presence and formative feedback, suggesting that professional development may need to prioritize online moderation, communication consistency, and feedback quality. Third, the study identified the need for explicit metacognitive instruction, tutor modeling, structured peer interaction, and gradual release of responsibility to strengthen autonomy development. Fourth, students valued asynchronous flexibility while also requesting greater synchronous engagement, indicating the importance of strategically integrating live interaction without compromising flexibility.

These findings should be interpreted while considering several limitations. The focus on student perspectives captures rich experiential data but reflects only one stakeholder group. Future studies could incorporate instructor and administrative

perspectives to better understand implementation constraints and institutional decision-making processes. Challenges in achieving higher response rates indicate the potential benefit of shorter instruments, alternative data collection strategies, or institutional incentives in future research.

Overall, the study offers implications beyond the focal institution: developing discipline-specific EAP modules, strengthening tutor presence and formative feedback, redesigning autonomy support, balancing asynchronous and synchronous elements, and enhancing interactive learning design. Future research should examine the longitudinal impact of these enhancements, compare outcomes across disciplines, and explore how emerging technologies may address identified gaps while preserving the human and disciplinary characteristics valued by graduate learners.

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Authors' Contributions

Luis Hernando Tamayo-Cano and Edgar Picón-Jácome contributed to the research project conceptualization, literature review, survey instrument design, data collection and analysis, and article writing and revisions.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no financial, professional, or personal interests that could have influenced the preparation or submission of this manuscript.

Ethical Implications

Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical safeguards, and this information was explicitly stated in the article. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, anonymity was ensured, participants could withdraw without penalty, and the study was approved by an institutional review board.

Statement Using Artificial Intelligence

Grammarly was used to review grammar and style throughout the manuscript.

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