

# Panel Discussions to Promote Meaningful Learning at Distance Education

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First Received: (October, 31, 2022)      Accepted: (1 August 2023)

**Abstract.** The present mix-method study was carried out with the purpose of promoting meaningful learning through panel discussion to enhance students' active participation in English. It was conducted at a private university in its distance modality. The sample of the study was 52 students from different provinces of Ecuador and 2 teachers. The data-collection instruments were two questionnaires and an observation grid. These were designed to learn if the use of panel discussions promotes meaningful learning and also to identify the students' level of satisfaction regarding the use of panel discussions. The questionnaires were applied after 8 panel discussions were held. The observation grid was used by the teachers during each panel to take notes about aspects such as motivation, comprehension, and functionality. The findings demonstrate that students' level of satisfaction was high regarding the use of panel discussions since they helped to increase their motivation to actively participate by using previous experience with new knowledge.

*Keywords:* Active participation, Distance Education, Meaningful Learning, Panel Discussions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Using English as means of communication in specific subjects or courses has become a daunting task for Ecuadorian students. The causes of this concern may be related to different aspects such as communication apprehension, which is present in every classroom specially in classrooms where students do not use their mother tongue and can have negative results at the time to verbally participate creating anxiety in students (Lucas, 1984). Also, motivation, which varies according to the students age and the skill that is being addressed (Cabrera-Solano et al., 2019) and lack of appropriate vocabulary, which is complex for ESL students to acquire thus hindering communication (Arju, 2013). This situation is even more sensitive with university students in distance education since interaction with professors and peers is reduced. To try to alleviate this situation, it is crucial that teachers look for techniques that allow a process of elaboration, in the sense that the learners select, organize and transform the information they

receive from many different sources, establishing relationships between this information and their previous ideas or knowledge (Diaz-Barriga & Hernandez, 2002). Therefore, creating meaningful learning.

In order to produce meaningful learning, researchers have conducted studies on different techniques to help build the knowledge students need. One research conducted by Sharan (2015) focuses on building meaningful learning in the cooperative class where the role of the teachers is paramount since they are the ones who will create cooperative groups that will allow students to acquire significant knowledge. The author also explains that the teacher's training is vital to the success of the activities planned since they should stimulate students higher reasoning and analysis. Similarly, Nel (2017) encouraged her students to collaborate in pedagogical decisions to create experiences that will enhance their learning by using technology. At the end of the research, it was observed that this project allowed students to use technology to participate in a collaborative environment incrementing their learning and their participation. The activities carried out permitted them to interact with their peers and share their opinions and viewpoints. To reinforce the students learning, the teacher also provided feedback that aided the students' knowledge acquisition. Also, Rahmawati (2022) conducted research on developing meaningful learning by using blended learning. The results of this study led the authors to conclude that in order to get students to enhance their listening and speaking skills, teachers need to wisely select and integrate activities that can be work both online or offline taking into account a good leaning management system.

Another technique applied in the learning environment is the use of panel discussions where students act as experts discussing a specific topic in a dialogue manner giving them the opportunity to present their ideas to the audience. In this respect Abdullah and Krishnan (2014) who used panel discussions to develop English skills learned that the students' motivation was enhanced, and the speaking skill was improved. Likewise, Werdiningsih (2022) carried out research focused on the use of panel discussion to enhance speaking skills, which determined that this activity allowed students to build knowledge by collecting specific information for the discussion. In addition, this activity created interaction among peers and teachers. Panel discussions positively influence intermediate EFL students since they need to choose appropriate vocabulary and specific grammar structures to communicate ideas related to the topic. Another positive aspect of using panel discussion is that it is a student-centered activity, which keeps students active by doing different tasks such as taking notes and preparing for discussing (Safarnejad & Montashery, 2020).

Additionally, Arnold (2013) suggest that a panel discussion can be a live or virtual discussion where the panelists share different perspectives on a topic. The author claims that a moderator guides the panel and the audience for about 60 to 90 minutes where three to four

panelists participate in sharing facts and opinions and respond to questions from the moderator or the audience.

Focusing on the educational context, Mansoureh et. al., (2016) claim that the use of discussion-based teaching enhances students' understanding since they can analyse their conceptual knowledge. The authors also believe that discussion-based teaching provides students with opportunities to exchange questions, answers, agreements, and disagreements which promote their critical thinking and reduce self-centeredness among students.

According to Faust and Paulson (1998), the use of panel discussions allows involving all the students in the class when giving class presentations or reports. Students work in groups to research the topic in advance and prepare the panel presentation. During the panel, the panellist presents the topic and at the end, the audience makes some questions. The authors suggest selecting the topics thoughtfully and guiding students to have them prepared for the presentations. Additionally, Leh and Melincavage (2012) claim that panel discussion promotes the spirit of inquiry in the classroom. It encourages students' engagement in learning and supports teachers' and students' knowledge. Similarly, Abdullah and Krishnan (2014) argue that a panel discussion combines language proficiency, motivation, and content understanding which improve the students' language speaking proficiency and increase their motivation through feedback provided by peers.

Anwar (2016) conducted a study to examine the use of panel discussions to develop students' self-confidence in learning the content subject. The author suggests that the implementation of panel discussions has a positive impact on students' confidence due to the frequent interaction in discussions and presentations. The author concludes that studying the content by reading journal articles promotes student-centered learning while analyzing concepts on their own and conveying ideas in the panel discussion. Additionally, the author concludes that students should review research journals to give them natural exposure, recognize concepts, share, present, and discuss in a group to prepare them for the panel discussion.

This study also focuses on meaningful learning. According to Diaz-Barriga and Hernandez (2002), meaningful learning is the learning that leads to the creation of knowledge structures through the substantive relationship between new information and students' previous ideas. Likewise, Esteban-Guitart et. all (2017) explain that meaningful learning is the information that students recognize as pertinent, which is added to other experiences learned throughout a period of time.

Additionally, Gonzalez-Ceballos et al (2021) carried out research to collect experiences related to learning from adolescents who used personal journals throughout the pandemic. By the end of the study, they could observe that adolescents were involved in different activities that contributed to learning development. The participants showed positive results in experiences related to values, perspectives, ideas, and opinions. In addition, the participants encountered learning experiences with their classmates and teachers. Finally, the study showed that

participants increased their learning through the use of technology.

By the same token Shahriarpour and Kafi (2014) conducted research where they used video games to learn and increase English vocabulary. At the end of the study, the authors could conclude that using video games to learn vocabulary is motivating because it facilitates the acquisition of new words through interaction and therefore creates meaningful learning. Moreover, the authors mention that the advantage of creating meaningful learning through technology is that students are aware of its use since it has been available to them since they were born. Finally, Shahriarpour and Kafi (2014) explain that learning vocabulary is enjoyable because the environment where the learning occurs is not stressful.

Frey (2017) investigated the use of multimodality to enhance the students' mindset when learning poetry in English. The author mentions that multimodality can awaken the learner's creativity because of the environment it builds, which is full of options and resources that other traditional ways do not provide. The findings show that using poetry and multimodality changes the attitude positively. Therefore, the researcher concludes that poetry awakens students' creativity, which inspires them to learn. Furthermore, multimodality allows students to engage positively with what they are studying improving their critical thinking.

There are also a few studies about community of inquiry. According to Garrison, et al., (2001), the community inquiry model includes three elements: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Cognitive presence refers to the extent to which participants can create meaning by means of continuous communication. This element is very important in critical thinking since it represents a process and an outcome that is one of the most desired goals of higher education. The second element is the social presence which refers to the ability of participants to show their personal traits to the community. It helps them to present to others as genuine people. This element contributes directly to the success of the educational experience. The last element is the teaching presence which has two functions: designing the educational experience that involves selecting, organizing, and presenting contents and activities; and considering "facilitation" which involves sharing responsibility among teachers and students.

Szeto (2014) carried out a study based on the use of a community of inquiry instructional approach with the purpose of determining the effects of the presence on shaping the experiences of online and face-to-face students and their instructors. The results demonstrated that reaching the desired goals depended more on the teaching presence than on the social and cognitive presences.

Another study was carried out by Zydney, et al. (2012) who investigated the impact of an electronic protocol on asynchronous discussions by comparing two virtual graduate classes. Findings demonstrated that cognitive, social, and teaching aspects, which are essential in a virtual community of inquiry, were well distributed when using electronic protocols. Additionally, it enhanced discussion group cognition and student control of the discussion.

The environment where learning takes place influences the results. For this reason, Shea and Bidjerano (2012) developed a study with the purpose of describing and explaining

differences in learning outcomes in hybrid and fully online learning environments of college students. The results demonstrated that the quality of teaching and social presence, and cognitive skills, which are part of the learner characteristics, provide positive results when social interaction is low or inadequate.

Lin, et al. (2006) carried out a study focused on a teachers' virtual community with the purpose of understanding the flow of communication among people from different institutions. The results revealed that consequences are different when using various strategies such as collaboration, IT, knowledge sharing and creation strategies. Also, by tracing knowledge flows the knowledge flow discontinuities phenomena was identified.

Even though there is research that promote meaningful learning and the use of panel discussions to improve specific skills (e.g., Anwar, 2016; Arnold, 2013; Freyn, 2017), there is not much attention given on creating active participation in Ecuadorian university students who are taking courses in English. This research focuses on leaning the students' perceptions and satisfaction level about the use of panel discussions to promote meaningful learning, and the influence that panel discussions have on active participation. Thus, the results can shed light on what teachers can implement in class when there is not much participation.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. PARTICIPANTS

The participants of this study consisted of 52 students (35 females and 17 males) from a distance private university in the city of Loja. The students, who are from different provinces of Ecuador as shown in table 1, belong to different socioeconomic statuses. Their ages ranged from 22 to 41 years old, the participants were selected by applying the convenient sampling technique. Additionally, two English professors, who are currently working at the university, were part of this study.

**Table 1. Demographic information of the participants**

<b>Ecuadorian Region</b>	<b>Number of students</b>
<b>Amazon Region</b>	
Morona Santiago	1
Napo	1
Pastaza	1
Sucumbíos	3
<b>Coast Region</b>	
Guayas	4
Santa Elena	1
Manabí	1

El Oro	2
Santo Domingo	2
<b>Highlands Region</b>	
Pichincha	21
Azuay	3
Bolivar	1
Chimborazo	1
Cotopaxi	1
Imbabura	2
Loja	7
<b>General</b>	<b>52</b>

## 2.2. Procedures

A mixed-method research design that combines qualitative and quantitative methods was used for carrying out this study. The instruments applied for collecting data were two questionnaires and an observation grid. One questionnaire was designed to know if the use of panel discussions promotes meaningful learning. It contained 10 close-ended questions. The other questionnaire sought to identify the students' level of satisfaction regarding the use of panel discussions. It contained 8 close-ended questions and 2 open-ended questions. For the observation grid, three indicators related to motivation, comprehension, and functionality were considered. These instruments were revised by English teacher colleagues to assure their validity.

This study was executed in six months. It involved students participating in 8 virtual panel discussions focused on academic writing and language assessment aspects. The two English professors were the moderators in each panel discussion and the students participated as panelists and attendees. During each panel discussion teachers took notes by using the observation grid. After participating in each panel, a questionnaire based on the use of panel discussions to promote meaning learning was applied. Once all the panels were completed, the level of satisfaction questionnaire was given to students. The panel discussions were carried out by using the Zoom platform

Each panel discussion was organized as shown in the following table:

**Table 2. Panel discussion organization**

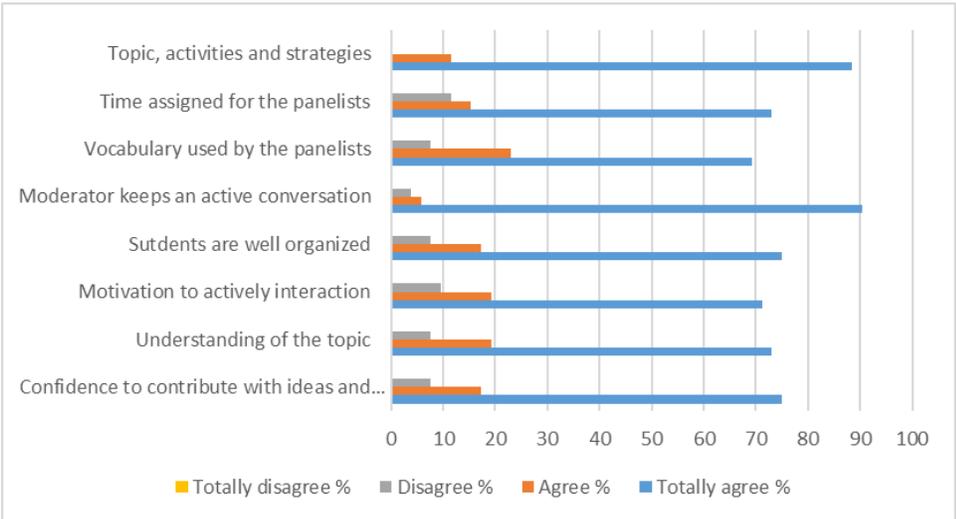
Activity	Responsible	Time
1. Welcome	Moderator	1 minute
2. Presentation of the panelist	Moderator	2-3 minutes
3. Setting rules	Moderator	2-3 minutes
4. Introduction of the topic	Moderator	2-3 minutes
5. Answering question	Panelists	25 minutes
6. Students' participation	Students	10 minutes

7. Summary or conclusion	Moderator	3-5 minutes
8. Panel discussion closing	Moderator	1 minute

The results were tabulated and presented in three tables. The first table includes information regarding the first four panel discussions and the second table information from the last four panel discussions. The last table includes information regarding the level of satisfaction of panel discussions.

For the analysis of results, the obtained data was contrasted considering the age, gender, and active participation of the students. With this purpose, the ANOVA analysis was considered.

### 3. Results and Discussion

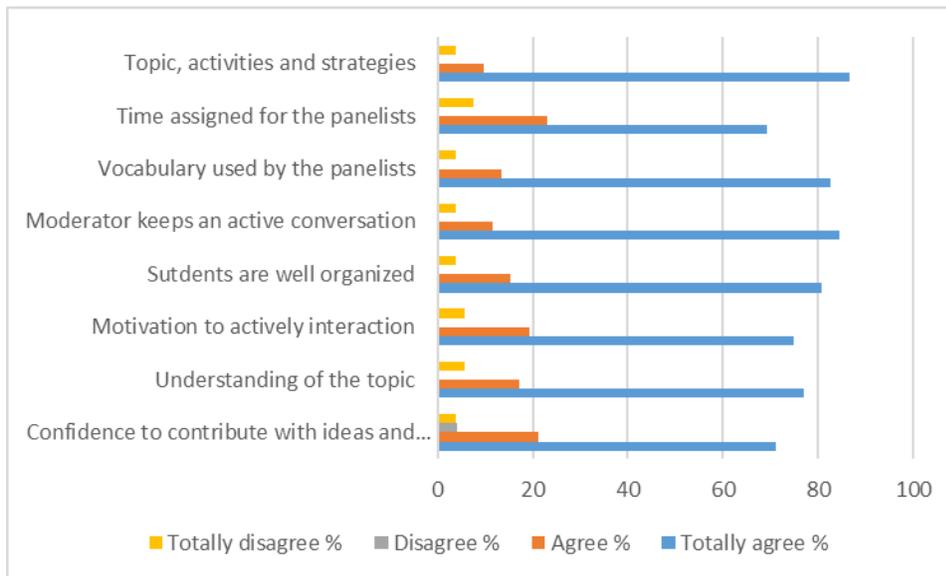


**Figure 1. Panel Discussions - First Term**

Figure 1 presents information about students’ perceptions regarding the four panel discussions that took place during the first term. In relation to the topic, activities, and strategies proposed in the panel discussion, 88% of students totally agree with the fact that they helped them to be prepared to participate. Regarding the time assigned for the panelists, 73% of the students consider it was enough to actively participate during the panel discussion. According to the vocabulary used by the panelists, 69% of the students mention that it was very comprehensible and let them understand all the ideas. This data shows that the language used during each panel discussion suited the students’ English proficiency level. According to BritishCouncil.org (2015), for boosting authentic, free-flowing conversation, it is important to be

conscious of the student's language ability and their knowledge about the topic under discussion.

Also, most of the students (90%) state that the moderator of the panel discussions keeps an active conversation. In relation to the organization of the panel discussions, 75% of students mention that they are well organized. Motivation plays a very important role when having to participate, then 71% of students mention to be motivated to actively interact in the panel discussions which let to have positive results. Most of students (73%) also consider that presenting topics through panel discussions helps them to understand them better. Finally, the students (75%) mention that after the application of this strategy, students felt confident to contribute with ideas and ask questions. This result confirms what was concluded by Anwar (2016) who suggests that the implementation of panel discussions has a positive impact on students' confidence due to the frequent interaction in discussions and presentations.



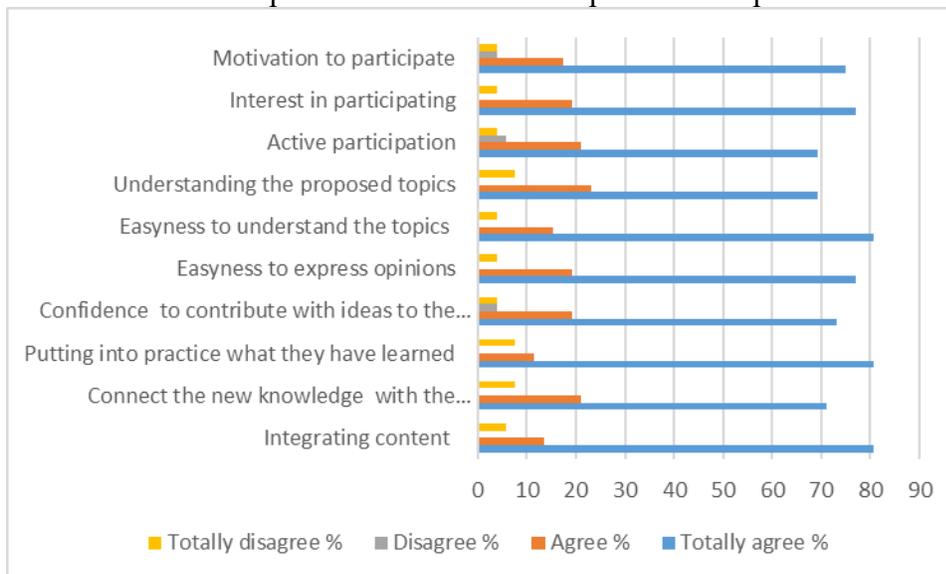
**Figure 2. Panel Discussions - Second Term**

The results in Figure 2 show the students' perception of the four panel discussions that took place during the second term. Concerning the topic, activities, and strategies planned for the panel discussions, 87% of students totally agree that these three issues helped them to be able to participate in the panel discussion. Similarly, 69% of the participants totally agree that the time allotted to the panelists was enough to present their contributions during the panel discussion. Besides, it was found that 83% of the students totally agree that the panelists used words that the attendees can all understand. The result also revealed that 85% of participants believe that the moderator of the panel discussion kept the conversation on track.

Figure 2 also illustrates that a considerable number of students which corresponds to 81%

consider that the panel discussion was well organized while 75% of them believe that the panel discussions motivated them to actively participate. Similarly, 77% of the participants think that the panel discussions are a good strategy to better understand the topic under study. Finally, 71% of students totally agree that they feel confident contributing with opinions or asking questions after the panel discussions.

Considering the data, the use of panel discussions allows students to promote meaningful learning. Concerning learning, Coll (1990) and Zarzar (2000) proposed the following five dimensions of meaningful learning; motivation, comprehension, functionality, active participation, and relationship with real life. In this context, findings show that well-designed panel discussions motivate students to participate which is evidenced in students' active participation, interest, and attentiveness during the panel discussions. Regarding the second dimension, it was evidenced that students developed their comprehension skills since they asked pertinent questions and expressed clear ideas about the proposed topics, this is in line with Hajhosseini et. al., (2016) who claim that students enhance their understanding when they participate in discussions and analyze their conceptual knowledge. Concerning functionality, students integrated new knowledge with the knowledge they have acquired and applied what they have learned to solve problems; finally, students actively participated and were involved in meaningful discussions making them relate this experience to real-life situations where they would have to solve problems related to their professional practice.



**Figure 3. Satisfaction level regarding the use of panel discussions to promote meaningful learning**

Regarding the level of satisfaction in relation to the use of panel discussions for

promoting meaningful learning, students (75%) agree that after finishing the 8 panel discussions, their motivation to participate improved. Likewise, 77% of students mention that their interest in participating increased. Regarding active participation, 69% of the students are satisfied with the use of panel discussions since they helped them to actively participate. Also, 69% of students agree with the fact that the panel discussions help them understand the proposed topics. In relation to the established topics during each session, 81% of students consider that they were easy to understand. Hajhosseini et. al., (2016) state the use of discussion-based teaching enhances students' understanding as they can analyze their conceptual knowledge. On the other hand, expressing opinions can be difficult for some students, nevertheless, it is not easy. But 77% of the students mention that the use of panel discussions helped to reach this goal. In the same way, panel discussions made students (73%) feel secure to contribute with ideas to the discussion.

Additionally, 81% of the students feel that the application of this strategy helped them to put into practice what they have learned. It also helped them (71%) to connect the new knowledge with the previous one. It represents a very important aspect of the learning process since it is related to meaning learning which according to Diaz-Barriga and Hernandez (2005) permits the creation of knowledge structures through the substantive relationship between new information and students' previous knowledge. Finally, students (81%) mention that panel discussions help them to ingrate content which in turn help to improve their teaching practice.

All the previously mentioned aspects are based on the community of inquiry method which according to Garrison, et al., (2001), helps to create meaning by means of continuous communication. Applying this type of methods helps students to improve their thinking abilities as well as their language skills.

**Table 3. Contrasting results from active participation considering gender and age.**

Origin	Sum of squares	gl	Root mean square	F	Sig.
Age	Among groups	3	,932	,030	,993
	Inside groups	48	30,790		
	Total	51			
Gender	Among groups	3	,172	,757	,524
	Inside groups	48	,228		
	Total	51			

Taking the ANOVA test and 95% confidence level as a basis, it is necessary to evaluate the value of GIS that is greater than 0.05 or greater than 5%.

For the AGE-Among groups, the GIS value is 0.993; therefore, the value obtained is

greater than 0.05, this data indicates that there is no significant difference between age and participation between groups.

For the GENDER-Among groups group, the value is 0.524; which is also greater than 0.05, therefore, this data shows that there is no significant difference between gender and student participation between groups.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that students' active participation in activities increased significantly without being influenced by age or gender. It happened due to the implementation of panel discussions as they provide dialogue spaces that strengthen English language learning. They also enhance intrinsic motivation because students are considered as the main actors of their own learning as they research, prepare and present the topic. Moreover, it is important to mention that this technique promotes meaningful learning since it leads to a better understanding of contents.

Additionally, the use of panel discussions in a distance learning environment has a positive impact on the students' level of satisfaction. Its use gives students the opportunity to share their own experiences regarding any topic that is being addressed during each session, which makes it a valuable resource.

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