

*International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*  
Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 268-282, January 2023  
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.22.1.15>  
Received Sep 23, 2022; Revised Jan 11, 2023; Accepted Jan 29, 2023

# Implementing the Engage, Study, Activate Approach Using Technological Tools in Higher Education

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**Abstract.** This study aimed to determine the effectiveness of the “engage, study, activate” (ESA) approach using interactive technological tools at a private university in southern Ecuador. The participants were 67 undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in two English as a foreign language (EFL) programs. The study was conducted over a period of ten weeks in three different courses, in which the ESA approach was implemented in an online remote learning environment due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The research instruments included an online diagnostic questionnaire, an observation checklist, an online perceptions questionnaire, and semi-structured interview. In each stage of the ESA approach, activities focusing on developing students’ knowledge were designed using interactive technological tools such as Zoom, Canvas, Quizizz, Canva, and Padlet. The results show that in the engage stage, participants felt comfortable, relaxed, and motivated about learning something new. In addition, dialogues and groupwork were the favorite activities during the study stage, where participants shared their ideas with one another. The use of ICT tools was especially effective in the activate stage, because it allowed participants to work collaboratively and receive feedback. All the stages of the ESA approach helped the participants improve their linguistic and pedagogical skills since the use of technological tools allowed them to be actively involved in the learning process.

**Keywords:** activate; EFL teaching; engage; study; technological tools

## 1. Introduction

English is considered a global language, since most of the world’s communications are developed in this language; certainly, English is widely used in scientific research, business, and education (Rao, 2019). English as a foreign language (EFL) learning in higher education is essential for university students (Chávez-Zambano et al., 2017), especially for future teachers of this language. For this reason, it is important for English teachers to look for new educational alternatives aimed at promoting and developing the communicative competence of their students (Ortega-Auquilla et al., 2020). In this sense, one way to guarantee

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innovation in teacher training is through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). As stated by Ala-Mutka et al. (2008), technologies provide new education and training opportunities since they promote collaboration, innovation, and creativity. In this regard, there are different approaches that integrate ICT into the teaching process which can be incorporated to develop EFL skills. Some of these approaches are substitution, augmentation, modification, and redefinition (SAMR) (Puentedura, 2012); technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) by Koehler et al. (2013); blended learning (b-learning) by Sharma and Barrett (2008); technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) by Walker and White (2013); and engage, study, activate (ESA) by Harmer (2001). These approaches seek to generate meaningful and active learning environments.

In this study, the ESA approach designed by Harmer (2001) was implemented. ESA is an effective alternative to arouse students' interest, curiosity, and emotions for learning something new, attract their attention, and motivate them to participate. Tomlinson (2013) stated that ESA is a very useful approach for fostering students' interest. However, he suggested that the teacher must be responsible enough to motivate students during each of its stages; that is, the didactic sequence must be adjusted according to students' age, previous knowledge, and motivation level (Ayiz, 2014).

In relation to the three stages that constitute the ESA approach, the engage stage seeks to attract students' interest at the beginning of the lesson, which is achieved through the use of teaching resources such as images, games, music, discussions, anecdotes, and videos, among other resources (Arifani et al., 2019; Weller, 2021). In the study stage, the teacher focuses on the main topic of the lesson, explaining and making the students participate and develop certain activities based on the topic raised. According to Harmer (2001), in this stage, the teacher asks students to put into practice what they have learned through the development of different activities. The aim of this stage is to consolidate learning and improve students' performance (Khoshsima & Shokri, 2016). Regarding the activate stage, Harmer (2001) defined it as the stage in which the teacher designs activities and exercises, such as dialogues, debates, and discussions. In this way, students use the target language to communicate, thereby improving their level of involvement. However, for the proper implementation of each of the aforementioned stages, it is necessary to have up-to-date technological tools that support the teaching-learning process.

The ESA approach has been implemented in several studies in different training fields in which its potential has been highlighted. For example, in the study by Khoshsima and Shokri (2017), the impact of the implementation of ESA elements on EFL students' motivation to develop speaking skills was investigated. Likewise, Shokri (2017) analyzed the effect of the ESA approach on strengthening students' reading comprehension, thus demonstrating positive results. Similarly, Katemba and Sinuhaji (2021) proved the effectiveness of the ESA approach through Quizizz to improve English high school students' knowledge.

Considering the relevance of implementing such approach, this paper will shed light on the following research questions:

- Research question 1: How effective are the engage, study, and activate stages when implementing the ESA approach through the use of ICT tools?
- Research question 2: What are students' perceptions about the effectiveness of the ESA approach in EFL learning?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 EFL Teaching and Learning**

As a result of globalization and technological progress, the English language continues to be widely taught and learned. In this sense, Richards and Rodgers (2014) asserted that during the last three decades, the development of the field of EFL teaching has significantly progressed. For instance, there has been an improvement in the quality of teaching as well as of learning by focusing on students' needs, their motivation, the strategies they use to learn, and the processes they go through in learning. In addition, the teachers' roles as course designers, the methods they utilize to transfer knowledge, and the resources they employ to promote understanding cannot be neglected. Similarly, Renandya and Widodo (2016) claimed that English teaching is as dynamic nowadays as it has been in the past due to some reasons. One of these reasons is that English is currently used internationally by many people for communication in diverse environments. Another reason is that in many countries, English has become the language of business and social interactions, which implies that the language will be more important in the future.

In the same regard as described above, Bakhreddinova (2020) explained that today, the English language is very important since many people need it to study and obtain higher education degrees. Moreover, global connections are offered and supported by means of sharing scientific, technical, and cultural data. Under these circumstances, the teaching of EFL as a subject is of paramount importance; therefore, foreign language teachers should successfully contribute to instructing students. Thus, there are some effective approaches to teaching EFL; their function in the upbringing of all generations is crucial.

### **2.2 Innovation in EFL Teaching and Learning**

A recent innovation in teaching is the use of the flipped classroom, which is considered a leading learning approach. Bergmann and Sams (2012) asserted that this approach involves providing students with preliminary resources before teaching a class so that learners use class time to build their learning. In this regard, Chen Hsieh et al. (2017) stated that flipped instruction for teaching EFL has formative profits and results in beneficial outcomes, since students are engaged in the classroom activities provided by the teacher in which they can actively participate.

Another novel teaching approach is blended learning, which involves the implementation of innovative learning environments (Zhang & Zhu, 2018). In fact, Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour (2017) believed that the blended learning approach offers a dynamic learning setting for students and instructors.

Moreover, Oweis (2018) indicated that blended learning motivates students to practice the language more authentically since it provides learners with facilities to apply it in different settings.

A different approach is gamification, which includes games as part of the language instruction. In this regard, Hung et al. (2018) indicated that game-based language learning provides benefits regarding learners' affective conditions and academic results. Furthermore, using games in the classroom promotes learners' motivation to be more involved in diverse tasks by lowering their speaking anxiety (Hung, 2018).

### **2.3 The ESA Approach**

The ESA approach is an effective teaching methodology that implies students' participation as a key factor for language learning success (Ikhrom et al., 2018). Furthermore, Ikhrom et al. (2018) stated that ESA requires the participation of learners in different communicative situations so that they have the opportunity to practice listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills of the target language through a great variety of activities and resources.

According to Harmer (2007), in the engage stage, teachers need to arouse learners' curiosity, involvement, attention, emotion, and interest so that they can be ready to start a new lesson. In this stage, teachers can also use gamification, storytelling, and descriptions, among other methods. During the study stage, some tasks are designed to help learners use the language and construct new knowledge. In this way, students subconsciously acquire the target language. In other words, this stage focuses on using communicative tasks, constructing new knowledge, discovering grammar structures, and eliciting grammar knowledge from learners. Finally, in the activate stage, students are involved in more communicative activities and they feel free to use the language. In addition, the practice of fluency is promoted rather than language accuracy.

### **2.4 ICT Tools in EFL Teaching**

The use of ICT has increased in all academic fields around the world, especially during the last decade. In EFL education, technological tools have a positive impact on supporting teachers and learners (Guettl et al., 2013; Razak et al., 2019). EFL instructors can take advantage of several approaches and technological resources for teaching language skills. The use of ICT attracts students' attention, promotes their motivation, and helps teachers design language-teaching activities that encourage learners to improve their skills (Leliani et al., 2014). In addition, the use of technological tools supports foreign language teaching because instructors can easily adapt authentic materials on the web to the learners' level and needs (Isisag, 2012).

There are many technological tools that can be used for teaching EFL skills. In this respect, some of the most popular resources include wikis, weblogs, YouTube, Educaplay, Jamboard, Padlet, Socrative, Mentimeter, augmented reality apps, online gamification tools, and social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. For instance, Jamboard, which is part of Google products, is an interactive tool that allows users to brainstorm ideas and share

labels, images, and other elements synchronously (Pinzón, 2020). In fact, Jamboard motivates learners to work collaboratively and innovatively (García et al., 2020). Regarding online games, Korkmaz (2012) affirmed that they are useful for promoting social interaction, sustaining students' interest when learning a language, and encouraging learners to take risks when working with other classmates. Another useful tool is Padlet, which has been defined as a digital wall in which teachers and students can easily share and edit comments, files, images, hyperlinks, and other elements that motivate active learning (Ellis, 2015). Furthermore, Socrative is an interactive web-based student-response system that is suitable for formative evaluation (Robertson et al., 2019). It allows teachers to assess learners' understanding and progress in real time through quizzes that can include multiple-choice, true/false, or short-answer questions.

## 2.5 Previous Studies

Khoshsima and Shokri (2017) conducted a study with the purpose to investigate teachers' perceptions of teaching-learning techniques using the ESA elements involved in the teaching of tasks in intermediate EFL learners' speaking skills. Ten experienced EFL teachers were involved in the study. To analyze the data, a descriptive survey method was employed. A questionnaire containing 37 five-point Likert-type items, including closed-ended items, was utilized to analyze teachers' understanding and perceptions of teaching speaking through the application of the ESA approach on tasks. A checklist was used for classroom observation focused on instructional activities or techniques employed by teachers, the role teachers and learners played, and instructional materials used in the teaching-learning process. The results revealed that most of the teachers held a positive perception of implementing ESA elements in their classroom settings as an instructional approach to boosting the speaking ability of EFL learners.

Another study implemented by Herdi and Ningsih (2018) aimed to improve students' vocabulary mastery by using the ESA approach. Thirty Eighth Grade students participated in this classroom action research. Qualitative and quantitative data gathered from tests, observation checklists, field notes, and interviews were analyzed. The results showed that students improved their vocabulary knowledge since they were engaged in activities, had fun, and were active in the learning process. The ESA approach allowed students to understand the topics and materials easily, thus encouraging students to speak in the target language without being afraid or anxious.

In the study conducted by Ikhrom et al. (2018), the ESA approach was implemented in an English program for teachers. The study was conducted using a qualitative approach with a collaborative participatory model. The participants were 19 men and 6 women. The findings of this study revealed that the participants' English skills increased through the ESA approach, which was used to maximize their learning achievement. Another factor that must be considered is that the teachers had high motivation when being part of the activities. They also had a strong commitment to learning English, which had a positive effect on the improvement of learning performance.

Katemba and Sinuhaji (2021) carried out a quantitative research study to determine if the use of the ESA method through Quizizz can enhance EFL students' vocabulary knowledge. This study included 65 junior high public school students who were divided into control and experimental groups. Data were collected using questionnaires. The findings indicated that both groups enhanced their vocabulary knowledge; however, there was a significant difference between the experimental and the control group. In addition, the participants' responses demonstrated that they liked the ESA model. Therefore, the researchers concluded that the ESA methodology through Quizizz games is effective for teaching vocabulary; furthermore, Quizizz can be used at all academic levels since students enjoy learning vocabulary through this model.

Even though the aforementioned studies focused on the use of the ESA approach in the EFL context through use of ICT tools, the present research makes use of interactive technological tools to enhance learners' linguistic and pedagogical skills in a higher education setting.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Setting and Participants**

This study was conducted at a private university in southern Ecuador. There were 67 participants, of which 23 were male and 44 were female. Participants were students enrolled in three different courses of an English major, and a course of a Teaching English as a Foreign Language master's program. The participants' ages ranged from 17 to 45 years. The participants' proficiency levels ranged from A1 to B2, according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020).

#### **3.2 Research Instruments**

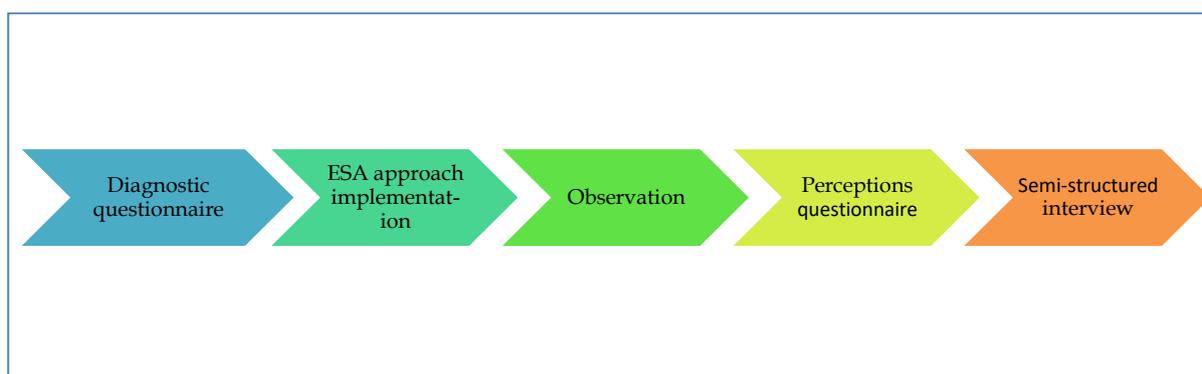
Several research instruments were used to gather data. First, an online diagnostic questionnaire was administered to determine the participants' learning expectations and needs regarding the ESA stages of an English lesson. This questionnaire included 12 closed-ended questions and 1 open question. Furthermore, an observation checklist was used to determine the participants' attitudes during the three stages of the ESA approach. Then, an online perceptions questionnaire was employed to determine the participants' views regarding the effectiveness of the types of activities supported by ICT tools when implementing the ESA approach in their learning. This questionnaire had 16 closed-ended questions and 2 open questions. Finally, a semi-structured interview was applied to confirm the participants' perceptions of the ESA approach. This instrument consisted of 10 open questions.

#### **3.3 Research Design**

A mixed-methods approach was used in this study, in which qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), this method combines quantitative and qualitative elements, which allows for a better understanding of a research issue than either method alone.

### 3.4 Procedure and Data Analysis

This study followed a methodological procedure in which the research instruments were administered to gather data before, during, and after the implementation process (Figure 1). The first step consisted of applying a diagnostic questionnaire, which was used with the purpose of gathering information on the participants' learning expectations and needs regarding the use of the ESA approach. After analyzing the diagnostic survey results, activities for implementing the ESA approach were designed using ICT tools. This step was carried out for a period of 10 weeks in all the courses in which the ESA approach activities were used to involve students in EFL learning. It is important to highlight that those courses were delivered in an online remote learning environment due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In the first ESA stage (engage), students received appropriate input to draw their attention and motivate them to learn a new topic. During the study stage, activities focused on developing students' knowledge were designed. Finally, in the activate stage, students had the opportunity to practice the new knowledge acquired. Along this process, 30 lessons were observed and students' attitudes were registered through an observation checklist. After finishing the instruction, the online perceptions questionnaire and the semi-structured interview were employed.



**Figure 1: Research procedure**

It is necessary to emphasize that all the instruments were piloted and validated before their final administration. For this purpose, Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal consistency of the items, yielding a positive coefficient result of .7.

## 4. Results

The following section includes the findings that address the research questions dealing with the effectiveness of the ESA approach through the use of ICT tools and the participants' perceptions about this method in EFL learning. The results of the observation and those of the interview are summarized in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

At the diagnostic phase, it was identified that 59.3% of the participants had good skills in using technological tools, and 79.7% were not familiar with the ESA approach, as it had not been previously used in other courses. It is worth mentioning that the participants' opinions with respect to the different stages of

this approach were diverse. In fact, the participants suggested that in the engage stage, they wanted their teachers to use videos (67.8%), pictures (61%), and games (55.9%). As for the study stage, the participants' preferences were distributed into games (57.6%), samples (54.2%), and dialogues (49.2%). In relation to the activate stage, the participants preferred discussions and role-play activities (50.8%), individual tasks (44.1%), and debates (39%).

Regarding the online perceptions questionnaire, 100% of the participants felt comfortable in the engage stage, 98.4% were interested, 87.3% relaxed, and 95.2% motivated. It is worth mentioning that the observation revealed that the participants were willing to participate in the lesson, felt enthusiastic, paid attention to the topics, asked and responded to questions, and enjoyed the resources and ICT tools used by the teacher when introducing the lesson (see Table 1). The participants' interviews evidenced that they actively participated in class and valued the implementation of different activities and resources (see Table 2), which helped them understand the contents of the course.

For the study stage, the participants indicated that dialogues (69.2%), oral exercises (55.4%), presentation of examples (47.7%), and games (44.6%) were the types of activities they preferred when studying a new subject. In addition, 64.6% of the participants indicated that when studying a new topic, they preferred direct feedback. Participant observation showed that participants actively participated in the activities by responding to the teacher's elicitation, asking questions about the contents, and thus constructing new knowledge (see Table 1). With respect to the interview (see Table 2), participants expressed their positive perceptions regarding groupwork activities, the design of tasks to practice, and the way feedback was provided.

Regarding the activate stage, the types of activities that participants preferred when practicing what their teacher taught them were group activities (69.2%), the presentation of infographics (63.1%), oral presentations (53.8%), discussions (52.3%), and written exercises (33.8%). As for the observation (see Table 1), it was noted that most of the participants enjoyed the activities used by the teacher to practice the topics studied. In addition, participants had the opportunity to rehearse what they had learned and were willing to receive and ask for feedback. In the interviews (see Table 2), the participants expressed that group discussions helped them practice the contents studied, and they felt less anxious to express their ideas in front of their partners. It is worth mentioning that the course design allowed participants to work collaboratively, which was a factor that promoted commitment and motivation.

The implementation of the three stages of the ESA approach included a variety of ICT tools. In this respect, a majority of the participants liked to use Zoom (66.2%) and the institutional Canvas platform (61.5%). Similarly, the majority indicated that they preferred free access tools such as Quizizz (58.5%), Canva (58.5%), and Padlet (56.9%). Finally, the interviews revealed that participants liked the ESA approach because it allowed them to generate significant learning, be creative, understand the topics, and also improve their EFL learning and teaching skills.

**Table 1: Observation results**

Items	Not at all	Very little	Somewhat	Very much
<b>Engage stage</b>				
Students are willing to participate in the lesson.	0%	7%	23%	70%
Students look enthusiastic at the beginning of the lesson.	0%	0%	20%	80%
Students pay attention to the topics that will be discussed in the lesson.	0%	0%	20%	80%
Students answer or respond to questions based on activities and resources used by the teacher.	0%	3%	20%	77%
Students like the ICT tools used by the teacher when presenting the lesson.	0%	0%	37%	63%
Students like the resources used by the teacher when introducing the lesson: PowerPoint presentations, pictures, realia, games, videos, songs, and others.	0%	0%	20%	80%
<b>Study stage</b>				
Students respond to the teacher's elicitations.	0%	6%	27%	67%
Students ask questions based on the contents of the lesson.	0%	10%	40%	50%
Students actively participate in the activities.	0%	4%	23%	73%
Students construct new knowledge.	0%	7%	13%	80%
Students like the activities used by the teacher: dialogues, text analysis, examples, oral exercises, written exercises, and games.	0%	0%	20%	80%
Students like the type of feedback they received to improve their knowledge: group feedback, individual feedback, direct feedback, and indirect feedback.	0%	0%	43%	57%
<b>Activate stage</b>				
Students feel free to use the target language.	0%	13%	40%	47%
Students rehearse what they have learned in the study stage.	0%	3%	14%	83%
Students are willing to receive and ask for feedback.	0%	3%	14%	83%
Students like the activities used by the teacher to practice the topics studied.	0%	0%	13%	87%

**Table 2: Results of the participant interviews**

Stage	Participants' perceptions in the interview
Engage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students were willing to participate in class.</li> <li>• Pair work and groupwork helped students learn.</li> <li>• Students were engaged and focused on the topic.</li> <li>• The use of different tools and resources helped the students understand the contents of the course.</li> <li>• The technological resources were appealing.</li> </ul>

Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Groupwork activities helped students to understand the contents.</li> <li>• The content presented by the teacher motivated students.</li> <li>• Students were able to express their opinions and ideas.</li> <li>• Students felt connected to the whole content of the lesson.</li> <li>• Timely feedback provided by the teacher was effective.</li> </ul>
Activate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussions in groups helped students practice the contents studied.</li> <li>• The course design allowed learners to work collaboratively.</li> <li>• Activities helped students to be interested in learning.</li> <li>• Students were less anxious to express their ideas in front of their partners.</li> <li>• Students were more committed and motivated to learn.</li> </ul>
ESA approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students liked the approach for introducing topics and generating significant learning.</li> <li>• The approach allowed the students to be more creative when doing the tasks designed by the teacher.</li> <li>• Through this approach, students could understand some topics that were difficult for them.</li> <li>• ESA helped students to improve their language and teaching skills through ICT tools.</li> </ul>

## 5. Discussion

This research was designed to determine how effective the ESA stages were when implementing this approach using ICT tools. The process started with a diagnostic questionnaire, which revealed the participants' needs and preferences with respect to the types of activities and resources to be used during the intervention. These results demonstrate that the majority of participants were interested in learning through this methodology to improve their linguistic and pedagogical skills, as well as practice the target language interactively and acquire new knowledge about its implementation. These findings are similar to recent research that demonstrates learners' improvement in their English skills (vocabulary), thus proving the ESA approach is appropriate to maximize students' learning (Rahmat, 2019; Vikasari, 2019).

In relation to the effectiveness of the ESA approach, the results show that the participants felt more comfortable developing collaborative activities and sharing their opinions through oral and written activities as was perceived during the observation of lessons. These findings are aligned with previous research evidencing students' positive perceptions towards working in different situations with their peers, as they were able to share their ideas and learn from one another in a community of practice (Matyakhana & Sukavatee, 2021; Özüdogru & Özüdogru, 2017). In fact, promoting collaborative work in the digital era enhances students' language learning in the EFL classroom (Zhanga & Chen, 2022). In this regard, Demirci and Düzenli (2017) asserted that the use of active learning strategies makes students interact with each other, which means that in the ESA approach, learners feel involved in the EFL instructional process. On the other

hand, the implementation of the three stages of the ESA approach in this study included a variety of ICT tools. The majority of the participants preferred using Zoom and the institutional Canvas platform. In addition, they favored the use of Quizizz, Canva, and Padlet. These results show the participants' interest to be actively involved in learning tasks using the aforementioned technological tools, as evidenced in the observation process. As Rehman and Fatima (2021) asserted, active learning promotes positive reinforcement in the classroom.

As for the participants' perceptions about the effectiveness of the ESA approach in EFL learning, the majority of the participants were enthusiastically engaged in each of the topics planned in class, which favors the teaching-learning process in higher education. In this respect, Harmer (2007) emphasized that in the ESA approach, the engage stage is crucial, because it has a communicative dimension in which adequate input should be provided to activate students' cognitive abilities and emotions. In the study stage, most of the participants preferred using dialogues and oral exercises, presenting examples, and playing games, which, according to Khoshsima and Shokri (2016), are effective to consolidate learning and improve student performance. Finally, in the activate stage, the most common types of activities were groupwork, the design of infographics, oral presentations, discussions, and written exercises. In this regard, Harmer (2001) asserted that in this stage, students use the target language to communicate, which improves their level of involvement. Furthermore, most of the participants expressed that the ESA approach allowed them to generate significant learning, spark creativity, enhance comprehension of content, and also improve their linguistic and pedagogical skills. These results are aligned with those by Arifani et al. (2020), whose findings evidenced that the ESA approach helps learners enhance their writing skills.

## 6. Conclusions

The ESA approach has been proven to be an effective methodology because it allowed the participating EFL students to be involved in the learning process through use of ICT tools. In the engage stage, the participants felt comfortable and interested in acquiring new knowledge, as most of them indicated that they felt relaxed and motivated about learning something new. This shows that there was no fear or anxiety before starting a new topic. Participants were enthusiastically engaged in this stage; certainly, videos, pictures, and games were the resources and activities that participants liked the most when the teacher introduced a new topic.

With respect to the study stage, dialogue was the most preferred type of activity according to the participants' perceptions. In addition, oral exercises, the presentation of examples, and games had an essential role in learning of a new topic. Participants preferred direct feedback and actively participated in the tasks constructing new knowledge through groupwork, which allowed them to share their ideas and learn from one another.

As for the implementation of the activate stage, the use of technological tools was positively effective to involve participants in learning the EFL linguistic and

pedagogical skills. Group activities, the presentation of infographics, oral practice, discussions, and written exercises were the most common types of activities preferred by the participants. In addition, the participants were committed to working collaboratively, receiving feedback, and rehearsing what they had learned. This implies the importance of collaborative work and visual stimulation when planning exercises that involve this type of activity in remote learning conditions.

Finally, during the implementation of the three stages of the ESA approach, the most significant ICT tools included Zoom, the institutional Canvas platform, Quizizz, Canva, and Padlet, because they allowed participants to improve their teaching and learning competencies. Technological tools permitted the participants to be actively involved in the learning process, generate significant learning, be creative, and understand the topics. Since this study was conducted using a mixed-methods approach, further research might consider an experimental method to determine the effectiveness of the ESA approach by using other technological tools with a larger sample.

## 7. Acknowledgements

The authors want to acknowledge the authorities of Universidad Tecnica Particular de Loja and the ELF Learning, Teaching and Technology research group for their financial and academic support.

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