

The redesign of the English language subjects in the online degree programs at the Autonomous University of Hidalgo State

El rediseño de las asignaturas del idioma inglés en los programas de licenciatura en línea de la Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo

Adriana I. Godínez-Meneses^a

Abstract:

A foreign language learner's major goal is to be able to efficiently communicate in different situations. In traditional face-to-face classrooms, language lessons are planned to allow students with opportunities to practice and develop their communication skills through interaction with the materials and among peers. One of the main challenges of English language teaching is to permit the same opportunities for practice when a language course is delivered online, for that reason, the instructional design plays an essential role to allow the effective communicative practice. The present article explains the limitations faced in the English language subjects in terms of the learning activities, materials, interaction, and evaluation in the Bachelor's Degree program in Marketing and the Bachelor's degree in Educational Technology, online programs offered at the Autonomous University of Hidalgo State. This work also describes the actions that were taken to redesign these online courses so they could meet the English language communication needs of the students.

Keywords:

Communication, instructional design, online, materials, activities, interaction

Resumen:

El objetivo principal de un estudiante de idiomas extranjeros es poder comunicarse de manera eficiente en diferentes situaciones. En las aulas presenciales tradicionales, las lecciones del idioma se planifican para permitir que los estudiantes practiquen y desarrollen sus habilidades de comunicación a través de la interacción con los materiales y entre pares. Uno de los principales desafíos de la enseñanza del idioma inglés es permitir las mismas oportunidades de práctica cuando un curso se imparte en línea, por lo que el diseño instruccional juega un papel fundamental para permitir práctica comunicativa efectiva. El presente artículo explica las limitaciones que enfrentaban las asignaturas de idioma inglés en cuanto a las actividades de aprendizaje, los materiales, la interacción y la evaluación en la Licenciatura en Mercadotecnia y la Licenciatura en Tecnología Educativa, programas ofrecidos en línea en la Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo. Este trabajo también describe las acciones que se tomaron para rediseñar estos cursos en línea y poder satisfacer las necesidades de comunicación en inglés de los estudiantes.

Palabras Clave:

Comunicación, diseño instruccional, en línea, materiales, actividades, interacción

Introduction

At present, there is a great demand for English language learning, since companies require employees to know this language to communicate in professional situations. As a result, higher education institutions have paid special attention to incorporating the English language into their curriculum so that students greatly increase their future employability opportunities, and the need for effective language teaching that allows students to develop their communication skills is as strong as ever.

Traditionally, students have learned English in face-to-face environments where the focus was on mastery of different items of grammar through controlled activities such as memorization of dialogs, drills, and mechanical language exercises. However, in the past decades, significant progress was made in the understanding of second language learning, mainly due to the Communicative language teaching (CLT) approach which according to Richards (2006), can be best described as a set of principles about the goals of language teaching,

^a Autor de Correspondencia, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6514-4476>, Email: adriana_godinez@uaeh.edu.mx

how learners learn a language and the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning.

In that sense, language learning started to be seen as more than producing grammatically correct sentences, suggesting that language learning occurs through actual and meaningful communication opportunities rather than through grammar-based instruction, and language lessons started to be conceptualized as learning experiences that have a clear connection between the things learners do in class and the things they will ultimately need to do out of the classroom (Nunan, 2003). In consequence, the goal of language teaching is to develop communication, and classroom activities that provide opportunities to experiment with language and develop accuracy and fluency as well as language skills through pair or group work take great relevance for building learners' communicative competence.

This reappraisal was not only in terms of language teaching but also in the form in which a course is delivered. With the advent of new technology, the boundaries to learning a language in a traditional face-to-face disappeared, and online learning became an option for students as it enables them to learn anywhere and at any time. Dudeney & Hockly (2007) describe online learning as coursework that takes place virtually, using the internet, and is often delivered via a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or platform (also known as a Learning Management System or LMS) on which course content can be stored. There, the learner can see course content such as documents, audio, and video lectures, and take part in activities involving quizzes, tests, discussion forums, and chats that are assessed by a tutor.

An example of this form of learning can be observed in the Bachelor's degree in Marketing and the Bachelor's degree in Educational Technology, programs offered by the Autonomous University of Hidalgo State (UAEH), where the disciplinary as well as the English language subjects, are delivered online through an LMS. A more detailed account of these English language subjects will be given in the following sections.

English language teaching and learning at the Autonomous University of Hidalgo State

The Institutional Language Program (2013) is the document that guides the operation and strategies of /languages in all educational programs at the Autonomous University of Hidalgo State and whose purpose is to guarantee the students' development of communicative language competencies for optimal performance in personal and professional situations. Therefore, the

Institutional Language Program determines the B1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as the level of English that the undergraduate students will reach after taking six compulsory subjects in this language. This implies that the learner completes 64 hours of study in a semester.

Semester	Subject	Level of language according to the CEFR	Number of hours of study
1 st	Socializing. Foreign language	A1	64
2 nd	Past and future events. Foreign language	A1	64
3 rd	Achievements and experiences. Foreign language	A2	64
4 th	Personal decisions. Foreign language	A2	64
5 th	Cause and effect. Foreign language	B1	64
6 th	In other words. Foreign language	B1	64

Figure 1: English language subjects in the UAEH Bachelor's degrees

Concerning the methodology and language teaching philosophy in the institution, it was identified that before entering the UAEH, students had been exposed to traditional teaching generally influenced by the Presentation, Practice, and Production sequence, with a great focus on grammar and vocabulary, and little or no real communicative use of language. Then, considering the UAEH students' learning needs and motivations, and current language teaching trends such as the Communicative Language Teaching, as well as Content-, Task-, and Skills-based teaching, the Institutional Language Program suggests the Language Teaching Cycle as the approach underlying the English syllabus, learning and teaching materials, and tests.

In this cycle, instruction is organized into four stages of work with English as the classroom language and continuous evaluation through the cycle as it can be observed in the following figure.

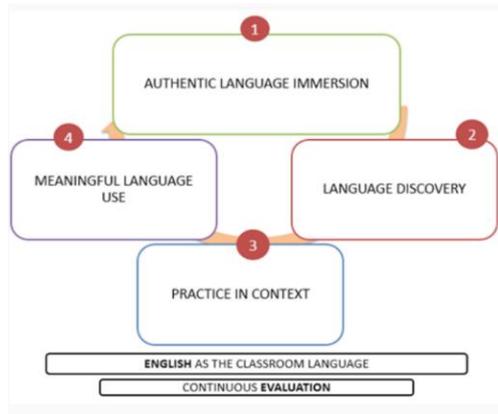


Figure 2: Language Teaching Cycle

With this approach, a lesson begins with natural written and oral texts to provide students with relevant language input. Students develop comprehension tasks related to speaking and/or writing that allow the development of communicative skills.

In the second stage of the cycle, Language Discovery, examples of target grammar and/or vocabulary that have appeared in the preceding input texts are explored through noticing, guided discovery, or consciousness-raising techniques, favoring in this way that students discover features of the target language by themselves. Other techniques like explicit rules and explanations of various types are sometimes used depending on the complexity of the target grammar and/or vocabulary studied.

Concerning practice, it must take place within the lesson's topic, and activities that reflect the development of fluency and accuracy through communicative practice need to be included. However, typical controlled-practice activities such as fill-in-the-blanks and sentence-transformation exercises are not excluded from the lesson as long as students need to master or experience certain difficulties with a specific language form.

Finally, in the last stage of the cycle, students are asked to develop a written and/or oral product that mirrors as far as possible the real-world use of language. In this product students use the new language they have learned and recycle at the same time, what they have acquired in previous lessons.

Although the Language Teaching Cycle has been implemented in face-to-face English language classrooms at the UAEH until 2020 there had not been *an analysis to determine to what extent the English courses within the online bachelor's degree programs were*

aligned with the language learning goal and the teaching philosophy in the institution.

Problems and limitations existing in the English online courses in the BA in marketing and the BA in Educational technology

Currently, the UAEH offers two online degree programs, the BA in Marketing and the BA in Educational Technology, programs that today do not only have a local and national scope but have spread internationally. Although those programs have been operating for some years and the same language syllabus as in the face-to-face programs was followed, the content of the online English language courses had not been examined. In consequence, in 2020 a detailed analysis of the six subjects of English allocated on the Garza Platform (the UAEH Learning Management System) was conducted by the UAEH Language Center.

An important feature to mention about online English language subjects is concerning the number of hours of study. The same contents studied in a semester in the face-to-face degree programs should be covered within six weeks in the BA in Educational Technology, and 5 weeks in the case of the BA in Marketing. That suggested that on the account of the limited amount of time for study, the activities must provide learners with efficient practice to reach the desired objectives

However, after the referred analysis it was determined that there was no correspondence between the methodology used and the language teaching philosophy at the UAEH and that due to an ambiguous and ineffective instructional design, students of the online degree programs could barely reach the institutional English language learning goals. In addition, it could be observed that the courses contained a marked grammar and vocabulary focus and that students had few opportunities for the development of communication skills as in traditional views of language learning.

The limitations identified in terms of the activities, the materials, the interaction, and the evaluation are described in detail in the following lines.

Type of activities

Each subject of English allocated on the Garza Platform was organized into four units of study similar to the face-to-face degree programs, however, it was difficult for students to have a sense of direction or expectation on their learning experiences as the amount of time that the student would take to complete each unit, and the total and type of activities were not defined.

Scrivener (2005) claims that someone learning a language needs far more than “in the head” knowledge of the language to be able to use it successfully. However, it could be observed that the activities in the online English subjects benefited learning based on grammar and vocabulary, and there were few opportunities for the development of receptive and productive language skills.

Moreover, students were guided to learn grammar and vocabulary with little or no context/situation to later use new words and structures in mechanically created sentences as a form of producing language, and students often experienced a huge leap from learning grammar and vocabulary to using it, without having any opportunities for practice and making mistakes on their use.

Another important point is that, since there was no context or situation for learning, vocabulary was often learned through Spanish translation, and although the introduction to the courses, visible for students on the platform, claimed to follow guided discovery techniques as their learning methodology, learners were entirely presented with explicit grammar rules. Those explanations were in the form of PowerPoint presentations or mind maps created by the designers of the courses but contained isolated examples to explain a grammar topic and frequent spelling mistakes.

Concerning the reading and listening abilities, it was identified that when students were presented with audio or texts, there were no opportunities to develop skills that facilitate the comprehension of the material such as inferring, paraphrasing, getting main ideas, understanding specific details, etc., as the purpose of exposing students to input was merely the identification of the target grammar or vocabulary. For example, students were asked to read a text to recognize sentences in the present perfect, or when the objective of the activity was to have some listening practice, students were presented with audio consisting of a grammar explanation.

In the same way, there were no moments for students to develop products that related to real-life practical uses of language such as writing an email, giving a presentation, or discussing a topic. As it was previously described, the type of language products that students developed was based on the mechanical creation of sentences on PowerPoint presentations or Word processor where the grammar and vocabulary learned needed strictly to be used. As for speaking products, students were asked to record audio repeating those sentences that they had mechanically written minimizing in that way, learners’

opportunities for meaningful and purposeful interaction through language.

An important element of the success of an activity relies on the instructions, and they become essential in an online course where there is no opportunity to instantly check that students have understood what they have to do. Nonetheless, the instructions for the activities in the online English subjects were wordy, contained frequent grammatical and vocabulary errors, and didactic terms not necessarily to be known by the learners. Furthermore, the first subject, Socializing. Foreign languages, contained instructions entirely in Spanish even though experts in the field like Scrivener (2012) and Harmer (1998) highlight the importance of providing learners with short, simple, logical, and concise instructions in English even at lower levels.

Materials

Although coursebooks provide a variety of ready-made activities and skills work and are frequently used as core material in face-to-face classrooms, students of English in the online degree programs at the UAEH did not use a textbook, therefore, sources for input and practice were mainly taken from the web and allocated on the Garza Platform. When the Language Center analyzed those materials, it was identified that texts and audio/videos were not of the authentic type. Gower et al. (2005) argue that authentic materials (materials not designed for English language teaching and learning) may result in intrinsically motivating and interesting for students and provide exposure to the language as it is used. However, the materials in the six subjects of English lacked an authentic relationship to real life and as it was previously described, their use was with a complete focus on grammar and vocabulary.

Gower et al. (2005) also claim that there needs to be a careful selection of the material having in mind the learners’ needs and interests, yet, it was found that some of the materials were aimed at kids. For example, students were asked to watch videos consisting of childish songs, and there were links to webpages that contained grammar practice with visuals and exercises not suitable or relevant for adult students.

Interaction

In a face-to-face classroom, the interaction among students, in pairs or groups, reflects an important aspect of developing communication. In the online English courses analyzed, the interaction among peers happened entirely through discussion forums on the platform but with no communicative intention as students were asked to reply to their classmates’ posts emphasizing that they

should state their opinion, evaluate them, or identify strengths and weaknesses.

In addition, students received no guidance to know the criteria taken into account to assess their classmates and reiteratively, they were asked to discuss what they had understood about a grammar point through the discussion forums on the platform.

Evaluation

At the UAEH, all subjects, including language subjects, take into account self-assessment and peer-assessment grades to evaluate learners in a course, however, it was identified that only three out of the six subjects of English in the online degree programs considered those forms of assessment and concise evaluation instruments that guided students through the process did not exit.

In addition, there was no correlation between the evaluation criteria and what students had previously practiced. For instance, when students recorded audio as a speaking product, they were required to demonstrate a correct pronunciation of words even though they had not had previous practice and had not been exposed to input that served as a model for it.

In the same way, the evaluation criteria of activities took into account aspects that were not relevant to the learner's development of communication. This could be particularly observed in writing products where students wrote several sentences and attached images to illustrate their work. They were also commonly asked to add a cover to the document where they included the name of the subject and personal information like their names. Both, the image and the document cover weighted a high percentage of the activity's grade but did not contribute to demonstrating students' language progress.

Furthermore, students did not present a test at any stage of the course, and the only form of measuring learners' language was through barely demanding activities like the assignments described before.

English language subjects redesign

Given all the problems and limitations identified, in 2021 the Language Center began working on redesigning the English subjects available on the Garza Platform, and during the first stage of the redesign, a new instructional design was proposed.

The course activities were now organized into four different stages according to the Language Teaching Cycle implemented in face-to-face degree programs and the stages were renamed as "steps" to provide the learner with a sense of the procedure on the platform.

Each week of study the student goes through the four steps of the cycle, from being exposed to authentic input to developing an oral or written product that integrates the language knowledge and skills they have acquired.

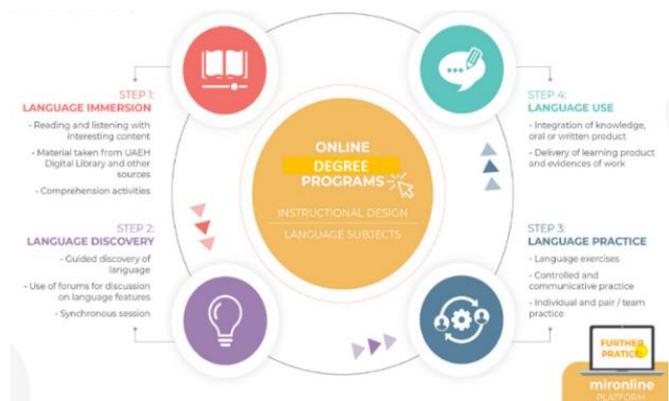


Figure 3: Instructional design proposed for the online English subjects

Bearing in mind that the main focus for the courses should be communication, interesting and engaging topics for adult learners were proposed. As a result, topics related to academic life, social issues, environmental problems, and technological advances among others, would be discussed. In that way, students learn language through relevant and meaningful content and make connections with real-life use of language.

Concerning the materials, authentic texts or audio taken from various sources were incorporated. Consequently, students are now exposed to YouTube videos with relevant content, documentaries, academic and web articles, news reports, etc. accompanied by simple comprehension tasks for lower levels and more difficult ones for higher-level students.

1.1.3 Environmental concerns

Read the article "**Environmental concerns**". Make a mind map that illustrates the most important information about the environmental problems described in the text. Add any other problem that the text does not mention.

When you finish, name the document as *W1_1.3_LastnamesName* (for example, *W1_1.3_NaviaCabreraLourdes*)
Add the document to your e-Portfolio on Google Drive.

*This activity weighs 10% of this week's grade.

Figure 4: Activity on the platform where students are exposed to relevant topics and authentic input at the A1 level

Although most of the activities are self- make and students work through the materials at their own pace, in

Step 2 of the cycle a synchronous session was included so students could have some sort of communicative interaction with classmates and with the instructor. An agreement on the date and hour of the session was suggested so the students could join it, as well as using any platform that allows video conferencing and video recording in case a learner is absent.

During the session, students develop specific learning tasks, for example, they discuss the week's topic, or share their findings from previous internet research. The weekly synchronous session also results in an opportunity for the students to explore language forms and functions through consciousness-raising, noticing, and guided discovery techniques.

1.2.2 Synchronous session

Attend the synchronous session with your teacher and classmates (See the time and link in the Announcements).

During the sync session:

1. Share with your classmates the comparisons you made between two museums in Mexico City, and learn more about the comparative form.
2. Analyze with your teacher the following superlative sentences taken from the article you read. Pay attention to the parts in bold:

- Mexico City is home to **the most visited** museum in the country: the Museo Nacional de Antropología
- This is one of **the most functional and beautiful** museums in Mexico City
- Its walls are some of **the most imposing** murals of **the greatest** Mexican Muralists: Diego Rivera...

What's the adjective in each of the sentences?

Are we comparing the museum with another museum or with all the museums?

Is there a similar structure in Spanish?

What is the rule for long adjectives? What about short adjectives?

3. Complete the following charts

Adjective	Comparative	Superlative
Big		Bigger
Great		
Pretty	Prettier	
Young		

Figure 5: Example of an A2 task that students develop during a synchronous session.

As for the practice stage, controlled and communicative activities were included within the cycle. Littlewood (1981) suggests that structural practice provides a point of departure for other, more communicatively oriented activities, therefore, students are asked to answer language practice exercises on web pages that contribute to the mastery of grammar and vocabulary to then, work with their peers to complete more demanding language tasks. In contrast with the activities before the redesign, the new tasks for practice involve interaction among students as they discuss a topic through the platform forums, or work collaboratively in information-gap, information-gathering, and opinion-sharing activities.

3.3.1 Discussing fast fashion

According to the examples and information you got from the sync session, you will continue discussing fast fashion on Twitter.

Your facilitator will make an entry about fast fashion in Mexico. Provide your opinion using the expressions you learned during the sync session.

Include images or links to your tweet to your e-Portfolio on Google Drive as evidence of this activity.

Note: You must have a Twitter account.

*This activity weighs 10% of this week's grade.

Figure 6: Example of a communicative task for language practice at the B1 level

At end of each week of study, students develop a written or oral product in which they not only demonstrate accurate use of language, but also the full development of communication skills. It is worth mentioning that these products reflect real uses of language and students' profiles by personalizing some of the activities. For instance, students are asked to discuss important information about their Bachelor's program such as the number of semesters, graduation requirements, modality, most important subjects, etc., and to record a video giving a presentation for students who are interested in enrolling in the program.

1.4.1 My Bachelor's degree program

Imagine that due to your great work in the English subject, you have been selected to give a presentation for foreign students who are interested in studying your Bachelor's degree program. What relevant information would you give them? Get in pairs and brainstorm the points that you will cover. Take into account your answers and your classmates' to the questions in activity 1.1.1.

See who you are working with within the Collaborative work forum.

Then, individually write notes or a script for your presentation and prepare visuals.

Record a video of you presenting the most important information about your Bachelor's degree program (3-5 min).

Save the video as W1_4.1_LastnamesName (for example, W1_4.1_NaviaCabreraLourdes) and add it to your e-Portfolio on Google Drive.

Write "Activity completed" here, in the space provided for that.

*This activity weighs 50% of this week's grade.

Figure 7: Example of a speaking product at the B1 level

As each subject of English should be completed in the online degree programs within 5 or 6 weeks, students can make use of the MIR platform, a platform that accompanies the coursebooks for students of face-to-face bachelor's degrees. Although students of the online degree programs do not purchase a coursebook, free access to the platform was granted so they could benefit from the available activities for practice and increase in that way, the number of hours of study per week.

The evaluation for the courses was also an aspect that needed some adaptations. Taking into account that the most usual form of demonstrating the language level one possesses is through a proficiency test, at the end of the subject students take a comprehension and grammar test that is designed by the Language Center similar in structure to the TOEFL ITP examination, while the speaking and writing skills are evaluated through the writing and oral products developed during the course.

These products are allocated electronically in a portfolio of work on Google Drive along with evidence of other activities that learners develop during a week of study being the learning product the task that has the greatest weight on the weekly grade. Although not every single activity that students do is considered for evaluation, it is important to mention that they are interconnected so that students do not skip important tasks in the cycle that may

affect the sequence and therefore, the final learning objective.

The evidence of work portfolio (e-Portfolio), the final test, and the activities on the MIR platform become the elements considered for the subject evaluation, adding the grades students assign as a result of peer- and self-assessment.

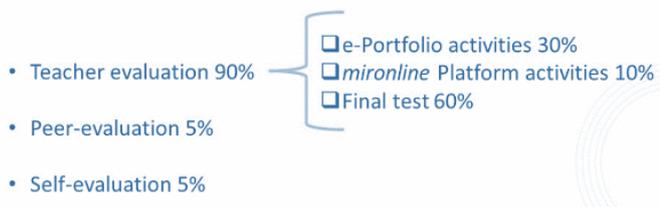


Figure 8: Evaluation of the English language subjects in the online degree programs after their redesign

To make the learning expectations clear for the students and course facilitators, rubrics for evaluation of learning products are available on the platform as well as instruments to objectively carry out self- and peer-assessment.

Another important highlight of the English language subjects is that after the redesign, students are no longer asked to entirely work with basic tools like PowerPoint presentations or Word processor, instead, they are required to explore current technological tools like easy-to-use applications or platforms which invite them to engage with the activities and with the course content.

In addition, although in an online course having a teacher-student dialogue as it happens in face-to-face classrooms would be difficult, activities encourage reflection and critical thinking as they open with a rhetorical provocative question that helps students to build interest and relate to the topic. For example, students find the following questions as a form to start discourse in the last subject of English: Have you ever heard the phrase that says "reality is stranger than fiction"? Why do you think this is said? Although students are not asked to demonstrate that they have answered them, the questions allow them an opportunity to reflect on the answer and start thinking on the form to express their ideas in English.

Finally, an important feature of the courses on which careful attention was paid was the visual aspect. An online course visually attractive not only serves the purpose of capturing the learners' attention, but it also guides the student from the start to the end. Therefore, consistency in design is important because it makes learning

memorable and helps learner identify the structure of the course.

Because of that reason, icons representing each step of the cycle were included on the platform so that students could identify a new stage of work as well as banners to let students know when a week of work would start.

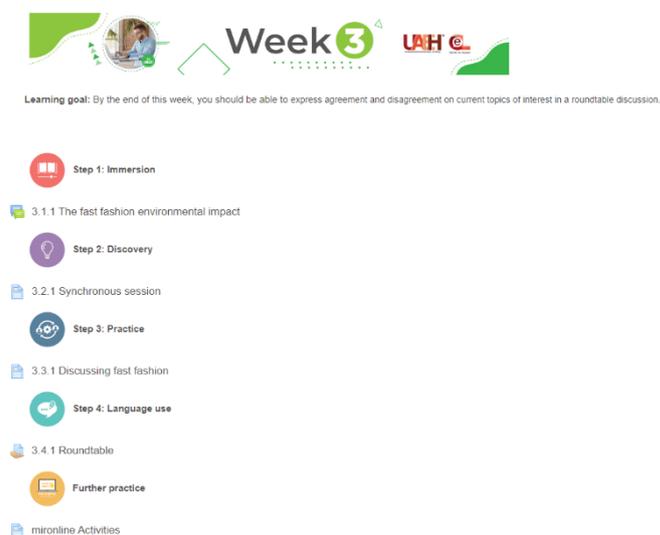


Figure 9: Visual look of a week of work on the Garza Platform

Final thoughts

The redesign of six subjects of English in the online degree programs at the UAEH was concluded at the end of 2022 contributing to a paradigm shift when it is about online language courses in the institution. Although online learning and teaching are a challenge, the key to a good quality course is a solid instructional design that allows learners to reach the expected language objectives.

In this sense, effective courses provide students the chance to actively build their knowledge rather than simply absorb it, so the selection of materials and the design of activities play a fundamental role in equipping learners with the necessary skills to take part in real-life situations where the English language is a vehicle for communication.

In addition, it can be concluded that online learning is not a synonym for individual self-study and that activities that allow collaboration and interaction among students can be integrated into the course design. Likewise, another important issue in an online course is the evaluation form as it needs to contribute to tracking learners' progress as

a result of the instruction and to determine the success of the course itself for continual improvement.

Although the redesign of the English language subjects was concluded and the new courses provide the learner with effective communicative practice and interaction, the topics, activities and materials, should constantly be updated in order to keep content relevant to learners and to meet the students' new language needs.

References

- [1] Dudeney, G., & Hockly, N. (2007). *How to Teach English with Technology*. Pearson Education
- [2] Gower, R., Phillips, D., & Walters, S. (2005). *Teaching Practice Handbook*. Macmillan.
- [3] Harmer, J. (1998). *How to Teach English: An Introduction to the Practice of English Language Teaching*. Longman
- [4] Littlewood, W. (1981). *Communicative Language Teaching: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press.
- [5] Nunan, D. (2003). *Practical English Language Teaching Teacher's Text Book* (D. Nunan, Ed.). McGraw-Hill
- [6] Richards, J. C. (2006). *Communicative Language Teaching Today*. Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Scrivener, J. (2005). *Learning Teaching: A Guidebook for English Language Teachers*. Macmillan.
- [8] Scrivener, J. (2012). *Classroom Management Techniques* (S. Thornbury, Ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- [9] UAEH. (2013). *Programa Institucional de Lenguas*. México: UAEH