

Developing the Oral Skill in Online English Courses Framed by the Community of Inquiry

El desarrollo de la habilidad oral en cursos de inglés *online*,
enmarcados por la comunidad de indagación

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Over the last decade, the community of inquiry framework has proved successful for online learning experiences in diverse disciplines, although studies in the teaching of English as a foreign language arena are still scarce. In this vein, this article reports a preliminary study about the development of the oral skill in a Basic English online course, uncovering the relationship between the community of inquiry framework (with its three forms of presence: teaching, cognitive, and social) and some indicators of the oral skill. Findings, based on learners' perceptions, confirmed the existence of such framework and suggest that *the teaching presence* fosters grammar, accuracy, and vocabulary. Discussion of findings, limitations of the study and future possible research actions conclude this report.

Key words: Community of inquiry, foreign language teaching-learning, online education, oral skill.

En la última década, el modelo de comunidad de indagación ha demostrado ser efectivo en experiencias de aprendizaje en línea en diversas disciplinas. No obstante, los estudios en el campo de la enseñanza del inglés aún son escasos. En este orden de ideas, el presente artículo reporta un estudio preliminar acerca del desarrollo de la habilidad oral en un curso de inglés en línea, así, se revelan algunas relaciones entre las presencias de este modelo (docente, cognitiva y social) y algunos indicadores de la habilidad oral. Los hallazgos, basados en la percepción de los estudiantes, confirman la existencia de dichas presencias y sugieren que la docente contribuye a la mejora de la gramática, la precisión y el vocabulario. Finalmente, se presentan conclusiones, limitaciones y futuros aspectos por indagar.

Palabras clave: Comunidad de Indagación, educación en línea, enseñanza-aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras, habilidad oral.

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Introduction

Education, as a strategy to transform societies into knowledge societies, in which knowledge is shared through diverse possibilities of communication (extended by technology and networks), should promote the production, distribution, and socialization of information in order to empower individuals (UNESCO, 2005). Thus, as active participants of the educational process, teachers have been facing a condition in which technology has become an important element in education.

Although distance education is not new, only recently has this movement become official according to the Ministry of Education in Mexico. As a result, several Mexican universities have implemented distance education by creating flexible online options for everyone to have access to formal higher education (Estados Unidos Mexicanos, Presidencia de la República, 2012). In this way, the authorities have intended to facilitate access to knowledge, to increase the education level of the population, and to assure the universal right to education according to the declarations of UNESCO (1998) and the Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura (OEI, 2010). However, this flexibility in education should be assumed from a systemic point of view, so that we understand this educational phenomenon as a whole.

Thus, online distance education (ODE) should be understood from a global perspective, and not simply in terms of geographical locations and time constraints regarding a physical classroom. Learning in virtual learning environments (VLE) provokes ruptures in the ways knowledge is generated, situating learning within the learner's scope, and making the educational process a reality (Aguirre & Edel, 2013). Moreover, these new learning perspectives encourage the teacher to become a facilitator, a guide, and an instructor that accompanies the learners in their educational quest. Therefore, learners are urged to play a more active role,

but not only for individual action, but for collaborative work in a virtual learning community; aspects that will determine their learning experience.

Specifically, in the field of language learning, ODE has challenged the area of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in terms of the development of linguistic skills. Although technology has been present in this area for a long time, and computer assisted language learning (CALL) has benefited from technological tools that have provided educational resources in the target language, most online courses have focused on reading, writing, and listening skills (Jordano de la Torre, 2011).

Regarding the oral skill, which we perceive as being traditionally conceived as the product of the verbal interaction between the learners and the instructor in a face to face context, Levy and Stockwell (2006) assert that it is the most difficult to teach, practice, and evaluate through technology. Consequently, fostering the development of the oral skill through CALL, in online education, seems to be a complex issue that demands different approaches in order to succeed in the context of a VLE.

In an emerging knowledge society that incorporates new ways of learning and thereby increasing our intellectual capital, the ability to communicate verbally in a foreign language complements the profile of the learners who aim to accumulate their own capital. In this context, the current research article examines the development of the *oral skill* in online English courses that embraced the pedagogy framed by the community of inquiry (COI) (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999). Accordingly, we present a literature review related to the COI framework, specifically in the field of TEFL. Then, the aim and questions that underlie this research are established, followed by the methodology considered for the data collection and analyses, which finally lead to the findings that are discussed afterwards.

Literature Review

The Oral Skill in TEFL

Among others, Gordillo (2011) has defined oral skill as the capacity of expressing oneself verbally for communicating, based on the linguistic rules of a language. It is divided into two complementary skills: listening (the receptive skill) and speaking (the productive skill); both of them are produced within a communication act, in which the speaker and listener communicate among themselves, not individually.

The oral skill indicators to be considered in this research are four: fluency and coherence, lexical resources, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation. Within the parameters determined in the certification exam IELTS (Institutional English Language Testing System, 2007) and the British Council, they are defined as follows:

[Fluency and coherence] is the ability to talk with normal levels of continuity, rate, and effort and to link ideas and language together to form coherent, connected speech. The key indicators of fluency are speech rate and speech continuity. The key indicators of coherence are logical sequencing of sentences, clear marking of stages in discussion, narration or argument, and the use of cohesive devices (e.g., connectors, pronouns, and conjunctions) within and between sentences. (IELTS, 2007, p. 12)

In Kaye's words (n.d.),

fluency and coherence refer to how good the candidates are at keeping talking at the right speed and how good they are at connecting their ideas together; additionally, speakers need to be able to understand and follow the rules of language at word, sentence, and text levels. (para. 8)

A second indicator of the oral skill is the lexical resource, which makes reference to

the range of vocabulary the candidate can use and the precision with which meanings and attitudes can be expressed. The key indicators are the variety of words used, the adequacy and appropriacy of the

words used, and the ability of circumlocution (get round a vocabulary gap by using other words) with or without noticeable hesitation. (IELTS, 2007, p. 12)

In other words, this is about the amount of vocabulary the candidates have and "how well they use it. As well as the rules of language at a word level, this criterion considers the communicative functions of speech and the social meaning of speech" (Kaye, n.d., para. 9).

Grammatical range and accuracy is another indicator that is evaluated in the oral skill, and it refers to:

the range and the accurate and appropriate use of the candidate's grammatical resource. The key indicators of grammatical range are the length and complexity of the spoken sentences, the appropriate use of subordinate clauses, and the range of sentence structures, especially to move elements around for information focus. The key indicators of grammatical accuracy are the number of grammatical errors in a given amount of speech and the communicative effect of error. (IELTS, 2007, p. 12)

Another way to understand grammatical range and accuracy has to do with "how much vocabulary the candidate has, and how well he uses it; along with the rules of language at a word level; this criterion considers the communicative functions and the social meaning of speech" (Kaye, n.d., para. 10).

Finally, pronunciation is the last of the indicators of the oral skill that we are considering in this study, and it is understood as:

the ability to produce comprehensible speech to fulfill the speaking test requirements. The key indicators will be the amount of strain caused to the listener, the amount of the speech which is unintelligible and the noticeability of L1 influence. (IELTS, 2007, p. 12)

To be more precise, this indicator relates to "how well the candidate pronounces the language and the communicative effect of the candidate's pronunciation. Within this indicator, speakers need to be able to produce the phonological features of speech." (Kaye, n.d., para. 11)

Although the importance of the oral skill in a foreign language is undeniable, its evaluation is one of the most complex and controversial aspects in the TEFL field (Weir, O’Sullivan, & Horai, 2006). As Luoma (2004) states, it is not an easy task to find the most appropriate ways to connect the objectives of evaluation with the corresponding activities or with the most appropriate instruments to assess the way a person communicates verbally.

According to Escalona, Medina, and Escalona (2010), in the English language teaching (ELT) milieu, it is known that the communicative approach to language teaching and learning has guided current programs in many language schools and higher education institutions; however, the oral production still seems to be disregarded. Escalona et al. assert that the lack of oral communication is a reflection of the use of traditional approaches focused on the grammatical skill. This usually threatens the quality of the learners’ oral expression by limiting their achieving of the required standards of communicative competence. That is to say, they learn the language, but their level is not good enough to perform in a real communicative context (Hernández, 2010). This condition is augmented by the lack of activities and/or opportunities that may promote the oral skill in online courses, thereby restraining the learners’ ability to communicate verbally in their context.

Online Pedagogy in Language Learning

Associated with the complexity of developing and evaluating the communication skills in VLE, the pedagogical aspect appears. Learners and teachers should adopt specific roles that lead to the achievement of their learning goals. In this sense, the CoI framework (Garrison et al., 1999), comprising the cognitive presence, the teaching presence, and the social presence, seems a viable option to guide the learning process towards a meaningful learning experience.

The social presence, as defined by Garrison et al. (1999), is the “ability of the participants in a community to project themselves socially and emotionally as real people” (p. 89). That is, in their learning environment, the participants establish a comfortable atmosphere by demonstrating signs of affection such as greetings, use of names/nicknames, and sense of community; factors that foster communication and create group cohesion.

On the other hand, the cognitive presence refers to the “extent to which participants construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse in a community of inquiry” (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 89). This presence characterizes the inquiry process in four phases: triggering event, exploration, integration, and resolution. Finally, the teaching presence is understood as the “design, facilitation, and direction of the social and cognitive processes with the purpose to achieve personal, meaningful, and educational outcomes” (Garrison et al. 1999, p. 90).

Regarding the research about the CoI, there is some concerning its application in different disciplines such as education, business, and technology¹, but research in the specific field of TEFL is more limited.² These studies have confirmed the existence of the three types of presence described by Garrison et al. (1999) during the development of the corresponding courses. Most implementations and research have taken place at universities in North America, Europe, and Asia, where the language is the medium of instruction, but not the learning objective. Yet, the findings are limited and have been investigated in cultural, educational, and

¹ See Akyol, Garrison, & Ozden, 2009; Arbaugh, 2008; Arbaugh, Bangert, & Cleveland-Innes, 2010; Burgess, Slate, Rojas-LeBouef, & LaPrairie, 2010; Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010; Goda & Yamada, 2013; Ke, 2010; Kumar, Dawson, Black, Cavanaugh, & Sessums, 2011; Lambert & Fisher, 2013; Shea & Bidjerano, 2010; Stein et al., 2007; Stodel, Thompson, & MacDonald, 2006; Vaughan & Garrison, 2005.

² See Alavi & Taghizadeh, 2013; Arnold & Ducate, 2006; Asoodar, Atai, Vaezi, & Marandi, 2014; Chen, 2012; Lomicka & Lord, 2007; Olesova, Richardson, Weasenforth, & Meloni, 2011; Randrianasolo, 2013; Tolu, 2010; Yamada, Goda, Matsukawa, Hata, & Yasunami, 2014. For a summary of these studies see González Miy & Herrera Díaz (2015).

linguistic settings different from the Latin-American context, which is the setting of this study that has taken place in Veracruz, Mexico.

Learning Theories in Distance Education

In this scenario, we conducted a piece of research in the area of TEFL and ODE, specifically concerning the development of the oral skill in virtual courses. This would be analyzed by means of the social, cognitive, and teaching presence that, as suggested by the COI Framework (Garrison et al., 1999), should intervene in an online learning experience. On this ground, this research is based on a group of theories that incorporate, on the one hand, a pedagogical foundation integrated by the *transactional distance theory* (Moore, 1993), *constructivism* (Ausubel, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978), and the *language learning pedagogy* (Whong, 2011). On the other hand, the technological basis is integrated by the VLES and the CALL (Thomas, Reinders, & Warschauer, 2013a).

The transactional distance theory emerges from distance education, in which “distance” exists not only geographically, but also in the interactions between the teacher and the learner, the environment and the behaviors. According to Moore (1993), this “separation” affects both teaching and learning as there is a psychological and communicational gap, which could easily lead to confusion. It is this psychological separation that is referred to as transactional distance, and it demands specific teaching and learning strategies (instructional dialogue, structure, and autonomy) to be reduced.

Constructivism is known as a psychological and philosophical view, which assumes that what a person learns is the result of the constructions of knowledge based on his/her experiences and through interaction (Schunk, 2012). Constructivism has, among other things, been the foundation of the learner-centered approach; therefore, the teacher’s and learner’s roles have adopted

different, specific characteristics. The teacher is expected to generate the conditions for the learners to interact with contents in an active way, as well as to generate the opportunities for them to socialize knowledge. Therefore, the learner is expected to take an active role, self-regulating and collaborating with others to approach contents from different perspectives.

This view of social learning is well recognized in the work of Vygotsky (1978), from whose perspective is the social component that transforms the personal experiences of the learner and leads to a reorganization of mental structures. This is often referred to as dialectic or cognitive constructivism (Schunk, 2012). Here, the cognitive function suggests that learners are able to monitor and evaluate a stimulus and develop a response; however, learners are not passive entities as they are able to control the learning process.

In the context of language learning, when learners are trying to learn a new element of the target language, they often compare it to the repertoire they have already learned, then make a hypothetical plan and try it. If such hypothesis is correct, they accept or reject it and try a new one. In this trial and error exercise, grammatical rules are learned individually, but when learners take this knowledge to a social environment of exchange, internalization of knowledge takes place and conducts to a reorganization of thoughts (Shastri, 2010).

The conceptions sustained by Ausubel (1983) may be helpful to understand the “meaningfulness” of learning experiences. In his view, meaningful learning is an extension of the knowledge that the learner already has. This basis, previous to knowledge or the cognitive structure, serves as an anchor for new information; that is, linking new information to existing information leads to meaningful learning. However, it is important to understand that meaningful learning cannot only happen by association; there should be an interactive process. Thus, this interaction between previous and new knowledge is what modifies the existing cognitive structure and makes learning meaningful.

Figure 1. Pedagogy and Technology for Online Language Learning

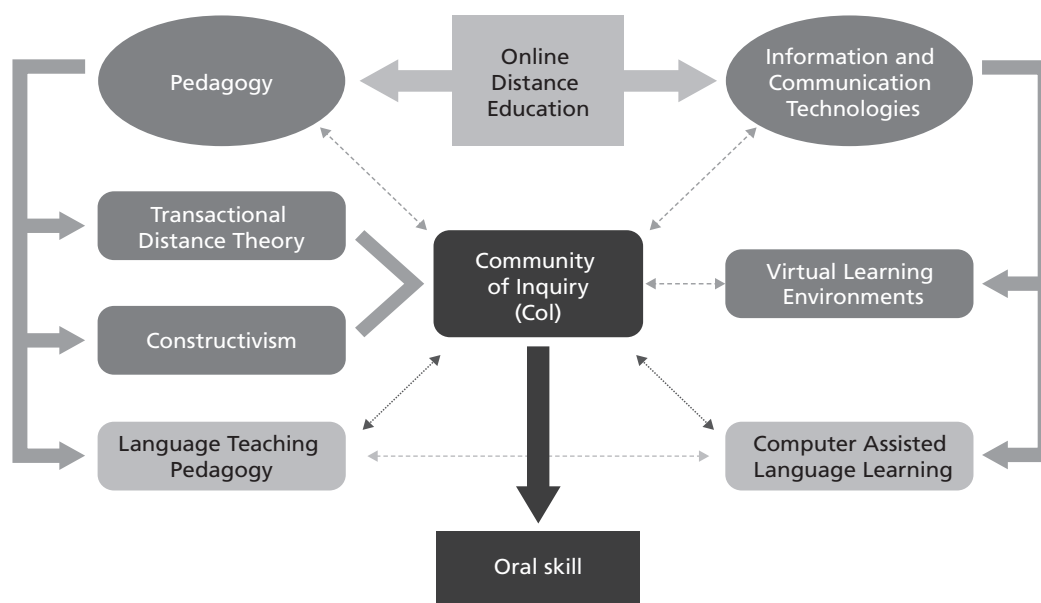


Figure 1 shows how the pedagogical and technological sides are interconnected by the CoI, all aiming at the development of the oral skill.

Language learning pedagogy, specifically the communicative approach, seems like a feasible way to reach the goals for verbal and written communication, since its focus is on language use instead of on learning language and grammatical rules (Whong, 2011). Thus, learners are encouraged to speak as much as possible in order to communicate, emphasizing the process rather than the final product. Mistakes are treated secondarily with the teacher being careful not to cause the learners distractions while communicating and interacting. Furthermore, by using authentic materials or those specifically created for language learners (often found in EFL textbooks), learning is promoted in an environment where linguistic situations are created to simulate reality. In this sense, the communicative approach promotes an active learning process through interaction between the users.

Regarding the technological foundation, the VLES consist of the hardware for the installation of

learning resources, which are placed on the cyberspace and accessed through the internet (Leakey, 2011). They are also referred to as *management learning environments* (MLE) or *course management systems* (CMS), which offer learning and evaluation materials as well as communication means to be used among learners and instructors. These environments facilitate the administration of educational materials and their delivery to their users; such materials include multimedia resources that accelerate learning and foster learners' autonomy. Additionally, their availability, automatic revision, communication tools, and information storage, represent advantages for both the learners and instructors, making them functional for distance learning (Leakey, 2011).

This technological scenario encompasses the CALL approach, which serves as a methodology that, according to Thomas et al. (2013b), aims to use digital equipment in the teaching-learning field. In words of Leakey (2011), CALL is better understood as

the exploration, sometimes coherent, sometimes disparate, of all aspects of the human-computer axis, with the primary goal of

enhancing the process of second-language teaching and learning, be it in curriculum design, delivery, testing, feedback, monitoring or evaluation, by means of the generation of improved computer-based platforms, courseware, learning environments and pedagogies. (p. 22)

In the context of online education, language learning, by means of computer-mediated communication, is known as *distance computer assisted language learning* (DCALL) (Lamy, 2013). Within this theoretical framework, our research aims to explore language learning in VLE, specifically the development of the speaking skill in online courses, since as Tudini (2005) points out, it is essential that distance online language courses provide opportunities for oral interaction.

Research Problem

Unlike face-to-face learning, when working in virtual contexts “the oral skill is weakened, since existing technologies do not have a solid methodological base [for] its maximum development” (Morales & Ferreira, 2008, p. 96). In other words, in online courses, the speaking practice is not often provided or it is limited to repetition and the learners’ progress is rarely followed up on. In this way, the oral skill, understood as an instrument for communication, should not be overcome by the writing, reading, or listening skills, which are more easily adjusted to online courses. Therefore, it was the aim of this research to find out how learners developed this skill when they were provided with opportunities to do so by means of an online language course.

Research Questions

In the current study, we aim to analyze and describe the contribution of the COI framework for the development of the oral skill in an online language course. For this purpose, the following research questions are proposed:

1. What is the learners’ perception of the COI types of presence in the online language course?

2. What is the connection between the social, cognitive, and teaching presence of the COI and the indicators of the oral skill?
3. How do learners’ oral skills develop at the end of the course?

Method

As previously mentioned, this study focuses on the learners’ perspectives about the development of their oral skill in online English courses through the lenses of the COI model. For that reason, this study has adopted a constructivist view in order to understand how reality is built and maintained (Silverman, 2013). As well, it has embraced an interpretive perspective that sustains that any attempt to understand “reality” must be based on the experiences of the people in that social reality (Gray, 2013). Thus, the researcher intends that the meanings of such experiences emerge from themselves and not from prejudices and preconceptions that may limit the participants’ views (Creswell, 2014).

To analyze this phenomenon, an embedded mixed method design was used. According to Creswell (2014), this method rests on one or more forms of data within a larger design, in which the researcher can collect data during, before or after an intervention. The fieldwork was carried out in an online English (Level 2) course during a school period (February-July 2015), at a public university in the southeast of Mexico. Communicative tasks and other types of class activities such as grammar explanations, exercises for practice, and assignments were fully developed online at the university’s educational platform (Eminus), and supported by email and videoconference sessions, while exams were taken in situ. One of the researchers worked as a facilitator of the course, which allowed her to participate directly and to incorporate the COI elements, as considered appropriate; while the other one participated in the interviews and data analysis.

Participants' Description

As mentioned before, this study took place at a public university in Veracruz, Mexico, in an online English II course with the 12 students registered in the course. The sample, purposefully chosen (Patton, 2002), consisted of nine participants (four female students and five male students) from 19 to 31 years old from the following majors: nutrition, odontology, accounting, communication, medicine, topography, and engineering.

The inclusion criteria considered those undergraduate students registered in the online English course, who accepted to participate, after being informed about the purposes and procedures of the current study. On the other hand, the exclusion criteria consisted of not considering those undergraduate students, registered in this course, but who had a certified level of English over A2 (Common European Framework for Languages). Finally, the elimination criterion refers to those students who even if they were registered in the course, dropped out or were found to be inactive for three or more weeks.

Data collection

As shown in Table 1, for data collection we applied a semi-structured interview, an online survey, and pre and post oral tests in order to look at variations on the development of the oral skill. These methods and their corresponding instruments provided data about the learners' performance regarding the oral skill, the existence of the social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence in the course, and their relationship with indicators of the oral skill such as: pronunciation,

fluency and coherence, grammar and accuracy, and lexical resources.

Since this investigation was carried out in two phases, qualitative and quantitative, we made a practical summary of the data collection techniques and their corresponding instruments and functions, which is displayed in Table 2. In the first approach to fieldwork, for the qualitative phase, an interview, which was originally going to be sent (via e-mail) to the learners, was done face to face when they attended the final oral exam (which was compulsory). The answers to these interviews were inductively analyzed and some links between the teaching presence and the oral skill emerged. Document analysis (digital registers) and participant observation of the learners' use of information and communications technology (ICT) tools as well as their work and interaction on the platform (Eminus) were also carried out in this phase, and qualitatively processed later on.

In the quantitative approach to this study, we used a quasi-experimental treatment in which the dependent variable was the oral skill with its respective indicators (fluency and coherence, pronunciation, grammar and accuracy, and lexical resources). It was measured through two standardized oral exams that were graded according to rubrics already established by the English department evaluation committee. The independent variable was the COI model with its respective social, cognitive, and teaching presence. Additionally, a survey, suggested by the COI model and based on a Likert scale, was given to the learners. The analysis of the data gathered in this phase was deductively done and statistically treated.

Table 1. Methods and Instruments for Data Collection

Method	Instrument	Validity	Data analysis	Data processing
Interview	COI-oral skill interview	Judges	Qualitative	Inductive
Survey	COI questionnaire	Arbaugh et al. (2008)	Quantitative	Deductive
Test	Oral test Rubric	Standardized test	Quantitative	Deductive

Table 2. Data Collection Phases

Phase	Data collection technique	Instrument	Function
Qualitative	Interview	Questions' guide	Relating the learners' perceptions about the COI presence and the oral skill indicators. Knowing the learners' experiences regarding their development of the oral skill in this online course.
Quantitative	Test (pre/post)	Oral English exam	Comparing the learners' performance according to the oral skill indicators: fluency and coherence, pronunciation, grammar and accuracy, and lexical resources.
	Online questionnaire/survey	COI questionnaire (Likert scale)	Describing the learners' perceptions about the COI presence, the use of ICT, and their oral production (during the course).

Since we are reporting here only the results obtained from the interview, the oral exams, and the survey, these are the instruments presented in Table 2.

Validity

The following considerations were taken for the sake of validity. A standardized oral English exam, designed by an EFL evaluation committee and applied at the same time, under same conditions in all the campuses of the university, was used to register the results of the students' first and last evaluations. The consistency of the COI questionnaire was sustained by the work of Arbaugh et al. (2008) and Yu and Richardson (2015), and it has statistically demonstrated its reliability. Additionally, the interview questionnaire was revised by a TEFL expert in order to validate the consistency and congruency of its Spanish translation.

Data Analysis

According to the mixed perspective of this study (Creswell, 2014), qualitative data, that is, the recorded interviews, were analyzed deductively and the COI presence and the indicators of the oral skill were coded

by using the software ATLAS.ti. On the other hand, through the analysis of quantitative data, in order to evaluate the development of the oral skill, we compared the grades of both pre- and post-oral exams (applied at the beginning and end of the course), which consisted of a teacher-student dialogue and a role-play suggested on a performance rubric.

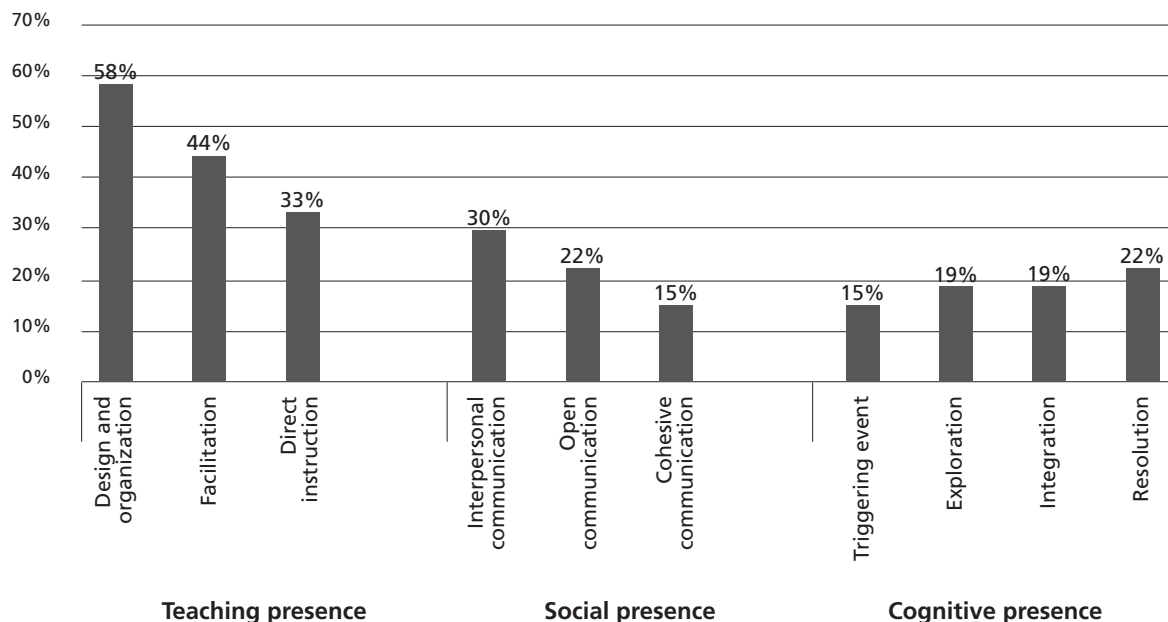
Findings

Learners' Perceptions of COI Presence in the Course

Once the data obtained from the COI questionnaire were processed, the results from the option *totally agree* (the most popular one) were integrated into a chart in an attempt to demonstrate how the participants perceived each of the COI presence in the course. It must be mentioned that all the answers were distributed between *totally agree* and *agree*.

Figure 2 shows that the teaching presence revealed the highest values, especially in the dimension "design and organization", which refers to the teacher's action when communicating the learning goals, topics,

Figure 2. Col Presence in the Online English Course



submission dates, and instructions to complete the course successfully. In other words, this teaching presence is identified when the teacher provides information about the operative aspects of the course for an adequate performance. The second best evaluated dimension was “facilitation”, that is, the dialogic actions that the teacher established to guide the class, to keep interest and to promote participation. “Direct instruction”, which refers to the teacher’s feedback on the students’ activities and the teacher’s participation in the group forums, appeared in the last place.

As a whole, the social presence had low values according to the participants’ view. Social interaction, represented in Figure 2 as “interpersonal communication”, was the highest evaluated dimension; while “cohesive communication”, also understood as collaboration, was lower. This denotes a lack of interrelation among the learners, hence, a scarce sense of belonging to a community.

Connections Between the Col Presence and the Indicators of the Oral Skill

Regarding the cognitive presence, that is, the process in which a topic is developed from introduction, treatment, and analysis to conclusion through exchange and discussion of ideas, the graphic reported a low level of involvement of the participants. Therefore, on average, this turned out to be the presence with the lowest percentage.

With reference to verbal expression and the dimensions of the teaching presence, findings obtained through the analysis of interviews, Figure 3 reveals a positive relationship between “direct instruction” and the indicators “lexical resource” and “grammatical range and accuracy” of the oral skill. Similarly, “facilitation” was positively related to “grammatical range and accuracy”, another indicator of oral skill. However, “design and organization” did not show any relation to the oral skill indicators.

Figure 3. Links Between the Teaching Presence and the Oral Skill

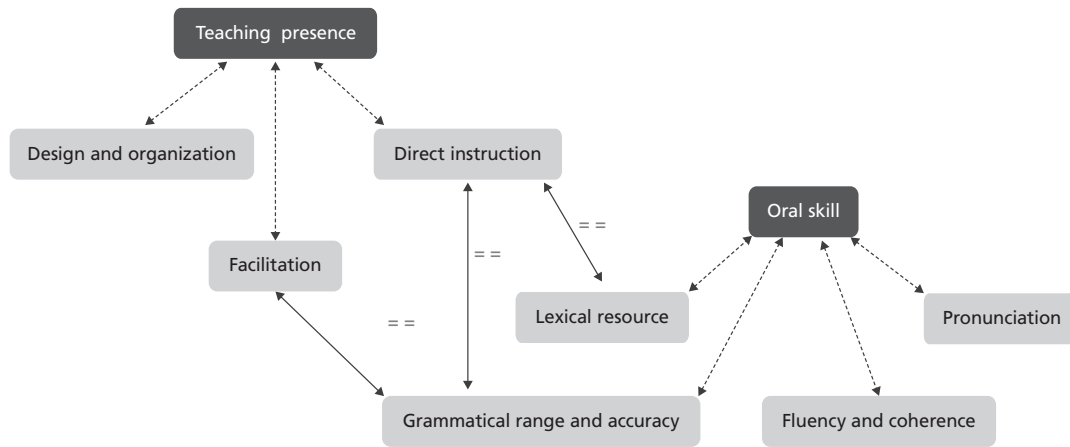
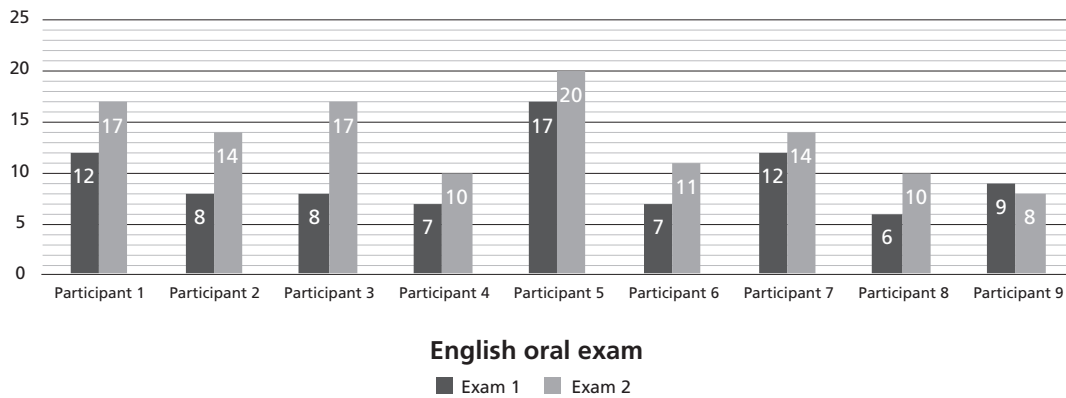


Figure 4. Comparative Scores of Pre and Post Oral Tests



Development of Learners' Oral Skill

After having analyzed the learners' grades on both oral tests, we came up with the following findings. Regarding the development of the oral skill, results obtained from the pre/post oral tests showed evidence of an increment in the participant's scores in the second (post) test given to the learners at the end of the course. That is to say, eight out of the nine participants scored higher in the final exam, as shown in Figure 4. In terms of the oral skill, this shows improvement in the indicators: grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

It can be observed that the lowest increase was 2 points, the highest was 9 points and 3.5 points was the mode. Eight out of nine learners improved in their oral performance even if the initial grades were below the minimum to pass (11, considering that the highest grade would be 20). In other words, six of the learners who had failed their first oral test, were able to pass the second one; while only one learner not only got a failing grade on the second exam, but a lower grade also.

Discussion and Conclusions

As has been shown in the previous section, results obtained from this exploratory research revealed a connection between the COI framework and the indicators of the oral skill in an online English course. Although the participants' general perception of their interaction with the teacher is hardly perceived, the teaching presence, in its dimensions "facilitation" and "direct instruction", has become positioned as the most and best perceived presence. Regarding the social presence, in the learners' view, its levels are low and although there is communication among the learners inside the course, it is perceived as very limited, making it difficult to establish a community. Participants recognized their participation as just sufficient enough to accomplish the minimum course requirements, that is to say, there is a low level of involvement, both individually and collectively, which might prevent higher levels of cognitive presence.

According to these findings, the oral skill is basically promoted by the teacher. However, this finding raises the issue of course design as a factor that may favor the teaching presence and disregard the social and cognitive presences in the development of the oral skill. This matter could be explored further through deeper observation and documental analysis.

As stated by Ke (2010), the teaching presence should be the first element to be considered when establishing a community, thus, learners would adapt their social presence and cognitive presence based on such teaching presence. In accordance with this claim, findings presented in this study revealed that it is the teaching presence itself that showed a connection with the grammar, accuracy, and vocabulary indicators of the oral skill.

It seems that the scarce perception of the cognitive presence in this study is consistent with Alavi and Taghizadeh's (2013) research, in which they also found that the four stages (triggering event, exploration, integration and resolution) proposed by the COI model

hardly existed in the online course. Furthermore, Arnold and Ducate (2006) suggest the need to research the role of the students' native language and the levels of the cognitive presence and the social presence.

In this particular case, participants were enrolled in an EFL course and their first language was Spanish, but as their level of English was very limited, their participation in forum discussions did not occur or was poor, and often supported by automatic translators (frequently inaccurate). These aspects agree with Chen's (2012) findings concerning the cognitive presence, which demonstrate that learners did not engage in productive dialogue. In the same vein, in this research the learners' contributions to discussion were limited and these were habitually posted on the deadline, affecting the flow of the discussion.

Limitations

It can be said that the course itself was one of the most representative limitations of this study. As these online English courses do not focus on a communicative approach, the development of the oral skill is very limited and most activities are intended to develop writing, reading, and listening skills.

Another limitation was that teachers can operate most courses without having the possibility to modify, adapt, or add different activities to the ones preloaded on the platform.

Future Research

Although the teaching presence proved a positive connection with the indicators of the oral skill, this research will continue exploring deeper into the relation between the COI framework and the development of such skill, especially through the social and cognitive presences. It would be worth doing further research with the aim of exploring other technological applications that, along with the COI pedagogy, may contribute to the field of TEFL in online environments.

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