

Experiences in the use of *hot potatoes* to elaborate exercises for English language lessons

Experiencias en el uso de *Hot Potatoes* para elaborar ejercicios para las clases de inglés

*Yanelis Jaramillo Campos*¹

*José Ramón Guzmán Rodríguez*²

*Marbelis Sarmiento Muñoz*³

Abstract

This paper explores the usefulness of an Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) tool known as *Hot Potatoes* to elaborate exercises for English language lessons to contribute to the enhancement of the students' communicative competencies and to the formation of highly proficient professionals in our universities, after the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) in Cuban Higher Education under the new policy for English language teaching and learning. In it, an analysis of the types of exercises used to evaluate learners by the standards of the CEFRL, as well as of the concepts and characteristics of *Hot Potatoes* as an alternative tool for devising exercises for English language lessons was made. To carry it out, several methods and techniques of scientific research were used, such as analysis-synthesis, historical-logical, hermeneutics, interviews, etc. Finally, some examples exercises using this tool for the English language lessons at the Language Centre of Holguin are provided in it.

¹Bachelor in Education, specialty English Language with a Second Foreign Language: French. Master of History and Culture in Cuba. Lecturer. Language Centre of the University of Holguin. Cuba. E-mail: jcanel@uho.edu.cu ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2334-1695>

²Bachelor in Education, specialty Foreign Language: English. Instructor. Language Centre of the University of Holguin. Cuba. E-mail: jose.guzman@uho.edu.cu ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2567-8542>

³Bachelor in Education, specialty in Foreign Language: English. Main Lecturer. Language Centre of the University of Holguin. Cuba. E-mail: msarmiento@uho.edu.cu ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5685-8610>



Keywords: exercise, language teaching, Higher Education

Resumen

Este trabajo explora la utilidad de una herramienta de las Tecnologías de la Información y las Comunicaciones (TICs) conocida como *Hot Potatoes* para elaborar ejercicios que contribuyan al desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa en inglés y, por ende, a la formación de profesionales altamente competentes desde nuestras universidades, siguiendo la implementación del Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas (MCERL) en la Educación Superior cubana bajo la nueva política de perfeccionamiento de la enseñanza del inglés. En el mismo se analiza el tipo de ejercicios empleado para evaluar a los aprendices según los estándares del MCERL, así como los conceptos y características de *Hot Potatoes* como herramienta alternativa en el diseño de ejercicios para la enseñanza de inglés. Para llevarlo a cabo se emplearon diversos métodos y técnicas científicos del conocimiento como los de análisis y síntesis, el histórico-lógico, hermenéutico, entrevistas, etc. Para finalizar, se ofrecen algunos ejemplos de ejercicios creados con esta herramienta que pueden ser incluidas en las clases de inglés del centro de idiomas.

Palabras clave: ejercicio, enseñanza de idiomas, Educación Superior

Introduction

Taking into consideration the country's demands and imminent projections, and according to global tendencies, the study and command of English remains yet an unsettled goal of Cuban Higher Education. It is imperative to master this language in order to facilitate Cuba's insertion on the contemporary global arena. For this reason, every major in our country has set up as graduation prerequisite for their students to become independent users of at least one foreign language according to the standards of the CEFRL (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2001). Today, the teaching-learning process (TLP) of English in Cuba

is motivated towards accomplishing this objective. According to the upgraded Res. 165 of 2019 of the Cuban Ministry of Higher Education (2017), university students must acquire and certify communicative competencies to express themselves proficiently at independent user level [Levels of the CEFRL: Basic User (A1-A2), Independent User (B1-B2), Proficient User (C1-C2)]⁴, both orally and in written way by means of a standardized IELTS⁵ (International English Language Testing System) or TOEFL⁶ (Test of English as a Foreign Language) -based on exam following the principles of the CEFRL.

They will have to use English as a formative instrument in the academic, professional and investigative spheres of their majors to widen their knowledge, to relate to others and to express their national identity. Yet, there is another aspect that must be taken into consideration in our current setting as well. That is the technological revolution our society is experimenting and the changes related to it.

Ruiz-Madrid (2006) asserts that educators can not ignore it since they are set to play a decisive role in today's techno-friendly generations. In fact, Bricall (2000, quoted by Ruiz-Madrid, 2006) states that integrating Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the curriculum from an active perspective favours the integration of our students in the Information and Communication Society. Plus, other important, interesting construe of differences in student evaluations of teaching, despite explicit warning to avoid over interpretation and (mis)interpretation of teaching evaluations by administrators' best practices in evaluation (Boysen 2015), Boysen et al, (2014), Buller (2012), López Palomares et al. (2021).

Taking all this into account, it could be said that, at the University of Holguin (UHo), the advantages provided by the CEFRL and by current technologies for the TLP of L₂ have not been

⁴ CEFRL (2001)

⁵ *International English Language Testing System*

⁶ *Tests of English as a Foreign Language*

fully exploited. Hence, it should be sensible to find out how to better contribute to the comprehensive formation of the University of Holguin's alumni combining both the CEFRL and the ICTs. To answer this scientific problem, we took as our field of study the use of ICTs in L₂ teaching and the exercises devised by means of an ICT tool such as *Hot Potatoes* to enhance the communicative competencies became our scope of action.

Our main goal is to provide some examples of exercises devised by means of an ICT tool such as *Hot Potatoes* aimed at enhancing the student's communicative competencies in learning English under the new policy, following the CEFRL's guidelines and its action-oriented approach. To accomplish that goal, the following specific objectives were projected:

- 1- To analyse the implementation of the CEFRL in Cuban Higher Education under the new policy.
- 2- To review the use of ICTs in L₂ teaching
- 3- To examine the type of exercises included in IELTS/TOEFL exams
- 4- To explain the characteristics of *Hot Potatoes* tool and its wide variety of exercises.
- 5- To provide examples of tasks devised by means of Hot Potatoes that may contribute to the formation of communicative competencies in our alumni.

Furthermore, several sources were reviewed such as the CEFRL and its Companion Volume with New Descriptors, different papers on ICTs' use on L₂ teaching, laws and Ministry regulations, course's curricula, programs, syllabuses, etc. Some specialists were also consulted. Several theoretical and empirical methods and techniques of scientific research were used as well, to examine the object from different points of view.

Some of these include: analysis and synthesis, departing from a conscious bibliographic search and revision; historical and logical, trying to determine the previous treatment this subject

has received; induction and deduction, to define the current state of the problem and devise the most accurate proposal to solve it. Hermeneutics and sources' cross-checking were also of paramount importance for this research to determine the theoretical foundations of the investigation and to define the approach to be applied. Furthermore, observation and interviews were also carried out to obtain information and to diagnose the state of the problem as well as to devise the proposal and implement it, as well as to assess its pertinence. The programs used since the implementation of the policy were also revised and gauged.

Development

Language Centres and implementation of the CEFRL

According to the upgraded Res. 165 of 2019 of the Cuban Ministry of Higher Education concerning the new English policy in Cuban Higher Education, the Ministry of Higher Education in Cuba decided to implement the CEFRL taking into account the different changes and influences of diverse elements in our current setting. English is no longer a discipline within the curricula. Nonetheless, it's a graduation requirement. University students were introduced to the policy in 2016.

English courses were designed following the recommendations and levels described by the CEFRL, in synchronisation with the objectives of Cuban Higher Education for its alumni. With that purpose, the Ministry of Higher Education (2017), established language centres across the entire net of Cuban universities. The University of Holguin was not excluded. Its Language Centre was inaugurated in March of 2017.

ICTs in L₂ teaching

Technology should be used in classrooms as a means to generate meaningful activities, designed taking into account learners' individual needs and interests, their learning styles and strategies in order to engage them in their own learning process.

There are countless ways to refer to the use of technological tools and devices in the field of pedagogy and also an extensive debate about their use. Nevertheless, the term ICT is widely accepted as an umbrella term covering most of those tools and applications, as well as for embodying the multiple opportunities offered by them. The use of ICTs in the teaching-learning spheres is already an undeniable and inexorable reality, and L₂ teachers and researchers must better accept that and act accordingly. Hence, the first matter to reflect upon should refer to the role the ICTs are going to play in current and future educational proposals.

On the word of Ruiz-Madrid (2006) there was a shift in the approach to the introduction of technology within the language teaching-learning field from early structural proposals to more communicative ones. This author states that the current paradigm of integrative Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is based on a socio-cognitive view of language learning. This author also claims that what matters is not what teachers could expect from technology, but what language teachers could be able to do with technology in order to enhance their proposals.

Therefore, when L₂ teachers think about their pedagogical proposals, they think about their students. Consequently, she states that pedagogy must lead technology, and advocates for learners' needs to be the ones leading the inclusion of technology into programmes and curricula. Hence, according to her, language teachers should expect from technology what they want technology to offer their students. Furthermore, ICTs should maximize the drive offered by technology itself and therefore be aimed at renovating learners' view of learning so that they become more active and autonomous partakers in their own learning process.

Types of exercises in standardized IELTS/TOEFL exams

The exercises included in the current exams that allow students certify their level of communicative competency follow the standards of IELTS and TOEFL. Now, according to primary and secondary public sources, both, the TOEFL iBT and the IELTS are exams that assess reading, listening, speaking, and writing, but they do so in dissimilar ways.

As stated by Marín (2016), the TOEFL reading section includes three or four reading passages of different sizes, and the questions are all multiple choice. While, Edgar (2017), declared that IELTS reading section includes three sections, but it includes multiple choice, short answer, labelling diagrams, and matching information questions. The IELTS reading section on the academic test is different from the general test, with the former emphasizing books, journals, and newspapers and the latter focused in more general resources.

Whereas, the listening section of the TOEFL consists of four to six academic lectures with six questions each and two to three conversations with five questions each and its question types include multiple choice with one or more than one possible correct answer, ordering of events, and matching objects to categories in a chart; the IELTS listening has four sections of ten questions each. The first two sections are based on social situations, while the latter two are dedicated to academic and professional life, with one exercise on each with a single speaker and a conversation. Test-takers write down their responses chronologically and then transfer them to an answer sheet (the last 10 minutes of this section is set aside for the latter purpose). The IELTS listening assessment is the same on both the academic and general test.

TOEFL writing features two essays that require students to demonstrate competence in independent writing and integrated writing. The former requires applicants to express and support their own opinions, while the latter is primarily devoted to written analysis of a given

reading passage. The IELTS academic writing assessment, which is distinct from the general test, also has two tasks. In the first, students must write an essay describing a graph or chart. The second is devoted to common academic writing tasks, such as offering a solution to a problem, comparing and contrasting evidence, or evaluating ideas.

Finally, students taking the TOEFL must complete two tasks on the speaking section: independent and integrated. The first requires applicants to express their own opinions in spoken form, while the second asks students to synthesize reading, listening, and speaking. Spoken responses are preserved by audio recording. The IELTS speaking assessment, on the other hand, is an in-person interview with an official proctor (this portion of the IELTS need not be taken on the same day as the rest of the exam). IELTS proctors ask students questions about their lives, interests, and other general topics, and the student then has a conversation with the examiner about a provided topic. There is no distinction between the academic and general test in terms of IELTS speaking.

Now, how do IELTS and TOEFL scores differ?

Broadly speaking, the TOEFL iBT and IELTS Academic are objectively similar tests. Both exams are a common admission requirement for undergraduate and graduate education in English-speaking countries. Nevertheless, each test uses a distinct scoring scale.

Characteristics of Hot Potatoes

According to Donaire (2007), *Hot Potatoes* is a program developed by the research and development team of the Humanities, Computing and Media Centre (HCMC) of the University of Victoria (UVic) in Canada. It consists of six tools that allow users to create interactive exercises and load them to the web. Besides, it allows users to personalise its different aspects. The process entails elaborating an interactive exercise in Hot Potatoes and then exports it to

HTML format to upload it to the net. Once there, anyone can carry out the exercise. The HTML file can also be copied in any device and used offline in any internet browser.

Its components include:

- *JQuiz*: for the generation multiple choice questions with feedback.
- *JCloze*: for the elaboration of limitless blank spaces, where there is a help and/or hint button to assist students.
- *JCross*: for the creation of crossword puzzles. It also includes a help button.
- *JMatch*: for the design of matching exercises with images and texts. It also provides the option of rearranging the materials randomly.
- *JMix*: for the formulation of exercises of phrases or paragraph reconstruction departing from a series of jumbled words or chunks. It also includes a help button.
- *Masher*: for the production of holistic and inclusive exercises comprising any of the above-mentioned tools, combining them by units.

According to Unknown Blogger (2015), this program was launched in 1998 for the first time in the EuroCall Belgian conference and since 2009, and it has been a free program all along. Some of its users declare that the virtual environment achieved with this program boosts student's motivation, teamwork and develop in them a sense of community; while experts affirm that this tool can be used as support material for those who start dabbling in second language learning processes either in classroom activities, teamwork, pair work and/or individual work since it assists learners in developing their own views, opinions and helps them to express themselves.

Unknown Blogger (2015) pointed out the following advantages and disadvantages in the use of this specific tool:

Advantages

- It facilitates work when elaborating exercises such as crossword puzzles
- It simplifies the process of sharing materials with students
- It does not require knowledge of complex programming languages
- It allows insertion of text
- It may supply time limits for each exercise which could motivate students to concentrate on imminent work
- It enables use of images, charts, videos and sounds

Disadvantages

- It was not designed to elaborate web exams so it is not viable as assessment tool
- The essential infrastructure to use this tool involving computers or Internet may be challenging for some students
- Large audios, videos and charts' displays can be affected by a slow Internet connection
- It is easy for students to cheat by clicking on the *HELP BUTTON* to see the answers
- The option to correct spelling has to be selected, the program doesn't provide it automatically
- The type of font can't be changed.

It has been stated by several specialists that to achieve learning goals using *Hot Potatoes* as educative strategy, teachers must display their own creativity and wit to produce stimulating, engaging exercises. It favours students' autonomous learning and sense of responsibility, since the program lets them check their answers. Besides, there are continuous technological improvements to enhance knowledge.

According to Casas Blanco et al. (2013) and Trujillo Domínguez et al. (2015), ever since students can assess themselves, they can also develop personal opinions, decide on what to do in view of their needs and the mistakes made, come to the realization of their actual possibilities and foster motivation and self-esteem.

Examples of tasks devised by means of Hot Potatoes

Figure 1

Example of a multiple-choice exercise generated with JQuiz


Source: Author's own elaboration

Figure 2

Example of fill-in-the-gaps exercise devised by means of JCloze

<= Index =>

Activity 3: Weekend Activity



Video Activity

Let's keep on practising! Watch the [video](#) again if you need it for support to complete the conversation about two friends and their weekend activities. Once you have filled in all the gaps, press "Check" to check your answers. Use the "Hint" button to get a free letter if an answer is giving you trouble or use the "Clue" button for more information. Note that you will lose points if you ask for hints or clues! If you need help with vocabulary you may check the following [Glossary of terms](#)

M: Hi, Lily!

L: Hi, Melissa!

M: Oh, you look great!

L: You do too. You're well rested! How [?] your trip to London? [?] you have any free time between meetings?

M: London [?] great! We [?] very busy all week, but I [?] some free time on Saturday and Sunday morning. I [?] back on Sunday evening. (...) I only [?] a day and a half in London, but I was great! I [?] on the London Eye. I [?] on a boat ride on the river Thames. I [?] Tower Bridge and the Tower of London. I [?] Buckingham Palace and Saint Paul's Cathedral. I [?] across Westminster Bridge. [?] Big Ben and [?] Westminster Abbey. It was wonderful! Oh, but what about you? Did you have a good weekend? What did you do?

L: Me? I [?] a great time. I [?] my apartment. I did laundry. I [?] to the pharmacy. I [?] a subway ride and [?] my brother's baseball game. And I [?] a lovely supermarket where I [?] groceries. It was wonderful!

Check Hint

<= Index =>

Source: Author's own elaboration

Figure 3

Example of exercise generated by the JCross tool

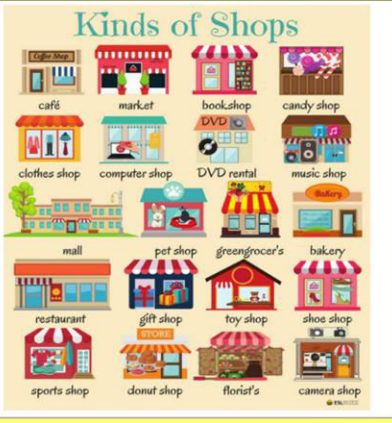
Index =>


Preparation Activity 2

What does it sell?

How often do you go shopping? What kind of shops do you visit? Look at the pictures and complete the crossword identifying the type of shop and what it sells. Bear in mind that you must not include spaces in your answers, i.e. if you think the answer is "bike shop" you should write it as "bikeshop". On the other hand, you do have to include the (s), so your answer should be "butcher's" for the shop where they sell meat. When you are ready, click on "Check" to check your answer. If you are stuck, you can click on "Hint" to get a free letter. Click on a number in the grid to see the clue or clues for that number.

Kinds of Shops





Check

Index =>

Source: Author's own elaboration

Figure 4

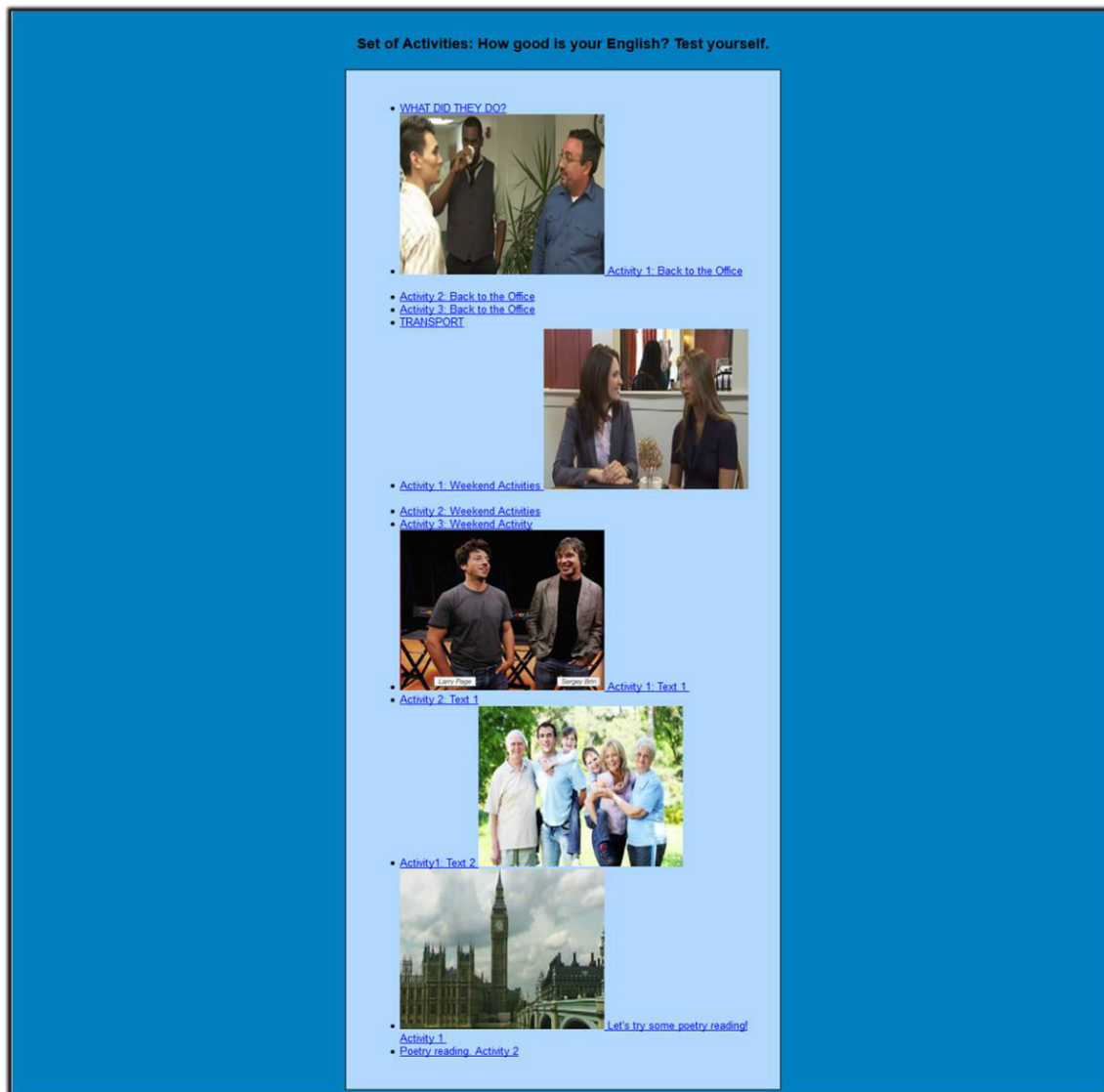
Example of exercise created by means of the JMatch tool (randomly re-arranged each time it is opened)

The screenshot shows a web-based matching exercise titled "A RESTAURANT MENU". At the top, there is a navigation bar with "Index" and arrows. Below the title, the instruction reads: "Preparation activity: Match the picture to the word". A timer shows "14.47". The main area contains 14 food items on the left, each with a corresponding "???" label on the right for matching. The items are: a burger, a plate of food, a cup of coffee, a pizza, a salad, a bowl of soup, a plate of rice, a roasted chicken, two glasses of beer, a plate of fish, a plate of fried food, a plate of food with a drink, a plate of food with a drink, and a plate of food with a drink. A "Check" button is located at the bottom of the matching area.

Source: Author's own elaboration

Figure 5

Example of an index page generated with the Masher, collapsing all exercises into one page, for easier access



Source: Author's own elaboration

Methodology

This paper is based on small-scale research. The sample used comprised 27 students who attend the senior years of the majors of Sports Sciences and Spanish Literature. The sample was

chosen out of practicality. Information was collected from participants through semi-structured interviews and surveys.

Findings and Discussion

With reference to questions of the conducted survey and interviews related to their experiences with working with exercises elaborated with this tool, 74.07% of the students stated that they felt at ease while solving them. 85.18% of the sample thought these exercises were quite engaging and helpful, and that the contents explained and drilled thus were easier to remember. The rest described the exercises as challenging. 70.37% assessed their performance as very good and an 81.48% asserted that their motivation had indeed increased with this type of exercises. From these results it can be concluded that *Hot Potatoes* is a very practical, appealing and user-friendly tool and that it helps boosts student's inner drive and self-confidence.

Conclusions

The important role played by technology in education is undeniable, but a new approach is needed in our current setting. This paper is just a proposal for professors to consider while planning their lessons, to make our students feel more independent, and to encourage them to become more autonomous. It could be an opportunity to implement some of the latest approaches and flipped models and conceptions regarding L₂'s TLP by making the most of the new technologies available, taking into account the new English national strategy and the country's needs.

References

Boysen, G. A. (2015). Significant interpretation of small mean differences in student evaluations of teaching despite explicit warning to avoid overinterpretation. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 1(2), 150–162. <https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000017>

- Boysen, G. A., Kelly, T. J., Raesly, H. N., & Casner, R. W. (2014). The (mis)interpretation of teaching evaluations by college faculty and administrators. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 39(6), 641–656. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2013.860950>
- Buller, J. L. (2012). *Best practices in faculty evaluation: A practical guide for academic leaders*. Jossey-Bass.
- Casas Blanco, J.C, López Guerra, R.L., Rodríguez Hernández, M. (2013). *Propuesta de ejercicios interactivos para la autoevaluación del aprendizaje en la asignatura Medicina General Integral*. EDUMECENTRO. <http://scielo.sld.cu/pdf/edu/v5n2/edu15213.pdf>
- Council of Europe (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching and assessment*. Electronic document. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. <https://rm.coe.int>
- Council of Europe (2018). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Companion Volume with New Descriptors*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. <https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989>.
- Donaire Romero, M.J. (2007). *Tutorial y prácticas de Hot Potatoes 6. Herramientas Informáticas en el aula*. CEIP Andalucía-Posadas (Córdoba). https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&url=https://infopadresjag.files.wordpress.com/2009/04/manual_hot_potatoes.pdf&ved=2ahUKEwjNjJ3x3oz2AhVOSjABHU3ZBAgQFnoECAMQAQ&usg=AOvVaw35-tR4KFInJ7spqLIRiZsv
- Edgar, A. (2017). *Train the trainer Workshop*. Postgraduate course. University “Marta Abreu”, Santa Clara. Cuba.

- López Palomares, R., Gamboa Graus, M. E. y Ferrás Mosquera, L. M. (2021). La comprensión auditiva en la enseñanza del idioma inglés desde el tratamiento didáctico de materiales audiovisuales. *Didasc@lia: Didáctica Y educación*, 253–273.
<https://revistas.ult.edu.cu/index.php/didascalía/article/view/1264>
- Marín González, S. (2016). *Propell® Workshop for the TOEFL iBT® Test*. Plenary Session. University of Holguin, Holguin. Cuba.
- MES (2017). *Resolución 165 del 2019*.
- Ruíz-Madrid, M.N. (2006). *The ICT and Applied Linguistics: An Integrative Perspective For the L₂ Language Learning Process*.
<https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=2254314>.
- Trujillo Domínguez, R., Montesering Puig, C. y Hernández Pérez, A. (2015). *Utilidad del software Hot Potatoes para la elaboración de ejercicios interactivos*.
<http://www.revincientifica.sld.cu/index.php/ric/article/view/573/1363#:~:text=Hot%20Potatoes%20es%20un%20conjunto,Web%20y%20de%20diferentes%20modalidades>.
- Unknown Blogger. (2015). *Hot Potatoes como herramienta educativa*.
<http://hotpotatoesestrategiaeducativa.blogspot.com/2015/10/?m=1>