

Teaching and social presence in online foreign language teaching

Pasi Puranen¹ and Ruby Vurdien²

Abstract. This paper examines and reports on ways of promoting teaching presence in foreign language online learning environments in Finland and Spain. ‘Teaching presence’ refers to all the tools and resources teachers use during online courses to deliver teaching, guidance and feedback, or situations in which they are present for their students. A qualitative approach was adopted, and data were collated from questionnaires completed by 34 teachers and 16 students involved in different online language courses at different educational levels. The aim was to examine (1) the extent to which students’ views on feedback and teaching presence in online courses differ from those of teachers, and (2) the impact teaching presence has on student engagement and behaviour in online courses. Based on the polling data, both teachers and students find student engagement to be significant in fostering learning in an online environment. Students tend to be generally satisfied with teacher feedback.

Keywords: teacher presence, online learning, guidance, learning analytics.

1. Introduction

Research has shown that teaching presence plays a vital role in online education, as it connects students and teachers who are not physically in contact (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Nami, Marandi, & Sotoudehnama, 2018; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). Online teachers design the structure of online courses, create learning tasks, and plan course schedules. Throughout the course, teachers assist students in interacting with their materials, peers, and teachers. Furthermore, they not only instruct students, but also provide them with feedback and monitor their social

1. Aalto University Language Centre, Espoo, Finland; pasi.puranen@aalto.fi; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0724-6973>

2. White Rose Language School, Valladolid, Spain; whiterose_va@yahoo.es; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6011-5606>

How to cite: Puranen, P., & Vurdien, R. (2020). Teaching and social presence in online foreign language teaching. In K.-M. Frederiksen, S. Larsen, L. Bradley & S. Thouésny (Eds), *CALL for widening participation: short papers from EUROCALL 2020* (pp. 286-290). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.48.1202>

activities online (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010). However, teachers are faced with new challenges in online learning environments, and as mentioned in Yang, Quadir, Chen, and Miao (2016), it is of paramount importance to provide interpersonal communication opportunities for students to socially engage with their teachers and peers in order to afford online students a sense of presence similar to that in face-to-face classes. The importance of online presence has been highlighted by numerous studies (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005), and it has been found that teaching presence is important to maintain students' motivation, to prevent a feeling of isolation and to reduce the number of dropouts (Bowers & Kumar, 2015). Effective online guidance in language learning involves three main aspects: giving both time and attention to the learners, and showing them respect (Cunningham, 2015). Successful teaching presence also includes guidance in interaction during the online learning process, constructive use of peer reviewing, and providing feedback.

With these considerations, the two research questions are as follows.

- To what extent do students' views on feedback and teaching presence in online courses differ from teachers' views?
- What impact does teaching presence have on student engagement and behaviour in online courses?

2. Method

Our study explored how a group of 34 teachers (25 Finns and nine Spaniards) involved in different online language courses (English, Chinese, German, Spanish, Italian, French, Swedish, and Russian), in secondary, university, vocational, and private language school education, gave their students feedback via digital tools in order to guide and motivate them to perform their tasks regularly. 16 of these teachers' students, who voluntarily participated in the Finnish-Spanish study (11 Spaniards and five Finns), belonged to the 21-30 age group, and were studying English, Portuguese, French, Spanish, and Italian. They were requested to comment on how their teachers made their presence felt before, during and after a course.

A qualitative approach was adopted and the participants (both teachers and students) were asked to complete two questionnaires consisting of ten questions each, in order to gauge their views on (1) the effectiveness of the digital tools used

to provide feedback, (2) how important student engagement online was considered to be, and (3) what their preferred digital tool would be. The data were categorised to match the two research questions.

3. Results and discussion

When comparing the results between the online tools teachers report using, and how students report getting feedback and their perception of teaching presence in online foreign language courses, it could be observed that there was coherence between the responses of both groups.

3.1. Effectiveness of the digital tools used to provide feedback

The students stated that they received sufficient feedback and guidance from the teacher, who was present online, making their presence felt prior to, during and after a course. When asked to respond to the statement *I get enough feedback and guidance from my online teacher/tutor*, 81.3% of the students agreed. Furthermore, 93.8% strongly agreed that their teacher provided enough feedback and guidance online.

When both teachers and students were requested to comment on the impact of teaching presence on student engagement and behaviour, the responses in both groups were similar in many cases. The teachers pointed out that they provided their students with substantial feedback and that student feedback was given regularly. The teachers also said that by being present online they became aware of their students' needs, and were able to encourage them to play an active role (e.g. via videoconferencing) online. In addition, and importantly, teachers could prompt students to interact with each other in online forums. However, a couple of teachers were critical:

“It would be great to have more time for teacher presence, but teaching resources are limited, so teaching presence is limited to a minimum” (Finnish, November 2019).

“I’m a learner, so if we are moving from contact to online courses, I guess I have to adjust my pedagogy” (Spanish, November, 2019).

This suggests that some teachers need support in order to be able to cater for their students' requirements.

3.2. Student engagement online is important

75% of students perceived the impact of teaching presence on student engagement and behaviour as a positive experience. They mentioned, for example, that teachers were helpful and supportive, because they provided (1) advice on pronunciation, (2) feedback on spelling, and (3) made corrections and suggestions about how to improve their skills, and that they graded tasks and sent feedback. They also reported that teachers were concerned about students and took care of them, thereby confirming their appreciation of the role played by their teachers in their online courses.

3.3. Preferred digital tools

The teachers reported that they use a variety of online tools. Those preferred were discussion forums (91.2%), email (85.3%), recorded videos (70.6%) and videoconferencing tools, including Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Adobe Connect (67.6%). Other tools mentioned included the comment tool and wiki.

The students reported that they preferred receiving their feedback in written form by email or in the discussion forum (12 students out of 16). This was due to four reasons: (1) written feedback is more flexible when it comes to time management; (2) it is easy to send emails; (3) teachers can respond at their convenience; and (4) students can reread the received feedback when necessary.

However, when asked: *In an ideal case, how would you like to communicate with your online teacher/tutor?*, 9 out of 16 reported that they would prefer personal online chat tools (like Skype, Hangouts, or WhatsApp) because it allowed them to discuss and clarify issues instantaneously. Regarding this, one student said: “A balance between written and face-to-face skype communication would be desirable in order to practise speaking” (Finnish, November 2019). Another commented: “Skype, although I might be ashamed” (Spanish, November 2019), but did not explain why.

4. Conclusions

This paper has shed some light on the importance of teaching presence in online courses, and the impact it can have on student engagement and behaviour. As the findings show, teaching presence plays a significant role in the organisation of courses, prompting students to engage with their materials, peers, and their teachers.

In the present study, both students and teachers have expressed positive views regarding their experience of both teaching and social presence in online courses. Although the students' preferred tool for receiving teacher feedback is email, as comments can be reread, they also consider videoconferencing to be a timely option. In their view, Skype could be a convenient tool because the teacher-student relationship can be more personalised. It has also been seen that the impact of teaching presence on student engagement is crucial for students to benefit from their learning experience. However, due to the small scale of the study, the findings cannot be generalised and, hopefully, more research in this field will widen the scope of teaching presence in online courses.

5. Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the students and teachers who made the commitment to answer our questionnaires.

References

- Bowers, J., & Kumar, P. (2015). Students' perceptions of teaching and social presence: a comparative analysis of face-to-face and online learning environments. *International Journal of Web-Based Learning and Teaching-Technologies*, 10(1), 27-44.
- Cunningham, J. M. (2015). Mechanizing people and pedagogy: establishing social presence in the online classroom. *Online Learning*, 19(3). <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v19i3.667>
- Garrison, D. R., & Cleveland-Innes, M. (2005). Facilitating cognitive presence in online learning: interaction is not enough. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 19(3), 133-148. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15389286ajde1903_2
- Garrison, D. R., Cleveland-Innes, M., & Fung, T. S. (2010). Exploring causal relationships among teaching, cognitive and social presence: student perceptions of the community of inquiry framework. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 13(1-2), 31-36. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2009.10.002>
- Nami, F., Marandi, S. S., & Sotoudehnama, E. (2018). Interaction in a discussion list: an exploration of cognitive, social, and teaching presence in teachers' online collaborations. *ReCALL*, 30(3), 375-398. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0958344017000349>
- Sheridan, K., & Kelly, M. A. (2010). The indicators of instructor presence that are important to students in online courses. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 6(4), 767-779.
- Yang, J. C., Quadir, B., Chen, N.-S., & Miao, Q. (2016). Effects of online presence on learning performance in a blog-based online course. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 30, 11-20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2016.04.002>

Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Contact: info@research-publishing.net

© 2020 by Editors (collective work)
© 2020 by Authors (individual work)

CALL for widening participation: short papers from EUROCALL 2020
Edited by Karen-Margrete Frederiksen, Sanne Larsen, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thouéšny

Publication date: 2020/12/14

Rights: the whole volume is published under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives International (CC BY-NC-ND) licence; **individual articles may have a different licence.** Under the CC BY-NC-ND licence, the volume is freely available online (<https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.48.9782490057818>) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.

Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book is believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net

Cover theme by © 2020 Marie Flensburg (frw831@hum.ku.dk), based on illustration from [freepik.com](https://www.freepik.com)
Cover layout by © 2020 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-81-8 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.

A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2020.