

The impact of social presence in synchronous online language learning in non-formal adult education for interaction competence

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How to cite: Korkealehto, K.; Leier, V. (2024). The impact of social presence in synchronous online language learning in non-formal adult education for interaction competence. In Y. Choubsaz, P. Díez-Arcón, A. Gimeno-Sanz, J. Hriňák, X. Liashuk, S. Pokrivčáková & H. Vančová (Eds.), *CALL for Humanity - EUROCALL 2024 Short Papers*. <https://doi.org/10.4995/EuroCALL2024.2024.19001>

Abstract

The increasing popularity of online learning platforms has provided a convenient and accessible option for adults seeking to enhance their language skills. However, replicating the social aspects of a traditional classroom environment can be challenging in a virtual setting. This study investigates the impact of social presence on the development of spoken language skills in adult learners. The research involved 35 adult learners in a non-formal English course delivered synchronously via Zoom. Learners were surveyed on their perception of social presence, instructor presence, and their progress in developing spoken English proficiency. The findings revealed a strong correlation between social presence and a positive learning experience for adult learners. Humour emerged as a key element fostering interaction and collaboration among learners. The ability to connect with fellow students further contributed to a sense of community. Notably, a robust instructor presence was identified as critical in establishing and maintaining a high degree of social presence. More importantly, learners reported significant improvement in their spoken language skills. A supportive and positive learning environment, coupled with well-designed online activities that encouraged collaboration, were highlighted as key factors contributing to this improvement.

Keywords: social presence; online learning; non-formal learning; spoken language skills.

1. Introduction

The pervasiveness of online learning platforms has transformed language education, offering adults greater flexibility and accessibility in their pursuit of language acquisition. However, the inherent challenge of replicating the social aspects of a traditional classroom environment in a virtual setting persists (Bergdahl, 2022). Social interaction, a cornerstone of language learning, plays a crucial role in promoting learner engagement, facilitating collaborative learning opportunities, and fostering a sense of belonging (Rourke et al., 2001). This study investigates the impact of social presence, the feeling of connection within an online space (Short et al., 1976), on the development of spoken language skills in adult learners enrolled in a non-formal online English course.

The concept of social presence has been extensively explored within the context of online learning environments. Garrison et al. (2000) Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework identifies social presence as one of the three core elements, alongside cognitive presence and teaching presence, that are critical for fostering a successful online

learning experience. Social presence is further characterised by the degree of intimacy and immediacy experienced by learners in the virtual space (Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968). Studies have shown that a high degree of social presence fosters a sense of community and belonging among online learners (Tu & McIsaac, 2002; Dunlap et al., 2016; Krejns et al., 2022), leading to increased interaction and communication (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2020; Panjefouladgaran et al., 2024), ultimately contributing to improved learning outcomes (Whiteside et al., 2017).

This research specifically focuses on the impact of social presence on adult learners developing spoken language skills. Adult learners often mention the development of spoken language as a primary reason for pursuing language courses (MacIntyre et al., 1997). However, speaking a new language can be a daunting experience, particularly in an online environment where opportunities for spontaneous interaction may be limited. A high degree of social presence can create a safe and supportive learning environment where adult learners feel comfortable taking risks and practising their spoken English skills (MacIntyre et al., 1997). We must consider that the new approach to teaching post COVID-19 should not simply replicate an onsite classroom in an online setting, rather, it should transform synchronous teaching into an experience that enhances the learner's sense of social presence (Kimmons et al., 2020).

2. Method

2.1. Context and course design

The context of this research is an adult education centre in Finland where the learners attend the courses in their free time as a hobby. In pre-pandemic time the courses at the adult learning centres were predominantly implemented via face-to-face learning approach. During the pandemic, the course offering was forced to be transferred online. After the pandemic, some course offerings remained available in online versions, such as the course of our research.

The course design adhered to the CoI framework, emphasising the importance of social presence. The course spanned two semesters, with each weekly session lasting 1.5 hours. The sessions typically commenced with an icebreaker activity designed to encourage interaction and familiarise participants with each other. Following the icebreaker, a warm-up activity introduced the day's topic, which was related to grammar or the textbook content. Tasks were first teacher-led and then practised in pairs within breakout rooms. Each online session concluded with a wrap-up activity where all learners returned to the main Zoom room. During this activity, learners reflected on what they had learned and what takeaways they gained from the session.

2.2. Participants

The research involved 35 adult learners enrolled in a non-formal English course delivered synchronously online through Zoom. The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 80 years old, with the majority (59%) falling within the 51-70 age bracket. Their educational backgrounds varied from compulsory primary and lower secondary education (17%) to higher education (45%). All participants possessed a basic understanding of English, ranging from A1 to B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) scale.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

To investigate how students perceived social presence, instructor presence, and the development of their spoken language skills, a questionnaire was created using Webropol software. The questionnaire of 29 questions was based on the design of the social presence scale originally introduced by Tu and McIsaac (2002). The questionnaire was divided into two sections with a total of 29 multiple-choice questions: teaching presence (13 questions) and social presence (9 questions). Seven additional multiple-choice questions were added to the social presence section to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the aspects which learners perceive having an impact of social presence. All multiple-choice questions used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). To triangulate the data and gain a deeper understanding of student perceptions, six open-ended questions

were included about the student's learning experiences. The questionnaire was administered anonymously, and respondents answered in Finnish.

Three weeks before the courses' completion, the survey link was added to the learning management platform and shared during the last three online sessions in the Zoom chat window. A total of 42 students participated in the four online English courses; however, only 35 responded to the questionnaire, resulting in an 83.33% response rate.

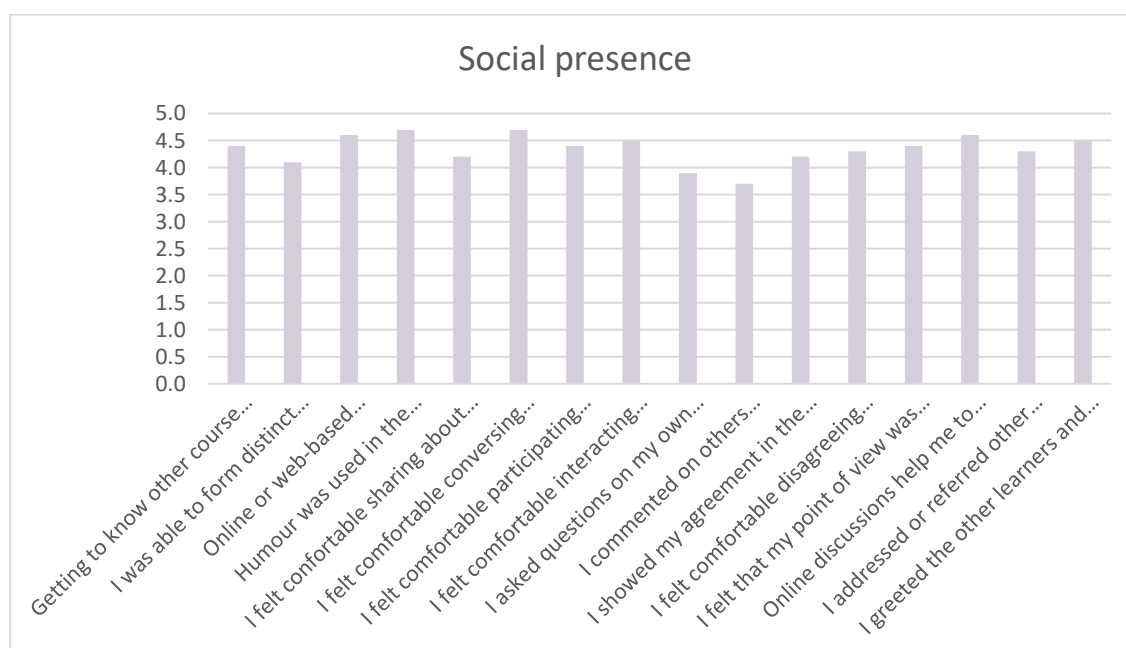
Quantitative data from the multiple-choice questions were analysed using basic statistical methods. Qualitative data from the open-ended questions were analysed using the deductive content analysis method (Krippendorff, 2019). In the initial analysis stage, the data were reviewed thoroughly several times. Expressions related to the social presence aspects according to the CoI theory of affective, interaction, and cohesive elements were then identified, categorised, and divided into indicators.

The qualitative data were further analysed using a data-driven content analysis method focusing on spoken language skills. A total of 117 expressions were identified and divided into five categories: collaboration, course atmosphere, course design, learner activity, and teacher impact.

3. Results

The results indicated a high perceived level of social presence (SP) among the learners in the class, as depicted in Table 1. Humour emerged as the most significant aspect within the affective category of the SP scale. Self-disclosure, a key element in building social presence, presented some challenges. While students expressed a sense of belonging to the course they felt less comfortable sharing personal details about their lives which impacted their ability to form clear impressions of other participants.

Table 1. Social presence.



Despite the challenges with self-disclosure, the emphasis on interaction in this course was perceived positively. Students reported feeling comfortable participating in discussions. Confidence in using the video conferencing platform for online discussions was also rated highly. While commenting on others' contributions, asking questions and indicating agreement were used less frequently. Features that encourage interaction were seen as helpful in building cohesion. There were ample opportunities for online discussions, and learners found these discussions

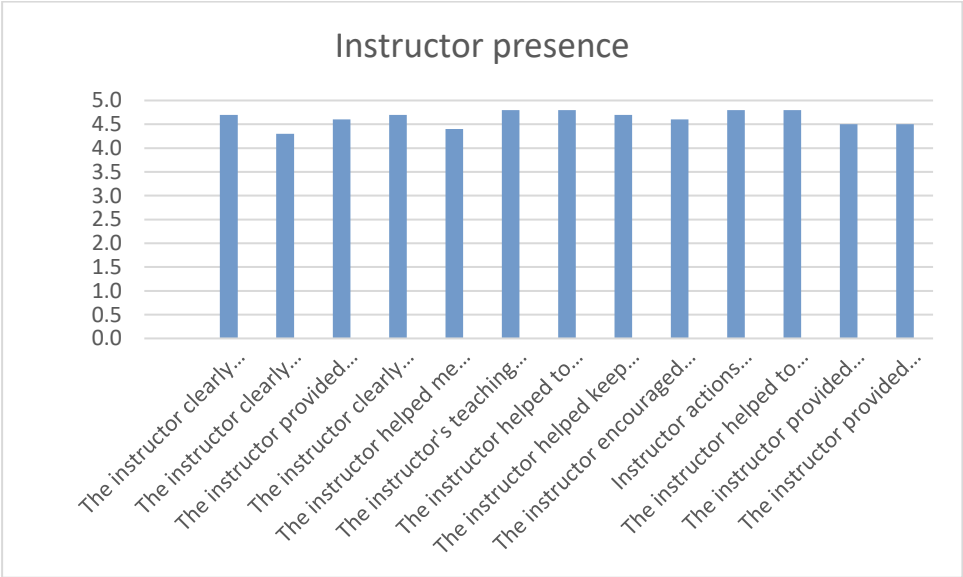
valuable in developing a sense of collaboration. They greeted and said goodbye to other learners and felt their viewpoints were valued. There was a sense of comfort disagreeing with others while maintaining trust and learners used each other's names.

Humour (4.7) was regarded as the most significant aspect in the affective category in the SP scale. Humour is a valuable component in promoting social presence during online sessions. A student stated: "I really enjoyed the humour and the joyful atmosphere in the course. I felt relaxed because of the shared humour.

Participants identified several factors contributing to their sense of realness in the classroom. The sense of group cohesion fostered self-confidence and enjoyment. Examples of building a cohesive environment were seen in student responses where they referred to themselves as "us" in the class or addressed their fellow learners by name. The prescribed etiquette from the instructor, such as thanking students for comments and complimenting each other, helped create a safe and respectful classroom atmosphere.

The learners' perception of instructor presence revealed the teacher's significant role (see Table 2) . Clear explanations were essential for supporting learning. The instructor effectively managed the flow of conversation, keeping the primary focus on spoken language development. Direct instruction and the instructor's feedback were appreciated for enhancing motivation and learning.

Table 2. Instructure presence.



Ninety-five percent of participants reported improvement in their spoken language skills during the course. Overall, collaboration, course atmosphere, course design, learner effort, and teacher impact were perceived as the key contributors to spoken language development. (see Image 1)

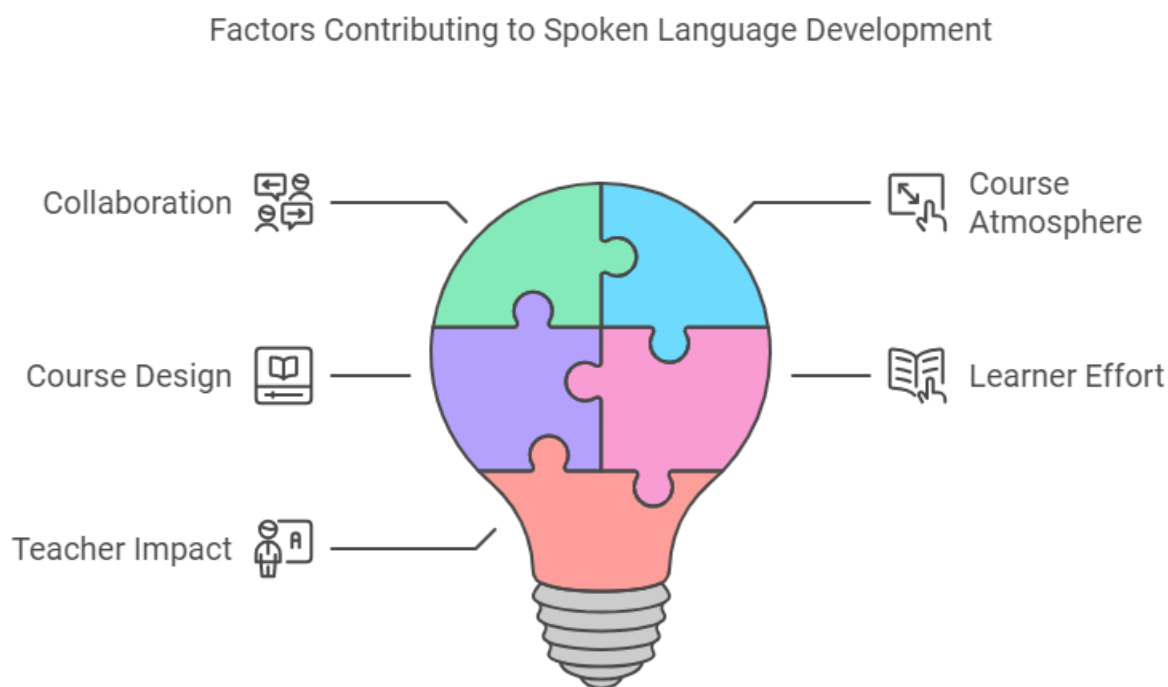


Figure 1. Elements contributing to spoken language development

4. Discussion and conclusions

This study focused on the development of spoken language skills in an online English course for adult learners, with a particular emphasis on the role of social presence. The findings demonstrate that social presence-based tasks can significantly enhance the online learning experience for adult learners.

Humor emerged as a crucial element in fostering interaction and collaboration among learners. This aligns with Tu and McIsaac's (2002) study, which highlighted the importance of using both formal and informal communication styles in online courses depending on the situation. As our results indicate, the formality level decreased over the course duration, fostering a relaxed and informal online community. This finding is further supported by Panjefouladgaran et al. (2024), who emphasise the importance of digital technology in facilitating online student interaction. In our study, students felt comfortable using the online platform enabling them to interact without hesitation and develop a unique learning community. This aligns with Tu and McIsaac (2002), who suggest that once a learning community is established, the learning process can be divided into three domains: social context, online community, and interactivity. Krejns et al. (2022) redefine social presence in their article and propose two additional components to consider in the online learning place: social space and sociability. Social space is contributed to by a sense of community, group atmosphere, mutual trust, social identity, and group cohesion. Sociability can be, i.e., small talk or, in our study, humour, which has a function in developing trustworthiness, group cohesion, and social space.

The sense of "realness" in the online classroom environment relates to the findings of Guanwardera (1995). This study suggests that the feeling of realness is not solely dependent on the media used to facilitate interaction among participants, but is also closely linked to the tasks themselves. Tasks are part of course design and require instructor involvement; therefore, the instructor plays a vital role in developing social presence as both a designer and guide. The role of the instructor deserves further exploration within the framework of social presence. Lowenthal and Dunlap (2020) call for more research on how teachers develop social presence, while Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) highlight the importance of instructors who can facilitate and guide higher-order learning, create an open communication climate, and build group cohesion. Our findings demonstrate a strong link between social presence and instructor presence, suggesting that a high degree of social presence in an online classroom can only be

achieved with a strong instructor presence. These two presences are inseparable and must be considered together in teaching online spaces.

Finally, we examined the elements that learners perceived as enhancing their spoken language development. A positive and joyful course atmosphere was viewed as the most effective way to promote spoken interaction. A secure learning environment encourages learners to speak the target language, and an atmosphere where learners feel valued and supported motivates them to contribute and participate actively. These findings are supported by Wriggelsworth (2019) and Leino (2017).

In conclusion, social presence-based tasks made the online language course more engaging and interactive, significantly impacting learner motivation. These tasks fostered a sense of community, provided a supportive and respectful learning environment, and facilitated improvements in language skills, particularly spoken language skills. The learners perceived social presence and interaction in the online course as beneficial and felt that their listening and speaking skills in the target language had improved, which was the primary goal of participating in the course.

The results of this study contribute to the growing body of research on social presence and spoken language development in online learning environments. Furthermore, it provides valuable, research-based information for online non-formal adult education. Adult learners participating in language courses at adult education centers often prioritise improving their spoken language skills.

A limitation of this study is the relatively small sample of 35 participants, which is a relatively small sample size.

This could limit the generalisability of the findings to other adult learners' contexts. It's possible that the results are specific to the participants in this study, and might not hold true for other learners with different backgrounds or learning styles. However, the participants of this study represent a typical set of learners in an adult education center's language course and the number of learners on a course is typical. Therefore, we consider this limitation to be minor as the research context reflects the real-life situation in the setting we investigated.

Future research could explore how to create a sense of social presence in online language courses with larger and more diverse groups of learners. That could help to confirm or refute these findings and enhance generalisability. Further research could also explore the impact of social presence on spoken language development in different online learning contexts, platforms and approaches such as asynchronous, blended learning and hybrid implementation modes. Additionally, it would be beneficial to investigate the long-term effects of social presence on spoken language development and retention in online language learning environments.

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