

Incorporating Synchronous Communication Tool to Promote ESL Graduate Students' Online Participation

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many schools to adopt online teaching, causing a shift in how content is delivered and how students participate in class. Instructors utilized various online synchronous meeting tools (SMTs) to deliver instruction, most of which include built-in synchronous communication tools such as Zoom Chat Box. This study explores one graduate course at an American university utilizing Zoom as a teaching platform to figure out the impact learning online has on Graduate-level ESL participation and the factors conducive to an engaging online course. To this aim, the author collected observational notes for 12 consecutive online sessions and conducted critical analysis through the lens of the theory of Community of Inquiry (CoI). Analytical data highlighted a relative increase in-class engagement and interaction when the class transitioned from in-person classes to an online environment. The study identified a set of contributors to elevated ESL participation and the design of a successful online course, all of which naturally fall into the three presences of an online CoI. The findings showed that the most significant factors are synchronous communication tools (i.e., Zoom Chat Box), the leading social presence component. The benefits of incorporating synchronous communication tools in online courses and related pedagogical implications are discussed.

Keywords: synchronous communication tool, Community of Inquiry (CoI), ESL, participation, online learning

1. Introduction

The pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for education practitioners and students, transforming online learning into a new norm. This study explored one of the courses of the MAT-TESOL program at a University in the United States. Since the second half of the semester (from week 9 to week 15), the school moved online due to COVID-19. The majority (over 92%) of the class were international ESLs. The author noticed an increase in ESLs' class participation around week 10. To verify this assumption and to figure out the contributors to this increased participation, if any, the author took observation logs and conducted critical analysis through the lens of Community of Inquiry (CoI) theory. Analytical data indicates that incorporating synchronous communication tools in an online course can effectively promote ESLs' participation and brings about four instructional implications.

2. Related Literature

According to Garrison et al. (1999), there are three elements of a community of inquiry for educational purposes: social, cognitive, and teaching presences. The cognitive presence is the fundamental element in critical thinking and essential for success in higher education. The core concept of cognitive presence lies in constructing and validating meanings through sustained communication, such as continuous reflection activities and peer participation (Cho & Tobias, 2016). Garrison et al. (1999) define social presence as "the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as 'real people.'" Social presence primarily facilitates the construction of the critical thinking process and directly contributes to a successful educational experience by eliminating isolation and loneliness (Cho & Tobias, 2016; Garrison et al., 1999). Teaching presence plays a role in balancing the cognitive and social presence in creating CoI for educational purposes, with instructors functioning as designers and facilitators of the educational experience (Garrison et al., 1999).

Defining online participation and engagement has been controversial, and there is no consistent answer. The present study adopted the definitions of participation and engagement of Hrastinski and Handelsman et al. respectively. Hrastinski (2009) defines online learner participation as "a process of learning by taking part and maintaining relations with others. It is a complex process comprising doing, communicating, thinking, feeling and belonging, which occurs both online and offline" (p. 1761). Handelsman et al. (2005, p. 187, as cited in Dixon, 2015) divided engagement into four sub-categories: skills engagement, performance engagement, emotional engagement, and participations engagement. Thus, participation is naturally embedded in and related to engagement.

Although considerable research has been conducted in online teaching, most of the contributions have focused on the impacts of asynchronous activities such as online forums ((Branon & Essex, 2001; Journell, 2008; Vonderwell, 2003). Little attention was paid to synchronous communication. Thus, this study explores the factors of a successful online course, with a particular focus on synchronous communication.

3. Methods

The research process was guided by two main questions: (1) Is there an increase in ESL participation after the class moved online? (2) What components contribute to online participation? Observational data were collected for 12 consecutive sessions in the form of a class diary. Entries in the documents include class dates, themes, class rapport, student participation level, exceptional cases (e.g., spring break), the researchers' subjective comments on each lesson, and five particular students. Also, the researcher referred to class recordings to supplement details.

4. Results and Discussion

Analytical data indicated an increased participation level among ESL students and identified a set of components conducive to elevated participation. Those factors naturally fell into the three presences of an online Community of Inquiry.

4.1. Cognitive Presence

There are two primary components of cognitive presence: implementation of group works and the composition of course content. The breakout group function makes it possible to implement various collaborative activities in an online setting, such as Think-Pair-Share, Round robin, and small group discussion. The construction and validation of meanings are mainly realized in this way. Moreover, the features of course content, such as difficulty level, relevancy of the topic with students' lives, and criticality involved in the course design, also impact students' cognitive development and engagement level.

4.2. Teaching Presence

The teaching presence is mainly affected by two factors: 1) the instructor's facilitation of group works and 2) the instructor's multitasking ability. Firstly, thoughtfully designed and well-organized collaborative activities are essential for students' critical thinking development and mastery of the course content. Secondly, the instructor's multitasking ability is especially vital for the feelings and experience of the students, affecting students' wiliness to participate, and consequently, their academic outcomes. Chickering and Gamson (1987) claimed that the instructors are expected to address various learning needs and "provide timely feedback on students' academic progression." However, it is known that multitasking in an online class is challenging for even the most experienced instructor. Thus, intentional training on that skill is of utmost importance for creating an engaging online classroom.

4.3. Social Presence

The online social presence consists of three components: an in-meeting Chat Box, breakout group activities, and a positive class rapport. Garrison et al. (1999) proposed three indicators of social presence in text-based communication: emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion. Chat Box function plays an essential role in building up and maintaining a good social presence. On the one hand, the synchronous Chat Box creates space for emotional expression and open communication in the Zoom context, such as students posting emoticons and doing risk-free sharing. On the other hand, Chat Box co-construct group cohesion with group works. Group activities like small group discussion

and Think-Pair-Share are examples of collaborative communication activities. Implementing group activities is vital to establish a sense of belonging and group commitment and to elicit students to share personal meaning. Furthermore, the positive class rapport built in the first eight-week on-ground classes contributed to a higher comfort level, effectively lowering ESL students' affective filters to participate in class orally.

4.4. Benefits of Incorporating Synchronous Communication Tool

As stated above, all of the three presences of a CoI are dispensable components of a successful and engaging online course. However, most of the factors identified above are standard features shared by on-ground classes and online ones. The unique quality and strength of online teaching is a built-in synchronous communication tool, the Zoom Chat Box function, in the present study.

Synchronous discussions like Zoom Chatbox interactions are open but purposeful communications (Garrison, 2009) essential for building up social support that encourages communication, fosters knowledge work, and facilitates collaborative learning (Hrastinski, 2008). It also makes it possible for students to equally contribute to the class by providing an extra text-based space to continue the discussion. Furthermore, those casual, personal emotion communications in the chatbox help establish the class rapport and group commitment, making up the absence of in-person communication to some extent.

4.5. Pedagogical Implications

There came four instructional implications for online instructors to better design their courses and elevate graduate-level ESLs' online participation.

- 1) Facilitating the composition and continual interaction of the three elements of CoI is the driving force for developing a dynamic and active online community, not just an online classroom (Garrison, 2009).
- 2) Intentionally establishing a positive rapport will lead to a higher comfort level and a language learner-friendly learning space, positively developing social presence. The instructor and school administrators should seek ways to connect the class (e.g., holding regular chatting sessions).

- 3) As the crux of an effective online course lies in a shared social identity and or/a cohesive group identity (Rogers & Lea, 2005), instructors should be flexible about students' participation forms, encouraging students to speak out and take full use of synchronous communication tools.
- 4) The present study also indicates that course design, instructor's facilitation, the level of criticality involved in the course content, and opportunities for collaborative development are all essential to supporting and sustaining a community of learners. Thus, effective online teaching can be developed around three core elements: instructor, community sense/rapport, and the course per se.

5. Conclusion

This study derived from the author's observation of an increase in ESL students' class participation in one U.S online graduate course. To verify the assumption, the author took observational notes and conducted the critical analysis to figure out the factors at play. The study results indicated increased online participation among the target students compared to the first set of in-person classes. Findings showed that social presence is the most significant factor for language learners' involvement in the online environment. The integrity of the three presences of CoI is essential for maintaining ESLs' active participation. Moreover, the present study paid particular attention to exploring the significance of Zoom's built-in synchronous communication tool, namely Chat Box. In sum, synchronous discussions are essential for building up social support, which encourages communication, fosters knowledge work and collaborative learning (Hrastinski, 2008).

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