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How to Design an Online Course Creating a Strong Sense of Teacher Presence

Jak zaprojektować kurs zdalny stwarzający silne poczucie obecności nauczyciela

Yuliya Asotska-Wierzba

University of the National Education Commission (Krakow). Institute of English Philology
Karmelicka 41, 31-128 Krakow, Poland
yuliya.asotska-wierzba@up.krakow.pl
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6045-7091>

Abstract. The article analyses how a group of Polish university students responded to the physical absence of a teacher while attending an asynchronous online course designed to create a sense of virtual presence. The following research questions were formulated: What are the blueprints for the design of an online course that ensures a sense of teacher presence? How did students evaluate the teacher's presence on the online English Course for Spatial Planning (e-ECSP)? The study was carried out with the participation of 44 university students. The findings suggest that a properly constructed e-course incorporating teacher-led activities contributes to a sense of teacher presence.

Keywords: teacher presence; virtual presence; asynchronous; design of an online course; spatial planning

Abstrakt. W artykule przeanalizowano, jak grupa polskich studentów zareagowała na nieobecność nauczyciela podczas uczęszczania na asynchroniczny kurs online, którego celem było stworzenie poczucia wirtualnej obecności. Postawiono następujące pytania badawcze: Jakie powinny być

założenia kursu online, który zapewni silne poczucie obecności nauczyciela? Jak studenci ocenili obecność nauczyciela podczas zdalnego kursu języka angielskiego dla gospodarki przestrzennej (e-ECSP)? W badaniu wzięło udział 44 studentów. Analiza wyników sugeruje, że odpowiednio skonstruowany e-kurs, obejmujący zajęcia prowadzone przez nauczyciela, przyczynia się do poczucia jego obecności.

Słowa kluczowe: obecność nauczyciela; obecność wirtualna; asynchroniczny; projektowanie kursu zdalnego; gospodarka przestrzenna

INTRODUCTION

Cutting-edge technology had become omnipresent in our lives even before the arrival of COVID-19. Despite this, the pandemic has brought previously unthinkable changes to teaching and learning (Pokhrel, Chhetri 2021). Although these changes have immensely influenced education in general, their effect on the higher education sector has been especially significant. The technological innovations that are available these days to universities across the globe offer a wide range of new possibilities that can be readily applied to online teaching and learning. However, the results of studies undertaken by some researchers (Dockter 2016; Lehman, Conceição 2010; Vai, Sosulski 2011) show that although we are teaching the Net Generation, namely a generation who already take the presence of new technology for granted, the presence and support of a teacher are still crucial for them. Lehman and Conceição (2010) and Dockter (2016) discuss the importance of teacher presence during online learning and how to manage an online course so that learners feel the instructor's support.

The research objective of this paper is to analyse student attitudes towards teacher presence in online settings while taking into account that online courses are generally associated with asynchronous, passive interaction from both teacher and students. Also, the author of this paper gives some thought to the online course design and how its elements may influence a sense of teacher presence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although online learning has existed for nearly two decades (Singh, Thurman 2019), there is still some space for improvement when it comes to asynchronous online courses. Undoubtedly, online learning has already undergone numerous changes and has passed through various evolutionary stages, from Web 1.0 – passive, behaviouristic, controlled (also known as the “Read-Only Web”), through Web 2.0 – creative, collaborative, user-generated, interactive (also known as “the Social Web”) to Web 3.0 – more connected, dynamic, open, personalized,

intelligent (known as “the Semantic Web”; see Morris 2011; Rubens, Kaplan, Okamoto 2014; Solomon, Schrum 2007; Walker, White 2013). The appearance of COVID-19 has led to online learning taking place on a global scale. Students are studying at home independently, so it has become desirable for teachers to use online technology effectively. The role of a teacher in asynchronous learning has been underestimated, as it involves much more than sending the materials. Conrad and Donaldson (2012) discuss two roles an instructor should perform in an online environment. First of all, the teacher should motivate learners and foster their enthusiasm. Secondly, the provision of proper support and assistance is important. Seeing as the “totally online learning” delivery method is considered to be “the most complex mode of online learning” (Bach, Haynes, Lewis-Smith 2007: 100), learners should be guided by their course instructor, who would generally help to build an adequate learning experience replicating, as far as possible, her physical presence in the classroom. This replication of physical presence in the classroom is highly important, as Dockter’s research (2016) indicates that students create their own perception on who their teacher is by simply looking at the format of the online classes and online materials when there are no face-to-face meetings. Online content is highly structured, yet despite such formal constraints, online materials are still prepared according to a teacher’s view and knowledge “resulting in a teacher-centered approach” (Ibidem: 76). All these elements influence the transaction process through which knowledge is developed (Ibidem). Even though there are some restrictions to asynchronous study, there are still certain consciously developed opportunities for maintaining effective online engagement that can recreate the sense of ‘being there’ or ‘being together’ (Dockter 2016; Lehman, Conceição 2010; Vai, Sosulski 2011).

According to Lehman and Conceição (2010), an instructor wishing to create a sense of presence should prepare so-called “instructor-led activities”. For example, instructors of an online course can publish announcements, record a welcoming video or write a welcoming letter if they would prefer the students not to see their faces. When introducing a welcoming video, instructors can share their life experience, introduce themselves or simply summarise what has already been completed in the course and what the projected outcome or future aims are. Another good “instructor-led activity” that creates a sense of presence are synchronous meetings, e.g. electronic office hours (Ibidem). These elements provide “a real time dynamic for assessment that can offer instructors an immediate sense of how well students grasp the course content” (Simonson, Smaldino, Zvacek 2015: 237) or simply allow the teacher to listen to students’ concerns, develop a good relationship and offer immediate feedback on, e.g., how to develop self-discipline in an online environment (Lehman, Conceição 2010). Moreover,

during such online meetings, students can be in contact not only with their on-line teacher but also with other learners, which is immensely important if we, as teachers, want to create a detectable teaching presence. Finally, it is important to note that when writing to learners or recording ourselves, we should try to come across as natural and authentic so that learners feel equally relaxed and confident.

Another crucial “instructor-led activity” that can have a positive mitigating influence on students’ feelings of isolation in the online environment is to provide learners with constructive assessment and feedback (Ibidem). It is not enough to prepare an automatic correct answer or final grade for students, as even in online settings, the teacher’s digitally mediated feedback is valuable (Ene, Upton 2014, 2018). More general feedback should be followed by the instructor providing detailed personalised feedback showing individual learners the progress they are making. The benefits of scaffolded support were initially described by Vygotsky (1978), who highlighted how important the guidance of an expert was throughout the learning process: “Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement” (Hattie, Timperley 2007: 81), which also gives students the idea that someone is showing an interest in them, supporting them and monitoring their answers and learning process by providing them with a clear explanation as to why an answer was wrong or what elements could be improved. Furthermore, the instructor may manage their time more effectively by developing “automatic computer-generated feedback” containing a detailed analysis of why learners’ selections were correct or incorrect (Vai, Sosulski 2011: Kindle Location 2951).

Finally, it is also important to note that all the elements discussed above combine to create a teacher’s multiple approach to students. In online settings, we never get a homogenous group (Dockter 2016). The Entry Points Approach described by Gardner in *The Unschooled Mind* (1991) compares the presentation of new material to a room with seven doorways. These doorways represent the approaches of a teacher to a newly introduced topic. Only varied materials, methods and approaches invented by a teacher will lead to the overall success of the classroom, while at the same time reaching learners with different backgrounds (Asotska-Wierzba 2013). As Dockter (2016: 83) states, “multiple ways to develop meaning makes it more likely that the student’s perception will be richer and more complex, offering multiple opportunities to form a connection with the teacher.”

THE STUDY

This article forms part of a broader research project conducted for a doctoral thesis. Within the scope of this thesis, an online platform titled “The Online English Course for Spatial Planning” (e-ECSP) was developed. In the overarching study,

a design experiment was implemented, which involved the triangulation of various types and sources of data (Asotska-Wierzba 2019). However, this paper will not delve into the instruments utilized in the larger study, as they fall outside its scope. Instead, the author of this paper selectively extracted relevant data from a large project and focused solely on aspects of teacher presence pertinent to the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the blueprints for the design of an online course that ensures a sense of teacher presence?

RQ2. How did students evaluate the teacher's presence in the online English Course for Spatial Planning (e-ECSP)?

The study aims to connect theoretical insights about online learning with practical aspects of course design, a need highlighted by the extensive move towards online education initiated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Research design

The research design for this study is a mixed-methods approach, which combines both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies (Creswell 2009). The integration of these two methods enables a more holistic understanding of the research questions. While quantitative data offers a broad perspective on student attitudes, qualitative data provides depth and context. This mixed-methods approach not only enriches the findings but also ensures that the conclusions drawn are both empirically grounded and deeply informed by the participants' personal experiences and perceptions.

2. Participants

Forty-four students (seven male) who had enrolled on the Spatial Planning programme while studying for Bachelor's degrees at the Pedagogical University of Krakow took part in the study (now University of the National Education Commission, Krakow). These students were between 20 and 22 years old. Their traditional lessons on General English were delivered at the B2 level (Council of Europe 2001); consequently, an e-ECSP course was prepared at the same proficiency level.

3. Materials and the design of the e-ECSP course

The online course was specifically developed for the larger doctoral research project, in collaboration with an IT specialist. It was hosted on a dedicated website <http://tools4studying.com>, which was exclusively accessible to students

participating in the research. As the website was purpose-built for this project and is no longer active, it cannot be found on the internet anymore. Also, it is important to note that the author of this article, who also created and conducted the e-ECSP course, will be referred to as the “instructor” in the further description of the course’s design.

The e-ECSP course was taught in parallel with the General English classes at the Foreign Language Centre at Cracow Pedagogical University. However, it was conducted asynchronously. Once every two weeks, the learners were expected to complete one obligatory e-lesson. Over the two (winter and summer) semesters, the students managed to complete eleven e-lessons (see Table 1), which were tailored to their specialized spatial planning needs.

Table 1. Topics covered during the e-ECSP course

Winter semester	Summer semester
e-lesson 1: European Coastal Areas e-lesson 2: Green Building Is the Future of All Building e-lesson 3: Territorial Priorities for the Development of the European Union e-lesson 4: Windows Can Power City Skyscrapers	e-lesson 5: The Slow Cities Movement e-lesson 6: Summarizing Passages about Geographic Information Systems e-lesson 7: The Ageing Populations e-lesson 8: Gentrification e-lesson 9: Territorial Dimensions of the Europe 2020 Strategy e-lesson 10: EU Policies to Tackle Youth Unemployment e-lesson 11: Urban Sprawl

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

The course itself was constructed strategically to create a sense of teacher presence so that the students would sense their teacher’s support. While constructing the e-ECSP course, the author followed the principles described in the theoretical part of this article on how to construct an online course in such a manner as to give course participants a sense of teacher presence. First of all, by selecting “instructor-led activities”, the instructor demonstrated engagement in the course and motivated learners by posting videos or written announcements on the platform (see two examples of such announcements in Figures 1 and 2).

There was also a “Tutor button” (see Figure 3) that students clicked on when they did not know something and wanted to contact the instructor directly from the online course page without logging in on their mail box. It was not a ‘beep-a-tutor’ service of the kind offered by some institutions, which guarantees students rapid responses within an hour, seven days a week (Oblinger 2003: 42). However, the aim of e-ECSP course was to show “presence” of the teacher during online learning process of students, which is why the instructor tried to reply as quickly as possible.

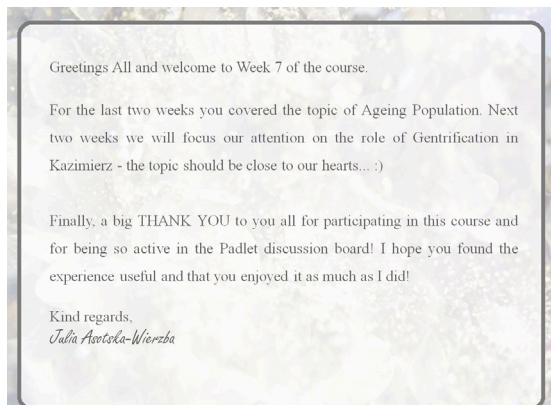


Figure 1. Example of an online announcement

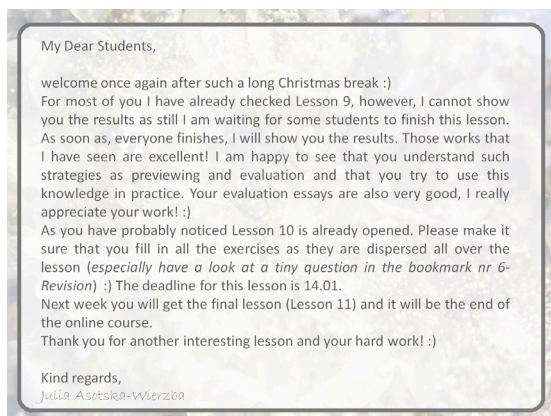


Figure 2. Example of an online announcement

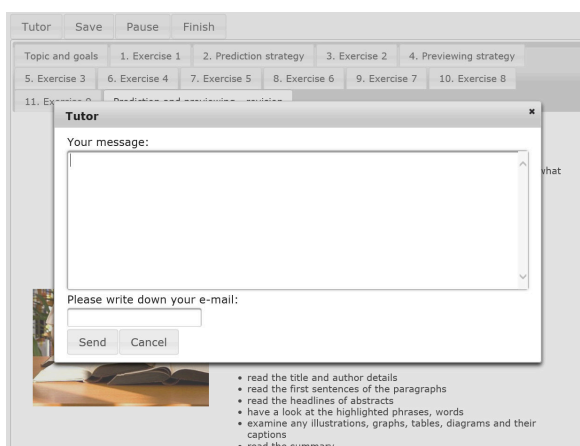


Figure 3. Example of a “Tutor button”

While constructing each e-lesson, the instructor differentiated between multiple teaching strategies, methods. For example, Figure 4 shows the instructor presenting students with the issue of how to deal with unknown words while reading. Here, at the beginning, the instructor personally discusses this issue in the video, then gives a written clarification why it may happen that some words are unfamiliar for us and finally students are provided with clear visualization of some strategies that can be used while reading.

The screenshot shows a web interface for an e-lesson. At the top, there are navigation buttons: Tutor, Save, Pause, Finish. Below that is a progress bar with seven exercises: 1. Exercise 1, 2. Exercise 2, 3. Dealing with unknown words (highlighted), 4. Exercise 3, 5. Exercise 4, 6. Revision, 7. Glossary. The main content area is titled "DEALING WITH UNKNOWN WORDS WHILE READING" in red. It features a video player on the left with a play button, and a word cloud on the right shaped like a question mark, containing words like "unknown", "meanings", "words", "context", "parts", "general", "sentence", "paragraph", "text", "important", "difficult", "impossible", "vocabulary", "knowledge", "strategies", "focus", "increase", "unfamiliar", "reading", "academic", "materials", "likely", "find", "exact", "every", "page", "this", "time", "I", "would", "like", "to", "focus", "on", "strategies", "to", "increase", "your", "vocabulary", "knowledge". Below the video and word cloud is a URL: <https://todaysmeet.com/unknownwords>. Underneath is a paragraph of text: "When reading academic materials, you will most likely find difficult or unknown words. It is impossible, even for students whose first language is English, to know the exact meaning of every word on the page. This time, I would like to focus on strategies to increase your vocabulary knowledge." Below this is another paragraph: "Read the strategies below that you can use while dealing with the difficult words that you encounter as you read." This is followed by a table with two rows of strategies. The first row has a red heading "1. Don't try to understand every word" and a red arrow pointing to a list of bullet points. The second row has a red heading "2. Figure out the meaning from the context" and a red arrow pointing to a list of bullet points. At the bottom, there is a small line of text: "You are going to practice these strategies in the next part of this lesson."

1. Don't try to understand every word	→	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes the general meaning of a sentence/paragraph/text is more important
2. Figure out the meaning from the context	→	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What part of speech is this word (noun, verb, adjective, adverb, etc.) • Look at the words that are around the word • Think about the connotation of the unknown word, is it positive or negative • Check to see if you can break down the word into parts and if you know the meaning of any of the parts • Look at the whole sentence or paragraph to see if there are clues to the meaning of the word (a synonym, antonym, pronoun, or paraphrase)

Figure 4. Example of an online announcement

Additionally, a “Help button” was provided to offer learners extra assistance when they found particular exercises challenging (see Figure 5). By clicking on this, they could read some suggestions on how to do that specific task.

Also, in each e-lesson there was a “Further Reading button” (see Figure 6) that enabled students who wanted to read more on a particular topic to acquire more information by clicking on it. At the bottom of Figure 6, a reading figure can be seen. Clicking on this figure caused another window to appear containing additional information on, e.g., the topic of ‘Interesting facts about GIS’ (the

lesson topic was ‘Geographic Information Systems’. These buttons (“Help button” and “Further Reading button”) were created to support learners online and offer them an alternative to direct teacher support in online settings. In effect, it acted as a “substitute teacher”.

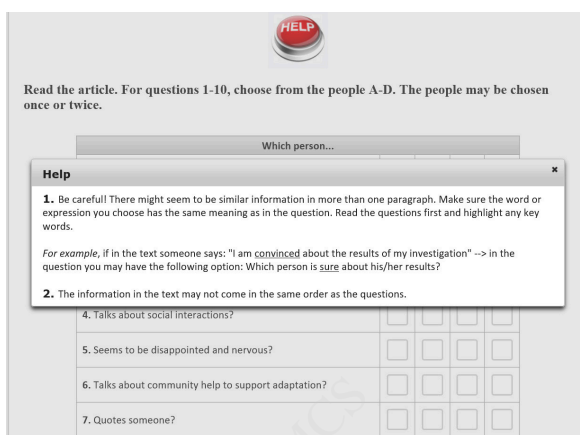


Figure 5. Example of a “Help button”



Figure 6. Example of a “Further Reading button”

Furthermore, the instructor of the e-ECSP course provided in-depth feedback for every online written assignment. The instructor allowed time for monitoring the students’ interactions and participation as well as their online task completion process. The students always received highly personalised feedback and support on their written assignments. Most of the time the instructor tried to provide students with positive reinforcement, clear explanations or constructive advice on their writing assignments. For example, the instructor could write: *I am glad to see that this time you have taken into account my last suggestions on the usage of linking words. In comparison to your previous written assignment, this essay is much more coherent and clear. Please don’t forget to use linking words in the future ;)*

However, there were also some elements in the exercises for which feedback was provided automatically (see Figure 7). In order to avoid “leaving” students with no interpretation, almost all the automatically generated answers were explained in depth, with detailed justification and concrete examples being provided.

Listen to the introduction on urban sprawling. While listening highlight words in yellow that are mentioned for the description of sprawling and mark words in blue that are mentioned for negative impacts of sprawling:

SUSTAINABLE	HAPHAZARD DEVELOPMENT	ENVIRONMENTAL
URBAN AREA	LOW-DENSITY	SPIRALING
SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT	SOCIAL HOMOGENEITY	AIR POLLUTION
POLICY IMPLICATION	HABITAT FRAGMENTATION	INFRASTRUCTURE COSTS
INEQUALITY	WATER POLLUTION	LIVABLE

Points: / 5.0

Correct answer:

The way in which we develop the American landscape and its urban areas is a critical component to creating livable and sustainable cities. The footprint of major metropolitan areas, suburbs, and small towns ultimately shapes the environmental and social conditions within our communities. One type of development pattern that has received increasing attention by researchers and policy makers interested in fostering sustainable communities is called "sprawl". Sprawl is generally typified as **low-density, haphazard development spiraling outward** from urban centre. For years, scientists have argued that sprawling urban and suburban development patterns are creating negative impacts including **habitat fragmentation**, **water** and **air pollution**, increased **infrastructure costs**, **inequality**, and **social homogeneity**. Understanding the causes, consequences, and policy implications related to sprawl can provide important insights on how to construct more sustainable communities over the long term.

Figure 7. Example of an automatic feedback

Finally, during the first semester, all the e-content was introduced asynchronously on the e-ECSP course. However, in the second semester, the author of this e-course encouraged real-time interaction by introducing optional Electronic Office Hours, which were conducted synchronously on the TodayMeet¹ webpage once a month.

¹ TodayMeet was a backchanneling e-tool allowing participants to participate in synchronous and asynchronous discussions. Unfortunately, it is no longer possible to use it because it has been shut down.

4. Data collection instruments and data analysis

To comprehensively assess the effectiveness of the e-ECSP course and the perceived presence of the instructor, the study employed a dual approach in data collection, utilizing two structured questionnaires and a semi-structured interview.

The questions in the two questionnaires and semi-structured interview were prepared in the Polish language so as to avoid any misunderstandings and provide an opportunity for the respondents to express their opinions freely and spontaneously. The acquired data was translated into English and verified by a bilingual external reviewer.

After the first four e-lessons, the students were asked to complete the first questionnaire. They then completed the second questionnaire after the last seven e-lessons. The difference in the number of e-lessons was dictated by the structure of the students' academic programme (the first semester was shorter).

When the students had completed the eleven e-lessons, the instructor on the e-ECSP course invited 12 interviewees to a group interview to explore their perspectives and attain a more complete picture of their viewpoints on the e-course in its entirety. The respondents were selected for the group interview according to the results they had attained over the course of the whole project. A balanced perspective was obtained by inviting students who had achieved weak, average and strong results. The interview was recorded and then transcribed in order to provide an opportunity for data analysis.

Given that the questionnaires were initially designed for a broader project, for the purposes of this research, the author selectively analyzed three quantitative questions from the first questionnaire that were directly addressed to the aims of this study. The participants on the e-ECSP course were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed with a number of statements that were followed by five-point Likert response sets (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly agree). The received data was analysed using Microsoft Excel. Table 2 provides the content of these questions.

Table 2. Questions from the first questionnaire (winter semester)

1	I could count on the teacher
2	The teacher's comments in the open-ended questions made a useful contribution to the development of my language skills
3	The teacher's feedback was useful when it came to improving my language skills

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Five quantitative questions from the second questionnaire were analysed. As was the case with the first questionnaire, the data collected from the second questionnaire was analysed using Microsoft Excel. The first three questions were the same as in the first questionnaire. The participants on the e-ECSP course were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed with a number of statements that were followed by five-point Likert response sets (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly agree). However, two additional questions were provided in the second questionnaire (see Table 3). While the fourth question was followed by Likert response sets, the fifth question offered multiple-choice response options.

Table 3. Questions from the second questionnaire (summer semester)

1	I could count on the teacher
2	The teacher's comments in the open-ended questions made a useful contribution to the development of my language skills
3	The teacher's feedback was useful when it came to improving language skills
4	I did not experience a major difference in a contact with an online teacher in comparison to the traditionally taught course
5	I did not use the opportunity to chat during office hours because: a) I did not have time b) I had no need c) other

Finally, in order to strengthen the validity of the interpretations, an analysis of two questions from the semi-structured interview was presented, notably: (1) In the online environment, the teacher was not "present" in the traditional sense. Did you want a different form of the teacher being present? Did you feel that something was lacking? Did you want to change anything?; (2) What way of learning do you prefer – online or traditional? Why?

5. Results

Seeing as the first three questions in both questionnaires were identical, the author of this article decided to report the results in one table (see Figure 8). The results for the fourth question in the second questionnaire are presented in Figure 9.

The results obtained from the fifth question in the second questionnaire ("I did not use the opportunity to chat during office hours because") show that most of the respondents (79.5%) had no need to take up that opportunity. The second group of participants (22.7%) marked option "a", namely "I did not have

time”. One person wrote the following response in the space provided by the “other” option: “I did not have any need to talk to the course instructor as everything was clear to me.”

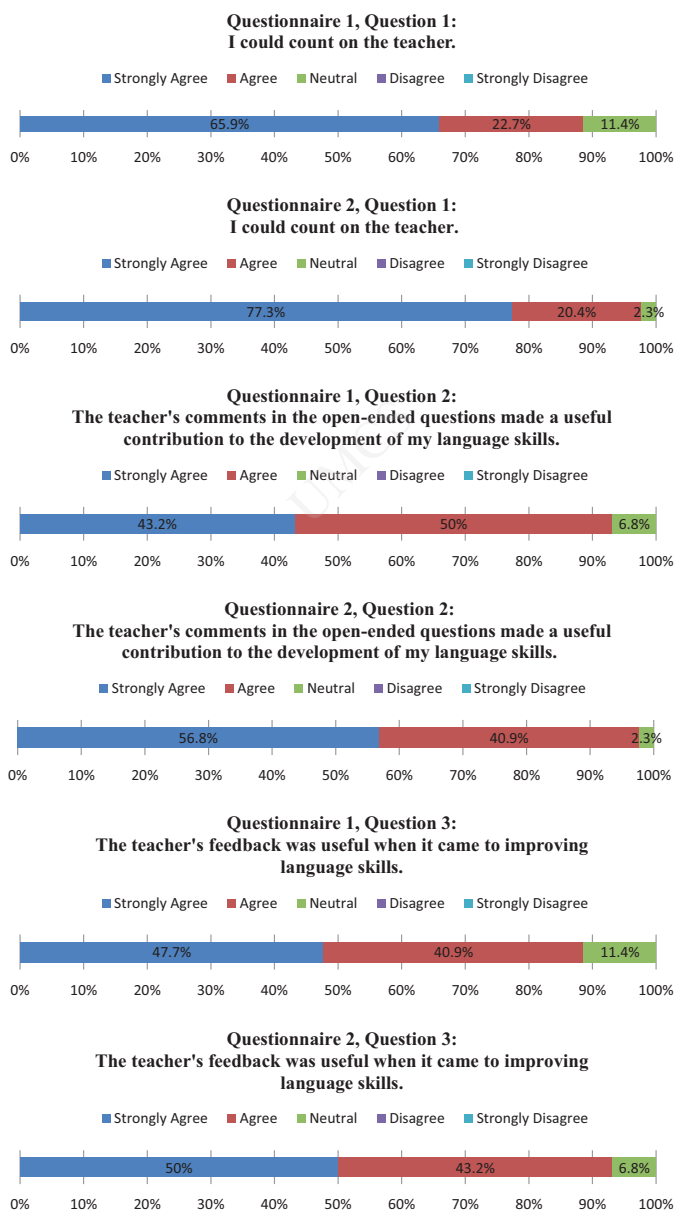


Figure 8. The students’ results for the first and second questionnaires (questions 1–3)

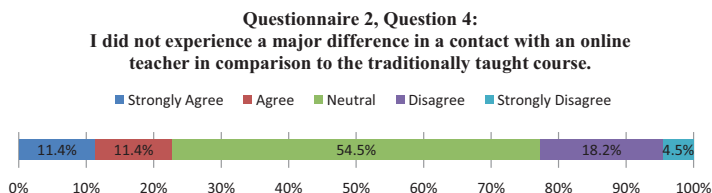


Figure 9. The students' results for the fourth question in the second questionnaire

During the interview, the students were asked the following question: In the online environment, the teacher was not “present” in the traditional sense. Did you want a different form of the teacher being present? Did you feel that something was lacking? Did you want to change anything? All the respondents were satisfied with the role performed by the teacher and the immediate replies they had received to their requests as they knew that there was someone who was monitoring their progress. This “proactive” attitude from the teacher made them feel that someone was looking after their needs. One student mentioned: *It doesn't happen very often with other academic teachers*. The students also stated that they had the feeling during the online course that someone was monitoring their learning process, reading their answers and analysing all the feedback they were providing in order to help or support them (e.g. *A wonderful element of the course was that the course instructor underlined and explained all my mistakes*). This level of engagement from the course instructor was extremely motivating for participants. The students said that they liked the way the course was managed and that they would not change anything. However, one female student suggested that the teacher prepare videos with subtitles as it turned out that the instructor's voice was not very clear in some of the videos.

Additionally, all the interviewees stated, on being asked about the “Help button”, that they liked this option as when they were unsure of how to complete a difficult exercise, this button directed them and explained the task. As one student claimed: *Sometimes I did not know how to do an exercise and the help button prompted me with a suggestion on how to do it*.

In response to the second question (What way of learning do you prefer – online or traditional?), the students state that their preferred mode of learning depends on the subject as some topics can be taught online and some topics can only be taught in a traditional way. One person said that it was difficult to sit in front of a computer all the time and that traditional teaching gives an opportunity to meet and talk, not only with colleagues but also with academic staff. Moreover, the students made clear that it was very important for them to learn from their mistakes by analysing them, and this possibility was given to them

by an e-ECSP course. On the whole, the participants complained that lecturers generally grade their written assignments without any further comment, which was highly discouraging. All students taking part in the interview highlighted that they do not like the kind of lessons in which teachers simply show them a PowerPoint presentation and read the text for them off the slides. Instead, they would prefer to receive a richer interpretation and justification accompanied by examples, as had happened on the e-ECSP course.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this subsection is to present the findings for the research questions in relation to the consolidated information obtained from the research results provided by the two questionnaires and the interview.

The second and third questions from the first and the second questionnaires, the fifth question from the second questionnaire and some parts of the students' answers from the interview provided the data for the first research question: What are the blueprints for the design of an online course that ensures a sense of teacher presence?

As Lehman and Conceição (2010) highlight, in online settings, it is important to remember to maintain clarity and simplify organizational procedures when designing courses. These rules were followed when constructing an e-ECSP course. The design took into consideration that students would be completing tasks independently, necessitating clear and structured organization of online lessons. Instructions were kept straightforward, supplemented with examples where necessary to guide students. At the beginning of each e-lesson, students could read the aims of that lesson. All new topics on either specialised vocabulary or academic reading strategies were well thought out, with each being presented in various formats on order to meet the students' multiple styles of learning. Also, at the end of each lesson, there was always some revision and a glossary of newly acquired terms. The instructor's observations and student feedback during interviews indicated that the repetitive structure and consistent layout of the lessons were beneficial. It was noted that students taking part in the e-ECSP course do not differentiate much between the online or traditional way of learning as long as the online course is presented in an appropriate manner. Teacher-led activities are of high importance, as such materials give students insight into who their teacher is, resulting in their engagement. The results obtained from the survey of student responses to the e-ECSP course showed that even such a small element as a "Help button" can give students the sense that they are receiving immediate support. As a result, students did not feel lost in

online settings and were confident with what they were supposed to be doing. Moreover, the results indicate that automatically generated answers with clearly explained examples and proper justification are helpful. Similarly, the “Further Reading” option was often used, especially while doing written assignments. The students acknowledged that this option offered them additional resources that complemented the materials introduced in a given online lesson. The students were accessing the information via hyperlinks or embeddings, and this helped them to build up the specialized language, making it easier for them to write an answer to a given written assignment and ensuring they did not feel lost. The fact that many students felt no need to be present during synchronous “electronic office hours” can be explained by their overall satisfaction with the proper feedback and assistance that they had received from the instructor of the online course. Thus, we can conclude that if the online course is well planned and clear instructions are given, students do not miss synchronous meetings.

Questions 1–3 from the first and the second questionnaires, the fourth question from the second questionnaire and some parts of the students’ answers from the interview provided the data for the second research question: How did students evaluate the teacher’s presence in the online English Course for Spatial Planning (e-ECSP)?

The results indicate that the spatial planning students positively graded their teacher’s online support, enthusiasm and assistance. Analysis of the results suggests that this positive response was not only due to the active and attentive teaching approach but also a result of the specialized materials developed to meet students’ specific needs and interests. We know that students generally place high value on communication. It therefore came as no surprise that the instructor’s decision to provide comments and interpretation in writing in response to all the students’ mistakes encouraged the course participants to analyse those mistakes and follow additional hyperlinks that the instructor sent to offer them more practice. Furthermore, the students agreed that all the personalised comments and corrections that they had received from the teacher improved their language skills and helped them to reflect on different methods of studying the language. These results are consistent with data obtained in Ene and Upton (2014, 2018).

It was hardly surprising that more of the students remained “neutral”, in comparison to a traditionally taught course, when asked about their feelings towards their contact with the online teacher. However, the results show that students “felt” the instructor’s “presence” even though the whole course was being conducted asynchronously. Students liked the fact that the teacher sent swift responses to their inquiries, that their online study processes were being

actively monitored and that the teacher varied techniques and materials. Similar feedback has also been described by Vai and Sosulski (2011). The Spatial Planning students also mentioned that in traditional settings students would generally like to receive such detailed and swiftly delivered comments from teachers. Some students stated during the interview that there exists a tendency among academic teachers to limit their grading process to the final grade without giving any constructive feedback. Of course, it can be challenging for teachers to give constructive feedback to everyone. However, if there is such a possibility, we should provide it, learners' motivation quickly decreases when they are only offered automatically generated feedback in online settings. Moreover, it can be concluded from my examination of the students' opinions that the grading of written assignments without any attempt to justify the grades that are given neither satisfies learners nor assists their progressive acquisition of lifelong learning skills. Much like in Lehman and Conceição's (2010) findings, the instructor-led activities used during the e-ECSP course played a big role in students' perception of the teacher's presence in an asynchronous online setting. The students appreciated the instructor's authenticity from what they saw in the videos and from the messages addressed to them. Similar observations on the topic of teacher authenticity are also described by Dockter (2016). Although the e-ECSP course concentrated on the specialized language of spatial planning, the language used in the theory or in instructions was "light", simple and easy to understand. In the notes to students, motivation was fostered by expressing appreciation for their diligent and independent work, as well as acknowledging their adherence to deadlines. Students valued activities in which they could see others' ideas, e.g. when working on a Padlet board or preparing a map of their hometowns.

The results suggest that the positive attitude, creative teaching approach, readiness to assist and authenticity demonstrated by the course instructor, along with the diverse methods incorporated into the course design, effectively bridged the gap between instructor and students. This approach facilitated students in forming their perceptions of the instructor, which in turn positively influenced their motivation, performance, and the overall student-teacher relationship. Similar observations were reported by Dockter (Ibidem: 84) who admits in his paper that "providing students with purposefully varied interactions can help students to develop a more realistic perception of who the teacher is, creating a stronger sense of a teacher's presence, and solidifying a strong bond between student and teacher, all of which can help the student succeed."

CONCLUSION

The research was undertaken to create a blueprint for the design of an online course and to evaluate the teacher's presence on the e-ECSP. If we want to design an online course creating a sense of presence, certain structural elements should be pre-planned. The results of the study discussed in this article indicate that in online settings teacher-led activities, proper constructive support and clearly structured materials contribute to students' perception of teacher presence.

Nowadays, as COVID-19 has changed the ways we work and study and when online learning is already taken for granted, it is hugely important to take into consideration the way we teach online. Most of us academics have already noticed that online teaching is a challenge and it is not enough to simply move materials online that have been prepared to be taught in a traditional way.

In conclusion, it is essential to acknowledge the major limitations of this study. First of all, we should always be careful with the interpretation of interview data. Although the 'semi-structured interview' was arranged according to the suggestions described by Dörnyei (2007), still, the respondents' answers during the interview could have been influenced by various factors, such as shyness or the opinions of others. Secondly, this article is part of a larger study and the author narrowed down the data by selecting what was most relevant to the article's research questions. Finally, it is important to note that the results of this study should be treated with a degree of caution due to the relatively small number of research participants.

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