



# Beyond the Screen: Enhancing Social Presence through Effective Task Design in Online Adult Language Education

Kirsi Korkealehto<sup>1</sup>, Vera Leier<sup>2</sup>

Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Finland<sup>1</sup>  
Stockholm University, Sweden<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

*This mixed method study aims to clarify the relationship between task types and foreign language learners' perception of social presence, their feeling of 'real' in the online classroom [1] and their spoken language skill improvement in synchronous online learning [2]. The participants in this study were 35 adults between 20 and 80 years old who were learning English in an adult education centre in Finland; their proficiency was A2-B1 level CEFR. The course met weekly over a period of 24 weeks and was delivered via Zoom. Using technology-mediated task-based language teaching guidelines we designed five different types of tasks to cover each lesson's topic. By designing the tasks, we looked at ways of stimulating richer learner interaction, giving more opportunities for genuine meaning-focused language use and maximising learner responses. We administered an online survey with multiple choice and open-ended questions at the end of the course to find out the perception of the students regarding their social presence and perception of spoken language competence learning. The findings suggest that the task types affect learners' social presence development in the online classroom, with increased engagement and interaction which in turn improved learners' spoken language skill.*

**Keywords:** *online language learning, social presence, interaction, life-long learning*

## 1. Introduction

The pervasiveness of online learning platforms has transformed language education offering greater flexibility and accessibility. However, in online learning social presence can be challenging. Similarly, practising spoken language skills in online courses needs careful planning. This study specifically focuses on the impact of social presence on adult learners developing spoken language skills in non-formal adult education centres. Traditionally adult education centres predominantly offer face-to-face courses. Adult learners often mention the development of spoken language as a primary reason for pursuing language courses. 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 [3]. We present pedagogical implications as for the design of technology-mediated tasks and the conditions of the learning environment that can foster students' spoken skills development through social presence.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Social presence

Success in online learning is not automatic; it requires a specific setup. In our study, adult learners in a community English class historically met onsite more as a social activity than primarily focusing on learning the language. Shifting this group of students online requires careful planning and consideration to keep them engaged and coming back.

We developed a teaching plan by integrating a series of tasks, as in Technology-Mediated Task-Based Language Teaching to enhance the students' social presence in their online classroom. This approach kept the students engaged in their learning and socialising by making them feel real in their group of online learners.

Social presence is a term introduced by psychologists as early as 1976 by Short, Williams, and Christie [4]. They identified the need to problematize the interaction in online communication. Later, Gunawardena [5] was the first who proposed that social presence plays an important role in online



interaction. Studies based on the concept showed that social presence is essential for fostering an online community in a teaching environment (e.g. [2], [6]).

Furthermore, Garrison et al. [7] incorporated social presence into their Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. The framework comprises three independent elements: Social Presence, Teaching Presence, and Cognitive Presence, which together facilitate and implement meaningful learning experiences [7], [8].

The model helps examine how learners interact socially and emotionally in an online learning community. The component social presence in the CoI framework is defined as "the ability of participants to identify with a group, communicate openly in a trusting environment, and develop personal and affective relationships progressively by projecting their personalities" [9] and "the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as 'real' people (i.e., their full personality), through the medium of communication being used" [9]. Additionally, it is a catalyst in building social and emotional connections and is, therefore, important for learning community building. Learners and teachers create a positive, enjoyable learning atmosphere by showing affection and a sense of belonging, thereby establishing cohesion in the learning community [7].

Social presence is manifested by three factors: affective, interactive, and cohesive indicators reflecting learners' behaviour. The affective category includes emotional behaviours such as using humour or self-disclosing personal information. The interactive category indicates the participants' interactions with each other by continuing a conversation or thread, quoting others, or asking questions. The cohesive category refers to social purposes such as salutations, addressing the participants, and using inclusive pronouns.

To summarise, social presence is the prerequisite for setting the climate for the learning experience. It means that individuals identify themselves as part of a community, where they can meet, interact, and learn in a safe environment, build trust, and develop relationships online.

However, to achieve or enhance social presence in an online classroom, it is essential to carefully choose a series of real-life and pedagogical tasks [10], [11] to build a strong sense of belonging in the online environment, which leads to motivation and triggers learning.

## ***2.2 Task-Based Language Teaching and Technology-Mediated Task-Based Language Teaching***

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a learner-centred approach to language learning in which learners are owners of their learning. The approach offers opportunities for learners to engage in the authentic use of the target language through tasks. The aim is that through the authentic tasks, the learners develop language knowledge and gradually become more proficient in comprehending and producing the target language for meaningful purposes. The focus being on interaction during authentic tasks the method cultivates learners' linguistic and interactional competence. In essence, TBLT operates on the principle that while message comprehension and construction are paramount, attention to form and meaning are equally important for effective language learning. This highlights the framework's holistic approach to language learning [12].

González-Lloret and Ortega [13] introduced the framework of technology-mediated TBLT—a concept that combines task-based language teaching (TBLT), instructed second or foreign language acquisition, and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) by integrating the use of technology with task-based approaches for language learning purposes. TBLT has been a well-established area of research in language studies, however integrating technology into TBLT is a relatively new concept and under-studied research area [14], [15].

Previous research shows that by using technology-mediated TBLT methods learners generally enjoy communicating online (both writing and speaking). They have meaningful conversations with their peers using various communication strategies. However, some students were still hesitant to interact online in a foreign language [14].

## **3. Methodology**

### ***3.1 Context and Course Design***

The English language courses in our study were organised at a Finnish adult education centre. Adult education centres promote life-long learning by offering non-formal education for all citizens regardless of their educational background. The courses are affordable because the education centres are subsidised by the government.



We designed the courses and the online lessons with the help of social presence guidelines and technology-mediated TBLT framework. The aim was to create pedagogically sound technology-mediated tasks to enhance particularly spoken language competence and social presence. The starting point was that technology is organically integrated in the task design as Kim and Namkung [15] suggest.

The participants of the two consecutive synchronous online courses in question met in the evenings once a week: 12 times in the autumn term and 12 times in the spring term; altogether 24 times. The duration of each online lesson was 90 minutes. We used Zoom, a video meeting platform for the online sessions, and the *Pedanet* learning management system to share additional material and activities. Additionally, we used digital applications such as *Wordwall*, *Mentimeter*, *Kahoot*, *Padlet* and *Quizizz*. The participants had a course book at their disposal. The online lesson consisted of five types of tasks, which are described in the following:

#### Icebreakers

After greeting everybody each session began with an icebreaker activity designed to capture the learners' attention and focus on the upcoming lesson. An example of such an icebreaker is a selection of photographs displayed in the main room of *Zoom*. Learners were then invited to choose a photograph and explain their rationale for the selection. This icebreaker functioned as a chain-like activity, with each learner having to designate the next participant to contribute. Another example of an icebreaker was to ask the participants to choose a *Zoom* video filter to represent their current mood. The activity continues similarly as a chain where the participants explain their choice and ask another participant to continue. The intention in employing icebreakers is to foster the use of participants' names by one another, thereby promoting participants to get to know each other. The aim was also to encourage the participants to speak English as soon as they entered the online classroom and to help them make the transition from Finnish to the target language without delay. This kind of playful and fun activities leverage learners' mood and positive feeling as well as team spirit.

#### Warm-up activities

After an ice-breaker the lesson continues with a warm-up activity. The aim of warm-up activities is to introduce learners to the day's theme. One way is to use music with topic-related lyrics to spark learners' interest in the lesson's content. The lyrics of the song were displayed as text on the screen while listening to the song. Thereafter the central message of the song, the meaning of the words, and the structures were examined in a teacher-led manner. Also, topic-related photos and videos are effective methods for introducing learners to the topic. An example of a more learner-centred manner is e.g. an activity in which the learners were asked to upload their own topic-related photo in advance to a shared *Padlet* wall. In the activity everybody's photos were discussed either all together in the main room or in pairs or small groups in the break-up rooms. As a warm-up activity a world cloud created by the learners with the help of *Answergarden* or *Mentimeter* functions well, too. Topic-related vocabulary is collected to the world cloud and then the teacher instructs the learners e.g. to use the words to create questions and then ask and answer each other's questions in a break-out room. Warm-up activities give the learners a glimpse of the lesson's topic and stimulates them to look forward to a deeper engagement with the topic

#### Course book related activities

As the learners had a course book in their disposal, it was the main material for the course. After the icebreaker and warm-up activities, the text chapter and the chapter's vocabulary were listened to together in the main room. As a rule, the participants had prepared themselves for the lesson by reading and translating the text. After listening, the learners were divided in pairs into breakout rooms where they read aloud the vocabulary and the text taking turns. The teacher visited each room to help and correct pronunciation. Thereafter everybody came back to the main room where the chapter was reviewed teacher-led. After a thorough discussion of the text chapter collaborative pair activities followed in breakout rooms. The teacher had prepared the activities beforehand either with *Wordwall* or as written instructions. *Wordwall* was selected as the main application as it offers a variety of exercise types and is user friendly. One example of a text chapter related activity is to instruct the learners in memorising the story of the text with the help of questions that the teacher has written in the *Wordwall* wheel of words. The pairs work together in the breakout room and take turns in answering the questions. The activities and links to external websites were in learning management system *Pedanet*.



#### Grammar related activities

Grammar was taught using a traditional teacher-led method and *Powerpoint* slides in the main *Zoom* room. Similarly to course book related activities, the same digital tool functioned well for grammar related activities conducted in pairs in break-out rooms. An example of a grammar related activity is to divide learners into breakout rooms in pairs, then one learner shares their screen and displays a card pack the teacher has created with *Wordwall*. The learners see one word at the time in the card pack and they take turns and e.g. make a sentence in simple past tense using the word. Teacher's material and the activities and external links are uploaded to the learning management system *Pedonet*.

#### Wrap-up activities

To conclude each online session, all participants gathered in the main room for a wrap-up activity. This activity focused on summarising the key points learned during the session and identifying the main takeaways that learners could apply in the future. For this activity we used *Zoom* tools such as annotation, chat, reactions, voting and poll functions. Also, *Mentimeter* was used often to collect the take-aways from the lessons. It is useful to display everybody's thoughts and discuss them together. *Quizzes* or games functioned well for wrap-up activity - we used *Kahoot* and *Quizizz* in a teacher-led manner in the main room. Just as it is important to greet everyone at the beginning of the lesson, it is also important to thank and say goodbye to everyone at the end. The objective of wrap-up activities is to leave everyone feeling good about the lesson, their own effort and collaboration with others as well as to recognise their progress and learning. This reinforces the value of attending the lesson and encourages students to anticipate the next week's session.

### **3.2 Participants**

This study involved 35 adult learners (aged 20-80) enrolled in the two online English as a Foreign Language courses. Their proficiency ranged from A2 to B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages. The participants came from diverse educational backgrounds: 17% with compulsory primary and lower secondary education, 38% with upper secondary education, and 45% with higher education. Notably, 59% of the learners were over 50 years old and not having any prior experience of online learning.

### **3.3. Data, Data Collection and Analysis**

The data was collected by an online questionnaire including 29 multiple-choice questions and 6 open-ended questions. The quantitative data were analysed using basic statistical methods and the quantitative data by data-driven content analysis [16].

## **4. Results**

Humour was the most prominent affective element contributing to learners' strong sense of social presence in the course. It was the key factor fostering a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere. While students felt a sense of belonging, self-disclosure was challenging, hindering the formation of deeper interpersonal connections. Despite this, interaction was valued. Students were comfortable participating in discussions and using the video conferencing platform. Commenting, asking questions, and agreeing were employed. In addition, features encouraging interaction helped building a strong group cohesion. Learners valued online discussions, felt acknowledged, and were comfortable disagreeing respectfully. A sense of realness and belonging was fostered, leading to increased self-confidence and enjoyment. Using participants' names and promoting a positive classroom etiquette enhanced group dynamic.

Instructor presence was perceived as crucial. Clear explanations supported learning, and effective conversation management kept the focus on spoken language development. Direct instruction, positive interaction and timely feedback enhanced motivation and learning.

Ninety-five percent of participants reported improved spoken language skills. Key factors contributing to this development, as perceived by learners, included collaboration, course atmosphere, course design, learner effort, and teacher impact. Collaboration was central to spoken language practice. Participants valued group work and peer support. Course atmosphere fostered a positive and inclusive environment, encouraging participation. Course design with clear instructions, varied tasks, and multimedia resources supported skill development. Learner effort and teacher guidance were also essential with participants noting increased confidence and appreciation for timely feedback.





## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

In this study, we investigated how social presence and tasks designed following Technology-Mediated Task-Based Language Teaching principles influence the development of spoken English skills in online courses for adult learners in non-formal education. Findings indicate that social presence-based activities significantly enhance the online learning experience and improve participants' spoken interaction competence.

Particularly with non-digital native learners it is essential to select user-friendly digital tools and preferably not too many applications. The instructions and guidance for using the tools need to be clear in online teaching and to devote enough time to teach how to use Zoom, its functions and other digital tools. Especially senior citizens value if the teacher repeats the instructions many times in a positive and supportive manner.

To enhance learner engagement and involvement, use of break-out rooms is beneficial. Even though plenty of activities are conducted in breakout rooms in pairs, it is paramount that the teacher circles around and visits each room several times, because the participants might have questions, or they might need help or assurance that their expressions are correct. In this manner the learners learn at their own pace, but the teacher is there to support and scaffold.

Leveraging team spirit and sense of belonging, the main room activities in Zoom are equally important, therefore the beginning and end of classes are always in the main room. Similarly, as for break-up room activities, it is recommended to mix up the pairs so that all participants get to know everybody and benefit from learning from each other

## REFERENCES

- [1] Gunawardena, C. N. Social presence theory and implications for interaction and collaborative learning in computer conferences. *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications*, 1(2/3), 1995, 147–166.
- [2] Tu, C. H., & McIsaac, M. The relationship of social presence and interaction in online classes. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 16(3), 2002, 131–150.
- [3] MacIntyre, P., Noels, K. A., & Clément, R. Biases in self-ratings of second language proficiency: The role of language anxiety. *Language Learning*, 47(2), 1997, 265–287.
- [4] Short, J., Williams, E., & Christie, B. *The social psychology of telecommunications*. John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 1976.
- [5] Gunawardena, C. N. Social presence theory and implications for interaction and collaborative learning in computer conferences. *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications*, 1(2/3), 1995, 147–166.
- [6] Gunawardena, C. N., & Zittle, F. J. Social presence as a predictor of satisfaction within a computer-mediated conferencing environment. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 11(3), 1997, 8–26.
- [7] Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2), 2000, 87–105.
- [8] Fiock, H. Designing a community of inquiry in online courses. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*. 2020.
- [9] Garrison, R. D. Online community of inquiry review: Social, cognitive, and teaching presence issues. *Online Learning*, 11(1), 2007.
- [10] Ellis, R., Skehan, P., Shintani, N., & Lambert, C. The pedagogic background to task-based language teaching. In *Task-based language teaching: Theory and practice*, Cambridge University Press. 2019, 1-27.
- [11] Müller-Hartmann, A., & Schocker-von Ditfurth, M. *Teaching English: Task-supported language learning (Vol. 3336)*. UTB. 2011.
- [12] Ellis, R., & Shintani, N. (2013). *Exploring language pedagogy through second language acquisition research* (1st ed.). Routledge, 2013.
- [13] González-Lloret, M., & Ortega, L. Towards technology-mediated TBLT. In M. González-Lloret & L. Ortega (Eds.), *Technology-mediated TBLT: Researching technology and tasks*. John Benjamins Publishing Company. 2014, 1–22.
- [14] Chong, S. W., & Reinders, H. Technology-mediated task-based language teaching: A qualitative research synthesis. *Language Learning & Technology*, 24(3), 2020, 70–86.



- [15] Kim, Y., & Namkung, Y. (2024). Methodological characteristics in technology-mediated task-based language teaching research: Current practices and future directions. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 2024, 1–23.
- [16] Krippendorff, K. *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications. 2004.