


Language teacher training in CALL: fostering engagement in an online learning environment

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate how effective pre-service language teachers perceived the engagement fostered in an online language pedagogy course. The course was targeted at developing pre-service language teachers' content-specific knowledge and digital skills through CALL within a language teacher training program implemented at an Italian university. The instructor used various learning environments and teaching methodologies to foster engagement. The data for the study were collected through an online semi-structured questionnaire administered to 33 pre-service language teachers at the end of the course. Findings show that pre-service language teachers deeply valued the high degree of engagement fostered in the course, although some challenges emerged at the beginning.

Keywords: *teacher training, CALL, engagement, online learning.*

1. Introduction

University courses have moved online extensively in the last few years. However, engagement is still a challenge in online learning environments (Veletsianos, 2020; Bergdahl, 2022). The present study aims to analyze how effective pre-service language teachers (in the remainder of the paper, I will refer to the pre-service teachers as 'students' as they took part in the course in this capacity) perceived the engagement fostered in an online language pedagogy course targeted at developing students' content-specific knowledge and digital skills through CALL. The course was implemented within an online language teacher training program offered at an Italian university.

Since engagement with content, peers, and instructors is pivotal in online learning environments (Garrison et al., 2001; Garrison, 2017; Darby & Lang, 2019), the instructor designed a course architecture targeted at promoting effective engagement in the online language pedagogy course investigated. In particular, engagement was enhanced through social collaboration platforms, Flipped Learning (Brinks Lockwood, 2018; Kotska & Marshall, 2017), and Peer Instruction (Mazur, 1997; Dancy et al., 2016).

2. Method

2.1. Online language pedagogy course architecture

To make students feel safe and respected in the online course investigated, the instructor fostered students' social presence, which is "the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g. course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their

individual personalities” (Garrison et al., 2001). To foster social presence, a paradigm of the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison, 2017), the instructor designed icebreakers targeted at helping learners connect with their peers on a personal level. Furthermore, the instructor provided students with consistent formative feedback aimed at making them feel valued as individuals since “[s]ocial presence [...] arises when you and your learners experience an atmosphere of safe and open enquiry and mutual support in your class” (University of Waterloo et al., n.d.).

In the language pedagogy course investigated, social collaboration was instrumental in fostering highly engaging knowledge co-construction from a socio-constructivist perspective (Lantolf et al., 2015; Hampel, 2020). Flipped Learning and Peer Instruction contributed to the development of engagement (with content, peers, and instructor) and played a pivotal role in teaching presence, which is “the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (Anderson et al., 2001).

In keeping with Flipped Learning, students engaged with learning materials before class; students then delved into content-specific constructs critically during live classes. In particular, before live classes, students engaged in social annotation on the Perusall platform: “social annotation [...] [is] a type of learning technology that enables the addition of notes to digital and multimodal texts for the purposes of information sharing, peer interaction, knowledge construction, and collaborative meaning-making” (Hodgson, Kalir, & Andrews, 2023). On Perusall, students read the assigned scientific articles, inserted their comments, commented on their peers’ comments, and answered their peers’ questions. During live classes, students co-constructed their knowledge through Peer Instruction. In particular, students first answered individually a multiple choice question focusing on the content studied on Perusall before class; then, in small groups, learners discussed the answers provided; afterwards, students answered individually the same multiple choice question they had answered previously; and finally, the instructor showed the results of the multiple choice question (the one answered after group discussion) and commented on them (Mazur, 1997). Besides promoting active knowledge building, Peer Instruction enabled the instructor to provide students with consistent formative feedback, which is pivotal in online learning (Garrison et al., 2001; Garrison, 2017; Darby & Lang, 2019).

After live classes, self-selected small groups worked online to create sections of a digitally-enhanced lesson unit collaboratively. Before live classes, the instructor provided each group with video feedback on the teaching materials developed. The instructor thereby provided students with formative feedback consistently in keeping with online pedagogy (Garrison et al., 2001; Garrison, 2017; Darby & Lang, 2019).

2.2. Participants and context

The study was conducted in an online language pedagogy course targeted at developing pre-service language teachers’ language pedagogy and digital skills through CALL. The course was implemented within an online pre-service language teacher training program at an Italian university. The cohort consisted of 33 students.

Students filled in an online self-evaluation semi-structured questionnaire after each synchronous class. The questionnaire was course-tailored. Soon after each live class, students completed the questionnaire where they could also ask questions and express their needs to the instructor.

2.3. Research question

The present study aims to answer the following research question: how effective did students perceive the engagement fostered in the online language pedagogy course?

The self-evaluation questionnaire was targeted at monitoring students’ learning process, needs, and wellbeing. The data collected after the first live class revealed, for example, that students found the amount of digitally enhanced activities assigned overwhelming. The instructor thus modified the course structure accordingly in keeping with a pedagogy of care, which values students’ wellbeing (Gleason & Mehta, 2022; Quinn et al., 2022).

2.4. Instruments and data collection

A mixed-method approach was used to carry out descriptive research. The data for the study were collected through an online semi-structured questionnaire that students filled in before the final exam (see Endnote). The questionnaire included two sections: (a) the validated Community of Inquiry questionnaire, which features a five-point Likert scale (where 1 stands for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for undecided, 4 for agree, and 5 for strongly agree) (Caskurlu, 2018; Stenbom, 2018); and (b) course-tailored closed and open-ended questions, devised to identify students' perceptions on activity types and degree of engagement. The Community of Inquiry questionnaire is designed to identify students' perceptions on: teaching presence (design and organization, facilitation, and direct instruction); social presence (affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion); and cognitive presence (triggering event, exploration, integration, and resolution) (Caskurlu, 2018; Stenbom, 2018). In the present study, the Community of Inquiry questionnaire was used to investigate social presence and teaching presence.

3. Results and discussion

The data collected through the final questionnaire show that, in regard to pre-class activities, the majority of students (62.1%) found social annotation on Perusall especially suitable for fostering engagement. In particular, most students (75%) preferred reading their peers' comments; 42.9% of students preferred giving feedback to their peers, while 32.1% of students preferred writing comments. In terms of engagement during live classes, 99% of students found Peer Instruction very effective. Interestingly, as part of Peer Instruction, the majority of students (74.1%) highly valued answering multiple choice questions individually before and after group discussions.

Most students claimed that the instructor scaffolded their discussions effectively, making them focus on relevant issues (66.7% strongly agreed and 21.1% agreed), while 12.1% were undecided (Table 1). Likewise, the majority of students held that the instructor managed to make them spot controversial content-specific issues successfully (63.6% strongly agreed and 27.3% agreed), while 9.1% were undecided.

Table 1. Teaching presence.

Teaching presence	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Undecided	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree
The instructor helped to focus discussion on relevant issues in a way that helped me to learn			12.1%	21.1%	66.7%
The instructor was helpful in identifying areas of agreement and disagreement on course topics in a way that helped me to learn			9.1%	27.3%	63.6%
The instructor was helpful in guiding the class towards understanding course topics in a way that helped me clarify my thinking			9.1%	30.3%	60.6%
The instructor helped to keep course participants engaged and participating in productive dialogue			3%	24.2%	72.7%
The instructor helped keep the course participants on task in a way that helped me to learn			6.1%	27.3%	66.7%
The instructor provided feedback that helped me understand my strengths and weaknesses relative to the course's goals and objectives			9.1%	21.2%	69.7%
The instructor provided feedback in a timely fashion			6.1%	15.2%	78.8%

Students claimed that the instructor scaffolded their critical thinking in relation to course content successfully (60.6% strongly agreed and 30.3% agreed), while 9.1% were undecided. Likewise, most students claimed that the

instructor managed to engage them in effective online discussions (72.7% strongly agreed and 24.2% agreed), while 3% were undecided. The effectiveness of the scaffolding provided was confirmed further when most students claimed that the instructor enabled them to focus on the activities provided successfully (66.7% strongly agreed and 27.3% agreed), while 6.1% were undecided. Overall, findings suggest that the pedagogical architecture devised to promote engagement through a combination of Flipped Learning and Peer Instruction worked effectively; students perceived the added value of engagement as a key paradigm of course design. Although students often mentioned that it was the first time they engaged actively online, they got used to the learning practice rather easily; students expressed their appreciation for active learning in the post-class self-evaluation questionnaires.

Most students found that the instructor feedback enabled them to identify facilitators and challenges in relation to the course aims effectively (69.7% strongly agreed and 21.2% agreed), while 9.1% were undecided. In addition, most students held that they received feedback promptly (78.8% strongly agreed and 15.2% agreed), which is instrumental in fostering social presence and effective engagement in online learning environments; 6.1% were undecided. In particular, all students except one claimed that the weekly video feedback was effective (53.8% strongly agreed, 42.3% agreed, and 3.9% were undecided).

The instructor promoted engagement also through a specific out-of-class collaborative activity; noticeably, every week small groups worked together to devise a section of a teaching unit. Interestingly, the data collected through the course-tailored close-ended questions featured in the final questionnaire show that 90.9% of students claimed creating a teaching unit collaboratively was the activity that helped them to develop their content-specific knowledge and digital skills the most. Furthermore, the majority of students (70.4%) held that co-constructing the teaching unit increased their motivation, which shows how deeply engagement and motivation are intertwined.

As previously mentioned, social presence is instrumental in fostering student engagement. Findings show that most students claimed that the activities in which they engaged, such as ice breakers, helped them feel like in-group members (72.7% strongly agreed and 21.2% agreed), while 6.1% were undecided (Table 2).

Table 2. Social presence (see Endnote).

Social presence	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Undecided	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree
The instructor actions reinforced the development of a sense of community among course participants			6.1%	21.2%	72.7%
Getting to know other course participants gave me a sense of belonging in the course		12.1%		39.4%	48.5%
I was able to form distinct impressions of some course participants		4%	3%	60.6%	27.3%
I felt comfortable conversing through the online medium			24.3%	45.5%	30.3%
I felt that my point of view was acknowledged by other course participants			21.2%	57.6%	21.2%
I felt comfortable disagreeing with other course participants while still maintaining a sense of trust		6.1%	30.3%	45.5%	18.2%
Online discussions helped me to develop a sense of collaboration			12.1%	42.4%	45.5%

Likewise, the majority of students held that getting to know their peers helped them feel as part of a cohesive group (48.5% strongly agreed and 39.4% agreed), while 12.1% did not agree. Almost to the same degree, most students claimed that they got to know their peers rather well (27.3% strongly agreed and 60.6% agreed), while 3% of the students were undecided and 4% disagreed. Most students held that they were at ease while interacting online (30.3% strongly agreed and 45.5% agreed), while 24.3% were undecided. Exactly to the same extent, the majority

of students felt at ease while interacting with their peers and discussing various topics online. These findings suggest that most students felt safe and visible as individuals in online interactions; however, a few students still faced some challenges in online discussions. Most students claimed that their peers valued and respected their opinions (21.2% strongly agreed and 57.6% agreed), while 21.2% were undecided. Most students held that they managed to keep a trustful relationship with their peers while voicing different opinions on course topics (18.2% strongly agreed and 45.5% agreed), while 30.3% were undecided and 6.1% disagreed. These findings suggest that having one's opinions acknowledged and disagreeing online were still an issue for some students; thus, to improve online interaction in the next iteration of the course, students will be taught explicitly how to acknowledge their peers' opinions and how to disagree while maintaining a trustful relationship. In general, however, students felt mostly comfortable to a very high degree in online interactions, which is a positive result. Finally, it is noteworthy that the majority of students held that they developed collaborative practices through online dialogical interactions (45.5% strongly agreed and 42.4% agreed), which is pivotal for engagement to occur in online learning environments effectively; 12.1% were undecided.

Findings show that students appreciated extensively the high degree of engagement fostered in the course. The pedagogical added value of engagement in terms of knowledge and skill development, which surfaced in the analysis extensively. Findings also suggest that the changes the instructor made to some activity structures, to foster students' wellbeing, was successful; in this respect, students' feedback highlighted how grateful they were for the way the instructor listened to their needs and acted accordingly.

A limitation of the study is that the sample size (=33) is not sufficient to generalize the findings of the study but the findings may be useful to other instructors planning similar courses.

4. Conclusions

The design of the online language pedagogy course proved successful in terms of engagement. Students perceived the added value of engagement as instrumental in promoting knowledge co-construction, skills development, and social presence. Furthermore, the student-centered approach implemented in the course scaffolded active learning effectively leading students to feel increasingly motivated. Finally, it is noteworthy that the adoption of a pedagogy of care contributed to students' wellbeing significantly.

In the future, a longitudinal study of students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the engagement fostered in various iterations of the online language pedagogy course will be carried out.

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Endnote

Community of Inquiry questionnaire, <https://coi.athabasca.ca/coi-model/coi-survey>