

Full Length Research Paper

Can Anybody Hear Me?: A Qualitative Investigation of Social Presence in an Online Course in English for Academic Purposes

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Student evaluations of online classes are frequently lower than their face-to-face counterparts, and one of the most common explanations students provide for poor online class evaluations is a lack of communication. One phenomenon that has been shown to improve communication as well as learning outcomes is positive interdependence, the collaborative – not competitive – reliance of student group members on each other in order to achieve mutual group success. Not only does collaborative learning encourage better participation and learning outcomes, but it offers a more natural learning style for students from collectivist cultures than the independent learning environment that online courses often provide. English language learners (ELLs) educational experiences often take place in these collectivist cultures. This makes the community of inquiry framework, which values social, teaching, and cognitive presences, appropriate when designing online teaching and learning environments for ELLs. This paper presents a single qualitative case study of a synchronous online English for Academic Purposes class for Chinese high school students. The study introduces and evaluates the presence of indicators of social presence among the students in an especially non-communicative group. Findings and implications for future research and practice of social presence in collaborative learning environments in online English for Academic Purposes classes are discussed.

Keywords: intercultural communication; learner motivation; online courses; social presence.

Introduction

Low student engagement is frequently reported to be a problem for instructors of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Kim, 2005; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). With the shift in instructional practices in U.S. higher education from a lecture-based format to a student-centered discussion-based format, educational researchers have become increasingly aware of the positive correlations between student engagement and learning outcomes. For example, Brindley and colleagues have noted that student engagement with peers and interaction with faculty has been positively correlated to the students' quality of learning experience (Brindley, Blaschke, & Walti, 2009). However, despite the importance and benefits of students' active engagement in English-speaking classes, many instructors find difficulty eliciting such engagement, when it comes to verbal participation. In fact, English-speaking professors have reported in several studies that lack of verbal participation in class discussions is "the main problem" of college ESL students (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Kim, 2006). This presents an issue not only in the eyes of educators, but for students as well.

English learners perceive barriers in achieving participation expectations in their college classes. In fact, although they are aware of the cultural importance of oral participation in seminar courses, their educational background and cultural norms often conflict with such expectations, especially in the case of East Asian students (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Leki, 2001; Liu, 2001; Morita, 2004; Murphy, 2005). Not only does cultural background affect English learners' class participation, but their language skills, or their perceptions of their own language skills, deter participation as well. English learners report feeling frustrated with what they perceive to be inadequate language skills when attempting participation in class discussions, and so they often simply opt out (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Morita, 2002, 2004). This barrier is becoming increasingly relevant and pressing now, as the population of East Asian students in the U.S. has been steadily increasing, and currently make up the largest population of English learners in U.S. higher education. In 2019, China was the most common country of origin for international students in U.S. higher education, with a full one-third of U.S. international

students identifying as Chinese (IIE, 2019). The following study was conducted in order to investigate participation strategies of Chinese students in an online learning environment.

The Problem of Participation as Engagement

As the number of Chinese ELL students in U.S. higher education rises, many of these students are met with the challenge of meeting the oral participation expectations of U.S. colleges as well as performing well in oral interviews, which have become a necessary step for international applicants at some colleges. As a result, speaking is becoming an increasingly important skill for academic English courses among Chinese students hoping to study in the U.S. English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses, which prepare students for the demands of English-medium higher education, must provide support for developing students' academic English-speaking skills. For many students, colleges' oral participatory expectations are intimidating and challenging, as mentioned above. While an online context often presents a more approachable and comfortable learning environment for ELLs than a face-to-face class, it does not eliminate the barrier, and lack of engagement remains an issue in online platforms as well (O'Dowd, 2018). In some cases, in fact, online English language courses are especially susceptible to low engagement due to linguistic barriers, raised affective filter, and lack of confidence in fluency/accuracy. This evidence is counter to the Theory of Connectivism, a theory generally accepted among practitioners of computer-mediated communication today (Siemens, 2005). Theory of Connectivism posits that in an online learning environment, knowledge construction is most often accomplished through interaction and dialogue, as opposed to independent study. Therefore, for ELLs as well as all online students, "education" must consist of not only presentation of the target material, but also a rich social environment that promotes interaction and connectedness (Brindley, Walti, & Blaschke, 2009).

Affordances and Constraints of Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning

Originating from the field of computer-mediated communication comes the study of computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL). Research on CSCL in education began with studies of distance learning and computer conferencing in the 1980s and 1990s, and now includes research on massive open online courses (MOOCs), asynchronous, synchronous, video- and text-based online learning environments. Central to all research in CSCL is the role and outcomes of the second C -- *collaboration*. Some scholars take the position that online learning is inherently as social as it is individual (Kearsley, 2000; Brindley et al, 2009). Additionally, advances in educational technology platforms and innovations in online learning present new affordances for collaboration (Major & Warwick, 2019). Among these affordances is a potential to reduce social loafing; students may be more encouraged to participate due to the naturally higher

visibility of presence in an online forum, in which all participants ostensibly share equal space (Kwon, Liu, & Johnson, 2014). The shared platform of a learning management system and absence of visual cues may also lend a flattened hierarchy and power differential between students and their instructor, and possibly also among students, therefore offering a platform for the voices of students who are often marginalized in the classroom to be amplified (Schrum, Burbank, & Capps, 2000). On the other hand, online courses do not operate in a vacuum; they are constructed by institutions and their educators, and as a result are susceptible to perpetuating the same hierarchies and power systems that are present in face-to-face classrooms and throughout the institution of higher education. The online context may even exacerbate such disparities by ignoring the power dynamic that is made more obvious in face-to-face classrooms, and merely hide it behind a screen with the pretense of equitability (Valk, 2008). Additionally, if students are able to maintain anonymity in the virtual classroom, some incentive to participate is removed, and loafing may increase. The interaction of the online learning context (the virtual classroom and presence of peers) and the student's identity (as constructed in the online classroom space) determine the student's formation of community within the learning environment (Postma, Blignaut, Swan, & Sutinen, 2013).

The Role of Social Presence

Identity construction in an online context can be determined by social presence (Rourke et al, 2001) and interaction strategy. Social presence theory, originally developed by Short, Williams, and Christie in 1976, has been adapted in more recent scholarship to computer-mediated communication, and to computer-supported collaborative learning in an educational context specifically. While many definitions have been forwarded for social presence in an online context, Swan and Shih (2005) have presented a concise and clear definition which remains relevant in the current context: "the degree to which participants in computer-mediated communication feel affectively connected to one another" (p.115). Despite the boom in online social presence research, any singular formula for developing social presence among students in an online learning environment remains elusive (Dijkers, Whiteside, & Tapp, 2017). However, social presence experts Dijkers, Whiteside, and Tapp remain optimistic in regard to the value of continued study: "as with any field of inquiry, the more the concept of social presence (as well as its effects and means of attainment) is studied and reevaluated, the closer researchers and instructors will come to discovering the most effective pedagogical techniques for teaching online and blended courses" (p. 22). More research on social presence among ELLs in online environments is especially needed, as generally accepted beliefs about language-based social presence among English-speaking students may apply differently to multilingual students who demonstrate different communication patterns. For many ELLs, "difference" has become part of their social and academic identity. In a text-

based online context, in the absence of visual and auditory cues, they can choose to what extent they want to embrace or reject that identity, by way of how they enact social presence (Short et al, 1976). In a face-to-face context, social presence can be enacted via nonverbal cues such as body language and gestures. In online contexts, syntax and gesture, as well as physical appearance and the presence of marked speech, become less relevant, and social presence may be signaled via more globally accepted means such as emoji and punctuation (Pezzulo, Donnarumma, & Dindo, 2013).

The Role of Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is also a factor at play when considering the engagement and participation of ELLs in online classes. Some cultural differences support the preference of Chinese learners of English for online classes, whereas others contraindicate it. In general, social presence requires a certain amount of self-disclosure and the explicit expression of opinions and feelings, acts which students from individualistic cultures such as the U.S. may find more natural and comfortable than students from collectivist cultures such as China (Singelis, Bond, Sharkey, & Lai, 1999). Additionally, East Asian students may demonstrate silence to indicate respect or disagreement, while in an American classroom, it may be interpreted as shyness or a lack of knowledge (Lee, 2009). This general preference for nonverbal communication and avoidance of self-disclosure, disagreement, and stance-taking suggests a general tendency towards lower social presence among Chinese students in a U.S. academic context. For these reasons, Chinese students often prefer an online environment as a more comfortable context for self-expression than a face-to-face class, citing lower pressure to save face and less opportunity for confrontation (Gunawardena, 2017; Tu, 2001).

Despite these indicators that suggest lower social presence among Chinese ELLs, Lowry, Zhang, Zhou and Fu (2007) have found that social presence is necessary for building interpersonal trust among Chinese students. Higher social presence yields higher interpersonal trust, which is clearly a desirable condition to foster in any collaborative learning environment and one that is necessary to build peer relationships and for the establishment of sense of community in the class (Brindley et al, 2009; Chapman, Ramondt, & Smiley, 2005; Palloff & Pratt, 2005). Therefore, despite cultural differences which may impede the manifestation of social presence in online classes, students of both western and Chinese cultural backgrounds need social presence and identity construction in order to foster relationships and community in their online classes, which also contributes to positive learning outcomes.

The relationships between social presence and trust, community, and learning outcomes in collaborative learning environments indicates the need for research investigating the facilitation of social presence in online contexts, especially for English learners. However, contradictory findings on cultural

communication preferences in social presence research, as well as the gap in existing literature on the influence of linguistic diversity on social presence, demonstrate the need for further investigation of linguistic strategies undertaken by English learners to enact social presence in online learning environments (Giraldo, 2017; Gunawardena, 2017). This study aims to fill this gap by asking the question: How do Chinese students enact social presence in an online English for Academic Purposes course? The purpose of this study is to evaluate the oral participation strategies of students in a synchronous online learning environment to gain additional insights on the phenomenon of social presence among ELLs in online learning contexts.

Methods

Theoretical Framework

The frameworks that informed this study are community of inquiry and, more narrowly, social presence. I have chosen these frameworks because of their relevance to the particular context of this study as positioned within the scope of research on CSCL, and to serve as a response to calls for further scholarly research into their applications to online learning environments (Giraldo, 2017; Gunawardena, 2017; Whiteside et al, 2017).

“Community of inquiry” was originally coined as a general term to describe a model of scientific inquiry based on community rather than introspection (Peirce, 1955). The value of such a model, at the time, was that it recognized social interaction as a vital component to scholarship as well as the inevitability of individual bias, as opposed to the prevailing positivist perspective of the time. In more recent years, the community of inquiry framework has been utilized within the field of educational research as a social constructivist lens through which to study collaborative learning processes, particularly in studies of online teaching and learning (Akyol & Garrison, 2011; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Applying the constructivist belief that knowledge-building is a social process, rather than a mere transfer of information, the framework posits that learning occurs as a product of interaction and categorizes such interaction into three interrelated components: teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence. Social presence is defined in this model as the ability of a community’s participants to project themselves into the community of learners (Garrison et al, 2000). Since the current study attempts to investigate students’ engagement and interaction, the component of social presence, specifically, is of most relevance and therefore was isolated as the phenomenon to be studied in this case.

Social presence theory was originally developed by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) to describe the “degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (p.65), with *salience* entailing both verbal and nonverbal communication. At the time, studies of context-reduced

communication, such as telephone conversations, revealed the use of language-based affective cues, or *paralanguage*, to compensate for lack of visual nonverbal cues, a phenomenon that later carried into studies of computer-mediated communication (Gunawardena, 1995; Short et al, 1976). When applying social presence theory to computer-mediated communication, Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) found that social presence was a strong predictor of learner satisfaction in a “computer conferencing” environment and recommended that course developers intentionally design for maximum social presence in order to support satisfaction and learning. Building upon Gunawardena and Zittle’s work, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) defined social presence in online contexts as “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” (p. 94). Continued research on computer-supported collaborative learning consistently supports the importance of social presence as a critical factor for a variety of learning outcomes, including cognitive presence, engagement, high-order thinking, satisfaction, persistence, and course completion (Armellini & De Stefani, 2016; Garrison et al, 2000; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Kanuka, Liam, & Laflamme, 2007).

Research Design

The research design employed in this study was a qualitative instrumental single case study (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 1993), which was selected as the most appropriate design for this study because of the complex social nature of the classroom context. Case study often offers the best potential for social and applied fields of study, such as education (Merriam, 2009), as it allows for contextual description and the constructivist nature of social research.

Context

The setting for this case study was a synchronous online English for Academic Purposes course conducted over the platform Zoom, which features video, audio, screen-sharing, and text-based chat capabilities. The student participants were three Chinese female high school students based in Shanghai: Megan, Lily, and June (names are pseudonyms). All were ages 16-18, and all were enrolled in the EAP course with the goal of preparation for future study at U.S. colleges as well as the English-medium college application process including the TOEFL and admissions essays. While English proficiency in individual skills varied among the student participants, all were relatively advanced and had been studying English for many years. The instructor participant was a white, female, U.S.-based ESL teacher in her thirties experienced with both face-to-face and online EAP courses. Although this class was conducted independently of any institution of higher education, the instructor was also a PhD candidate and lecturer at a midsize public university in the Northeast United States at the time the classes took place. Since this single case comprises the bounded system of the class, it was not necessary to

employ a sampling strategy, nor would disentangling sample participants from nonparticipants in the class yield useful or valid findings, due to the social context of the research problem and intimate class size.

Data Collection and Analysis.

The student participants in this instrumental case study were chosen because of their reticence to speak and corresponding apparent low social presence. As both the instructor of the course and the researcher in this observational case study, I was embedded in the case as a participant. While this potentially conflicting positionality could be perceived as a limitation, I accept the subjective nature of my dual roles in alignment with Bromley (1986), who states that closeness is in fact a unique benefit of case study and that researchers should “get as close to the subject of interest as they possibly can, partly by means of direct observation in natural settings” (p. 23). The virtual classroom serves as the “natural setting” in this case, and therefore my access to participants in class allows for more naturalistic observation. Class sessions were recorded in their entirety, with the verbal consent of all participants and following institutional IRB approval. After all, three sessions, recordings were transcribed by the researcher, cleaned and anonymized by replacing existing student-chosen nicknames with pseudonyms, and subsequently indexed and imported to NVivo for analysis after the conclusion of the class sessions.

The instrumentalities collected for this study included all verbal utterances made in the Zoom classroom via microphone. Text-based chat was not recorded in the video and therefore not included in the analysis. Each class consisted of a one - hour lesson; three lessons were recorded over a two-month period, yielding three hours’ worth of discourse.

The unit of analysis for this bounded case is the class, as defined by its members (three students and one instructor) and the virtual space in which it takes place (the “classroom”). I utilized the pre-established Social Presence Coding Scheme developed by Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer (2001) and modified by Swan (2002). Derived from the Community of Inquiry framework, this coding scheme aims to identify functions of discourse within a learning community as indicators of social presence. The Social Presence Coding Scheme breaks down the concept of social presence, as defined earlier in this paper, into three indicators: affective, cohesive, and interactive intensity. Higher intensity in any of these areas indicates higher levels of social presence. The unit of data analyzed while coding generally corresponded with each speech act, defined in this discourse as a line of dialogue in the transcript, or a turn; however, consistent with existing CSCL research methods (Rourke et al, 2000), the granularity of these units was slightly flexible, to allow for dialogue to be coded in meaningful “chunks” rather than any arbitrarily enforced word count or other quantitative measurement. This resulted in turns that sometimes included several codes, and some that included none. However, no codes spanned more than one turn in the dialogue.

Table 1*Coding Scheme for the Assessment of Social Presence (Rouke et al., 2001; Swan, 2002)*

Category	Code	Definition
Affective	Emotion	Use of descriptive words that indicate feelings
	Paralanguage	Features outside of formal syntax used to convey emotion
	Humor or sarcasm	Use of cajoling, teasing, irony, or other forms of humor
	Self-disclosure	Sharing personal information, expressing vulnerability
Cohesive	Course reflection	Reflection on the course itself
	Greetings or salutations	Greetings and closures
	Group reference	Referring to the group as 'we,' 'us,' 'our'
	Social sharing	Sharing information unrelated to the course
	Vocatives	Addressing classmates by name
Interactive	Acknowledgment	Referring directly to the contents of others' messages
	Personal advice	Offering specific advice to classmates
	Agreement/disagreement	Expressing agreement or disagreement with others' messages
	Approval	Expressing approval, offering praise, encouragement
	Invitation	Asking questions or otherwise inviting response

Findings

In this section, findings will be presented in the order that they emerged in the data analysis: first, an overview of the imbalance in student talk vs. teacher talk as depicted in Table 2, followed by a representation of patterns evident in the dialogue, depicted in Table 3 and various excerpts. A total of three hour-long class sessions were recorded and transcribed, which contained 260 turns of dialogue among the four participants (three students and one instructor). Of these 260 turns, 136 were spoken by the teacher and directed at the student(s), 122 were spoken by the students and directed at the teacher, and only 2 were peer-to-peer turns among students. Although the number of turns taken by the teacher and students were generally similar (identical in the case of Class 2), the length of each turn differed significantly. Overall, teacher talk dominated the class with 84% of the coverage, as determined by quantity of coded space on the transcript. Student talk directed at the teacher comprised most of the rest of the dialogue, with about 15% of the coverage. Since there were only two instances of students talking to each other, that comprised less than 1% of the total dialogue analyzed.

Based on this overview of the quantity of student speech, social presence appears low. In order to answer the research question asking *how* social presence among these students was enacted, it was necessary to further investigate the nature of the speech that students produced. Table 3 presents the themes that emerged from student speech only in accordance with the social presence coding scheme. Instructor speech codes were not included in this analysis, as teaching presence is considered a separate entity from social presence enacted by the students.

Table 2*Teacher Talk and Student Talk*

	Teacher- Student	Student- Teacher	Student- Student
Class 1	39	33	0
Class 2	61	61	0
Class 3	36	28	2
Total # of turns	136	122	2
Total % of discourse	84.1	15.3	0.6

Table 3
Illustration of Themes from Student Speech

Category	Code	Examples
Affective	Emotion	I'm quite nervous today! [I'm] just great.
	Paralanguage	Hmmm...
	Humor or sarcasm	n/a
	Self-disclosure	I'm going to the TOEFL test tomorrow. It's been strange that we didn't have a test for Chinese and we performed a drama instead.
Cohesive	Course reflection	n/a
	Greetings or salutations	Hello.
	Group reference	Bye-bye! n/a
	Social sharing Vocatives	n/a Anita, hi!
Interactive	Acknowledgment	Yup.
		Ah!
		OK.
	Personal advice	Mm.... maybe, um, write more about the last point. That, about whether the product should be only exported internationally. And maybe she can add some details to her answer.
	Agreement/disagreement	I think writing is better. Cause we can read our sentences time to time. But when we are typing, we just focus on the typed word.
	Approval	No no no, June. Mm, I think she making a – she makes it very clear. And, um... has a very good summary.
	Perfect.	
	Invitation	Uh, I have a question. In the real test, can we see the passage after that? Can you see my words?

One apparent theme that emerged was that very few of students' contributions were cohesive. The majority of cohesive segments were students' responses to the instructors' greetings, generally a simple "hello." Students did not greet each other, nor did they refer to themselves as a class using collective pronouns or address each other by name. In fact, even when the instructor elicited responses from one student regarding something another had said, the elicited student would respond to the instructor directly, referring to the first student in the third person (e.g., "I agree with what June said"). When a student arrived late and the instructor attempted to pull

her into the ongoing discussion about the other students' social activities, the attempt was deflected with negation and silence:

Instructor: So... Lily, I heard that Megan and June both went to Disneyland today.

Lily: No no no, June.

Instructor: Sorry?

Megan: That's June.

Instructor: Yeah, Megan and June went, right?

Megan: Yeah.

Instructor: So I'm asking Lily what she did today. ...
Nothing? ... OK. Lily can join us later.
Maybe she can't hear me.

A small proportion of students' contributions were affective. June, in particular, was often willing to disclose details about her personal and academic life, such as her upcoming TOEFL and her midterm exams:

Instructor: How are you, June?
June: I'm quite nervous today!
Instructor: Oh, why?
June: Because I'm going to the TOEFL test tomorrow.
Instructor: Really?
June: Yeah.
Instructor: Good luck! ... Are there any sections that you're especially nervous about that you'd like for us to practice?
June: Not really. I think at this time, just relax. ... Yeah, and my, actually, one of my friends is studying at that school, and he said I'm already been to that classroom for you, so you don't have to be nervous.

Megan and Lily were less likely to engage in self-disclosure, generally responding to the instructor's elicitation for information with a simple acknowledgment.

Instructor: How are you doing today?
Megan: Um... I'm just fine.

Anonymity generally corresponds with higher self-disclosure (Gunawardena, 1995; Whiteside, Dikkers, & Swan, 2017), so it is possible that the synchronous nature of this class negatively affected likelihood for disclosure. Although there was occasional laughter, none of the students used humor or sarcasm in the class. Avoidance of disagreement, or voicing opinions at all, may have been a face-saving strategy (Whiteside et al, 2017; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Finally, students were communicating entirely in their second language. Communicating in one's native language increases social presence, while operating in one's L2 in an online discussion has been found to constrain social presence (Goodfellow, Lea, Gonzalez, & Mason, 2001; Gunawardena, 2017). This is consistent with existing observations that reliance on English would have a corresponding dampening effect among these students' social presence.

Most of the students' contributions were interactive. The majority of dialogue was sustained by repeated invitations and scaffolding from the instructor, as in this excerpt from an attempted peer editing session:

Instructor: All right! Do we have any volunteers to have your work discussed first? ... I'm gonna say June, since you submitted your response first, let's talk about yours first. So Lily! What feedback do you have for June? A strength and a suggestion.
Lily: Mm, I think she had a very good structure. And maybe she can add some details to her answer.

Instructor: OK. Anything specific?

Lily: Mm... maybe, um, write more about the last point. That, about whether the product should be only exported internationally.

Instructor: OK, thanks. And Megan, suggestions for June?

Megan: Uh... it is not in the third opinion about the, about the argument about the, make good business sense for American companies.
Instructor: OK, and that's a strength or a suggestion?

Megan: Mm... just this one.

Therefore, the majority of student contributions in the interactive theme, and the most frequent type of contribution overall, was characterized by acknowledgments that consisted of brief responses to elicitation and invitations from the instructor. The heavy facilitation required from the instructor in order to produce speech from the students corresponded with students' hesitation to spontaneously address each other, as evidenced by the lack of student-student talk.

Discussion

Most of the students' speech was elicited by the teacher, suggesting that in the absence of invitations extended by the teacher, student-produced speech would be minimal. These findings confirm the interdependent nature of social presence and teaching presence (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, Fung, 2010; Bangert, 2009). Additionally, this pattern suggests that a strong teaching presence is especially important with less communicative student populations such as the participants in this case. This is also supported by Shea and Bidjerano (2010), who assert that "past research methods may have resulted in a systematic under-representation of the instructional effort involved in online education" (p. 1722; see also Shea, Vickers, & Hayes, 2010).

Contrary to some previous findings, social presence was not found to be a necessary factor for cognitive presence here, as indicated by students' work produced in class and homework done after class, which included high-quality written essays and responses to verbal prompts. This lack of correlation may be a unique feature of ELLs. This is not the first study to find a weak relationship between social and cognitive presence. This finding is supported by Annand's (2011) assertion that extant literature provides insufficient evidence to support the connection, and that attempts to do so have "inappropriately magnified the effect of social presence on cognitive presence" (p. 52).

Silence may not represent simply a lack of presence. It may be employed as a nonverbal communication strategy as well. While western discourse tends to interpret silence as a lack of communication or involvement, we must also acknowledge the ability of participants in a conversation to communicate a number of messages via silence. Therefore, the absence of language must not be construed as an absence of participation (Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Hofstede, 1980).

Finally, my students and I may vary in the weight that we place on language's "information function" as opposed to "relationship function." While American culture values direct, information-rich communication, Chinese students may place higher value on deep, reflective thought about a subject and, as a result, may be less invested in the western concept that speaking is an important facet of learning (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). In fact, the influence of Zen Buddhist values favoring wordless communication (*ishin-denshin*) has remained strong in modern Chinese culture, and as a result, the tacit understanding that the most important ideas are not, and in fact cannot be, communicated via language. Confucius is said to have espoused similar views on communication, advising that "the superior man should be slow in words and earnest in deeds ... the superior man is ashamed to speak more and do less" (Pan & Wen, 1993). This philosophy of communication stands in stark contrast to a more utilitarian perspective that English-speaking cultures hold, in which language is the primary vehicle of information transmission (Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

Limitations

Several limitations exist in this study due to the design and context of the case, as well as some specific to the subject of this study. First of all, this was quite a small single case study of three student participants. As such, and as is the case to varying extent with all qualitative case studies, generalizability is limited. Hand-in-hand with this limitation is the issue of inter-rater reliability. With one researcher and a single author, inter-rater reliability for this study has not been established, which is in fact a consistent issue in social presence research (Rourke et al, 2001; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2000). Also inherent in case study research, and especially in those in which the researcher plays a participant-observer role such as this one, there is a potential issue of ethics (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). I am especially vulnerable to bias due to my dual role as the researcher and instructor of the course. As such, I present these findings not as empirical fact or the only possible interpretation of the case, but as my impressions from the position of a researcher and as the instructor of these students, Lily, Megan, and June, having built a relationship with the three of them over the course of a year prior to beginning this study. I did attempt to distance myself from the data by analyzing the transcripts only after courses had concluded; however, this meant that I was not able to conduct member-checking or iterative data collection after analysis.

Aside from methodological limitations are interpretive ones. While the influence of culture is important to acknowledge in any sociolinguistic discourse analysis, generalizations about the relationship between individuals' cultural background and communication style are purely speculative and based on generalities that may not be accurate to these specific individuals. As Scollon and Scollon (2001) warn, "we want to caution against making too direct an application of our ideas about cultural values ... in discussions of intercultural communication" (p.142). Therefore, assumptions about role of cultural on the communicative

phenomena detailed in this study are not to be taken as general fact but as scholarly speculation and meaning making on the part of the researcher.

Implications

Implications for Practice

As found in the current study and supported by previous CSCL research, low verbal evidence of social presence among ELLs is not necessarily indicative of a lack of cognitive presence. However, ELL students' social presence can be boosted with increased teaching presence, particularly with the use of interactive indicators to elicit acknowledgment, agreement, and disagreement. While American teachers of ELLs may shy away from excessive reliance on "teacher talk" in an attempt to foster a communicative student-centered environment, more teacher-produced speech may be necessary in an online environment than a face-to-face class, to compensate for the context-reduced nature of the online setting. This may be the case especially when teaching Chinese students, who are accustomed to teacher-centered didactic lectures in which students save face through silence (Kirkbridge, Tang, & Westwood, 1991).

Implications for Research

Lingering questions remain regarding the influence of face-saving strategies on self-disclosure (and affective intensity in general) of ELLs in collaborative online learning contexts. The field would benefit from additional research investigating this relationship and perhaps addressing whether instructors of online courses should expect some patterns of avoidance in the use of affective indicators. Additionally, more research is needed in synchronous online environments, and not just asynchronous text-based forums. Currently, the assessment of social presence in CSCL consists predominantly of discussion boards and other written media, which is an entirely different genre of discourse than a synchronous class with differences in intimacy, immediacy, and other factors that likely have a significant effect on the enactment of social presence. Therefore, contrastive analysis of social presence in online and face-to-face courses must isolate these multivariate confounding factors, some of which would be mitigated through further study of synchronous environments that may more closely resemble the traditional, face-to-face class.

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