

Full Length Research Paper

Developing Online Discussion Boards to Increase Student Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Mojgan Rashtchi, Babak Khoshnevisan

Mojgan Rashtchi: North Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, email: mojgan.rashtchi@gmail.com

Babak Khoshnevisan: University of South Florida, email: khoshnevisan@mail.usf.edu

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During the current pandemic, colleges are at the fork to either open the campus and curb the spread of COVID-19 or go virtual and risk their efficiency and finally give into financial ruin. This study explores learners' perceptions of engagement in an online environment to curtail online courses. How educators and students socially interact in cyberspace is a long-standing research topic. Several researchers explored online engagement in higher education in multiple studies (e.g., Kahu, 2011; Ross, 2010). However, there is a lack of research that explores preservice teachers' engagement in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses. We focused on preservice ESOL teachers' perceptions of engagement in online discussions to uncover factors that could contribute to increasing their engagement. We collected the data through an online survey, student interviews, and recording online asynchronous discussion transcripts. Constant comparative analysis of data indicated a safe, non-threatening atmosphere as well as a sense of confirmation, and exploring new aspects of the topic; factors that reassured the engagement of the participants.

Keywords: Online discussion boards; engagement; poststructuralism; preservice ESOL teachers

As the number of students with limited English proficiency (LEP) increases in the United States, ESOL teachers employ effective methods to accommodate LEP students' needs. More often than not, attempts have been in vain to meet these instructional needs. Multiple studies have investigated different technologies and technological tools in the field of language/teacher education: literacy and augmented reality (Park & Khoshnevisan, 2019); augmented reality and English language art classroom (Khoshnevisan, 2021a); augmented reality and teacher education (Khoshnevisan, 2019b; Khoshnevisan, 2021b); automatic writing evaluation (AWE) tools to enhance writing skills (Khoshnevisan, 2019e); animated pedagogical agents (Khoshnevisan, 2018a; Khoshnevisan & Rashtchi, 2021); AR flashcards (Khoshnevisan, 2020b); technology and language education in America (Khoshnevisan, 2019d); augmented reality and language learning (Khoshnevisan & Le, 2018); audiotaped dialogue journals (Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan, 2008); AR-infused apps (Hadid, Mannion, Khoshnevisan, 2019); material development (Khoshnevisan, 2020a) to name but a few. Khoshnevisan (2019c) chronologically reviewed different technologies used to help language learners. He put forth an array of technologies that could facilitate the process of

language education. Beginning with the affordances of these technologies, he detailed the constraints of the technologies when used to develop language proficiency. Furthermore, Khoshnevisan (2019a) noted that technologies and technological tools have been proved to be effective in increasing learners' cognitive attainment and motivation level. Despite these studies, we continue to wonder what services schools provide for LEP students to foster their achievement. To tackle this, different courses at the university level try to prepare preservice teachers to better cater to the needs of these students. Although there are many opportunities to take ESOL courses both in face-to-face and online classes, researchers have paid little attention to the nature of the content materials delivered to preservice teachers in both types of classes. In this inquiry then, we explored factors that might contribute to increasing preservice ESOL teachers' engagement while taking ESOL1 online courses at a major Southeastern American university. Preservice teachers need to take three different ESOL courses to receive ESOL endorsement. Preservice teachers receive similar topics in all online ESOL courses. Teachers have no control over the content and material. ESOL classes share content, yet they may have different final exam questions. There are six modules for ESOL 1. Each module has a discussion board where preservice teachers need to post their

thoughts and insights on the topic. Questions—listed on a discussion board—guided students’ response regarding the insight they gained on the PDFs, video lessons, and the like.

The pandemic exposed a massive divide between the face-to-face (FTF) classes and their digital counterparts. Our educational system has been massively upended the notion of engagement (Khoshnevisan, 2021c). The pervasive technological availability was deemed to have primed the pandemic. The pandemic forced schools to form hybrid models, yet they pose notorious challenges. To cap it all off, the viable instructional strategies such as FTF discussions are absent in online education. While our understanding of benefits of face-to-face and online discussions to engage students is well developed, the data do not apply to preservice teachers’ perceptions of engagement (e.g., Doorn & Schumm, 2013; Perkins & Murphy, 2006; Rovai, 2007; Zhu, 2006). Several researchers uncovered online engagement in higher education (e.g., Jeffrey, Milne, Suddaby, & Higgins, 2012; Kahu, 2011; Ross, 2010; Shu, Zhao, & Wan, 2012). Although researchers have considered engagement in face-to-face classrooms, they have not examined factors contributing to students’ engagement in online classrooms.

Furthermore, though researchers acknowledge the multidimensional nature of engagement, researchers discovering online student engagement tend to view it as a unitary construct. There is a widely corroborated view that students of online classes achieve more and are more engaged compared to students of face-to-face courses (Dixon, 2010). However, since online learning puts considerable emphasis on learners’ engagement with the material, it may lead to higher achievement, and more robust engagement (Wickersham & Dooley, 2006). To better explore student engagement in an online environment, we conducted the current study to uncover the modus operandi of crafting a quality online discussion, which fosters engagement and collaboration.

The Community of Inquiry (COI) Model

The leading theory undergirding this study stems from the Community of Inquiry Model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999). Although differences exist between engagement in face-to-face classrooms and online courses, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer’s (1999) community of inquiry model is appropriate for this study. The model incorporates *social*, *cognitive*, and *teaching* presence as factors affecting students’ engagement. COI model consists of three main pillars: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. *Social presence* is the degree to which online participants feel connected to one another (Swan & Shih, 2005). *Cognitive presence* is “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 89). Cognitive presence is germane to critical thinking and mainly focuses on higher-order thinking processes, including creativity and problem solving (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001). *Teaching presence* refers to the

design and facilitation of the educational experience (Garrison et al., 1999).

In the embryonic period of the COI model, the researchers were doubtful to include the social presence factor in an online environment (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2010). This view stems from prior empirical research concerning social presence and its one-dimensional construct. Additionally, the link between social presence and the other components such as teaching, and learning was missing. One of the prominent contributions of this model was presenting a multidimensional perspective for social presence. This multidimensional construct aligns with the other presences (i.e., cognitive and teaching presences). Garrison (2009) claims that the social presence component fosters interpersonal relationships in an online environment. It is worth mentioning that the links amongst the components of the model are not fully investigated. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2010) call for more empirical studies to explore the potential relationships between the components of the model. Similarly, Swan et al. (2009) maintain that exploring the relationship between social and cognitive presence is of importance for a more comprehensive understanding of the community of inquiry. Other studies, however, uncovered relationships amongst the presences in the COI model (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009).

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2010) gave a relatively comprehensive review of the studies on the COI Model. The research detailed the investigations conducted on each of the three constituents of COI. They also delineated the studies that measured the constituent parts of the model in the literature (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001; Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001). Garrison, Anderson, and Archer acknowledge that their phrase (community of inquiry) emanates from Lipman’s (1991) works that are inspired by Dewey. Dewey conceived of inquiry as a social activity forming the crux of learners’ educational experiences. The cognitive presence component of the model is inextricably linked with Dewey’s ideas (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). The backbone of this model was to establish and sustain a community of inquiry aligned with the potential of computer conferencing. A core topic of research on COI has been the juxtaposition of oral and text-based communication (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Prior studies have extensively scrutinized different modes of a community of inquiry (asynchronous online discussions and face-to-face and teleconferenced).

A Priori Question

To usher our way as the researchers in this qualitative inquiry, we crafted the following questions. All through this inquiry, we sought answers from the participants to fill the theory-practice gap:

1. In what ways do two ESOL preservice teachers describe their experiences of participation in online asynchronous discussion boards?

2. In what ways did the discussion boards form ESOL preservice teachers' perceptions of engagement?

Study Participants

We recruited two online students as participants. They voluntarily took part in this study once they had completed their ESOL 1 course. The two participants, Sera and Cassandra, introduced themselves in the interview session:

Sera:
I am from Mexico, I moved to Tampa eight years ago. I have three beautiful children. I'm a preschool teacher and worked for many years in Mexico. I worked in a bilingual school, and I was an English teacher. When I came to Tampa, I worked in a Christian school with 4-year-olds in the VPK program. I love teaching in preschool.

Cassandra:

Hi! My name is Cassandra. I'm an Especial Ed major I was born and raised in Orlando. I love to work with kids. I really enjoy watching movies and teaching. I love to help kids learn English and flourish... I'm single and am doing my internship at a high school... I enjoy attending classes and learn more instructional strategies to use them in my classes.

Data Collection and Interpretation

We employed an online survey to collect the preservice teachers' perceptions and feelings regarding the three components of the community of inquiry model (social, cognitive, and teaching presence). We adapted the survey from a previous study on the relationship among the components of the community of inquiry model (Garrison & et al., 2010). Then, we conducted two semi-structured interviews (Berg, 2009) to explore the teachers' beliefs, opinions, and perceptions of engagement. We video-recorded the interviews to extract the transcripts. For the sake of data triangulation, we collected the transcripts of online asynchronous discussion boards—platforms used by the study participants. We also kept a personal research journal to record thoughts and insights. In this way, we hoped to bracket my personal views and biases. We selected a phenomenological case study as an appropriate methodological approach. A phenomenological case study allows researchers to discover the participants' interests and experiences. The bounded system or case is two ESOL preservice teachers having shared experiences through online discussion boards.

Data Analysis

We transcribed, video-recorded, and shared interviews with the participants to ensure the verisimilitude of the data. We

analyzed the data using the constant comparative method. We used three levels of analysis described by Strauss and Corbin (1990), including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding helped the researchers in “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (p. 61). The second level, axial coding assisted the researchers to connect different categories by after putting the data “back together in new ways” (p. 96). Axial coding was performed by “utilizing a coding paradigm involving conditions, context, action/interactional strategies and consequences” (p. 96). Finally, we employed selective coding detailed as “The process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development” (p. 116). In terms of poststructuralists' lens, we used Spivak's notions of ‘impossible no,’ and ‘margin vs center.’ we learn from Spivak how the center (the academy) positions and defines marginality through its constitution of the subject. Spivak adheres to a refusal of either postcolonialism or marginality as pure, universal space.

Furthermore, we turned to Derrida notion of ‘absent present’ and desiring silence of Deleuze to view the data from a poststructuralist lens. The absent presence is that which was never there in a physical or “real” sense, but that which is always already there, preceding our speaking and writing. From the absent present, we could retrace the absent data to make sense of what is missing in the pool of data in our study.

Discoveries

Social presence is a crucial component of the COI model. This component attends to social interaction amongst the participants in an online environment. Participants should have the opportunity to know each other to negotiate their ideas and enrich discussions the way they do in a face-to-face classroom. To foster interaction amongst the participants, we developed one general online discussion board to introduce themselves and get to know one another. Furthermore, we developed one discussion board for every module so that the participants could discuss the questions and topics raised in a non-threatening atmosphere. This characteristic corresponds to face-to-face discussions in physical classrooms. The findings of this inquiry concerning the subcategories of social presence are discussed as follows.

#1 Open Communication

Both participants found discussion boards a non-threatening environment where they could post their ideas.

Sera:

I liked it. There is nothing I disliked about discussion boards. These were great tools to help me talk with other classmates and know them. Later on, I could share my ideas and make friends.

Cassandra:

I really enjoyed the discussion boards it was a little bit informal...I liked being able to sort of taking my own time with it. Take time reading and not being timed for it. I could manage my time and practice the content in the discussion boards.

The participants noted that they never argued or rejected anyone. They just posted their ideas and supported the opinions of the ones with whom they agreed. This feature helped them find classmates who had the same research interests and ideas. They could later team up with these classmates in final projects. Furthermore, the Language barrier was no more an obstacle for Sera. She could learn at her own pace and manage when to learn due to having a job and being a mom at home.

Sera:

I don't like to reject people's ideas because I respect everybody's ideas. If I don't like someone's point of view, I just respect that. They also respected my ideas, and if they wanted to argue with me, they did it in a very respectful manner. This established a safe environment to freely discuss your ideas and ask questions... I could not do the same thing in a physical classroom because it is very stressful to discuss your ideas when everyone is looking at me.

#2 Group Cohesion: Teaching Presence Led to Social Presence

Teaching presence impacted on the collaboration of participants in discussion boards. Mini lectures, videos, pdfs, links to other websites contributed to increasing understanding of the subject matter. Once preservice teachers gained an in-depth understanding of the topic, they participated in discussion boards.

Sera:

The content of the modules was well-explained and interesting. I had to study well and watch the videos before I leave a post on discussion boards. I feel confident if I leave comments after studying pdfs, but when I had no time, I studied all of the posts and commented on the question at the end of the week. If I did not study well, I did not comment at the beginning of the discussion board but towards the end of it.

Participants responded to other participants haphazardly and content-based. Personal communications came second. The content of the module took precedence compared with their communication. It can be partly related to the reason that we were present in the discussion boards and partly because it was

a graded task. Participants then tried to do their best when it comes to commenting on videos, pdfs, and others' ideas.

Sera:

I read the posts, and depending on what they are talking about, I responded. I just responded to the ones that were easier for me. If I found it hard, I did not respond to that post. I also responded to the posts of my friends. I also knew who shares the best posts. So, I read his posts to learn something about the module.

#3 Affective Expression

The participants opted they never used emoticons in academic writing. Therefore, they considered discussion boards a more formal environment compared to FTF discussions. They also encouraged more collaboration through "encouraging words."

Sera:

I loved discussion boards, and I felt comfortable when I was participating...I showed my emotions with positive words and encouraging words. I did not have to use my emotions, but I sometimes used words to show my positive or negative feelings/attitude to a topic.

Cassandra:

I showed my emotions through the tone of writing. I feel like for academics; I would never use emoticons. My parents are both teachers, so if I ever put an emoticon in a text, they would not be happy. I am not used to showing emotions in my personal or academic life. I simply avoided using emotions in the discussion boards as far as I remember.

#4 Teaching Presence Can Establish More Collaboration and Interest

Teaching presence—design and organization—leads to social presence—open communication and group cohesion. Teaching presence is tightly pertinent to the design and organization of the course in an online environment. Accordingly, the designs of the pdfs, lectures, videos, and lessons directly impact students' motivation, interest, and collaboration. The latter concepts culminate in students' learning gains. The participants deemed that teaching presence influenced their learning process. In other words, my questions in the online discussion boards were helpful for the participants to gain an in-depth understanding of the topics put forth in discussions.

Cassandra:

I found your questions and guidance very useful in the discussion boards. Whenever you asked a question in the discussion board, I tried to find the answer in pdfs or

minilectures. I also read the question first and then find the answer in the material rather than reading all the details. I could save much time and read more material about the topic you mentioned in the discussion boards.

#5 Open Communication: Risk-Free Posting

The participants emphasized they could study the topic in detail and then participate in discussions. They noted that they had to review the material before they stepped into online discussion; otherwise, others would not buy their ideas. To stay in the mainstream, they needed to study and introduce a new aspect of the topic, which could contribute to pique others' interests and agreement.

Sera:

in FTF discussions you are sometimes shy to ask, but in online discussions, you can ask everything because nobody is looking at you... I could read the pdf and watch lectures before I comment on the topic or answer the question. There was no stress, and I could learn much about different aspects of the topic... The questions in the discussion boards helped me know what to study and how to argue and make your point in discussion boards in a stress-free environment.

Cognitive presence

#1 Triggering event. Often times, the discussion boards were not useful for learning. They never came to the discussion board to learn. Discussion boards might accidentally fill the gaps in their knowledge, but they tried to understand the topic by using the text and videos and then posted their ideas on discussion boards. In rare cases, they highlighted that if they were pressed by the time, they studied the board and then left their comment, but generally it was not the primary source of learning and knowledge acquisition.

Sera:

Sometimes I felt confused because English is my second language, so sometimes I get a little confused, and I had to read more like open other websites to compare and make sure my understanding of the concepts. The posts in discussion boards were not useful for me, so I learned from pdfs and lectures, not the discussion boards.

#2 Exploration. Discussion boards helped to post the participants' ideas and exchange information because each participant focused on one aspect of the topic, and each of the participants had different prior knowledge and experience.

Sera:

I read the posts because everybody has a different idea, and I respect peoples'

ideas...I found that people look through the topic from different lenses, and this can enrich my viewpoint. I'd prefer to kinda learn from others' lenses.

Cassandra:

I enjoyed the reading, but sometimes I felt I was not able to get as much in-depth as I wanted to, but it was a good way of grading. Other students' posts and ideas were not similar to those of mine, and I am always open to others' opinions. I think reading their ideas can give you a broader perspective.

#3 Integration. Studying threaded discussions showed that ideas are posted developmentally not as a series of monologues. Participants emphasized this in the interviews. Threaded discussions indicated the type of development of an argument in an online discussion board. It also suggested how participants with their posts can shape a conversation.

Cassandra:

I did not notice how other students or I talk about different topics on the board, but I am sure that we were free to talk about different aspects of different topics. The first posts were important to shape the discussion. But, sometimes later posts were so good or impressive that twisted the path of discussions.

#4 Resolution. Discussion board did not help to apply their knowledge. However, the first session of field experience enabled them to know how useful discussion boards were, and they found that they can put theories they learned from materials and discussion board into practice.

Sera:

I did not get to do too much because it was more observation, but I could see that what I learned I could put into practice. Discussions did not help me a lot when it comes to instructional strategies but the practicum and field experience.

Teaching Presence

#1 Design and organization. PDFs, links of other related websites, and videos before discussion boards built the participants' confidence to participate. They gained enough confidence to share their ideas regardless of the nature of the discussion. The course material was the prominent source of confidence-building for the participants, reinforced during online discussions with peers.

Cassandra:

I liked the design of the course because it was a standard Canvas course. I learned a lot from videos and pdfs. I did not learn much about the topic in the discussions, but

sometimes they could teach me when I had no time or less time to study my lessons or surf the web about the topic then I turned to online discussions and read all of the posts to learn the gist of pdfs and videos and leave my comment.

#2 facilitating discourse. The participants mentioned that recapitulation and clarification of the whole discussion seemed to be necessary at the end of the board (scaffolding). The participants expected that the teacher reviews and evaluates their posts to reassure the quality of the discussion. Sera:

Well, I like when the teacher participates, because I like the teacher's opinion because we are learning from the teacher... when there is a discussion and the teacher comments on it that is important...participating with all of the students is impossible for the teacher...its nice even in general when the teacher make comments about the whole discussion."

#3 Direct instruction. In every discussion board, the instructor provided the participants with instructions and mind-boggling questions to help them focus on discussions and discuss different aspects of the topic. This direct instruction prior to online discussion boards increased the participants' motivation level and also augmented their cognitive attainment.

Cassandra:

The role of the teacher was to get everybody focused on the activity, know what to look for, know what to learn. He could keep me focused by the end of every lesson. I needed his guidance and his instructions in this online course.

Cassandra:

you were really present in the discussion but... you would tell us what to write about. I did not know what to write in the discussion boards, but the questions before we post our ideas helped me, and I liked the questions.

Post Structuralisms

Having studied the first discussion board, we found that participation in discussion boards taught them not to write short answers, post their ideas as soon as possible to be among the first students, and not to reject others' opinions. Practicing these acts over and over again formed their perceptions in a way that they mentioned: "*you are not going to reject others' ideas.*"

Spivak (center & margin)

The second reason for posting your ideas quickly and responding to others' posts without rejecting them seems to be the tendency to remain in the center. As Jackson and Mazzei (2012, p. 44) posited:

Spivak's deconstruction of marginality is to make visible the collision and collusion of the center and the margin. That is, deconstruction calls out the ways in which a particular teaching machine assures and validates its own center by shaping the contours of its margins. Furthermore, the margin itself, too, is "involved in the construction of a new object of investigation – 'the third world,' 'the marginal' – for institutional validation and certification."

We studied the discussion boards, and we found that the first posts are centers around which other responses are placed. They shaped a model that we call the "***Grapes Bunch Model.***" The *Grapes bunch model* posits that a participant starts the discussion when he feels ready and confident. Other participants post their responses and respond to him only because he was the first post. After a while, the post loses its credit as the center and new centers emerge. Our participants mentioned that they chose to respond to longer posts which were richer in content. Repeating this act made the participants post somewhat longer discussions with richer content to remain at the center.

Drawing on the notion of the *Grapes Bunch Model*, every post in a discussion board is likened to grape. Each grape has—metaphorically speaking—has a different color, taste, and size even in a single bunch. By the same token, posts in a discussion board, are of varying size, quality, and weight. If a post is timely and of quality, more participants will respond to it and make a threaded discussion in the discussion board. A grapes bunch may be comprised of few grapes or conversely have a lot of grapes in a bunch (exuberant).

Spivak (an impossible no)

The tendency of being at the center and not being rejected or isolated made the participants practice *impossible no* situations such as a lack of genuine argument and rejection and supporting one another.

Cassandra:

I don't want to stir the pot... you were not supposed to reject anyone. I do not want to be placed as an outsider. I like to be one of them, not a stranger who is always rejecting people. Honestly, I do not like pessimists... that is not how you make friends in an online classroom.

Having studies *impossible no*, we were led to Derrida's notion of '*absent present*' and Deleuze's notion of '*desiring silence*'. How does a *desiring silence* function to maintain social presence while participating in online discussion boards?

According to Spivak, only the authentic inhabitant of the center can deconstruct and detail the nature of an event (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). The participants—as authentic inhabitants of the structure—deconstructed their experience of FTF discussion and through practicing desiring silence attempted to support other participants and failed to reject others. Through the interviews, the participants tended to remain silent in response to “why did not you reject others” to stay at the center. Being at the center gives them power and confidence, which emanates from the knowledge they projected in their posts. The latter determines other participants’ perceptions of my participants. There exists a fine line to walk for the participants of online discussion boards. They are supposed to post their ideas and be placed amongst the first posts, so they are positioned in the center and catch attention. However, their posts need to be rich in content to encourage other participants to answer and (according to the grapes bunch model) allure more posts to turn into a threaded discussion. Otherwise, a wiser comment can hijack their respondents in no time. The posts seemed to revolve around the concepts of the *impossible no* coupled with the notion of *center and margin*.

Limitations of the Study

Various researchers have validated the COI framework (Arbaugh et al., 2008; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Conversely, some studies have critically reviewed the COI framework and noted that it does not explicitly lead to learning outcomes (Rourke & Kanuka, 2009). The current study was limited in several aspects. First and foremost, is researchers’ biases that might affect the interpretation of the results consciously or subconsciously. However, biasedness in sample selection, data collection, and data analysis are criticisms which usually qualitative studies encounter and derive from the essence of such studies. Every individual has their biases partly formed by their experiences and partly by the education he has received.

Another limitation to consider is that the study does not include the perception of the teacher of the course. Teacher’s perceptions of engagement have a direct impact on preservice teachers’ perceptions of engagement. However, the present study shed light on the students’ (preservice teachers’) perceptions. Lastly, a factor residing in hermeneutic considerations is that in qualitative studies, researchers are criticized for interpreting the findings from their perspectives. This study is not an exception is suffering from such limitation.

Implications and Importance of the Study

This study’s implications fall under the three main pillars of the *Community of Inquiry (COI) Model*: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. In terms of social presence, there are many issues that need to be addressed prior, during, and after every online discussion board. Firstly, an introduction board at the beginning of the course can serve as

an icebreaker for participation in the rest of the discussion boards. Also, rich content, including pdfs, links to related scholarly websites, exciting topics, can encourage participants to engage in discussion boards. Furthermore, since participants aim at learning rather than making friends, posts need to be content-based and developmental. Finally, the teacher can play a prominent role using a less formal language in discussions so that other participants can follow him to show their feelings.

Cognitive presence is the second subcategory of the COI model. This subcategory is linked with students’ understanding while taking an online course. This aspect of the COI model considers critical thinking, problem-solving, and a higher level of thinking while designing a course and how it may impact the learning process. In this sense, students are already puzzled about the subject so teachers can take advantage of this feeling and show them how to exchange and connect ideas. Additionally, resolution (application of theory) is postponed to the first voluntary observation in a classroom. Instead, educators can design video conferencing or supply students with videos to observe best practices. This way, they seem to be prepared for their late field experience wherein preservice teachers have their first teaching experience. They already reported that their late field experience is facilitated if they already critically thought about the content and created a new material, instructional strategies, and other of this ilk.

The last component of the COI model, teaching presence in an online environment, resonates with the course’s design and organization to facilitate the educational experience of the participants. The findings of this research suggest that the efficient design of materials can prepare students for a better discussion. Once students understand the material, they post their ideas. Similarly, teachers need to give a final comment at the end of each discussion boards to confirm and clarify ideas. Some students need to have their ideas audited and approved by the teacher. Explicit instruction and questions at the beginning of each discussion board make learning content-based and meaningful for the participants. Finally, we do not recommend teachers to interject in the middle of discussion boards to guide participants and facilitate discourse.

Ideas for further research

While relationships among three components of COI are well-explained, researchers need to investigate the relationship among subcategories of the components in discussion boards. This topic is under-researched, and more researchers need to dive into the potential links between subcategories to formulate novel ideas for online education. As the impact of discussion boards on cognitive presence (resolution and application of knowledge) was missing in this qualitative inquiry, researchers should conduct studies regarding field experience to explore discussion boards’ impact. Future studies should shed light on these oft-neglected aspects of the COI model to craft creative

ways to facilitate the process of learning in an online environment.

Context is key in providing good example sentences, especially when it comes to learning idiomatic language (see Khoshnevisan, 2018b, 2019a). Future studies are recommended to investigate the role of online discussion boards in learning English language. Online discussion boards are conducive to learning a new culture. Accordingly, the role of online discussion boards in supplying sufficient context for language learners is of utmost importance.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored the perceptions of two ESOL preservice teachers about their participation and engagement in online discussion boards when it comes to the three pillars of the *Community of Inquiry (COI) Model* (social presence, cognitive presence & teaching presence). Aligned with prior research concerning online engagement in higher education (Kahu, 2011; Ross, 2010; Shu, Zhao, & Wan, 2012), we explored preservice teachers' perceptions of engagement in online environments. The online survey, student interviews, and online asynchronous discussion transcripts implied fundamental points in different subcategories of the COI model. The findings indicated that online discussion boards are useful tools in distance education to both establish and foster rapport and a sense of friendship amongst students. These tools can increase students' level of engagement and motivation if the three pillars of the COI model are well observed. Online discussion boards need to have clear instructions and guiding questions. The teacher should recap every discussion at the end of the week to ensure that students have the right takeaway by the end of every module. A discussion board is necessary to familiarize students with one another and the teacher at the beginning of the course. The design and organization of courses are essential as they can augment students' motivation, engagement, and cognitive attainment. Teachers are suggested to be a guide on the side rather than a sage on the stage. As the course matures, students become confident in online discussion boards, and their posts will be richer in content.

Additionally, Spivak's "impossible no", Deleuze's "desiring silence," Butler's "performativity act," and Derrida's "deconstructionism" as theoretical lenses can contribute to data analysis. The poststructuralism perspective in data interpretation revealed students' preference for being at the center. To achieve this demand, students should leave their comments as soon as possible to gain the maximum amount of attention. Later on, they should consider the content of their posts. Quality posts allure other participants to reply to their posts and make an exuberant threaded discussion. This observation resulted in the formulation of a model that we termed the *grapes bunch model* of threaded discussion. According to this model, a threaded discussion might take place based on the quality of the posts and their timing. The sooner someone posts their ideas and the more decadent the

views, the better. In this case, a forceful discussion revolves around his ideas.

On the contrary, a late post with poor content might not gain attention and stays an island post with no threaded discussion. People who can make a threaded discussion in more discussion board events position themselves at the center. Otherwise, they are placed in the margin until they observe the two principles of timing and content of the posts. Centeredness is vital in motivating and encouraging participants to post their ideas promptly and make it richer in content. This activity reaffirms what Spivak noted about the academic marginality; "Spivak is convincing in her argument that academic marginality has been delineated by the center ...it is almost as if the center stands aside and concedes" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 44).

Alternatively, others might want to stay away from the margin and being marginalized; thus, they also try to observe the two principles. Derrida's notion of 'absent present' and Deleuze's notion of 'desiring silence' contributed to an in-depth understanding concerning the participants' level of motivation and encouragement. Data regarding the rejection of others' ideas and the posts of the teacher was absent. Retracing missing data through the notion of the absent present could usher the path for me. We found that the notion of 'impossible no' leads these participants to show specific behavior and drawing on the notion of performativity act of Butler, the common practice of these actions become normal behavior of the participants. It then comes as no surprise that thoughtful design and organization (teaching presence) can give rise to better critical thinking and learning (cognitive presence).

It is thus evident that preservice teachers should be provided with a working knowledge of different technologies so they can effectively incorporate them in classroom. This knowledge acquisition needs to be completed in the early stage of preservice teachers' identity development (cf. Khoshnevisan, 2017; Khoshnevisan 2018c; Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan, 2019). The need may arise in different stages of teachers' identity development. Alternatively, in-service teachers may feel the urge to incorporate different technological tools such as online discussion boards to help learners.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that during difficult times such as when the pandemic struck and mushroomed the whole world, researchers came to recognize the crucial role of distance education. An avalanche of technologies and technological tools were utilized to facilitate and hasten the process of learning. However, more empirical studies were required to explore the perceptions and experiences of users throughout the world (Khoshnevisan, 2021c). This study was an attempt to gain a clearer insight into the perceptions of ESOL preservice teachers and their experiences when it comes to online discussion. We hope that this study can usher the future practice of teachers on designing a quality and efficient online discussion board to increase the encouragement, augment cognitive attainment, and increase learners'

motivation level. The COI Model's efficiency must await further empirical research to dissect the main pillars and their links with their subcategories.

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