

Article

Student and Teacher Perceptions of Teaching and Learning in Times of Covid

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic has meant universities have had to rapidly adjust their courses to online-only learning environments. While much English Language Teaching (ELT) research in recent years has focused on both blended learning and distance learning programs, these studies mostly included students who had opted for distance or blended learning courses and teachers who were given time to prepare for such types of courses in advance. The current situation allows us to explore ELT strategies in the context of a sudden and unexpected shift to digital format only. Specifically, we employ the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 1999) to examine teacher and student perceptions of digital ELT strategies in two English language learning courses that were taught at a German university as part of a graduate degree programme in English. Our findings suggest that although students and teachers initially struggled with the move from face-to-face lessons to digital teaching and learning, they adapted and got more accustomed to many of the changes over time, but that digital interaction remains incomparable to 'real' interaction. We also found that although the CoI framework served as a helpful tool in data analysis, it could not account for all aspects relating to online learning, such as the need for pastoral care. We suggest a split of social presence into two categories as proposed by Kreijns et al. (2014) would go some way towards addressing this, but further research in this area is needed. Finally, we provide recommendations for practitioners and ELT teachers in the hope that they may be of help to those new to online teaching.

Keywords

Community of Inquiry, online learning, Covid-19, pastoral care, toll of online learning

1 Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has meant universities have had to rapidly adjust their courses to online-

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only learning environments. While much English Language Teaching (ELT) research in recent years has focused on both blended learning and distance learning programs, the studies mostly focused on students who had opted for distance or blended learning courses and teachers who were given time to prepare for such types of courses. The current situation, by contrast, allows us to explore ELT strategies in the context of a sudden and unexpected shift to digital format only. Specifically, we examine teacher and student perceptions of digital ELT strategies using the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 1999) to examine two English language learning courses that were taught at a German university as part of a graduate degree programme in English. The CoI framework was chosen for our study for two reasons: Firstly, it was developed specifically for the implementation and analysis of successful online teaching and learning, and we therefore deemed it particularly suited to the digital courses under study; Secondly, the CoI framework aligns with our personal teaching philosophy in that it conceives of learning as a collective process taking place in a social system (i.e., a community). In our discussion, we consider the relation between student satisfaction, student learning outcomes, online learning readiness, and the three pillars of the CoI framework (teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence).

2 Community of Inquiry

The CoI framework is a collaborative-constructivist model, originally developed by Garrison et al. (1999) as a tool to analyse and implement successful teaching and learning strategies in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) settings. The framework holds that successful learning and teaching occurs when students and teachers establish a learning context i.e., a community of inquiry, that is grounded in three interdependent elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Social presence describes students' sense of community within the learning environment and their ability to "identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop interpersonal relationships" (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 5). Teaching presence relates to the educational strategies employed within the community, such as "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). Cognitive presence describes the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse (Garrison et al., 2001). According to the CoI framework, the combination of these three elements will lead to a collaborative form of purposeful discourse where the focus lies on exploring, meaning-making and validated understanding.

The CoI framework has been criticized for its focus on learning processes rather than outcomes, and the difficulties of empirically testing the various aspects of the framework (Rourke & Kanuka, 2009; also see the response given by Akyol et al., 2009). One rebuttal to this criticism is that a Communities of Inquiry (CoI) Survey Instrument (Arbaugh et al., 2008) was developed and validated (Swan et al., 2008) to "quantitatively assess the state of a community of inquiry" (Garrison, 2017, p. 29). The survey contains 34 Likert-scale items, twelve to measure cognitive presence, nine to measure social presence, and thirteen to measure teaching presence. Cognitive presence is measured with items such as "reflection on course content and discussions helped me understand fundamental concepts in this class", social presence with items like "I felt that my point of view was acknowledged by other course participants", and teaching presence with items such as "the instructor clearly communicated important course topics". For a complete overview of the survey, please see appendix A. In 2019, the CoI survey was further adapted to measure the extent to which online writing courses function as communities of inquiry by a rephrasing of some of its items to pertain to writing and the addition of one further item associated with social presence and writing (Stewart, 2019).

Some scholars have also argued that the role of social presence is overestimated in the CoI framework (Annand, 2011; a response to which was published by Garrison, 2011), whilst others have sought ways

to strengthen the conceptualization and operationalization of the distinct CoI framework pillars (e.g. Kreijns et al., 2014; Shea & Bidjerano, 2012; Shea et al., 2012) or the framework as a whole (Caskurlu et al., 2021; Kilis & Yildirim, 2018). Caskurlu et al. (2021), for example, re-analysed qualitative evidence provided by earlier empirical studies of online learning experiences to see how these related to the CoI framework. This enabled them to synthesise the data into a number of CoI-related descriptive themes, including ‘accountability’, ‘being real’, and ‘supporting learning process’. Others have extended the CoI framework to include ‘learning presence’ (Shea and Bidjerano, 2010; Shea et al., 2012) or ‘emotional presence’ (Stenbom et al., 2016) as a fourth pillar.

Building on this, this study seeks to contribute to the strengthening of the CoI model by examining students’ and teachers’ experiences of the sudden shift from face-to-face teaching to an online-only course. Although the framework was initially adopted because of its conceptualization of the online learning and teaching environment as a community and therefore in line with our personal teaching philosophy, exploration of the data in the context of this framework will allow us to both shed light on teacher and student experiences of learning in lockdown and critically examine the CoI model. We hope this article also serves as an example of how reflective practice in ELT (Mann & Walsh, 2017) can be of help to practitioners.

3 Methods and Methodology

We adopted a case study approach for our analysis, as this allows for a reflective and analytical insight into similarities, differences, and patterns across the two courses under study and highlights the subjective nature of the research. The course leaders ($n = 2$) and the participants of both courses ($n = 17$) were purposely sampled as the data subjects of this study. Both written and spoken data were collected. Spoken data were collected from a recorded focus group in July 2020 and a recorded follow-up focus group one year later, in July 2021. Both groups consisted of course participants from both courses that had volunteered to meet and speak about their experiences of the shift to online teaching and learning. The open-source virtual classroom and videoconferencing software BigBlueButton was used to record the spoken data as this was also used to run synchronous course sessions and participants were therefore already familiar with it. Written data were collected from the online courses themselves, including from their digital discussion boards on the learning platforms Moodle and Opal, online course evaluation surveys that were distributed at the end of the courses, and written comments in the BigBlueButton chat box during recorded synchronous BigBlueButton sessions. Written data comprised course specific contents such as students’ work on course-specific tasks and discussion of exercises as well as written comments on how students experienced the shift from face-to-face teaching to an online-only learning environment. The collected data were anonymised (all names that appear in this article are pseudonyms) and further analysed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This method allows for categorization of data across multiple students and identification of recurring motifs in students’ learning experiences. Although thematic analysis is not grounded in any theoretical framework and can be applied with varying theoretical principles (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81), the analyst is expected to make their theoretical positioning of the method clear. In this case, we take the view that our thematic analysis should not be seen as a realist method (i.e., a direct reflection of reality), but rather as a constructivist method in which meaning is seen as co-constructed dynamically through interaction and should be analysed in context. In other words, our data and thematic analysis should not be interpreted as a direct reflection of participants’ experiences, but rather as the analysts’ reconstruction and interpretation of those experiences through discourse. Themes have been analysed semantically, which means that we have coded our data to show patterns in semantic content and attempted to theorize the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications in relation to previous CoI research and ELT teaching. Thematic analysis has

previously been used as a tool for assessing all elements of the CoI framework (Stephens & Hennefer, 2013; Waddington & Porter, 2021) and in our case was also driven by our theoretical interest in the CoI framework. Rather than a grounded approach, where the analyst approaches the data without any preconceived theoretical framework and constructs theories on the basis of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we have thus adopted a more explicitly analyst-driven approach. Using linguistic indicators provided in the CoI Survey Instrument (Arbaugh et al., 2008), we manually coded different aspects of cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence (see the full survey in Appendix A). If students, for example, talking about interaction with peers, said they had enjoyed working in small groups, we would code it as ‘social presence’. Similarly, comments on course contents and knowledge acquired was coded as ‘cognitive presence’ and mention of teacher feedback as ‘teaching presence’. Thus, the three presences are both themes and codes in our data. Two other themes emerged from the data as well: ‘the toll of online learning’ and ‘the need for pastoral care’. These themes emerged from the data because we provided codes for the evaluation of experiences as positive (e.g., ‘good’, ‘nice’) or negative (e.g., ‘difficult’, ‘challenging’, ‘overwhelming’). It should be noted that the codes are not mutually exclusive; a comment on the difficulty of undertaking group work, for example, was coded as a ‘negative experience’ but also ‘social presence’ because it was about collaborative work undertaken in one of the courses.

4 The Research Context

The Courses ‘Online Publishing’ and ‘Translation English-German in Digital Contexts’, which are used as case studies for this article, form part of the University’s English Practical Language Programme that is responsible for improving students’ English language proficiency, core academic skills, and employability. They both consisted of thirteen 90-minute sessions, and both were taught in the summer semester of 2020, which ran from the first of April 2020 until mid-July. By the first of April 2020, Germany was already officially in lockdown, and although the university kept in communication with staff and students on a regular basis via open letters (published online and emailed to staff), there was some uncertainty as to whether the start of teaching would be delayed until May or whether courses would be shifted to a fully online environment. As of 17 March 2020, it was thought that the face-to-face classes and lectures at TU Chemnitz would commence with a delay in the week of the fourth of May 2020, but as of the first of April 2020, almost all courses were moved online. This meant that teachers had relatively little time to adapt their courses to an online setting and to acquire the necessary technological skills.

4.1 Case study 1: Online publishing

The course ‘Online Publishing’ is designed to enhance students’ writing skills beyond academia, with an eye to providing a step up to possible future careers in publishing or marketing. Students learn about news values, factors that help journalists and editors decide if an event is newsworthy (Bednarek & Caple, 2017; Harcup & O’Neill, 2001) and editorial policies typical of the press in the United Kingdom, the United States, and other English-speaking regions. Students are also taught the attributes of a variety of journalistic texts and are required to practice writing original news reports and feature articles that adhere to the standards and practices of contemporary online publications. Editing, proofreading, and disseminating texts online is also covered, as is the role of photojournalism, the importance of visual impact, and the niche that social media occupies. By the end of the course, students are expected to have acquired the knowledge and skills to give an account of the principles that underlie the English language press: write, edit, proofread journalistic texts, select illustrations and layout formats, and use social media for publicising their work. As a practical skills course, the emphasis is on students practicing their

professional writing skills rather than, for example, the acquisition of extensive theoretical knowledge. The course typically consists of students practicing their writing and of guided discussion of writing practice and standards, and students are assessed on three written articles of 750 words each.

With the shift to an online-only environment, the course leader was unsure how to translate the course into an effective online seminar. She had envisaged running weekly synchronous sessions in a virtual classroom, but the university initially asked course leaders refrain from synchronous sessions unless absolutely necessary for fear of overloading the system. She therefore decided to run the course asynchronously via the online learning platform OPAL instead. She created 13 themed folders (with a new folder released to students on a weekly basis) containing reading material, group and individual exercises, and occasionally a recorded lecture. Students were requested to send in completed exercises by email for feedback. To encourage engagement and social interaction, students were emailed the session outline before the start of the course and received weekly reminders. They were asked to introduce themselves on the OPAL course forum and instructed to “keep up to date with the news and share interesting stories with each other” via a ‘Shared Stories’ activity.

To encourage students to introduce themselves on the forum, the course leader created a series of introductory questions as part of the first session that students were asked to respond to, including providing identifying information (“*name*”), answering an icebreaker (“*a two-sentence description of the last book you’ve read or what you’re currently reading and your thoughts on it*”) and sharing course-related information (“*your experience with professional writing or journalism; your expectations for this course*”). To further facilitate students posting, the course leader also posted an introductory post to the forum (see Figure 1 below), which answered the introductory questions and went beyond in terms of providing identifying information (further providing personal background information), icebreaker rationale and course expectations (discussing terms of address and a possible shift to face-to-face seminars).

Figure 1

Introductions – An Example from the Course Leader

As you may already know, my name is Isabelle van der Bom. I come from Eindhoven in the Netherlands, but have been living abroad since 2009. I obtained my PhD in English (on discourse analysis & stylistics) in 2015 from the University of Sheffield. I hope you don't mind that following UK tradition, I address you on a first-name basis. You may call me Isabelle or Dr van der Bom.

Together with Mr Pfundt and Mr Phillips, I take care of the Sprachpraxis section of the English department at Chemnitz University of Technology. Our section is focussed on improving your (academic) English and professional skills. In this course, writing is the core skill that takes centre stage. I have never worked as a journalist, but I do have experience writing professionally (as an academic) and have been published (in academic journals and books). I know some of you have experience in journalism (and professional writing), and it would be great if you could share your experience here.

Because writing and reading are inextricably linked, I've asked you to say a bit about your reading habits as well. I am currently reading *De Avond is Ongemak* (The Discomfort of Evening) by Marieke Lucas Rijneveld, which is about a family of 6 that becomes 5 due to a tragic iceskating accident that befalls the eldest son. This story is told from the perspective of a 10-year-old girl, and so far (I've only just started it) very heavy (theme) but also evocative and lyrical (language use). This novel was recently longlisted for the International Booker Prize.

Although this course focusses on digital environments and writing (which can easily be done digitally), Online Publishing works best as a face-to-face seminar as it involves lots of group work and discussions. I hope the university will be able to hold physical classes again soon but that, in the meantime, this course does provide you with the necessary skills and challenges to improve your written English.

The second activity to encourage social interaction and engagement with the course material was the ‘Shared Stories’ activity. This activity featured in the course weekly. Students were asked to follow the news and share interesting news articles or feature stories with the class. Every student was asked to sign up, and because the number of students was higher than the number of weeks the course ran for, this meant that some weeks, several students shared their chosen story. Their story could, but did not have to, be related to the theme of that week. The course leader shared the first story. Interestingly, students diligently provided their fellow classmates with news and feature articles that related strongly to their personal backgrounds or interests, but that were also session-specific or linked to the overall course. An example of this is given in Figure 2. This is Jiali’s explanation as to why she has chosen to share a CNN news article by Jessie Yeung entitled “From an extradition bill to a political crisis: A guide to the Hong Kong protests”. Jiali uses first-person pronoun narration, *verba sentiendi* (e.g., “*feel*”; “*scared*”; “*afraid*”; “*curious*”; “*wondered*”) and background information (“*growing in [Mainland] China*”; [*having*] “*studied and worked in Hong Kong*”) to frame the Hong Kong protests and the socio-political tensions between Hong Kong and mainland China in personal experience. Her mention of the different communities (“*Chinese*” versus “*the local Hong Konger Community*”) and verbalization of feelings of anxiety and isolation clarify the dichotomy between these communities (Chen & Flowerdew, 2019). Jiali also claims to speak on behalf of the wider [Mainland] Chinese community (“*Chinese like me*”; “*afraid that we will...*”), She then distances herself from this group by saying that while she shares feelings of anxiety (“*scared as well*”), she is also curious about the different thought processes that underlie the different socio-political stances. She notes that when comparing different news stories on the same event, “by just changing a few phrases, the same fact can be perceived in a totally different way by the audience” and ends her reflection by posing more general rhetorical questions on the difference between news and propaganda, and whether news can ever be “pure or true” or is always “based on different context and culture [and] always serves more or less some political roles”. Students responded positively to the ‘Shared Stories’ activity, reporting, for example, that “it was interesting to see the articles chosen by the others because [they] often reference current and important topics” (Anonymous, student course evaluation).

Figure 2

Shared Stories’ Activity - Jiali’s Story

Growing up in China and also studied and worked in Hong Kong [sic], I always feel this tension and between the Chinese community and local Hong Konger Community in Hong Kong society. After the controversial extradition bill issue, with the explosion of Hong Kong Protest in the summer of 2019, I feel more isolated as an outsider than ever before. Chinese like me are even scared of speaking mandarin [sic] on the street, afraid that we will be targeted at by extreme protestors. Many people “fled” back to China during that period of time.

I was scared as well but also very curious about why people from the two societies think so differently. In China we don’t really have this “protest” culture, and it was at first really difficult for me to understand the motives and behaviors of Hong Kong protestors. I followed news in Chinese about the

protest, and it was all negative comments. Then I got curious and checked cantonese [sic] news and English news on the same topic, even same specific incident, and I found that by just changing a few phrases, the same fact can be perceived in a totally different way by the audience.

This news is a relatively objective analysis on Hong Kong protest. For me, it helped me a lot in re-shaping the image of the whole topic. It also made me start to wonder: What's the difference between news and propaganda? Is there pure and true news, or based on different context and culture, the news always serves more or less some political roles?

<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/15/asia/hong-kong-protests-explainer-intl-hnk-scli/index.html>

Despite the university's initial warning to avoid synchronous sessions unless necessary, the course leader did run two later in the semester, one mid-course and the final session. These were both designed to see how students were doing and to discuss upcoming assessments. Additionally, synchronous individual tutorial sessions were also offered in one of the final weeks of the course. All the other sessions were made up of reading and exercises (comprising both group and individual tasks), but some included a recorded lecture.

4.2 Case study 2: Translation English-German in digital contexts

The course 'Translation English-German in Digital Contexts' focuses on the challenges involved in translating a text into one's first language in general and German in particular. Key principles of translation such as equivalence, translatability, strategies of adaptation, genre conventions, target readership orientation and stylistics are explored and used in analysing and translating various text types. Additional emphasis is placed on deepening the students' knowledge of current translation tools and resources. By the end of the course, students are expected to be able to translate a variety of texts adequately and proficiently, ranging from advertisements to newspaper articles to academic abstracts, using dedicated software and online resources as well as explanatory, background, and parallel texts. Furthermore, students are also expected to have developed the ability and skill to explain, justify and evaluate their specific translation choices. As a practical skills course, the emphasis is on students practicing and improving their translation skills through a series of different exercises. While a theoretical framework is provided and discussed, most of the course deals with practical tasks and applications of the translation process. The course typically consists of input sessions by the course leader, in which specific aspects of the translation process are practiced and source texts are discussed and analysed, and discussions of the students' translations handed in throughout the term. The final assessment is a translation exam in which the students need to translate an English source text of about 300 words into German within 90 minutes.

The shift to an online-only environment was announced at short notice before the start of the teaching period. Given that talking about translations and engaging in translation practice are vital elements of the course design, a transition to an online self-study learning environment was deemed undesirable. It became clear to the course leader that the only meaningful way of teaching the course online would be via running synchronous sessions in a virtual classroom. Subsequently, 12 synchronous sessions were held over the course of the semester on the platform BigBlueButton. Participants were asked to hand in translations on a fortnightly basis, after which they received individual feedback in writing. All of the students' translations that were handed in on one specific source text were discussed during the synchronous sessions. To facilitate the task in a meaningful and efficient way, the course leader selected passages from the source text that posed a challenge and compiled the students' various translation choices. This is exemplified in Figure 3, which shows a discussion of a translation during a synchronous

session. For reasons of clarity, the text in Figure 3 has been recreated in Table 1 below. In this case the students were given the task to identify idioms and fixed expressions in a British advertisement and subsequently come up with an adequate translation. All German translations were collected and then discussed in class. As the chat shows, students found figuring out the meaning of the idioms and fixed expressions in the source text's specific context challenging. Finding a fitting translation in the absence of a direct equivalent in the target language posed another challenge for them. Discussing and analysing the different translations as well as retracing the steps involved in translation was therefore deemed very insightful and helpful by the students.

Figure 3

Screenshot of Translation Discussion During a Synchronous Session on BigBlueButton

English Source Text	German Target Text
Loads of go.	Jede Menge los. Viel PS. Jede Menge Fahrspaß Unheimlich viel los
how to handle itself	die mit sich selbst umzugehen weiß das weiß, wie es sich zu verhalten hat die selber weiß, was sie machen soll mit tollen Fahrgefühl/für grenzenloser Fahrspaß das weiß, wie es läuft
under the bonnet	Unter der Motorhaube Unter der Haube
with a real sting in its tail	ist außergewöhnlich Leistungstark der es ordentlich krachen lässt mit echt starker Power aus dem Heck heraus mit einem besonderen Kick der es richtig draufhat welcher Sie echt überraschen wird
to put up with	einem echten Stachel im Heck Man muss sich nicht abfinden Sie müssen nicht verzichten auf Sie müssen sich nicht ertragen Dabei müssen Sie X nicht mit Y verkaufen setz dich rein

Recorded with BigBlueButton.

It's a weird thing to say in English so the translation is difficult.

I think I just did not know what exactly it's supposed to mean in the ST

because it depends on the context. What is meant by "loads of go"?

I already googled it when I tried to translate it but I just found that loads of means very much.

it's talking about quick acceleration, i think.

Table 1

Text from the Screenshot Translation Discussion in Figure 3

English Source Text	German Target Text
Loads of go.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jede Menge los. • Viel PS. • Jede Menge Fahrspaß • Unheimlich viel los
how to handle itself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • die mit sich selbst umzugehen weiß • das weiß, wie es sich zu verhalten hat • die selber weiß, was sie machen soll • mit tollen Fahrgefühl/ für grenzenlosen Fahrspaß • das weiß, wie es läuft
under the bonnet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unter der Haube • unter der Motorhaube

with a real sting in its tail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ist außergewöhnlich leistungsstark • der es ordentlich krachen lässt • mit echt starker Power aus dem Heck heraus • mit einem besonderen Kick • der es richtig draufhat • welcher Sie echt überraschen wird • mit einem echten Stachel im Heck
to put up with	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Man muss sich nicht abfinden • Sie müssen nicht verzichten auf • Sie müssen sich nicht ertragen • Dabei müssen Sie X nicht mit Y erkaufen

Accompanying discussion in the chat (pictured on the right in Figure 3):

Courtney: It's a weird thing to say in English so the translation is difficult

Lisa: I think I just did not know what exactly it's supposed to mean in the ST

Franziska: because it depends on the context. What is meant by "loads of go"?

Vanessa: I already googled it when I tried to translate it but I just found that loads of means very much.

Courtney: it's talking about quick acceleration, I think

These discussions provided the students with the opportunity to examine different translations, to explain their own translation choices and to receive feedback from their peers and the course leader.

Students were also asked to work together on specific tasks during the synchronous sessions. These included, for example, grammatical issues, background research for a translation, and language specific elements such as idioms and fixed expressions. While working on the respective tasks, the students were organised into groups of two to four people and sent to a 'breakout room' where they could complete the task in smaller groups without the constant presence of and observation by the course leader. Whereas students were sometimes reluctant and hesitant to switch on their webcams or engage in conversations in the

Figure 4

Etherpad Examples of Idioms and Fixed Expressions in Different Text Types (German & English)

English

newspaper article:

led to believe

the coffin has been shoved under the carpet

be in touch with

says it all

getting one over on

throw their lives away

separated the wheat from the chaff

<p><u>to make sure</u> <u>to be in the spotlight</u> <i>to be clocked at</i> <i>to be hammered with</i> <i>to ground a plane</i> <i>to reach out to</i> <i>a fix for sth</i> <i>novel: a fraction of a second</i></p> <p>German</p> <p>newspaper article: spielt nicht mehr mit Ende der Fahnenstange in Würde gehen</p>
--

‘main room’, they interacted more willingly in these breakout rooms, most likely because the smaller group size and absence of the course leader made them feel more at ease and therefore more willing to interact. Students were mostly asked to work on translation exercises in these rooms. The results of the breakout room sessions were collected and recorded on an interactive etherpad in real time, as depicted in Figure 4. This figure captures the different idioms and fixed expressions students found in different English and German text types such as newspaper articles, short stories, and written advertisements. The different font styles (e.g., italics, bold, underlined) in this figure signify input by different students. In this way, students’ progress was easily monitored, and the written findings could be used in larger group discussion once smaller group tasks had been completed.

5 Findings

While the small sample size ($n = 17$) makes it difficult to generalise the outcomes of this study to the larger population of online learners, the findings are nevertheless relevant to the CoI and ELT literature. Firstly, the findings indicate that the three interdependent elements of social presence, teacher presence and cognitive presence were readily found as themes in the data. This suggests that the CoI framework is applicable to the specific context of the online ELT courses described in this study. Secondly, our thematic analysis suggests that the three CoI pillars *alone* cannot sufficiently capture aspects in our data that detail students’ experiential evaluations of the sudden shift from face-to-face to online learning and teaching. These aspects are best represented under the additional themes ‘the toll of online learning’ and ‘pastoral care’. These findings have implications for CoI researchers and ELT teachers interested in applying CoI research to assess teaching and learning in their online courses and are more generally of relevance to ELT researchers and practitioners interested in the effects of online teaching and learning on students.

5.1 Social presence

Social presence, or, in other words, students’ sense of community and comfortableness with each other within the learning environment seemed to influence how satisfied students were with the transition to

an online learning environment, but this presence was to some extent built up outside of the course and extended beyond the learning environment. Students, for example, used a WhatsApp group for personal, self-organized exchange of experiences and reported that it helped them organize their coursework, understand course material, and support each other in managing the ramifications of Covid-19 at the time. The WhatsApp group did not include the course leaders and was not an official part of the courses. Within the course ‘Translation English-German in Digital Contexts’, students thought that synchronous sessions and breakout rooms in particular helped foster a sense of community. Susie, for example, explains she “liked reconnecting with the students in the break out [sic] rooms”. Lisa writes in a synchronous chat that “Speaking via the microphone or WhatsApp is also a good and (enough?) way, in my point of view. But it is of course not replacing the real interaction!!”. Social presence was experienced to a lesser extent in the ‘Online Publishing’ course, where synchronous sessions were limited to two in total. Group work was one of the ways in which the course leader of Online Publishing had tried to establish group cohesion, but students negatively commented in course evaluation that “working with a partner was difficult if you didn’t know them beforehand” (Anonymous). They further suggested that the course leader should not “set partners in group work because especially in these times, it was partly incredibly difficult to reach out to people who you don’t know and don’t respond to any of your texts” (Anonymous, course evaluation Online Publishing). In the recorded follow-up a year later, Anna noted that the sense of community that the WhatsApp group had provided in the summer semester of 2020 had diminished for her over time, and that the online learning environment prevented her from reconnecting with classmates:

I..I actually felt this this hanging out with friends in the first semester it all felt like we were really active in our Whatsapp group because everyone was just confused and then we were talking a lot there and that made it feel less less lonely in a way but I feel like this is something that the longer this this went on the less we communicated online and it would have been nice to have the chance to meet people after class and just talk erm so I feel like this feeling of isolation got worse over over time [sic].

These findings show the importance of social presence in an online learning environment, but also the difficulty in establishing it. Digital interaction, for example, is not granted the same affordances of ‘realness’ as face-to-face interaction. Interestingly, in this case social presence also seems to have partly been established outside of the courses. Establishing social presence thus poses a challenge for teachers of online courses. Our findings, however, also show that synchronous sessions and educational tools such as the breakout rooms, which allow for group work with peers in real time, might go some way in establishing a meaningful social presence in an online environment.

5.2 Teaching presence

The theme of teaching presence was also central to how students experienced the shift to online learning, and another decisive factor in student satisfaction. Some students reported feeling teaching presence had fallen away in some courses, even stating they had to take up the role of teacher themselves. Lisa, for example, explains that “...it was generally overwhelming, especially in the sense of that we had to teach several things ourselves. In some other courses there was only few interaction with lecturers [sic]”. Others also mentioned the “abrupt” move to online learning, which was seen as “not balanced in terms of methods of instructions between different teachers” (Anonymous, student course evaluation). Teaching presence was mostly evaluated positively in the two courses under analysis, however. Students, for example, praised the Translation course leader’s in-class discussions and the “personal touch” that synchronous sessions provided (Anonymous, student course evaluation), and students in Online Publishing liked the reminder emails and the “[c]lear structure for lessons and assignments, and correct use of [the learning platform] OPAL” (Anonymous, student course evaluation).

Students further commented extensively on the importance of feedback and reported feeling “completely lost” (Anne, recorded follow-up) in online courses where course leaders did not engage much with students or provide much feedback. They also found many course leaders did not sufficiently understand the amount of time certain tasks took online. During the recorded session in July 2020, Lisa, for example, said that she “felt really a lot of pressure in the break out rooms when I was looking at the time running. I felt like it was a totally different understanding of time there because it run so quickly” [sic]. It became evident from the students’ feedback as well as the lecturers’ in-class experiences that most tasks take longer in an online as compared to a face-to-face setting and that the normal workload used in face-to-face teaching might have to be adjusted when the course is solely taught online.

Motivation was also coded for in relation to teaching presence. Students commented on the importance of teaching presence to be established if student motivation were to occur during their learning in lockdown. The Community of Inquiry Survey Instrument designed to provide concrete linguistic indicators to measure social, cognitive and teaching presence lists “I felt motivated to explore content related questions” as part of cognitive presence (see appendix A), but motivation has been coded for as teaching presence in our data, because students emphasised that they needed a course leader’s feedback or feel some sort of personal connection in order to stay motivated. Lisa, for example, explained:

I felt less motivated because I was so overwhelmed. I agree with [Susie] that you [the two course leaders] considering how we were dealing already helped [sic]. There are teachers who say there is no excuse when not handing in all tasks, which is only contributing to be less motivated. I also feel motivated by your feedback! I think this is one important point to receive individual feedback. It doesn’t necessarily have to be very long of course. But a few sentences on our work, what has been good and could be improved was kind of motivating.

Student-teacher interaction and feedback was thus deemed very important but students’ comments seemed to go beyond the traditional CoI definition of teaching presence. These comments related more to pastoral care and have therefore been aggregated under the theme ‘the need for pastoral care’ below. The definition of ‘pastoral care’ which we use here is commonly used in educational settings and that is that pastoral care is the type of guidance and support where the focus lies on the physical and emotional wellbeing of learners, rather than on their purely educational needs.

5.3 The need for pastoral care

Students highlighted the increased importance of teachers showing an interest in and sympathizing with students’ situation beyond the classroom. They found it important that the course leaders in the present study engaged with students beyond the mere content of the course, were generally supportive of students, and shared their own personal experiences of teaching in times of Covid. The following example from the synchronous chat illustrates this to some extent:

Susie: Being supportive was very helpful!

Franziska: Totally!

As discussed in the previous section, students reported feeling ‘completely lost’ (Anne) in courses where course leaders did not engage much with students, and that overall, course leaders did not sufficiently understand students needed more time than they would in a face-to-face setting to complete certain course tasks. Students also reported that in general, course leaders did not seem to care that students were struggling, especially in these times of perceived ‘isolated online learning’. Students generally experienced the same or a similar workload as more taxing in an online setting. In this respect, they were appreciative of the fact that the course leaders of the present study accepted their “workload limits in

this special semester” (Vanessa), and that they cared about the effects the change to online learning and lockdown might have on their emotional wellbeing. Susie said about this: “You both [the two course leaders] kept asking how we were managing...others didn’t seem to care.” The WhatsApp group that students used among themselves during this semester was also reported as necessary because it provided much needed emotional support, although Anna mentioned in a follow-up that “the longer this [Covid-19] this went on the less we communicated online [...] so I feel like this feeling of isolation got worse over over time”. In sum, our findings show that it is important to students that there is some provision of pastoral care, where teachers show an interest in students’ wellbeing beyond their educational learning needs. Doing so might further prevent students from feeling ‘lost’ in an online-only learning environment.

5.4 Cognitive presence

Students talked about how the shift to online teaching meant that organising and coming to terms with the different online learning platforms, courses, and ways of communication took priority over learning itself. In this sense, cognitive presence was coded as lacking. Anne describes this in the recorded follow-up in July 2021 as follows:

So it was all very confusing and it felt like the biggest challenge in this semester was organising everything that happened and doing lots of lists of what was happening where and how and not really the learning itself...it kind of moved into the background.

Another student commented anonymously in course evaluation to Online Publishing that it was more difficult to stay motivated:

[g]enerally, it was very difficult for me to concentrate without the university environment. Sometimes it was a bit difficult to stay motivated with only the texts and exercises and not a lot of real interaction. I think that I learned less during this semester than it would have been possible during a real semester.

Online Publishing course evaluation feedback further revealed that students would have liked to have had more synchronous sessions, and that these could have increased meaningful exchange of ideas or, in other words, cognitive presence. A student, for example, commented that “I’d like to have some discussions on BBB [BigBlueButton], which I think we could have more ideas together” [sic]. Cognitive presence was also coded for positively, for example in case of the anonymous positive feedback on the shared stories activity, which was attributed to ‘cognitive presence’ on the basis of point 24 on the Community of Inquiry Survey Instrument: “Course activities piqued my curiosity”. However, this aspect did not feature much in the data.

5.5 The toll of online learning

In the recorded interaction and synchronous chats, participants discussed at length the toll of online learning. This comprised both negative mental aspects and consequences of online learning, such as exhaustion, and practical drawbacks. Among these, students cited the additional challenge of taking care of children and family during the nationwide lockdown in Germany while simultaneously working and studying from home, as well as technological issues such as unstable internet connections and malfunctioning laptops. Susie, for example, said the synchronous sessions were at times “so exhausting, due to poor WIFI connections, or [my] inability to use the system well”. One student wrote on their anonymous course evaluation form for Online Publishing that they experienced online learning as: “absolutely challenging! I’m really exhausted especially due to the fact that I also work [another job]

from home. I always sit in front of the computer.” In both recorded and written data, students reported they found the shift to online learning especially challenging at the beginning of the semester because there was no consistency in how course leaders adapted to online teaching and which platforms were used: some teachers used OPAL, others used BigBlueButton to run synchronous sessions, yet others taught on Moodle, and some teachers communicated solely via email. Students found the organisation of varying forms of learning and the mastering of the use of the new learning platforms stressful. Vanessa summed this up in a follow-up in July 2021: “it [i.e., course leaders’ use of different learning platforms and different online teaching styles] was confusing...it was an incredible organisational workload”. In the first recorded session (July 2020), students also situated the mentally draining aspects of online learning in a wider context, saying they found it additionally hard because of part-time work on top of studies, the need to take care of family and having children at home, and the frightening and overwhelming events that were taking place globally (Covid-19). Students further reported they found being in front of a screen all day exhausting but mentioned in the follow-up that they had now gotten used to this. Anne explained:

...I also agree that the whole feeling of this online life video things, this has gotten a lot better. I remember in the first semester I often felt really exhausted after having these online classes two in a row and now it kind of has become normal and it’s okay to do this even if it’s more than one each day, so yeah I also think there has been some improvement in some directions.

Another example comes from Shirin, who like Anna highlighted how the toll of online learning has lessened, but nonetheless really missed face-to-face teaching:

I..I started to manage and I started to erm I’ve got used to it I turn on my camera I..I started to be more productive and as an advantage having online classes and having no job due to the Corona it helped me to pass 8 seminars last semester [rather than the obligatory 4] and now I feel like Vanessa I feel very okay if it’s erm..I’m okay with staying in this situation, however, I really miss our ‘Präsenz’ [face-to-face] classes, hanging out with friends after and before the class, I really miss it.

The theme ‘the toll of online learning’ demonstrates how the switch to an online-only learning environment marked a significant change for the students and that online learning was mostly negatively evaluated. Overall, students found they had to cope with a greater workload and faced additional technological issues that would not have played a part in a traditional face-to-face teaching setting.

6 Discussion

The research aims of this study were twofold: Firstly, we wanted to explore how students and teachers experienced the sudden shift from face-to-face teaching to online-only teaching. Secondly, we aimed to critically examine the CoI model by analysing the students’ evaluations and cross-referencing it with the pillars of the model. In terms of the first research aim, our case study description and thematic analysis showed how teachers and students reacted differently to the challenges posed by Covid-19 and lockdown. Course leaders attempted to stimulate meaningful learning in different ways, some of which were more successful than others. Our case studies show that remote learning which exclusively runs via online learning platforms (Moodle, OPAL etc.) without any form of synchronous communication has a demotivating effect on the students. A mix of online synchronous sessions and asynchronous self-study tasks, frequent interaction with and between students, as well as continuous feedback are more suitable teaching strategies. Students initially struggled with the shift from face-to-face education to online teaching and learning. They experienced as stressful the various ways in which course leaders adapted to online teaching and found being in front of a screen all day exhausting. Our findings further

show in an online environment, perhaps unsurprisingly, individual feedback is highly appreciated, as is a lecturer's ability provide pastoral care. That is, students appreciate a lecturer's ability to go beyond the course contents to foster an atmosphere where students feel they are heard and their concerns are taken on board. Online learning was seen as "isolated learning" (Anonymous, student course evaluation), and in such an environment, any perceived disconnect is magnified. In courses with limited feedback or a lack of personal connection (social presence), meaningful learning (cognitive presence) did therefore hardly take place.

It should be said that the importance of scholars and practitioners focusing on pastoral care is especially pertinent now. With the well-documented rise of loneliness and other mental health problems in universities (Auerbach et al., 2018), further heightened by the Covid-19 crisis (Leal Filho et al., 2021; Killgore et al. 2020), and the rapidly expanding growth of online learning courses, it is vital that instructors establish inclusive learning environments where students' physical and emotional welfare is put at the forefront. This entails creating a learning community that encourages and enables students to communicate with each other openly and on a regular basis and supports the students by ways of frequent feedback and open channels for communication with the lecturer. If students feel connected, the effects of stress and loneliness on learning experience may be mitigated, and instructors play a key role in establishing such a climate (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020, p. 11).

The CoI framework provided a helpful toolkit for conceptualising the different elements that course leaders attempted to bring into their online teaching, and these elements (social, teaching, and cognitive presence) were also readily found as themes in data gathered from interviews, synchronous chat, and feedback evaluation forms. In this sense, we feel the CoI framework succeeds in conceptualising what makes for successful learning in which the focus lies on exploring, meaning-making and validated understanding. It is also readily applicable to qualitative data. However, the framework did not sufficiently capture interactions that went beyond the contents of the course to focus on students' mental well-being, and the effect this kind of support had on teaching and learning. We see this as pastoral care. In the CoI framework, this could be categorised under 'social presence' because of the social cohesion and individual wellbeing this kind of support work aims to develop. It could, however, also be seen as part of 'teaching presence', because it is a type of 'directed social processes' instigated by the instructor. Another possibility would be to incorporate pastoral care in the CoI framework as an additional fourth pillar. Alternatively, the concept of social presence could be split into different categories in which pastoral care would be one of the new categories.

It should also be noted that the students interviewed have grown accustomed to the different organisational styles adopted by teachers and to being in front of a screen all day over time. This has improved their online learning experiences and outcomes, but there remains a sense that online interaction cannot replace 'real' face-to-face interaction, and students miss the feeling that the 'other' in interaction is, at least to some extent, 'real' (Kreijns et. al, 2014). This has not been discussed at length in the findings, but in previous CoI research, 'realness' or a sense of 'being real' has also been found to be a salient concern (e.g., Caskurlu et al., 2021; Kreijns et. al, 2014). 'Realness' is traditionally categorized under social presence along with the notion of 'social space' or 'community'. As suggested by Kreijns et. al's (2014), however, it might be more helpful to split social presence into two separate notions: (i) the notion of 'being real' or the "degree of perceived 'realness' of the other in the communication" (Kreijns et. al's, 2014, p. 14) and (ii) the notion of 'social space', which relates to the sense of community, group cohesion, and open atmosphere that exists amongst course participants (Kreijns et. al's, 2014, p. 10). In our data, students describe the group cohesion and sense of community that existed amongst members, but this did not prevent them from distinguishing online communication from "real" interaction, and they reported missing meeting others after class and "hanging out with friends before or after class" (see Section 4.1 Social presence and 4.5 The toll of online learning) A distinction of social presence as proposed by Kreijns et. al (2014) would go some way towards further

operationalizing this pillar, but further research in this area is needed to determine whether and how pastoral care could be incorporated in the framework.

7 Implications

Based on the present findings, we present practical recommendations regarding online teaching to practitioners and ELT teachers. These recommendations can help a teacher create an online environment that takes into consideration social, cognitive, and teaching presences, as well as students' physical and mental wellbeing, all of which ultimately enhance student learning experiences and outcomes.

Course design and workload. Discussions, group work and question-answer sessions tend to take longer in an online-only environment. It is therefore necessary to adjust schedule, material, and time management accordingly. Synchronous sessions enable student discussion, acquisition of knowledge, and increased social presence, so include them in your course on a regular basis. Solicit course feedback verbally or using an evaluation questionnaire at least twice during the course and use this to adapt course design and structure where necessary. A revision week with no teaching sessions around midterm might alleviate some of the stress the students are experiencing. Students can use this time to review the contents of the preceding weeks and clarify doubts. Furthermore, the revision week also provides an opportunity to elicit additional and more in-depth feedback from the students via a midterm questionnaire.

Student engagement and pastoral care. Establish and maintain a rapport with students. Inquiries and talk about student welfare beyond course-related topics is generally appreciated. Doing so forms part of what it means to provide pastoral care. Further examples of pastoral care are frequently asking students for their needs, communicating regularly, and organising extra-curricular initiatives, such as virtual mentoring events or virtual 'coffee meetings'. These types of initiatives will also go some way to tackling some of the drawbacks of online learning such as increased loneliness (Ali & Smith, 2015). Individual feedback (written or oral) is very time consuming for instructors to give, but really appreciated by students and key to successful learning (Hattie, 2009). Students left on their own to engage with the course material independently and without much feedback will experience disorientation and isolation (also see Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020, p. 10). Synchronous sessions are more successful if all participants can see each other. If students are hesitant to switch on webcams, make it either mandatory to participate in the course or share your own teaching experience and explain why it is not only important for them, but also for you to have that visual input/feedback.

8 Conclusions

In this study, we examined how teachers and students experienced the sudden shift from face-to-face classes to online-only teaching and learning. In doing so, we have also applied and critically explored the Community of Inquiry framework. Our findings suggest that although students and teachers initially struggled with the move from face-to-face lessons to online teaching and learning, they adapted and became more accustomed to the changes over time. Digital interaction, however, even in synchronous sessions, is seen as incomparable to 'real' interaction. The CoI framework served as a helpful tool in data analysis but could not account for all important aspects of online learning, such as the need for pastoral care. A distinction of social presence in distinct categories as proposed by Kreijns et al. (2014) would go some way towards addressing this but further research in this area is needed. One limitation of our study is that its design as a qualitative case study with a limited participant sample means findings cannot be generalised to the larger population of learners new to online-only learning and teaching, warranting further studies in how teachers and students adapt to the sudden shift to online learning. We have changed our teaching strategies as a result of this study and have also

provided recommendations for practitioners and ELT teachers with the hope these may be of help to those new to online teaching.

Appendix A

Community of Inquiry Survey

Teaching Presence

1. The instructor clearly communicated important course topics.
2. The instructor clearly communicated important course goals.
3. The instructor provided clear instructions on how to participate in course learning activities.
4. The instructor clearly communicated important due dates/time frames for learning activities.
5. The instructor was helpful in identifying areas of agreement and disagreement on course topics that helped me to learn.
6. The instructor was helpful in guiding the class towards understanding course topics in a way that helped me clarify my thinking.
7. The instructor helped to keep course participants engaged and participating in productive dialogue.
8. The instructor helped keep the course participants on task in a way that helped me to learn.
9. The instructor encouraged course participants to explore new concepts in this course.
10. Instructor actions reinforced the development of a sense of community among course participants.
11. The instructor helped to focus discussion on relevant issues in a way that helped me to learn.
12. The instructor provided feedback that helped me understand my strengths and weaknesses relative to the course's goals and objectives.
13. The instructor provided feedback in a timely fashion.

Social Presence

14. Getting to know other course participants gave me a sense of belonging in the course.
15. I was able to form distinct impressions of some course participants.
16. Online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction.
17. I felt comfortable conversing through the online medium.
18. I felt comfortable participating in the course discussions.
19. I felt comfortable interacting with other course participants.
20. I felt comfortable disagreeing with other course participants while still maintaining a sense of trust.
21. I felt that my point of view was acknowledged by other course participants.
22. Online discussions help me to develop a sense of collaboration.

Cognitive Presence

23. Problems posed increased my interest in course issues.
24. Course activities piqued my curiosity.

25. I felt motivated to explore content related questions.
26. I utilized a variety of information sources to explore problems posed in this course.
27. Brainstorming and finding relevant information helped me resolve content related questions.
28. Online discussions were valuable in helping me appreciate different perspectives.
29. Combining new information helped me answer questions raised in course activities.
30. Learning activities helped me construct explanations/solutions.
31. Reflection on course content and discussions helped me understand fundamental concepts in this class.
32. I can describe ways to test and apply the knowledge created in this course.
33. I have developed solutions to course problems that can be applied in practice.
34. I can apply the knowledge created in this course to my work or other non-class related activities.

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