Boosting Interaction Skills: How Social Presence Transforms Synchronous Online Language Learning for Adults

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Abstract

Covid-19 forced non-formal adult education centres in Finland to seek ways to offer their students language courses during the pandemic restrictions. Synchronous online courses were a convenient natural solution during the lockdown and became a normal method to implement courses in the post-pandemic era. This article provides insights into how adult learners perceived social presence, instructor presence, and spoken language skill development in online English courses. The participants in this study were 35 adults between 20 and 80 years old who were learning English in an adult education centre in Finland and their language skill level was A2-B1 according to common European framework of reference for languages (CEFR). The data were collected via an online questionnaire, including Likert-scale multiple-choice statements and open-ended questions, which were analysed using the content analysis method. The quantitative data was used to support the qualitative data.

Based on learners' perceptions, the findings confirmed that social presence is a key element in collaborative learning, and it is closely linked to instructor presence. These two presences are

inseparable and must be considered in teaching spaces, especially in learning focusing on spoken language acquisition.

Keywords: social presence, language learning, online learning, non-formal learning, spoken language skills

Introduction

Language courses have long been implemented in higher education as synchronous and asynchronous learning methods (Korkealehto & Ohinen-Salvén, 2023) Nowadays, online language learning has gained popularity in non-formal adult education (Bergdahl, 2022) as a flexible option for ubiquitous learning. Studies have identified that the development of teaching practices and their learning designs have improved significantly during the pandemic. However, due to varying digital cultures across institutions, local approaches must survey how their practices have developed and identify emerging practices that can become good examples for others. Especially in non-formal adult education, there is little research on online learning from the learners' viewpoint. This study aims to bridge that gap and provide recommendations for synchronous online language learning, especially for adult learners in non-formal education.

Synchronous online learning poses novel challenges for both learners and teachers. In the online learning process, the teacher acts as a facilitator, creating affordances for the learners rather than being the traditional teacher. Learners, in turn, are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning and adapt to an active role. There is a lack of more profound knowledge about teachers' reflections on their educational purposes and principles when selecting content and teaching methods (Schoultz, 2023).

Social presence is critical in fostering a collaborative learning environment, as it promotes interaction and creates a sense of community and belonging among online learners (Tu & McIsaac, 2002; Dunlap et al., 2016). Social presence nurtures interaction and encourages communication, it helps participants to feel "real" in the online classroom (Gunawardena & Zittel, 1997; Krejns et al., 2022; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2020; Panjehfouladgaran et al., 2024; Whiteside et al., 2015). The teacher is an important contributor to social presence and must be considered a crucial component of the online teaching setting (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2020; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Gonzales-Lloret, 2020). We found that regarding the elements important to an online teaching environment, social presence is a suitable frame for investigating online language learning, focusing on spoken interaction.

This paper examines 35 adult education learners taking an English course in their spare time at adult education centres in Finland. We explore their perceptions of the online classroom and their learning progress. We will first present supporting literature in the field of adult education and spoken language competence, mainly delivered in synchronous mode. We will then write about social presence theory as a suitable frame for designing the study and analysing the data. Our data analysis focuses particularly on the social aspects of the classroom and the development of the group, considering the crucial role of the teacher.

The online classroom

Liberal adult education and adult education centres in Finland

In Finland, educational institutions that provide liberal adult education include adult education centres, folk high schools, learning centres, sports training centres (sports institutes) and summer universities. Liberal adult education refers to voluntary studies open to everyone in the country. Annually, 1.1 million citizens participate in the courses offered. Liberal adult education serves as a cornerstone for fostering informed individuals and a strong, inclusive society. Built on the principle of lifelong learning, it empowers adults to continually expand their knowledge, skills, and civic engagement. Education providers have the autonomy to design courses that cater to the specific needs and interests of citizens.

The impact of liberal adult education includes personal enrichment, continuous development and learning. It fosters social cohesion by nurturing a sense of community and emphasising self-motivated learning. Furthermore, liberal adult education embraces pluralism and multiculturalism. By fostering critical thinking, civic engagement, and a commitment to sustainable development, it equips participants with the tools necessary to navigate a complex world. (Ministry of Education and Culture)

Adult education centres are educational institutions maintained by local authorities or private service providers (Ministry of Education and Culture). In Finland, there are 175 adult education centres across the country and over 600 000 Finns attend courses at these centres annually. These centres function as democratic spaces for lifelong learning, catering to a diverse range of individuals irrespective of age, background, or prior educational attainment. A distinguishing feature of the centres' philosophy lies in their focus on fostering life-long learning and learner autonomy over pursuing formal qualifications. This self-directed approach allows individuals to explore subjects that resonate with their personal interests or professional aspirations. (Kansalaisopistot)

The course offerings encompass a wide spectrum, ranging from practical skills development in languages, IT, and crafts to artistic pursuits in music and visual arts. Furthermore, adult education centres embody the principle of inclusivity, providing learning opportunities for all individuals. This focus on inclusivity fosters a vibrant learning community where people from diverse backgrounds come together to learn, share ideas, and build connections.

The affordability of the courses, often subsidised by the government and local authorities, further reinforces the commitment to democratic access to education. Additionally, the centres frequently utilise school's after-hours for course delivery, enhancing accessibility for working adults with busy schedules. (Kansalaisopistot)

Spoken language competence

Of the four basic language skills - reading, writing, speaking and listening - our focus is on speaking. Listening and reading involve receptive skills whereas writing and speaking require productive competences. Speaking is generally considered the most demanding skill to learn, as it includes indicators such as fluency, vocabulary, grammatical aspects, coherence, pronunciation and accuracy. In the common European framework for language, speaking is assessed based on range, accuracy, fluency, interaction, coherence, and phonology (Council of Europe, 2018). In addition, MacIntyre et al. (1997) argue that language learners often feel insecure and vulnerable

when speaking a language, they do not feel mastering. On the other hand, the ability to speak a language fluently is widely regarded as a key indicator of language mastery.

Social presence in online classrooms

Delivering courses online while recreating a classroom design familiar to adult learners requires incorporating dimensions of social presence, a concept that has been around since the 1970s. Communication researchers Short et al. (1976) noted the importance of social presence in a telecommunications environment, describing it as the "realness" of other people in the interaction. According to Short et al. (1976), social presence can be measured by examining the immediacy of the psychological distance that a communicator creates between themselves and the object of their communication, their addressee, or their communication to achieve this "realness" (p. 72).

The concept of immediacy was first discussed by Wiener and Mehrabian (1968), who described it in face-to-face settings. Immediacy behaviours include the verbal and non-verbal approach behaviours that all simultaneously communicate warmth, availability, closeness, and interest. The second measure of social presence in Short et al.'s (1976) research is intimacy behaviours, such as eye contact, physical closeness, and the topic of conversation, among other factors. The concept of intimacy goes back to Argyle and Dean (1965), who studied it in face-to-face settings. When applied in a mediated learning context immediacy and intimacy strategies - such as calling students by name, praising students for work well done, showing concern, giving immediate feedback, and referring to the learning community as "we" (Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968) - can positively affect the learner's perception of the presence of others and foster a sense of inclusion in the learning community. In addition to intimacy and immediacy, Short et al. (1976) suggested that a high degree of intimacy and the feeling of being "real" in the online environment also depends on the communications medium and should be included in the list of factors affecting social presence.

The concept of social presence was further developed by Garrison et al. (2000), who integrated social presence into their Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. The CoI framework highlights three core elements –cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence- and measures the impact of the presence on the educational experience and achievement.

Examples of an online environment with high social presence are described by Rourke et al. (2001), who propose that those classrooms are characterised by affective, interactive, and cohesive indicators reflecting learners' behaviour. In our study, we divided social presence into categories and indicators, with definitions adapted from Rourke et al. (2001), as shown in Table 1. These definitions were adapted to the synchronous learning environment in our study, as the original definitions were based on an asynchronous learning environment.

Table 1

Categories, indicators, examples of social presence

Category	Indicators	Definition
Affective	Expression of emotions	Conventional and unconventional expressions of emotions, using emoticons or verbally commenting.
	Use of humour	Teasing each other and use irony as a means of humour. Making jokes that relax the course atmosphere.
	Self-disclosure	Presenting details of life outside of class or expresses vulnerability.
Interactive	Continuing a conversation	Answering and asking questions. Continuing the topic with own experiences.
	Quoting from others' messages	Quoting others' entire message or part of the message and use personal names.
	Referring explicitly to others' messages	Direct references to contents of others' contribution.
	Asking questions	Asking each other questions.
	Complimenting, expressing appreciation	Complimenting others and using expressions such as "Great!", "Well done!"
	Expressing agreement	Agreeing with others by commenting or using emoticons.
Cohesive	Vocatives	Addressing or referring to participants by name.
	Addresses or refers to the group using pronouns	Addressing the group as *we, our,* and *us.*
	Phatic expressions and salutations	Communication that serves a purely social function, greetings, closures. Talking about own e.g. family, work, and hobbies

Social presence is closely linked to the instructor's social presence. Instructors need to communicate and interact with the learners and support them throughout the learning process (Lowenthal, 2015). For consistency, we opted to use the term 'instructor' throughout this article as discussed in Richardson et al., (2015). Research shows a strong correlation between instructor social presence and learning satisfaction, student engagement and learner perceptions of the instructor (Oyarzun et al., 2018).

Garrison and Arbaugh, (2007) define the role of the instructor as both designer and facilitator, with instructor presence comprising three components: (1) instructional design and organisation (e.g., setting curriculum, designing methods, etc.), (2) facilitating discourse (e.g., setting course climate, acknowledging or reinforcing student contributions, etc.), and (3) direct instruction (e.g., summarising the discussion, presenting content/questions, etc.). The categories, indicators and definitions of instructor presence are listed in Table 2. In our study, we will use both social presence and instructor presence as frameworks to design our study and analyse the data. The categories were adapted from Richardson et al. (2015)

Table 2

Categories, indicators, and definitions of instructor presence

Category	Indicators	Definition
Organising	Clear communication	Instructor provides clear course structure and general information about the course. Instructor shares resources that are helpful to learners.
Facilitating Maintaining	Instructor engages	Instructor takes an active voice in the course discourse, provides directions, and continues discussion.
	Instructor guides	Instructor guides the conversation by asking follow-up questions and summarising key points.
	Instructor supports establishing community	Instructor ensures that everyone gets a chance to participate.
Sense Making	Instructor helps to focus on discussion	Instructor encourages learners to build upon each other's ideas and respond directly to their peers.
	Instructor provides feedback	Instructor provides clarification and feedback on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

The courses in our study focus on developing speaking skills in the target language. To support this goal, instructors should design an environment with suitable media. Gonzalez-Lloret (2020) argues that collaborative technology-mediated tasks enable teachers to promote productive language output, here spoken interaction, and the kind of interaction that facilitates language learning and motivates students to continue improving their language skills. This aligns with Swain (1985), who introduced the term "collaborative dialogue" and advocated that speakers should be given tasks to engage in problem-solving and knowledge-building.

Aim of the study

This study aims to build on previous studies by gaining a comprehensive understanding of non-formal adult education centre students' perception of social and instructor presence, as well as of their spoken language skill development.

Our overarching research questions consist of:

1. What is the learners' perception of social presence in an online language course in non-formal adult education?

2. What is the learners' perception of the instructor presence in the online language course in non-formal adult education?

3. What is the learners' perception of their spoken language skills development in the online language course in non-formal adult education?

Methodology

Context and Participants

This study is rooted in social constructivism, which posits that truth is constructed through social interactions as individuals engage with the world and one another (Gray, 2014). Additionally, sociocultural learning theory emphasises that learning emerges from complex internal and external interactions shaped by various factors, including psychological, societal, historical, and cultural influences (Stickler & Hampel, 2019). Within this framework, sociocultural epistemology highlights communication as a central method of knowledge creation (Littleton & Mercer, 2013), framing knowledge as a dynamic process rather than a static product.

This research was conducted at two Finnish adult education centres where learners attend the courses in their free time as a hobby. The centres promote life-long learning by offering non-formal education for all citizens, regardless of their educational background. Their courses are made affordable through government subsidies. Before the pandemic, instruction at these centres was predominantly implemented via a face-to-face learning approach. However, during the pandemic, the course offering was forced to be transferred online. After the pandemic, some courses, including the ones studied in this research, continued to be offered online.

The participants of this research are 35 adult education students studying English as a foreign language. The participants' ages range from 20-80, with the following distribution: 20-30 (17%), 31-40 (12%), 41-50 (12%), 51-60 (12%), 61-70 (41 %) to 71-80 (6%). A majority (59%) are over 50 years old. The participants' educational backgrounds also varied: compulsory primary and lower secondary education (17%), upper secondary education (38%) and higher education (45%). Their English proficiency levels ranged from A1 to B1. The participants chose online courses for their convenience, as they allowed attendance from home, the workplace, or even while travelling. Two participants mentioned that health issues prevented them from attending face-to-face classes.

Among the participants, the most desired language skill development area was spoken language skills (100%). Listening skills were the second most desired (89%), followed by reading (50%) and writing (44%). For most participants, studying at an adult education centre was a hobby, though

60% needed spoken language skills mainly for work. The same 60 % stated that they had opportunities to use the language outside the course, while 40 % clarified that the weekly lessons were their only chance to practice speaking the target language.

The course designs

One researcher in this study designed and implemented the courses, acting as an instructor. The course design was guided by the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework and ecological language learning principles. The online sessions were held once a week, each lasting 1.5 hours. The course had 12 sessions in the autumn term and 12 sessions in the spring term, a total of 24 online learning sessions. The participants were provided with a course book. The basic structure of the online sessions is outlined in Table 3.

Table 3

The basic structure of the online session

Activity type	Example	Who
Ice-breakers	Selection of photos, choose one photo and tell how you feel today and ask somebody else	Everybody
Warm-up activities	Warm-up carousel with 3 questions related to the topic	In pairs
Book's text chapter and assignments	Reading the text aloud with in pairs Conducting book assignments in pairs	First everybody (teacher-led) and thereafter in pairs
Grammar and grammar assignments	Practising grammar in pairs	First everybody (teacher-led) and thereafter in pairs
Wrap-up activities	Checking what was you learnt Asking about everybody's reflections of the lesson	Teacher led, everybody

Each session began with an icebreaker designed to gain the learners' attention and focus. An example of an icebreaker was a selection of photos depicted in the main Zoom room. Each learner selected a photo and explained their choice. The activity continued as a chain, with each participant choosing who would go next. The task required the learners to use each other's names and ensured everyone was included in the activity.

Following the icebreaker, a warm-up activity introduced the lesson's topic, whether related to grammar or the course book's content. Examples of warm-up activities included music with lyrics displayed on the screen or a warm-up carousel. In the warm-up carousel, the teacher showed one question, divided the learners into break-out rooms in pairs, and allocated three minutes for discussion. Afterwards, learners returned to the main Zoom where the teacher introduced a

second question and reorganised the break-out rooms to pair participants with new partners. The process was repeated with a third question.

The main part of each session focused on the book chapter and grammar themes. These topics were first teacher-led and then practised in pairs in Zoom break-out rooms. A commonly used activity was a question chain, in which a learner read a question and asked somebody in the group to answer the question. The respondent would then ask somebody else in the group a new question. The activity allowed learners to practise the topic while also encouraging participants to learn each other's names. Each session concluded with a wrap-up activity in the main Zoom room. Learners reflected on the session by summarising what they had learned and identifying their key takeaways.

Research setting

The setting of this research is two online English courses offered by an adult education centre in Finland. The language level of the courses varied from A1 to B1. The duration of the courses was one academic year.

Instruments and Procedure

In a mixed methods approach, the research questions guide the selection of data collection methods to ensure that the optimal data is gathered to address these questions. Johnson et al. (2007) describe research methodologies as existing on a spectrum, with pure quantitative and qualitative approaches at opposite ends and pure mixed methods research in the middle. According to Johnson et al. (2007), the current research is categorised as qualitative-dominant mixed methods research, in which quantitative data is integrated into a qualitative framework. Due to differing ontological and epistemological perspectives, qualitative and quantitative research methods should not be combined in a single study. However, numeric and non-numeric data can be utilised if the methodology and research design are properly aligned (Twining et al., 2017). Consequently, this research collected both numeric and non-numeric data sets, which were then analysed and interpreted using a qualitative research approach. In addition, data triangulation, which entails employing various data collection methods (O'Brien et al., 2014), was strengthened by gathering diverse data in this study.

The study measures participants' feeling of "real" and their perceived level of social presence and teacher presence in the online classroom using a question catalogue adapted from Arbaugh et al. (2008). The questionnaire was created using Webropol software (see Appendix 4) and divided into three sections with a total of 42 multiple-choice questions: teaching presence (13 questions), social presence (9 questions) and cognitive presence (13 questions). Even multiple-choice questions were added to the social presence section. A 5-point Likert scale was used for these questions ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).

Six open-ended questions focused on students' perceptions of learning. The questionnaire was answered anonymously. It was in Finnish to ensure participants fully understood the multiple-choice statements and could respond more effectively to the open-ended questions in their mother tongue.

Three weeks before the end of the courses, the survey link was added to the learning management platform and shared during the final three online sessions in the Zoom

communication platform chat. A total of 42 students participated in the four online English courses, with 35 completing the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 83.33 %.

Data analysis

The quantitative data, derived from the responses to the multiple-choice questions, yielded numerical insights. The qualitative data, the answers to the open-ended questions, were analysed using the deductive content analysis method (Krippendorff, 2019). This approach allows the researchers to rely on the theoretical framework during the analysis stage (Schreier, 2012).
In the first stage of the analysis, the data were carefully read through several times with each researcher conducting this process independently. In the second stage, all expressions related to the social presence aspects according to the CoI theory such as affective, interaction and cohesive elements were marked, and divided into the categories and indicators established in the Rourke et al. (2001) framework and presented in Tables 1 and 2 above. At this stage, the researchers compared the independently marked expressions and discussed the categories to reach an agreement.

For the third research question, the qualitative data were re-analysed using a data-driven content analysis method, focusing on spoken language skills. Firstly, the data were carefully reviewed independently by both researchers. Secondly, all expressions related to spoken language skills development were identified, resulting in a total of 117 expressions. Here again, the researchers discussed and agreed on the expressions and their categories. Thereafter, through collaborative discussion, the researchers agreed on the emergence of the five following categories: collaboration, course atmosphere, course design, learner's activity and teacher's impact.

Investigator triangulation (O'Brien et al, 2014) was employed to enhance reliability. Both researchers independently analysed the data, ensuring diverse perspectives. Subsequently, they compared and discussed their findings to resolve any discrepancies. Although minor differences in interpretation were identified, the researchers quickly reached a common understanding. This triangulation process resulted in a more robust and credible interpretation of the findings.

Findings

In this section, we answer our three research questions separately.

Learners' perception of social presence in the synchronous online language course in non-formal adult education

The results showed a high perceived level of social presence among the learners in the class (see Table 4, Appendix 1). Humour (4.6) was regarded as the most significant aspect of the affective category in the SP scale (see Appendix 5). Humour is a valuable component in promoting social presence during online sessions. As one participant stated: "I really enjoyed the humour and the joyful atmosphere in the course. I felt relaxed because of the shared humour."

Self-disclosure, another key element in building social presence, posed some challenges for participants. Many reported feeling less comfortable sharing details about their lives (4.1), which, in turn, limited their ability to form a distinct impression of the other participants (3.9).

Nevertheless, the process of getting to know the other participants contributed to a sense of belonging in the course (4.1). As one student reflected: "We had a really good team spirit and there was no need to be embarrassed about not knowing something".

The focus on interaction in this course was well-perceived. Participants answered and expressed feeling comfortable discussing topics with the other course participants (4.5), also taking part in discussions (4.4), and feeling confident in using the video conference platform for online discussion (4.5) was paramount. However, some interaction methods were used less frequently, such as commenting on other learners' contributions (3.4), asking questions on their initiative (3.8), or indicating agreement in discussions (3.9). Promoting interaction was important for creating a cohesive online environment where students felt part of the group. It certainly helped their perception of "real" in the online space and enhanced their motivation to interact.

Features that encourage interaction helped build cohesion within the group. Learners had plenty of opportunities for online discussions, and they helped develop a sense of collaboration (4.2). Additionally, they greeted and said goodbye (4.4) to one another. Further, they felt that their point of view was acknowledged by other learners (4.2) and felt comfortable disagreeing within the group while still maintaining a sense of trust (3.7). The use of each other's names also was seen positively (4.4).

Participants highlighted many factors contributing to their sense of "realness" in the classroom, with group cohesion enhancing self-confidence and enjoyment. A learner mentioned: "Because of our good team spirit, newcomers are immediately taken on board smoothly." Examples of building a cohesive environment included participants referring to "us in this class" or addressing fellow learners by their first names. The instructor played an important role in setting the rules for interactions. Prescribed etiquette, such as thanking students for their comments and complimenting each other, such as: "Thank you, it was nice to talk with you", helped establish a respectful atmosphere

Learners' perception of the instructor presence in the synchronous online language course in non-formal adult education

In the second research question, we looked at the instructor presence categories of design and organisation or the course's facilitation, of course, content and direct instruction (see Table 5, Appendix 2). Table 5 shows excerpts from the qualitative data highlighting the teacher's essential role in this online English course. The learners appreciated clear explanations to support learning, with one noting: "Teacher explained clearly what to do". Control of the level of talking was crucial, as the main course objective was the development of spoken language skills. This objective is shown in the comment "there was a lot of talking" and course satisfaction achieved by "…I wanted [the training] from this course."

Direct instruction, encompassing general and corrective feedback is a crucial component of any effective language course. In this context, the instructor's feedback was appreciated and proved instrumental in enhancing student motivation and learning, as a student stated, "Feedback helped me learn better and kept me motivated".

Learners' perception of their spoken language skills development in the synchronous online language course in non-formal adult education

The third research question addressed the learners' perception of their spoken language skills development in this online course. Quantitative data revealed that 95% of participants reported improvement in their spoken language skills during the course.

Participants identified five aspects that contributed the most significantly to their skill development: collaboration, course atmosphere, course design, learner effort and teacher's impact. These aspects were assigned to categories affecting spoken language skill development, as outlined in Table 6 (Appendix 3). The following sections outline the categories and describe them in more detail, they are supported by data excerpts.

Collaboration is the starting point for practising spoken language skills and interaction. The participants emphasised that spoken collaborative activities were central to their spoken language skill development. They regarded the collaborative assignments enjoyable and the peer support beneficial for their spoken language competence development. As one learner stated: "Discussions with other students. I got to practise speaking English." Another learner added, "Conversations with students in a shared group make it easier to use English."

Course atmosphere. A positive and supportive course atmosphere was perceived as beneficial to participants' willingness to engage in spoken tasks and ultimately to their spoken language skill development. Participants appreciated the environment where each learner felt accepted. The learners praised the shared humour during the online sessions and stated that they experienced a strong sense of belonging which grew stronger as they gradually got to know each other. Another learner wrote: "Really good team spirit and no need to be embarrassed if you didn't know something", and another remarked: "Participating in the discussions became easier over time, I was encouraged to participate and speak English as I got to know the course participants".

Course design. Participants identified course design as a significant factor in their spoken language skill development. The learners valued clear instructions, as well as versatile and meaningful assignments with clear learning objectives. They regarded that the versatile and meaningful assignments inspired them to conduct the activities. The use of multimedia sources, such as videos, photos and music, was considered effective for initiation pair and group discussions. Learners also regarded the clear course structure and the detailed written and spoken instructions on conducting the assignments as helpful. Particularly the contents of the online sessions were valued which covered all language skill areas and grammar topics, with a main focus on spoken interaction. A learner stated: "The teacher has used a variety of tasks for learning (music, etc.) The course brings me a good mood in everyday life and the joy of learning"

Learner effort and attitude. The learners' comments revealed that their own effort and attitude had an integral impact on their spoken language skill development. They noted their progress, which motivated them to practise more and participate in pair work and discussions. This increased their confidence to speak and their tolerance to make mistakes. As one learner wrote: "I dared to speak in English" Another learner had a similar comment: ¨I was happy because I gained the courage to speak in English"

Teacher influence. It became apparent that the learners regarded the teacher's influence on spoken language skill development as integral. Participants valued the teacher's content and pedagogical expertise, as well as the positive encouraging manner to interact with the learners. Similarly, the timely guidance and scaffolding were appreciated. Further, the teacher's ability to modify the assignments according to different kinds of learners and their needs was welcomed.

One learner stated: "Teacher's positive attitude helped me to practise speaking". Another learner appreciated the timely, continuous feedback: "It was good that we could practise pronunciation with the teacher, and she corrected my pronunciation".

Discussion and conclusions

Research questions one and two investigated students' perception of the online English course and their perception of social presence and instructor presence in the online classroom. The focus of the language course was to develop communicative competence, speaking, and understanding of the language, skills regarded as the most challenging aspects of online language learning. Participants highlighted humour as an important component that triggered their interaction and collaboration. As Tu and McIsaac (2002) noted, one should apply different formal and informal communication styles in online courses, depending on the situation. A more informal style would help to increase the willingness to communicate. In our study, humour contributed to a less formal teaching environment, triggering trust, and leading to interaction, which, during the time of the course, decreased the level of formality, and developed an online community. This aligns with findings by Lowenthal and Dunlap (2020), who also mention humour as an important factor in establishing and maintaining positive and emotional connections with the class members. However, they state that many more factors contribute to establishing this atmosphere required. It has to be remarked that Lowenthal and Dunlap's research is based on asynchronous learning environments, whereas our study examined synchronous settings.

Krejns et al. (2022) redefine social presence in online learning and propose two additional components: social space and sociability. Social space contributes to a sense of community, group atmosphere, mutual trust, social identity, and group cohesion. Sociability can be e.g. small talk or, in our study, humour, which played a significant role in developing trustworthiness, group cohesion, and social space. Panjefouladgaran et al. (2024) emphasised digital technology as an important part of how students interact online. Our results support these findings, as the students felt comfortable with their learning platform, interacting without hesitation, and eventually developing a sense of learning community. This outcome is in line with Tu and McIsaac's (2002) framework which divides the online learning experience into three domains: social context, online community and interactivity.

Another component to consider in the online community, the feeling of being 'real' goes back to the findings of Gunawardena (1995), who noted that it is not just the media that helps create a feeling of being real by supporting the participants to interact but is linked to the type of tasks provided. Tu and McIsaac (2002) confirm this finding and propose that there is not only one type of task required but different types to trigger and maintain online interaction, such as planning, decision-making, and social tasks.

In our study, the instructor played a crucial role in establishing a social presence with thoughtful course design and the integration of suitable tasks. Students perceived the course design as both beneficial and enjoyable. As Lowenthal and Dunlap (2020) mentioned, more research has to be conducted to understand how the teacher develops social presence. We found that students formed a close connection with their teacher and appreciated her guidance.

Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) also found that effective instructors facilitate and direct higher-order learning, create a climate for open communication and help build group cohesion.

Based on our findings, we want to declare that social presence is closely linked to instructor presence, and a high degree of social presence in an online classroom can only be achieved by a strong instructor presence. These two presences are inseparable and must be considered together in designing online teaching spaces.

The third research question addressed the elements learners perceived as enhancing their spoken language skill development. Speaking is one of the most difficult skills to master in a language course and learning it online is even more challenging. According to our results, a positive, joyful course atmosphere was considered the most beneficial to boost spoken interaction. A secure and supportive learning environment capacitates the learners to speak in the target language. This atmosphere, where learners felt valued and supported, motivated them to contribute and participate actively. This finding aligns with Sert and Balaman (2018), Wriggelsworth (2019) and Leino (2017). Leino (2017) in particular highlights the importance of a positive learning environment in adult education, noting that such an environment inspires and motivates the learners to interact in the target language. Further, a safe environment encourages the learners to encounter and tackle their fears of speaking the target language.

A well-structured course design also had an integral impact on their spoken language skill development. The teacher's attitude, positivity and encouragement were also perceived as important. These results are consistent with previous research, including Salmon (2012) and Korkealehto et al. (2021), which underscores the importance of teacher presence, sufficient guidance and feedback in supporting students' autonomy and learning in online language learning. Clear instructions, meaningful tasks, and various assignments created a fruitful base for spoken skill rehearsal.

Collaboration is another critical factor, as it by nature facilitates oral language practice. Learners' impact and increased confidence in speaking the target language without worrying about making mistakes was highlighted as a key learning experience, which is a strong motivator for continued participation and effort.

Finally, the teacher's impact is crucial for learners' spoken skill development as pair feedback on pronunciation directly contributes to learners' motivation by showing tangible improvements in their skills. This result is supported by Herrera Díaz and González Miy (2017), who argue that oral skills are improved mainly by the teacher's impact.

The research findings indicate that the activities designed to enhance social presence had a positive impact on learners' motivation to participate in the online language course. Particularly, getting to know other course participants through various activities gave learners a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging increased their motivation to engage more actively in the course.

Further, natural and enjoyable discussions, the use of humour, and an interactive learning environment fostered by social presence activities made the course more engaging. Activities promoting collaboration and mutual respect, as well as those that showed learners' opinions, played a significant role in creating a supportive and respectful learning atmosphere.

To sum up, social presence activities not only made the online language course more engaging and interactive but also significantly impacted learners' motivation by fostering a sense of community, providing a supportive and respectful learning environment, and facilitating tangible improvements in language skills, particularly spoken language skills. The learners perceived a

strong sense of social presence and interaction in the online course and felt their listening and speaking skills in the target language improved, which was the main goal of participating in the course. Adult learners participating in adult education centres' language courses dominantly aim to improve their spoken language skills. By incorporating well-designed social presence activities, such courses can be an engaging, and supportive environment that enhances learners' motivation and skill development.

The results of this article contribute valuable insights to the research of social presence and spoken language skill development in online learning environments. In addition, the results provide research-based information for online non-formal adult education settings.

The remarkably positive results of our study can be attributed primarily to the unique characteristic of participant motivation. Unlike traditional educational settings where learning is often mandated or extrinsically driven, our participants approached the learning experience as a voluntary pursuit rooted in genuine personal interest. The learners self-selected into the programme, indicating a pre-existing passion and enthusiasm for the subject matter. This voluntary engagement fundamentally differs from compulsory learning environments, where resistance and disinterest can impede knowledge acquisition and skill development. Secondly, characterising learning English as a hobby suggests an intrinsic motivation that transcends traditional educational frameworks. (Marszalek et al, 2022) When individuals pursue knowledge as a personal pleasure rather than an obligation, they demonstrate higher levels of cognitive engagement, invest more time and emotional energy into learning, experience reduced performance anxiety and develop deeper, more meaningful understanding. Voluntary, hobby-driven learning significantly contributes to the positive outcomes observed in our study. By fostering an environment where learning is driven by personal interest and enjoyment, we can enhance engagement, reduce anxiety, and promote deeper understanding and retention of knowledge.

The small number of research participants can be considered a limitation, and it might restrict the generalisability of the findings to other settings involving adult learners. However, in adult learning centres the number of course participants is generally low. Therefore, we consider this limitation as a small one since the research context reflects the real-life situation in the setting in question. Further, as qualitative research is interpretative by nature, its findings might be less generalisable. Therefore, instead of examining the generalisability, or stability of the research as in the quantitative paradigm validity and reliability of qualitative research are evaluated based on its truthfulness, credibility, and trustworthiness (Cohen et al., 2018). To ensure credibility in qualitative research, it is essential to justify the research questions, employ rigorous methods, and provide clear justifications for data collection, data analysis, and the interpretation of the analysis. All these phases must be transparent (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research can be enhanced through data, method, researcher, or theoretical triangulation (Oliver-Hoyo et al., 2006). These aspects were carefully considered throughout this study.

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