An Inquiry-Based Framework for Teaching English in Synchronous Environments:
Perceptions From Teachers and Learners

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a framework for teaching English in synchronous computer-mediated environments. This research shows the components of the framework, how it materializes in the teachers' pedagogical practices, and in the students' perceptions of lessons designed using the framework. The sources of data for this investigation are a questionnaire for students, in-depth interviews with teachers, and an analysis of the transcripts of synchronous sessions that were planned and executed using the framework. This investigation presents suitable guidelines to plan, carry out, and close lessons delivered synchronously. This study shows that when the framework is used, it helps teachers plan activities, and it supports the creation of a suitable environment for learning English online. This investigation also shows that when the framework is employed, it promotes a risk-free environment. It encourages collaboration, and it fosters the linking of ideas and the comprehension of fundamental concepts.

KEYWORDS

Case Study Research, Synchronous Environments, Teaching English Online, Theoretical Frameworks

INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that more than 400 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean have access to the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2018). This expansion has generated an increase in online learning opportunities. For example, in Colombia, there are more than a thousand online programs for higher education that range from undergraduate to graduate degrees (Ministerio de Educacion Nacional, 2016).

Several challenges have surfaced because of the increasing demand for online higher education programs. First, a need for the design of teaching frameworks that assure worthwhile online learning experiences (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999). Second, the combined use of media inherent in Internet-based applications represents a challenge for education practitioners who need to be educated to develop their technological and pedagogical knowledge and skills (De Freitas & Neumann, 2009; Hubbard, 2019). Third, there is a need for new teaching approaches and teaching skills that are

different from those employed when teaching languages face-to-face (Compton, 2009; Hampel, 2009; Hampel & Stickler, 2005); and fourth, learning and teaching occur differently in online environments as compared with face-to-face settings, and therefore, they need to be researched differently (Stickler & Hampel, 2019).

To overcome these challenges, we designed a framework that can be understood to be a practical guide for teachers, and whose objective is to develop teaching skills that are crucial for teaching in synchronous environments (Stickler & Hampel, 2007). The synchronous environments in which this investigation took place are video conferences that involve real-time communication between the teacher and the students (Oztok, Zingaro, Brett, & Hewitt, 2013). Our framework is based on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model that is a theoretical framework to explain the processes and dynamics of learning and teaching in online environments (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). The framework that we present in this paper contains technical support and methodological suggestions to plan, carry out and finish synchronous learning activities in an online English course.

This is a case study that employs qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyze data (Creswell, 2007). This investigation analyzes the results of a questionnaire to students, the transcripts from in-depth interviews with teachers, and the transcripts of the recordings of synchronous sessions that were planned and carried our using our framework. Similar to Wang, Fang, Han, & Chen (2016), our study seeks to explore the materialization of all three presences of the CoI model in synchronous sessions that were designed using it from two perspectives: the teachers' pedagogical practices and decisions, and from the students' perceptions of our framework.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Community of Inquiry (COI) Model

The CoI model is a key concept to understanding the framework that we propose. Higher education has viewed the learning community as an essential element to support collaborative learning and discourse associated with higher levels of learning (Garrison et al., 1999), who consider this learning community as a community of inquiry that has teachers and students. The CoI model is based on a social constructivist perspective of learning and has been acknowledged as a comprehensive framework to guide teaching in online environments (Garrison et al., 1999). The CoI model has three objectives. First, it systematically describes and explains the processes and dynamics of student engagement and learning in online environments. Second, it articulates the social and academic factors that are necessary for the development of high-quality online education. And third, it identifies the elements that contribute to the development of authentic collaboration in online learning settings (Shea & Bidjerano, 2008). In the CoI model, learning in an online environment takes place through the interaction of three elements: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Each presence has categories and indicators that facilitate their identification (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Figure 1 shows how the three presences interact to create a successful online educational experience, and Figure 2 shows the elements, the categories and indicators of the CoI model.

The Elements of the CoI Model: Social Presence, Cognitive Presence, and Teaching Presence

The CoI model is composed of three presences: social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. According to Shea & Bidjerano (2008), the concept of social presence can be traced back to 1976 when Short, Williams, & Christie (1976) defined it as the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction, and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationship. According to Garrison et al. (1999), social presence helps the participants in the CoI to project their personal characteristics into the community in order to present themselves to the other participants as "real people". Social presence promotes positive affect, interaction, and cohesion (Garrison et al., 1999;

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