

## **Peer-Assessment and Student-Driven Negotiation of Meaning: Two Ingredients for Creating Social Presence in Online EFL Social Contexts**

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### **Abstract**

With the current availability of state-of-the-art technology, particularly the Internet, people have expanded their channels of communication. This has similarly led to many people utilizing technology to learn second/foreign languages. Nevertheless, many current computer-assisted language learning (CALL) programs still appear to be lacking in interactivity and what is termed social presence, which is in turn an obstacle to the learners assuming active roles in their online experience of L2 learning. Consequently, the existing CALL programs do not seem to have updated themselves from the obsolete behavioristic and communicative genres to reach for the *integrative* one to yield optimum interactivity. The present study has attempted to cast light on the prospect of creating an online learning community that could optimize the patterns of interaction among the students and the teacher with the intention of creating online social presence. Using a qualitative research based on grounded theory, the researchers attempted to collect and analyze the data vis-à-vis the participants' feedback on the research questions that were cyclically obtained from 42 English students of the first researcher's weblog through 41 semi-structured interviews at the end of each virtual class on Skype and Discord over one year. The results suggested that content-based instruction (CBI) in which the students can opt for and create the content of the course through engaging in asynchronous activities and performing peer-assessment in the comment forms and discussion boards before practicing negotiation of meaning in each synchronous class could maximize the level of student-student interactivity and social presence among the L2 learners.

**Keywords:** social presence, peer-assessment, negotiation of meaning, content-based instruction

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## INTRODUCTION

This is a study of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) with a particular emphasis on optimizing interaction patterns among the L2 learners in an online social context (Gunawardena, 1995; Tu, 2001, 2002; Walther, 1997) such as a language learning weblog through creating social presence. Social presence is technically referred to as a shared feeling of community or connection among the learners (Palloff & Pratt, 2005), a sense of belonging in the learners (Picciano, 2002) and a consequent appreciation of online interpersonal relationships (Hauck & Warnecke, 2013; Tu, 2002) to account for student satisfaction (Gunawardena, 1995) in the most updated genre of CALL, i.e. integrative CALL (Gruba, 2004; McBride & Seago, 1996). This study plans to explore the impact of asynchronous peer-assessment occurring in comment forms and discussion boards and CBI-oriented negotiation of meaning in synchronous classes on the establishment of social presence.

Computers have been utilized for second/foreign language learning and teaching from the 1960s (Lamy & Hampel, 2007; Ng & Oliver, 1987; Wyatt, 1983). This lengthy period of time can technically be divided into the following three main stages: *behaviorist*, *communicative*, and *integrative CALL* (Lamy & Hampel, 2007).

Behavioristic CALL was replete with repeated drills generally to practice reading and writing, and the L2 learners were practicing second/foreign languages individually (Lamy & Hampel, 2007; Warschauer, 1996). In communicative CALL programs, computers adopted the role of tutors, interacting with the learners in a computer-human communication mode. Nevertheless, computer-mediated communication (CMC) caused a paradigm shift, altering the computer-human interaction mode to a human-human one (Simpson, 2002). From the 1990s, CALL has been carrying the *integrative* label, thanks to the widespread use of multimedia products and the democratization of Internet use (Lamy & Hampel, 2007). Unlike communicative CALL, in integrative CALL, the concept of L2 teaching and learning took a more relatively group-based form as a result of more emphasis being placed upon sociocultural considerations in education (Lamy & Hampel, 2007).

In conjunction with the significance of social considerations in CMC, Walther (1996) declares that “combinations of media attributes, social phenomena, and social-psychological processes may lead CMC to become *hyperpersonal*, that is, to exceed FtF interpersonal

communication” (p. 5), a phenomenon which was also referred to as *social information processing* (SIP) (Walther, 1997).

Nowadays, the majority of CALL-based education systems are not categorized as being integrative (Felix, 2001). In such education systems, CALL practitioners generally attempt to compartmentalize or disintegrate the whole system into individual variables, namely reading ability, acquisition of grammar, elicitation tasks, motivation and attitude, discourse analysis, etc., whereas “no large-scale multivariable investigation focusing on the students’ experience of Web-based language learning has been reported to date” (Felix, 2001, p. 47). In these educational programs where student-student interaction is not sufficiently encouraged, L2 learners can seldom develop a sense of belonging to the online community, their peers and the teacher due to the fact that the concept of *social presence* has not been truly realized.

In sum, although the training of CALL has developed over the last thirty years, the training of student interaction and involvement in virtual venues has still remained a low priority, confirming Warschauer’s (1996) view that involving the students in determining the class direction does not necessarily imply that teachers assume passive roles. Teachers’ contribution in a learner-centered, network-enhanced classroom includes coordinating group planning, focusing students’ attention on linguistic aspects of computer-mediated texts, helping students to gain metalinguistic awareness of genres and discourses, and assisting students in developing appropriate learning strategies.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Social Presence**

The concept of social presence is not new. Short, Williams and Christie (1976, cited in Palloff & Pratt, 2007) defined social presence as the degree to which a person is perceived as real in communication that is conducted via the use of some form of media. According to Short et al. (cited in Cobb, 2009), social presence is a construct consisting of two concepts: intimacy and immediacy. Factors, such as smiling, intimacy of topics, eye-contact and physical proximity, can influence intimacy in any communication medium (Argyle & Dean, 1965; Cobb, 2009). On the other hand, immediacy is referred to behaviors that are intended to decrease the psychological barriers among communicators in a discourse (Swan & Shea, 2005). When an immediate response is expected but not

received, “a feeling of low interactivity is created” (Tu, 2002, p. 297) and the level of social presence declines in return.

Social presence has been correlated with learner satisfaction (Gunawardena, 1995) as well as a sense of belonging to the online community (Picciano, 2002) that impacts learners’ online interaction (Tu, 2002; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). It is also viewed as a degree of awareness of another person in an online setting and a consequent appreciation of online interpersonal relationships (Hauck & Warnecke, 2013; Tu, 2002; Walther & Burgoon, 1992). Tu (2002) catalogues *interpersonal relationship, trust, learners’ perceptions on online environments, learner’s computer literacy and communication styles, attributes of communication media, task types, and privacy* as the building blocks of online social presence. Developing social presence is an integral part of creating a successful learning community because it is a measure of the feeling of community that a learner experiences in an online environment (Tu & McIsaac, 2002).

### **Peer-Assessment and CALL**

The opportunity for students to learn through collaborating with each other, instead of exclusively with the teacher, is a topic of much concern and interest to pedagogues and educational researchers (Coit, 2006; DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001; Foster & Ohta, 2005; Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Webb, 1989). Coit (2006) believes that any type of peer-assessment (compared to exclusive teacher-assessment) can strengthen the social and interpersonal skills and bonds in and among the learners by practicing being both the receiver and giver of assistance and feedback. Furthermore, DiGiovanni and Nagaswami (2001) argue that online peer review (OPR) is superior to face-to-face peer review (FFPR) in terms of increasing the level of attention and criticality in the students and the amount of time to analyze asynchronous activities, which is crucial for peer-assessment.

According to Vrasidas, Landone, Christodoulou, and Zembylas (2006), digital portfolios as the collection of selected pieces of work by students can help the learners to review, revise and update their own online contributions, analyze their learning strategies, evaluate their participation in virtual classes, and turn the spotlight of learning on themselves (the learners), rather than the teachers, thus increasing student autonomy and reflectivity. Regarding implementing teacher-

assessment, Chapelle (1997) proposes the following consciousness-raising activities and techniques that could be used by the teachers to call the learners' attention to linguistic forms: displaying hot spots with links to supporting materials, highlighting relevant forms, and signaling learners when they have made mistakes or errors. According to Blake (2000), inadequate systematic teacher-assessment in CALL programs could lead to the underdevelopment of grammar knowledge in the language learners.

### **Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and CALL**

Content-based second language instruction is built upon the foundation that second language acquisition could be facilitated through the medium of subject-matter content or meticulously selected themes and topics (Gaffield-Vile, 1996). CBI could motivate the L2 learners through developing a sense of accomplishment in them by exposing them to authentic content material (Kern, 2013), which provides a departure from more traditional, linguistically-driven syllabi (Chapelle & Curtis, 2000).

With regard to CBI, Yun (2011) argues for the efficacy of CALL in comparison to traditional systems of education because CALL can provide the L2 students with hypertext and hypermedia features through which the learners can easily have access to a vast amount of information in a nonlinear and interactive fashion through multiple types of resources, such as text, graphics, audio, video and animation. In this regard, flipped learning can be utilized to implement CBI effectively through CALL because flipping the classroom can help language learners to practice second/foreign languages at their own pace and convenience by pausing and playing the embedded audio/video players (Kostka & Brinks Lockwood, 2015; Mok, 2014), which could facilitate the process of learning and digesting complicated subject matter even for weak students (Mok, 2014).

### **Negotiation of Meaning and CALL**

According to Sullivan (cited in DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001), "CALL provides a forum for social interaction, collaboration, negotiation of meaning and dissension. In addition, transcripts of the real-time discussions can be stored easily as a shared accessible resource for research and reference" (p. 34). In a study conducted by Blake (2000), 50 intermediate L2 Spanish learners were asked to carry out networked

discussions in pairs during their lab time using a synchronous chat program called *Remote Technical Assistance* (RTA), which recorded all textual entries. The findings revealed that jigsaw tasks appeared to be effective in promoting optimum negotiation of meaning. If teachers can guide students through getting into the right kinds of online conversations, then the negotiations can extend the opportunities beyond what the learners can do in the traditional classrooms (Chapelle & Jamieson, 2008).

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The major objective of this study was to investigate the prospect of generating *social presence* in integrative CALL programs through implementing a student-driven CBI approach, and optimizing student-student and teacher-student interaction patterns both asynchronously (through stimulating peer-assessment) and synchronously (through organizing negotiation of meaning). As a result, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Which type of assessment (self-assessment, peer-assessment or teacher-assessment) is more influential in creating social presence in conjunction with CALL?
2. How could CBI help online L2 learners and teachers to become more actively involved?
3. How should the teacher organize negotiation of meaning to promote more social presence?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The participants of this study were 42 online English students of the first researcher's weblog at [www.lelb.net](http://www.lelb.net) who attended a general English course in preparation for IELTS and TOEFL with a particular emphasis on organized discussions lasting for over one year. Four of our 42 participants (9.5%) were not Iranian. To be more precise, they were from Bangladesh, India, Kazakhstan and Pakistan. Thirteen of our 38 Iranian participants (34.2%) followed our course while they did not live in Iran, generally from non-English-speaking countries. Twenty-four of the 42 participants (57.15%) were female and 18 (42.85%) were male English learners in the 18-41 age bracket whose average age was 27, which was calculated from their personal profiles on our online community. Their

level of proficiency in English was intermediate and/or above. This categorization of their proficiency level was confirmed through a tentative oral evaluation test that each participant was supposed to take before attending our classes in the form of an online interview with the researchers. Moreover, the new students could review our archived classes and podcasts to ascertain whether their proficiency level would suffice for the class.

## **Instrumentation**

### ***Round Table***

The core of our English conversation class lasting for over one year with 42 students was an activity labeled *round table*. The rationale for calling this activity *round table* was that the participants were expected to raise an appropriate question about the topic of each session on Wednesdays, from 20:30 to 22:00 according to Iran's standard time and place it in the comment form at the bottom of the corresponding post created by the researchers. Then the participants had plenty of time (from Friday to Wednesday) to refer to the specified comment form asynchronously, posing questions, editing their own questions (self-assessment), replying to or voting for/against the other participants' questions (peer-assessment), receiving feedback from the researchers (teacher-assessment), and preparing themselves for giving appropriate answers to each individual question synchronously in the class. These three types of assessment were practiced in our collaborative writing activity, as well. Our round tables based on group voice conferencing on Skype and Discord adopted a CBI approach to language teaching and learning based on flipped learning. Each synchronous class consisted of the following activities in order: *Lecture Delivery (optional)*, *Round Table*, and *Argue for/against*.

### ***Collaborative Writing***

Collaborative writing was an asynchronous collaborative activity in which the participants composed an argumentative essay interactively in response to a challenging topic posted by the researchers on the weblog like IELTS Writing Task 2. The participants, as the essayists, would refer to the post with the topic and a comment form, developing paragraphs in the form of comments (each essayist, one paragraph). With the exception of the first essayist writing the introductory paragraph, the subsequent

ones were to study the existing paragraphs in the comment form and make their own contribution correspondingly. The participants could also perform peer-assessment through *replying to* the previous paragraphs to practice negotiation of meaning and/or form in a nested or threaded fashion.

### ***Argue for/against***

Regarding the *Argue for/against activity* in which the participants were supposed to argue either for or against a challenging question or statement to perform negotiation of meaning through CBI, the researchers created two sub-voice channels under the English Conversation voice channel on Discord as *I agree* and *I disagree*. Then the participants were given approximately two minutes to clarify their positions to the multifaceted statement by entering the voice channel corresponding to their position. During that time, they were expected to work with their partners in their special voice channel, trying to come up with as many cogent reasons as they could to convince the opposing group that they were right in the argument. After two minutes of collaborative brainstorming, the participants would come back to the English Conversation voice channel to have a heated argument with each other.

### ***Call for Feedback***

Forty-one semi-structured group interviews under the title of *call for feedback* taking place in the last five minutes of each synchronous class were conducted, recorded, transcribed and analyzed as the main instrument of data collection. Fourteen questions principally developed from the research questions (Appendix A) were recursively and consecutively posed in the 41 group interviews (i.e., one question in each interview in approximately three iterative cycles) as the primary source of data collection. The participants had access to the questions of our interviews located at the bottom of each post created on the weblog corresponding to each synchronous class three days prior to the classes to consider them in depth. No linguistic error correction was performed as long as the intended meaning was clearly conveyed. Additional information about the technical terms of the questions was provided by the researchers orally on request.



## **Data Collection Procedure**

In this qualitative study based on grounded theory, the researchers endeavored to collect and triangulate the data through conducting 41 semi-structured group interviews, administering an open-ended questionnaire (Appendix B) at the end of the study, and making close observations during and after the classes. Data triangulation through conducting interviews and making observations is quite typical of any grounded theory research (Briggs, 1986; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Duff, 2008; Rennie & Fergus, 2006). It is important to note that the participants have already granted the researchers this consent to use their real names in our open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

To triangulate the data, the researchers made *participant observations* in order to be closely involved in the social setting and perform a negotiated and understood role in it (Creswell, 2007; Duff, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Robson, 2007; Warschauer & Whittaker, 2002). These participant observations were made with the help of field notes to record the researchers' feelings and reactions to the observed events (Best & Kahn, 2006) occurring at the time of the classes and group interviews on Skype and Discord in response to the three research questions. Afterwards, the researchers immediately listened to the audiotaped version of the classes uploaded on the weblog as podcasts, making an attempt to bridge in the gap between the data elicited from the interviews and their own speculations on the research questions. This type of *auditory observation* could tremendously cast light on some information that the participants voluntarily or involuntarily failed to present to the researchers in our semi-structured interviews.

## **Data Analysis**

Having listened to and transcribed the interviews (25 single-spaced pages, approximately 8200 words), the researchers strived to elicit direct evidence emerging from the transcribed interviews and the other data collection instruments and compare it to emerging categories (units of information in accordance with the research questions). They tried to swing back and forth over the new and old data "to take a fresh look as to whether this code sheds light on earlier data" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 517), something which is technically referred to as *constant comparative method* to provide a comprehensive description of the participants and

context of the research because, according to Felix (cited in Hubbard, 2005). One of the common problems of research on CALL is poor description of research design.

Data triangulation in a cyclical, inductive, process-oriented and iterative fashion (Charmaz, 2005) through 41 semi-structured interviews immediately after 41 synchronous classes lasting for over one year alongside supplementary observations and questionnaires enabled the researchers to *iterate* and *saturate* the data (Dörnyei, 2007; Lincoln & Gruba, 1985) to account for the internal validity or credibility of the study. Consequently, the iterative and cyclical processes of data collection and data analysis – occurring almost concurrently and not necessarily in succession – commenced from the very outset of conducting interviews at the end of each virtual class (i.e., from the very beginning of the study) and continued unabated throughout the study until a detailed account of the phenomena under investigation was fulfilled (saturation).

## RESULTS

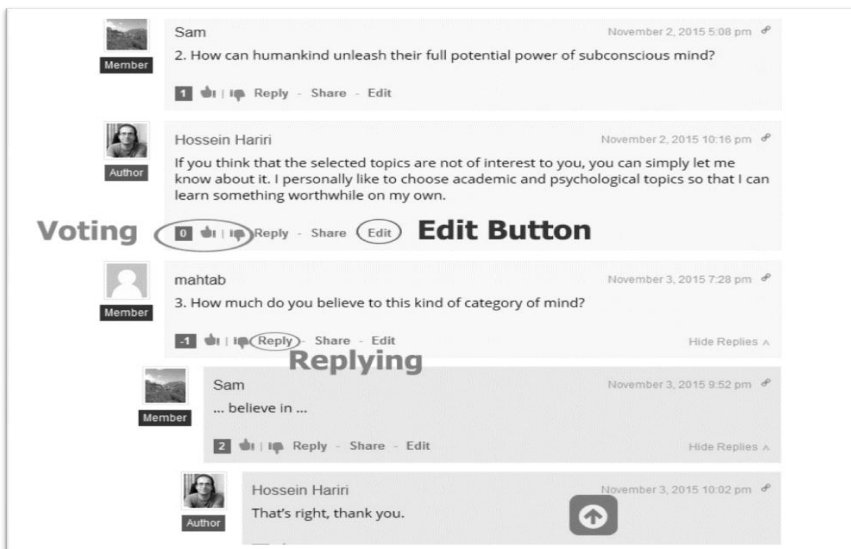
### Implementing Peer-Assessment

Regarding the dichotomy between synchronous and asynchronous communication, the majority of the participants (to be more precise, over 70%) asserted the superiority of synchronous communication over asynchronous CMC simply because the former could efficiently be practiced in oral communication and the latter was prone to delayed communication. Notwithstanding, in their questionnaires, S. Daliri and T. Ghanooni, respectively, enumerated some unique advantages of asynchronous communication to perform peer-assessment as “increasing the number of respondents” and “promoting more reflectivity and criticality before hitting the Post Comment button”. Furthermore, in an interview, A. Ahadzadeh (November 19, 2016) astutely called our attention to one of our collaborative writing sessions with over 50 comments and replies to compose an argumentative essay interactively through performing asynchronous peer-assessment. In addition, in their questionnaires, H. Zanjani and Leila explained that performing peer-assessment and negotiation of meaning in interaction with the overseas students had made our social activities quite exciting.

In one call for feedback session, S. Ghomi (August 18, 2016) stated that the possibility of expressing opinions and criticism freely and

making asynchronous peer-assessment on comment forms and discussion boards was helpful in “arousing the interest level of the students to maximize their interaction and develop a sense of belonging to the course”. Furthermore, H. Rezaei (August 11, 2016) stated that the proper use of categorized forums and polling/voting applications to reflect the students’ interests and opinions and the teacher’s consequent responses to the students’ feedback did motivate the learners to engage in the class activities enthusiastically because, according to S. Nasiri (October 6, 2016), “if the students are not interested in the class, they are not going to take the class seriously”.

Figure 1 is aimed at illustrating the participants’ asynchronous collaborative activities in our round tables. As illustrated below, through commenting, posting, replying, thumbing up/down other comments (peer-assessment) and even editing their own comments (self-assessment), the participants can engage in enlightened negotiation of meaning in a CBI approach, which per se might lead to the establishment of social presence.



**Figure 1:** Asynchronous interactivity in the form of commenting, editing, replying and voting in our comment forms prior to any round table

## **Practicing Student-Driven CBI**

Some round tables would start with voluntary English presentations given by the participants on the topic being discussed for approximately five minutes under the title of *Lecture Delivery*. Afterwards, the lecturers would give an interview to the other participants as a point of departure for our discussions. According to V. Kalhor (October 13, 2016), in this student-driven CBI approach to CALL, the students could have some “authority”. F. Rezanejad and H. Zanjani, in the same interview, referred to the concept of “student authority” expressed by V. Kalhor as “student autonomy”. In this regard, in another interview, S. Ghomi (October 20, 2016) contended that “giving lectures can be a good idea to make the students more active, but lecture delivery should only be a voluntary task”.

Our student-driven CBI approach aroused some controversy among the participants. In a call for feedback session, a minority of the participants, namely H. Hosseini, T. Ghanooni and V. Kalhor (September 29, 2016) criticized this approach for being too demanding and time-consuming. In his questionnaire, S. Ghomi, an IELTS candidate, announced that content development on the part of the students based on psychological and abstract topics was not a high priority for him. Nevertheless, the majority of the participants advocated for the efficacy of our student-driven CBI approach. For instance, in one of our group interviews, H. Rezaei (August 11, 2016) stated that the topics were “deep and challenging” for which the students were supposed to “conduct some research, sit down and think”. Moreover, Niaz (June 23, 2016) argued that our student-driven CBI approach on interesting subject matter had made her utterly motivated and confident in each round table.

Some participants, namely F. Rezanejad, H. Hosseini, R. Mousavi and T. Ghanooni, criticized our round tables for lacking adequate dynamism and improvisation as the students were supposed to exchange questions and answers that had already been placed in the comment forms by themselves. Moreover, the same participants contended that the teacher was rather strict and not intimate enough, thus undermining interactivity. To be more precise, H. Hosseini (November 5, 2016) complained that the teacher was unfriendly toward the new students who disregarded our class regulations.

## Organizing Negotiation of Meaning

In our round tables, the participants and the researchers had an abundance of negotiation of meaning over the questions and replies that the participants were required to form and leave as comments. In this regard, H. Zanjani (September 29, 2016) argued that “our round tables allow me to learn from others and share my ideas about certain issues”. As displayed in Table 1, in our round tables, we discussed a variety of thought-provoking topics, initially, through asynchronous comments and replies in the comment forms, and subsequently, through holding negotiation of meaning in our synchronous classes on Skype and Discord to discuss the participants’ asynchronous activities.

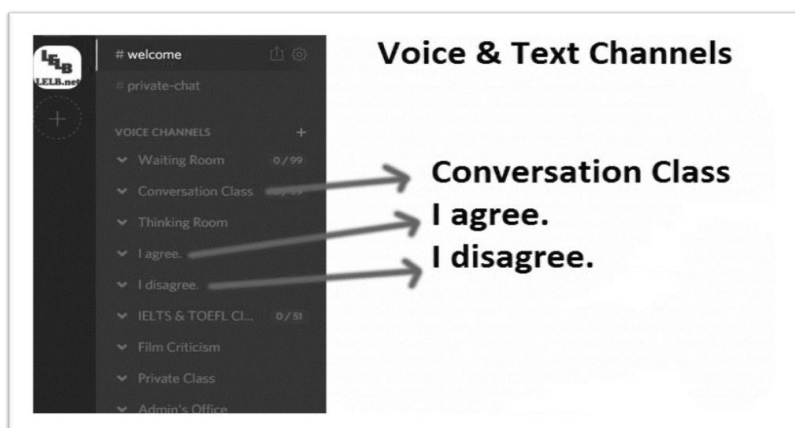
**Table 1:** Some selected topics for our round tables with detailed specifications

<b>Class Date</b>	<b>Discussion topics</b>	<b>Asynchronous platform</b>	<b>Synchronous platform</b>	<b>No. of comments and replies</b>
Jun 23, 2016	Mental Gender Differences	Comment forms at the bottom of the posts	Voice conference on Skype/Discord	38
Jul 21, 2016	Physical Appearance	√	√	32
Aug 4, 2016	Satire	√	√	66
Aug 11, 2016	Luck	√	√	67
Sep 8, 2016	Sixth Sense	√	√	83
Oct 6, 2016	Self-discipline	√	√	81
Nov 5, 2016	Attraction Law	√	√	76

Negotiation of meaning in our round tables was carried out both asynchronously (from Friday to Wednesday, through commenting and replying) and synchronously (on Wednesdays and in our online classes on Skype and Discord). Our synchronous classes, in the form of

podcasts, and asynchronous activities were archived for future reference. Podcasting and archiving our round tables turned out to be moderately effective in enhancing the level of motivation, activeness and engagement in the participants. The participants' numerous asynchronous activities (1920 comments and replies) occurring in our comment forms and in response to their archived podcasts, particularly lectures (so far, 40 lectures), are a testimony to this statement. Nevertheless, the researchers observed that podcasting and archiving could also cause tension and anxiety in some learners, especially female participants, as they knew that their presence in our round tables would be recorded and accessible to others publicly. For instance, F. Rezanejad (August 11, 2016) and Z. Rousta (November 5, 2016) requested that their recorded lectures as archived podcasts be removed from our weblog.

Regarding the teacher's roles in organizing negotiation of meaning to promote more social presence, in an interview, F. Rezanejad (June 23, 2016) appreciated the teacher's efforts to express his personal opinions only after the other negotiators so that the students could think about the questions freely and without any prejudice. In another interview, Niaz (July 28, 2016) highlighted the importance of not being stopped by the teacher in our negotiations, which according to her, is common in other English classes and can undermine the students' confidence. As displayed in Figure 2, in our synchronous negotiations on Discord, the participants were encouraged to practice collaborative brainstorming on challenging questions in two opposing groups.



**Figure 2:** Practicing negotiation of meaning on challenging topics by entering 2 opposing voice channels on Discord

Our synchronous negotiations based on voice conferencing received some criticism from a small minority of the participants in our call for feedback sessions (e.g., R. Mousavi & T. Ghanooni). Nevertheless, the other participants, namely A. Ahadzadeh, F. Rezanejad, H. Zanjani, M. Hesabi and S. Daliri, who were proportionately larger in number (to be more precise, almost all of the female participants and approximately 80% of the male ones), advocated for voice conferencing in both interviews and questionnaires. They argued that voice conferencing was self-sufficient because, in so doing, the learners could pay more attention to the form of language and express themselves more effectively, which, according to F. Rezanejad (October 6, 2016), was not quite possible if the participants could see each other on their webcams as video conferencing might be rather distracting.

## **DISCUSSION**

The main purpose of the study was to explore some factors that might influence the realization of social presence, thus precipitating interactivity in an integrative genre of CALL, including strategies to trigger peer-assessment, the impact of a student-driven CBI approach to CALL, and teacher's presence in initiating and maintaining negotiation of meaning in an appropriate social context.

### **Peer-Assessment and Social Presence**

The analysis of the interviews alongside the researchers' observations provided this answer to the first research question in this way that peer-assessment carries more weight in comparison to the other two types of assessment (i.e., self- and teacher-assessment) in fostering interactivity and social presence, particularly in asynchronous channels of communication. Both collaborative writing and round table activities triggered asynchronous peer-assessment in a low-anxiety environment because, first of all, the participants' tasks were collectively (not individually) assessed, and second of all, the participants had plenty of time to examine the preceding writing tasks or questions written by their classmates and make their own contribution.

It is in the light of peer-assessment in CALL programs that the learners raise their reflectivity, criticality and awareness in response to, first, their own asynchronous contributions on the blog (self-assessment), knowing that they will be assessed by their peers, and second, their

peers' contributions in a friendly, open-ended and interactive mode (peer-assessment). This degree of awareness of another person in an online setting and a consequent appreciation of online interpersonal relationship (Hauck & Warnecke, 2013; Tu, 2002; Walter & Burgoon, 1992) are the perfect end-results of peer-assessment. As a consequence, having attended our online course replete with self-, peer-, and teacher-assessment for over one year, most of the participants, in their open-ended questionnaires, asserted that they had become more reflective, critical and cooperative. In this regard, in one of our group interviews, S. Nasiri (November 5, 2016) suggested that "peer-assessment could elevate the level of knowledge in the learners by allowing them to exchange opinions and make corrections interactively".

When the L2 learners, in a virtual venue, under the guiding supervision and subtle presence of the teacher or CALL specialist, perform peer-assessment, chiefly asynchronously, for example, through using comment forms and discussion boards to learn from each other and fulfill a sense of academic satisfaction (Gunawardena, 1995), then "a feeling of community and connection among learners" (Palloff & Pratt, 2005, p. 7) or social presence is developed and consolidated among the interactive members of the community, which can never be accomplished through the exclusive implementation of self- or teacher-assessment.

Despite the fact that both intimacy and immediacy are among the integral ingredients of student interactivity, the majority of the participants, to be more precise, all of the male participants and half of the female ones, advocated for the superiority of immediacy over intimacy in conjunction with online communication in our *call for feedback* sessions. For example, N. Iman, from Bangladesh, and T. Ghanooni (September 1, 2016) argued for the superiority of immediacy over intimacy in being "more practical and helpful for the learners and prompting more successful conversational discourse". However, between intimacy and immediacy, intimacy should receive immediate attention at the outset of any CALL program before any spark of interactivity. In other words, intimacy takes precedence over immediacy, yet when it is noticed that immediate interactivity is no longer an aspiration, then the teacher is advised to be prudent enough lest a surplus of intimacy should jeopardize requisite disciplines for the successful maintenance of the learning blog. The above-mentioned delicate relationship between intimacy and immediacy was gradually revealed to the researchers



through their deliberate observations on the participants' social activities on the blog over one year during which they realized through trial and error that CALL specialists had better practice more intimacy in interaction with novice e-learners so that they could break the ice and get the ball of interactivity rolling. Nevertheless, when this dynamic inertia (initial stages of online interactivity) is triggered, it must be aptly directed to the major objectives of the learning community, for example, achieving a sense of academic satisfaction, instead of indiscriminately precipitating online interactivity, which might culminate in over-socialization.

Regarding this issue from another perspective, it is important to note that the L2 learners should not experience too much immediate interactivity exclusively from the side of the teacher, especially in an asynchronous mode in comment forms and discussion boards, which was a blatant mistake the first researcher made in the first phase of the current investigation. Accordingly, it was noticed that providing the students with a surplus of immediate teacher-assessment in the comment forms and discussion boards can technically obstruct peer-assessment in the form of student-student interactivity on the learning blog and make the L2 learners dependent on the teacher and his/her assessment, which was repeatedly solicited from the researchers in our semi-structured interviews upon modifying teacher's immediacy patterns in our online communicative activities.

In the second phase of the study, the unsatisfied participants were informed about this intentional change of policy (i.e., consciously delayed teacher-assessment) through negotiated curriculum (Smith, 2004) in our group interviews and gradually adapted themselves to it. However, teacher-assessment was considered to be the last resort, providing self-assessment and peer-assessment could not yield successful negotiation of meaning and/or form in our asynchronous channels of communication. This point was also made by S. Ghomi (August 11, 2016) in the sense that "if the teacher performs error correction at the last stage, we can learn from each other and our problems".

With the purpose of encouraging online peer-assessment among the L2 learners, the social context in which all online interactivity occurs must be conducive to the implementation of peer-assessment. In this regard, blogging that is enriched with nested comment forms, categorized discussion forums, polling/voting, and archiving systems to categorize posts and pages with rating applications can provide an

*inviting* and *friendly* atmosphere for the L2 learners to perform peer-assessment and maximize their interactivity. The significance of the two aforementioned characteristics of an appropriate social context (i.e., being inviting and friendly) was appreciated by most of the participants in our group interviews (e.g., H. Rezaei, H. Zanjani, L. Soleimani, M. Jalali, M. Rostampour, Nafiseh, S. Nasiri & V. Kalhor) because the process of L2 learning, particularly electronically as a relatively novel approach, could appear rather too stressful and demanding to some students, which was perceptible in the observations.

### **Student-Driven CBI and Social Presence**

Our voluntary *lecture delivery* activity at the outset of some round tables proved to be another effective collaborative task to account for the creation of a sense of belonging in the autonomous learners in the form of content development for subsequent classes, which was confirmed by some lecturers in our semi-structured interviews (e.g. A. Ahadzadeh, H. Zanjani, S. Daliri & S. Ghomi). The *lecture delivery* activity and the participants' asynchronous correspondence prior to each round table session were regarded as deliberate acts of reconsidering some surprisingly dominant teacher-driven techniques, such as Initiation-Response Feedback (IRF) in which it is the teacher who initiates class activities (Abrams, 2001; Waring, 2009). According to Abrams (2001), "learners are not to be viewed as passive recipients of ready-made systems of knowledge, transmitted to them by the knower, the instructor" (p. 492).

Content development on the part of the students automatically raised the level of their reflectivity, criticality, awareness and engagement in the process of learning. This point is clearly identifiable by juxtaposing the quality and quantity of the participants' asynchronous activities as the content of our round tables at the outset of the course with their social contributions at the end of the study with the help of the archived stream of activities. In a collaborative learning community, learners are encouraged to "develop an ability to think critically about new media genres when they actually go through the process of producing new media rather than just consuming it" (Warschauer, Grant, Real, & Rousseau, 2004, p. 534).

In one of our group interviews, F. Rezanejad (June 30, 2016), an M.A. graduate in TEFL, compared our student-driven CBI-based course

with the ones she was accustomed to as a university student, concluding that “our approach was more practical for learning English because the learners adopted genuinely active roles in learning”.

### **Negotiation of Meaning and Social Presence**

The findings of this study corroborate the results of Towndrow’s (2004) research about the efficacy of problem-solving activities and scaffolding in online L2 courses to encourage the students to interact with each other with the purpose of asking for clarification and providing feedback on challenging subjects for discussion, which was widely practiced in our *round table* and *argue for/against* sessions. Additionally, the efficacy of practicing collaborative brainstorming and problem-solving activities to promote student-student interactivity was acknowledged by S. Daliri in his questionnaire.

The analysis of the transcribed interviews surprisingly indicated that even our most teacher-dependent participants preferred that the teacher be unbiased, impartial and nonjudgmental, particularly in our oral synchronous negotiations taking place in our *lecture delivery*, *argue for/against* and *round table* activities. To be more precise, in our *call for feedback* sessions, the participants announced that the teacher should not interject the negotiators or try to intervene in the natural flow of synchronous conversations whose main partakers are the language learners. For example, the teacher’s strong presence in our negotiations was publicly (in our interviews) and privately (in our open-ended questionnaire) criticized by some active participants (e.g., S. Daliri & T. Ghanooni, September 24, 2016). This finding has also been investigated and corroborated by Palloff and Pratt (2003).

Moreover, on many occasions, the participants showed a great tendency to digress from the main point for a variety of reasons. This was one of the rare instances that the teacher would intentionally mediate the distorted course of conversations. This teacher’s direct intervention provoked controversy among the participants, especially in our group interviews, as some of them who were more socially inclined would dispute it, while more serious students who were IELTS or TOEFL candidates would generally favor this teacher’s attribute. For instance, S. Ghomi (October 13, 2016), who was also an IELTS candidate, requested that “our conversations should be even more focused and organized”. In his questionnaire, H. Hosseini explained that, unlike many other

conversation classes, our round tables were highly oriented around the specified topics because the students were actively involved in developing the content of this activity through commenting before our synchronous classes.

The examination of the transcribed interviews clarified this point that virtual English classes based on video conferencing through activating webcams can make the social context friendlier and more inviting, thus promoting more effective negotiation of meaning because the L2 learners can use nonverbal communication, especially eye contact and facial expressions, in more real-life contexts. The students, on the other hand, are made to be more conscious and mindful of the negotiations as they know that they are being watched by their peers and teacher. This analogy was drawn in the interviews by the participants who had attended both audio and video-based virtual classes.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The analysis of the data in this study underlines the significance of optimizing student-driven patterns of interaction and assessment in asynchronous CMC and negotiation of meaning in synchronous CMC in augmenting the level of social presence among the L2 learners in online social contexts. According to the findings of this study, an inviting social context with a friendly user interface equipped with interactive media of communication grounded on inspiring and challenging themes can spark the L2 learners' interest to engage in interactive activities, provided that asynchronous teacher-assessment is not overemphasized and too much unmonitored intimacy does not culminate in over-socialization.

Student-driven content development through flipped learning, negotiated curriculum (Smith, 2004) and harnessed dominance of the teacher in holding negotiation of meaning in online conversation classes proved to be effective in augmenting social presence in conjunction with CALL. Encouraged asynchronous peer-assessment promoted by the facilitative impact of teacher's presence and a thematically inspiring CBI approach to SLA can lead to the development of not only *individual autonomy* (independency) but also *social autonomy* (interdependency), which is a more mature approach to SLA (Blin, 2004).

Although the application of social presence to CMC has already started (Gruba, 2004; Harrington & Levy, 2001; Stockwell, 2009; Warschauer, 2001), the concept and its impact on L2 learners' success

have remained unfamiliar to many teachers who are CALL practitioners as well. As a consequence, it is hoped that the findings of this inquiry could yield useful insights into getting closer to a more integrative genre of CALL to accommodate a sufficiency of group-based activities (Lamy & Hampel, 2007) and learner autonomy (Blin, 2004; McBride & Seago, 1996).

This study could be of practical assistance to educational institutions, including e-teachers, CALL specialists and SLA educators, in the field of second/foreign language teaching electronically and on the Web, a relatively recent approach to practicing languages with a wide horizon to expect because social presence on the premise of student-student interactivity seems to be a sine quo non for the efficacy of integrative CALL.

In the end, it is recommended that group-based and project-based activities on the ground of flipped learning and authentic materials (Kern, 2013) in which using multimedia programs (Lambropoulos, Christopoulou, & Vlachos, 2006) and skill integration (Brown, 2007) are encouraged can facilitate the actualization of social presence.

### **Bio-data**

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Between the following two modes of communication (synchronous and asynchronous), which one seems to play a more important role in generating the sense of social presence among online L2 learners? Please give some reasons for your choice.
2. As long as the concept of teacher's interaction with the students in virtual venues is concerned, the following two important factors must always be taken into account: intimacy and immediacy. Which one of

these two factors carries more weight for the L2 learners to be able to perceive teacher's presence more effectively? Please explain about your answer.

3. Do you have any sense of belonging to our community? If your answer is "no", please let us know what we can do to generate a more solid sense of community and belonging in you to our weblog.
4. In our online classes, you have been experiencing three types of assessment: (1) self-assessment, (2) peer-assessment, and (3) teacher assessment. Among these three types of assessment, which one do you consider to be comparatively more important to create an ideally interactive online learning community? Please bring reasons for your opinions.
5. In our classes, you have been creating the main content of the course by making questions in the *Round Table* activity and replying to your classmates' comments. What is your idea about the impact of this *Content-based Instruction* (CBI) approach on your experience in learning English online? In simple words, how has CBI influenced your language learning?
6. To improve the quality of our classes and give more attention to the challenging and academic content of the course, we consciously held voice-based classes rather than video conferencing. Do you think it is necessary to have video-based classes and see each other in order to have successful argumentations and negotiation of meaning? Please provide reasons for your viewpoint.
7. You have been practicing negotiation of meaning in your class on challenging topics. Do you like your teacher, as one of the participants, to take a firm position in our negotiations, or do you think it would be better for him to be completely neutral and unbiased in the negotiations? Please feel free to express your ideas about this question.
8. About the CBI essence of this course, it has been attempted to focus on didactic and educational themes to increase the level of motivation in students. However, this central focus on intellectual themes has surely narrowed down the range of our audience (only special students would attend our classes). What is the influence of our intellectual topics in our conversation class on your language learning?
9. The title of our online community is *Learning to Live Better*. Have you ever experienced any change in your life upon pursuing our classes on our community? Please elaborate on your answer.
10. In our *Round Table* activity, the students have been the main content developers of the class through commenting, replying, and determining the topics for our discussions. How has our Round Table activity with the above-mentioned characteristics influenced your language learning?

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11. Do you think it is necessary for the teacher to be constantly present in the online community, or you think he/she should only be moderately present in the online community, especially when academically solicited?
12. In our classes, we have been trying to increase the level of interactivity between the teacher and the students and specifically among the students. Do you have any suggestion(s) that can help us even more to achieve this objective?
13. It has been noticed that unfortunately peer-assessment has not received adequate attention from the participants. What could be the reason for that, and what solution(s) do you offer to solve this problem?
14. McMillan and Chavis (1986) consider the following four factors to be the ingredients of establishing a sense of community in online classes: (1) comprising or a sense of belonging, (2) the ability to influence the group, (3) realization of needs through goals that are shared among the learners, and (4) rapport among the learners in the group. Among the above four elements, which one(s) do you consider to be more significant in creating a sense of community in L2 learners?

### **Appendix B: Open-ended Questionnaire**

1. The major objective of this online community is to create an online learning group to practice English in a communicative and interactive mode. Please explain about the activities and methods that were used by the teacher so that you could learn English in interaction with your classmates.
2. One of the purposes of this research is to generate a sense of belonging in you to this online community. Have you developed any sense of belonging to our society? If yes, please explain how?
3. What is your idea about the selected topics and materials that were employed in our conversation class? How did they influence your learning?
4. The title of this online community is *Learning to Live Better*. Have you noticed any changes in your own life upon taking our online classes and becoming a member of our community? If yes, please explain more.
5. In our conversation class, particularly round table activity, we have been practicing negotiation of meaning on challenging topics. Has negotiation of meaning influenced your language learning? If yes, please explain more.
6. In this online community, you have been able to evaluate and correct your comments (self-assessment) and also your classmates' comments (peer-assessment). What is your idea about the effect of these two

techniques on your language learning? Which one do you consider to be more helpful?