

# Current Academic Reflections on English Language Teaching in an EFL Setting



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Edited by

İsmail Hakkı Mirici and Hatice Ergül

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## INTRODUCTION

İSMAIL HAKKI MIRICI AND HATICE ERGÜL

In this comprehensive collection, we embark on a multifaceted exploration of contemporary issues, trends and challenges in English language teaching (ELT) within English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. The twenty-first century is marked by unprecedented technological advancements and cultural mobility which necessitate dynamic shifts and improvements in the field of ELT. This edited collection, *Current Academic Reflections on English Language Teaching in an EFL Setting*, aims to scrutinize contemporary methodologies, pedagogies, and challenges encountered in teaching English in EFL settings. The collection spans twenty chapters authored by distinguished scholars and practitioners, each offering unique insights and perspectives on diverse facets of EFL pedagogy.

At the outset, it is important to underscore the significance of this edited book within the field of ELT scholarship. Teachers and researchers in the field of ELT are faced with a myriad of complexities and unforeseen challenges with the rapid advancement of digital technologies and the ubiquity of English as a lingua franca. *Current Academic Reflections on English Language Teaching in an EFL Setting* has paramount importance as it offers a scholarly platform for educators, researchers and policymakers to critically reflect on existing practices and to contemplate innovative methodologies to increase the quality and effectiveness of ELT in EFL settings.

The chapters featured in this volume have been carefully chosen to offer a comprehensive examination of current concerns and developments in EFL instruction. Contributors examine many facets of ELT through an interdisciplinary lens, discussing theoretical frameworks, empirical results, and practical implications. This edited collection caters to the diverse interests and needs of ELT practitioners by combining theoretical rigour with practical relevance. From theoretical expositions grounded in applied linguistics to empirically driven case studies derived from classroom contexts, it provides invaluable insights into the practical applicability of ELT theories in EFL contexts.

This edited collection covers a wide range of subjects influencing the field of EFL instruction, from cutting-edge approaches like the sound-scripting model for increasing awareness of tone in complex sentences to the success of foreign-language education programs in Europe. Important topics covered in detail include how to evaluate textbooks for better curriculum implementation, how to fulfil the various demands of second-language learners in the area of reading-ability development, and how to support the wellbeing of women English-language teachers.

The book also explores the relationship between language learning and social presence, addressing current issues and prospects in virtual-learning environments. Additionally, it provides important insights into the actual foreign-language teaching practices in Turkey by exploring adult EFL classrooms adopting a conversation-analytic approach. An analysis of how pre-service English teachers view theories of language learning like the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is also covered.

Moreover, the book delves into themes such as the dynamics of interaction patterns in collaborative writing, conceptualizations of effective teaching, and cultural bias in language testing. It also includes empirical studies on lexical complexity and language proficiency, comparative analyses of language use among EFL learners, and narrative inquiries into bilingual education models for immigrants. Additionally, the collection explores the practical side of language learning with a suggested culture-integrated lesson plan designed for English-language learners in pre-intermediate preparation classes, highlighting the intersectionality of language learning with cultural sensitivity and awareness. It also examines the transformative power of out-of-class activities, illuminating how they affect language learning and student involvement. Furthermore, it offers practical strategies and reflective exercises on classroom management from both pre-service and in-service English-language teachers to help teachers effectively navigate the complexities of classroom dynamics. The book also features corpus-based comparative research which investigates how Turkish and Spanish EFL learners use the simple past tense, shedding light on cross-linguistic tendencies and difficulties in language acquisition.

In conclusion, *Current Academic Reflections on English Language Teaching in an EFL Setting* offers evidence of the vitality and dynamism of the field of ELT. This edited collection sheds light on the multifaceted nature of EFL pedagogy by discussing emerging trends and challenges, and offers innovative strategies for enhancing teaching and learning practices. Through this collection, we aspire to foster a deeper understanding of current practices and emerging trends in ELT within EFL settings, ultimately advancing the field of ELT. We hope that this



collection will serve as a valuable resource for educators, researchers and policymakers engaged in the pursuit of excellence in teaching English.



# CHAPTER ONE

## LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND SOCIAL PRESENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR VIRTUAL LEARNING SPACES

TANYA M. TARBUTTON AND LORI DOYLE

### **Abstract**

The field of education is situated in the social sciences; therefore, theoretical and conceptual connections allow for extensions and applications to further the body of knowledge in multiple directions. In this chapter, the authors lean on Bruner's interactionist theory of language acquisition, specifically Language Acquisition Support Systems (LASS) and the social presence arm of the Community of Inquiry model to glean insights on how to support adult learners in the virtual learning environment. Most adults discovered their own learning patterns in a traditional classroom where social norms were a natural byproduct, yet many choose to further their degrees by way of virtual classes and programs which require a new set of andragogical strategies and learning methods. The authors share their authentic experiences working with adult learners in online programs through three key discoveries and wrap up the chapter with some suggestions for future research. This chapter begins with theoretical foundations and transitions into practical applications which can be immediately adopted for the benefit of adult learners in virtual learning spaces.

**Keywords:** Adult learners, andragogy, language acquisition models, social presence, virtual learning environments

## **Language Acquisition and Social Presence: Implications for Virtual Learning Spaces**

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the literature on language acquisition to draw conclusions for how best to support learners. Specifically, virtual-learning spaces available to adult learners will be explored, and from there, ways to circle back to integrate and consider the impact of language-acquisition strategies. Bruner's interactionist theory of language acquisition will be used as a starting point, and the Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) will further narrow the discussion on ways to support learning through a purposeful focus on language as one key to opening up learning pathways. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model will be used to connect language acquisition with virtual learning, specifically regarding ways for social presence to impact learners. Practitioners who work with adult learners do well to understand andragogical practices and ways to capitalize on the wealth of experience each learner adds to create a diverse social dynamic where language acquisition is treated as a tool rather than a challenge.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Social-science research is focused on human phenomena and variables that affect lived experiences. Establishing a theoretical and conceptual foundation is part of a process that can allow for new discoveries that add to the existing body of knowledge (Ivanović and Ho 2019). This paper will draw on a social-science approach of connecting theory and research to an existing context or phenomenon and drawing new conclusions or implications for the field – in this case, education. The conceptual framework for this paper is based on the theoretical underpinnings of Bruner's interactionist theory of language acquisition, the Language Acquisition Support System (LASS), and the Community of Inquiry model, specifically social presence as one arm of the theory. This conceptual framework will be applied to the population of adult learners in the context of virtual-learning environments.

### **Bruner's Interactionist Theory of Language Acquisition**

The topic of language acquisition among adults can benefit from a starting point of describing familiarity with any aspect of language (i.e. written, spoken, nonverbal, etc.) as existing on a spectrum based on maturity. This

allows for language theories typically used when discussing child or adolescent acquisition to be applied to adult learners. For the purpose of this paper, online or virtual skills will be discussed as a form of language, and a point that adult learners can progress towards for greater maturity as learners will be discussed. Bruner focused on the concept of knowledge construction as a larger aim beyond language acquisition alone, and highlighted the importance of symbols, scaffolding and discovery learning (Ozdem-Yilmaz and Bilican 2020). Bruner also recognized the role of learning communities including educational settings (Grazzani and Brockmeier 2019). This concept can be embraced by program directors, curriculum developers, and instructors so that online classrooms are truly seen and treated as places where learning communities exist.

One of Bruner's key tenets is that learners benefit from social interaction in the form of dialogue, including any kind of interactive communication, and this leads to greater knowledge (Elboj Saso and Niemelä 2010). The author goes on to claim the importance of interactive groups in the learning process as well as communication among members regarding language acquisition. For the purposes of this article, this concept is furthered to include language maturity specific to communication in virtual-learning situations. Language acquisition cannot be separated from the culture surrounding the learner (Bruner 1985). The education process for many adult learners exists in a virtual environment where a culture of learners takes more effort to create or discover and then to foster and maintain. Bruner puts great emphasis on the richness that comes from purposeful and social forms of communication (Elboj Saso and Niemelä 2010), an aspect of virtual learning that is not always valued for the ways it can lead to language maturity. In this way, Bruner's insistence on the social side of language maturity can be applied and discussed in terms of systems of support.

### **Language Acquisition Support System (LASS)**

Butzkamm (2007) strongly asserts the importance of early learning in the ongoing process of later development. Bruner's development and research on LASS came out of his research on social and discovery learning, topics that are still being applied in recent studies on knowledge construction (Grazzani and Brockmeier 2019). For example, Wang et al. (2023) apply the work of Bruner and look at the effectiveness of a learning-support system for meaningful e-book learning. When discussing the acquisition of language, this would be an acknowledgement of the mother tongue or first language (Bruner 1961). When extended for the purposes of online

learning in new language learning, a suggestion can be made to avoid completely disregarding the ways adult students most likely learned when in grade school, high school or even their undergraduate degree program. The social aspects of learning that were of benefit in a brick-and-mortar classroom cannot and should not be unlearned in order to embrace online platforms. Rather, they can be built upon as something most if not all learners have in common. Ozdem-Yilmaz and Bilican (2020) make a similar extension when they draw on the work of Bruner, who insists that learning takes place through discovery. Bruner (1961) writes extensively on the ways a learner discovers by building on that which was already familiar, and for online adult learners, this is almost always a social-learning experience.

While discovery can absolutely take place on individual levels, learning is enhanced through activities that are socially structured (Grazzani and Brockmeier 2019). An online cohort of adult learners with a rich and diverse mix of backgrounds and experiences can become a language-acquisition support system. Together, through purposeful activities that require social interaction, program participants can be propelled forwards towards higher levels of learning maturity.

## **Community of Inquiry**

Community of Inquiry (CoI) is a theoretical framework frequently associated with best practices for online learning among higher education institutions. In their seminal work, Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) identify CoI as a promising model for enhanced teaching and learning in the online environment. Subsequently, the theoretical framework has gained popularity across the globe and has been accepted as a trusted model for improving online teaching (Richardson et al. 2017; Stenbom 2018; Castellanos-Reyes 2020; Fiock 2020). Identified within the framework are three presences believed to regulate and shape the virtual-learning environment: teacher presence, cognitive presence and social presence (Garrison et al. 2000). Teacher presence includes exercises focused on the instructional design, facilitation and delivery of instruction. Cognitive presence involves the execution of such practices as self-reflection, problem solving and application skills. Finally, social presence focuses on relationship building and human interactions (Fiock 2020). The three presences do not operate as silos but rather work in unison, creating an overarching educational experience for each learner. In this paper the authors will focus on the importance of social presence as a direct

influence on language development and acquisition, specifically in the virtual environment among adult learners.

## **Social Presence**

Social presence could be defined as the ability to distinguish and recognize individuals in the virtual-learning environment (Richardson et al. 2017). Research suggests social presence has an impact on a learner's overall motivation, satisfaction, participation and rate of course completion within the virtual classroom, and therefore warrants careful consideration (Richardson et al. 2017). According to Garrison et al. (2010), social presence is a bridging variable connecting teacher presence and cognitive presence as it illuminates the relational side of teaching and learning. With the growing popularity and implementation of online learning platforms, more attention is being given to the importance of establishing a sense of community and cultivating relationships within the virtual arena (Berry 2017). Two decades of research suggest that CoI, with its distinct presences, is worthy of adoption as course designers and developers broach effective online instructional practices for elevated learning (Castellanos-Reyes 2020; Richardson et al. 2017).

## **Virtual Learning Spaces**

The popularity of virtual-learning spaces has increased over the past decade to include a growing number of participants and curriculum offerings (Moore and Shemberger 2019; Tarbutton and Doyle 2023). Virtual-learning spaces, also known as online education platforms or learning-management systems (LMS), have become commonplace among higher-education institutions, with nearly 97% of four-year universities rendering virtual-course offerings in 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics 2021). This trend is not isolated to post-secondary settings but also encompasses K-12 educational realms where the implementation of virtual schools has risen from just 16% (prior to 2020) to 46% in 2021 (Klein 2021). The demand for online learning is not likely to dwindle given the favourable variables surrounding this modality, including flexibility, affordability and accessibility. In this paper the authors will share their expertise as online graduate-level program directors in including practical applications for accelerating language-acquisition learning outcomes among adult learners within the context of nurturing social presence in the classroom.

## Adult Learners and Andragogy

Over the past decade, adult learners have been a growing population within university and college systems. Most recently the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2021) reported that adult learners totalled 7.5 million of the 19.7 million post-secondary population. However, this number is thought to have since declined as a result of the financial hardship and instability equated with Covid-19 pandemic (World Health Organization 2019). Nevertheless, adult learners make up a significant proportion of the college and university enrolment, and therefore institutions must attend to the unique needs of these learners. Within the university system, the term “adult learners” is routinely accepted as those learners aged twenty-five or older.

Adult learners are inherently different from children and therefore bring their own unique perspectives, needs and challenges to the learning environment. Course designers and developers must attend to these differences by adhering to the principles of andragogy. Andragogy is defined as the art and craft of teaching adult learners, whereas pedagogy is defined as the art and science of teaching children (Knowles et al. 2020). Knowles et al. (2020), an authority in the study of andragogy, postulate that there are several assumptions to consider when teaching adult learners: (1) the learner’s need to know, (2) the learner’s self-concept, (3) the learner’s prior experience, (4) the learner’s motivation to learn, (5) the learner’s readiness to learn, and (6) the learner’s orientation to learning. Course designers should intentionally attend to these assumptions using purposeful planning. Table 1.1 sets out practical examples of this.

**Table 1.1. Assumptions and Practical Application Examples**

<b>Knowles’s Assumptions of Adult Learners</b>	<b>Practical Application Examples Rooted in Social Presence</b>
Need to Know	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Identify and connect course-learning objectives or standards within the syllabus and connect them to each assignment including group-learning activities, thereby highlighting the relevance or importance of the content.</li></ul>



Self-Concept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide differentiated learning opportunities whereby adult learners can choose what they want to study and how they will demonstrate this learning, including asynchronous (i.e. creating a podcast) and synchronous (i.e. professional presentation) options.</li> </ul>
Prior Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Scaffold assignments so that adult learners can build upon previous learning experiences and extend or stretch their learning, as in conducting interview(s) beyond their professional scope to include leadership and specialists within or outside of the classroom.</li> </ul>
Motivation to Learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Build in frequent opportunities for self-reflection activities that can be shared within communities of practice for affirmation and growth.</li> </ul>
Readiness to Learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Incorporate meaningful activities and content that can be immediately applied to the work context enhancing and solidifying the learning, especially when accountability measures are involved.</li> </ul>
Orientation to Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Arrange collaborative project-based learning initiatives which simulate authentic issues or challenges as a means of preparing students for real-world environments.</li> </ul>

### One University's Solution

Language development and acquisition are heavily influenced by educational technology, especially within the online-learning environment. Course designers, program developers and directors play important roles in selecting, delivering and manipulating materials, thereby orchestrating opportunities for powerful language learning, even if the language being discussed is a new style of learning. The authors serve as directors of graduate-level programs within the School of Education at a faith-based liberal arts university located in suburban Southern California. In this role, the authors research, develop and implement rich content and learning exercises rooted in andragogical principles. It is the authors' belief that

language acquisition – including the new language of online learning – and overall learner development are natural by-products of carefully planned learning activities, particularly when planted in firmly established social activities within the virtual classroom. In the following section, the authors will share practical ideas that can be implemented in virtual-learning spaces to promote and enhance language acquisition, as discussed in terms of online learning maturity, using social presence as a vehicle.

## **Application**

A theoretical framework was established based on the contributions of Bruner (1985) in the area of language acquisition and social discovery learning, as well as Garrison et al. (2000) regarding the role of social presence as one facet of community-based learning. When combined, a strong argument can be made for purposefully planning and actively maintaining social communities in any learning environment, including virtual spaces, and any learning population, including adult students. The authors of the current paper posit three implications in the form of discoveries regarding language acquisition – in the form of a new language of online learning – drawing on the already-established need for social interaction.

## **Discovery One**

Discovery one is the purposeful use of a cohort model, even for programs designed to be fully virtual. Through a psychology lens, Short et al. (1976) conducted a seminal research project on the concepts of personal and immediate communication measures as imperative in the social structure of learning. When a learning community has to start each class with getting to know a new group, testing the waters in terms of comfort levels, and starting at a basic level of trust, the personal and immediate aspects can be lacking. Picciano (2021) makes the claim that social communities must first be built and then maintained, leaning heavily on the work of Garrison et al. (2000) regarding the role of social presence. Berry (2019) suggests this concept as applicable and also valid in the virtual-learning environment. According to Lin et al. (2015), learners value belonging and connectedness with others in the social-learning environment, and the argument can be made that a cohort progressing through a program together is better positioned to gel as a group and foster a research-based sense of social community. This idea is echoed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2023), which identifies adoption of

cohesive learning communities as a high-impact practice in post-secondary learning. One example the authors of the current paper have witnessed is the successful passage rate of greater than 98% of candidates on the state-performance assessment, where cohort participants lean into and support one another during their learning.

## **Discovery Two**

Discovery two highlights the benefits of implementing purposeful collaborative projects that also include either synchronous or asynchronous components to allow students to review not only the content, but also the language used to convey the content (i.e. rubrics with an oral component). Grazzani and Brockmeier (2019) stress the use of socially structured learning activities for amplified language acquisition. Collaborative assignments must be intentionally implemented so that learners have ample opportunities to connect and build on their existing language or skill in an attempt to solidify their learning. In K-12 environments, this opportunity is a natural by-product of the environment; however, in adult online-learning environments, such an atmosphere must be cultivated and encouraged. The benefit of incorporating collaborative assignments has been recognized by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2023) as a high-impact practice known to benefit learners. One well-reasoned outcome of collaborative learning is the development of language skills, or language learning, by way of social communication that unfolds during joint projects (Salma 2020). One example the authors of this paper have witnessed is the consistently elevated grades earned in collaborative learning assignments over individual efforts.

## **Discovery Three**

The third discovery is the significance of implementing purposeful culminating projects in end products, such as capstones or e-portfolios. These assignments begin with the end in mind while also requiring intentional scaffolding and advanced learning applications. According to Bruner (1961), when previously learned material acts as the foundation for new learning activities then language acquisition can flourish. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (2023) identifies eleven high-impact practices for elevated learning, including capstone projects, e-portfolios and collaborative group assignments. High-impact practices, when combined, can augment the learning to include language development and learner maturity. One example observed by the authors

of this article is the far-reaching implications of culminating projects, such as e-portfolios and capstones, into surrounding communities by way of intentional outreach efforts and action-based efforts intended for societal or system-wide improvement. Specific examples include community newsletters, content-specific podcasts and professional-development webinars designed to support diverse audiences with varying needs. High-impact practices, when successfully implemented, have been effective at improving student engagement and retention for all learners while also closing equity gaps often present in formal learning (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2023).

### **Future Areas of Research**

To further the impact of the current theoretical explication, a suggestion is made to extend the theoretical application of Bruner's language-acquisition model to different populations of learners and in the direction of modern learning needs, specifically those associated with virtual or online environments as a new education norm. The current authors focused on adult learners in a virtual, cohort-based learning space. Another researcher might extend that by collecting quantitative data to measure correlations between cohort-based and non-cohort models, or between undergraduate and graduate learners. A qualitative research design would allow for data in the form of themes and discoveries regarding adult-learner perceptions based on the addition or absence of social presence in the virtual-learning environment. The combination of Bruner's (1961) language theory and CoI (Garrison et al. 2000) can be used as a conceptual framework for a range of theoretical and or empirical research studies. The current paper moved in the direction of theory to practice, and a follow-up study might start with a specific practice, select related variables, and move back in the direction towards theoretical implications.

### **Conclusions**

In this paper, the authors advise that implementation of the CoI framework, coupled with Bruner's interactionist theory of language acquisition, can result in favourable outcomes for adult learners related to language acquisition and maturity in the online-learning environment. Grazzani and Brockmeier (2019) study the work of Bruner for ongoing and recent applications to research, and this paper further extends the concepts of language acquisition, learning maturity, and the need for social interaction to the population of online adult learners. Adult learners

continue to move towards and actively seek online programs, even though the format is different from that which they most likely experienced previously. The authors of the current paper focus on ways to foster deeper maturity specific to the skills and needs of adult-online learners and apply a conceptual framework as a foundation for discovering implications for directors and higher-education institutions. Bruner's (1961) language-acquisition theory, including his position on the importance of establishing LASS, is extended, and the tenets applied to helping adult online learners grow towards greater maturity as learners in a virtual environment. Essentially, virtual learning is treated as a new language of learning for the purposes of applying a theoretical framework to an andragogical argument. The CoI model is also addressed to establish social presence as instrumental in the process of encouraging the population of online adult learners, a point supported by Bruner's call for support systems as instrumental in the learning process. One university's approach is discussed through the experience of two directors of online master's programs, and three key discoveries are outlined: the purposeful use of a cohort model, purposeful collaborative experiences, and purposeful culminating projects. Areas of future research are provided as a way of inviting new and innovative studies to further the conceptual framework in the support of online adult learners.

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