

Factors Affecting Interaction in Online EFL Courses: A Multiple Case Study of Instructors' Perspectives

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Abstract

A variety of factors might impact interpersonal interaction between instructors and students in an online course. This study seeks to explore the opinions and attitudes of six EFL instructors working at various universities in Turkey regarding the factors they believe increase interaction in their online courses and to contribute to the pertinent literature. Within the scope of collaborative research, the use of purposeful sampling technique and semi-structured interviews with the participants provided the best opportunity to describe the attitudes and opinions of these instructors who were assigned to teach online in an emergency remote teaching environment due to the coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19. The end result includes a variety of factors and strategies influencing interaction that can be used by novice and experienced online instructors aiming to influence interpersonal interaction in their online courses. While all the participants expressed the need to provide higher quality interactions during the online courses, the obstacles they face in their efforts to reach the desired level of interaction were the main agenda of the interviews. They discussed the role of course structure factors, environment and media effects, feedback and assessment techniques, and discourse facilitators, which constituted the main themes that were categorized into codes emerging from the interview data.

Keywords: Factors and strategies, interpersonal interaction, online courses

Çevrimiçi İngilizce Derslerinde Etkileşimi Etkileyen Faktörler: Öğretim Elemanlarının Görüşlerine İlişkin Çoklu Bir Vaka Çalışması Öz

Çevrimiçi bir kursta öğretmenler ve öğrenciler arasındaki kişilerarası etkileşimi çeşitli faktörler etkileyebilir. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'de çeşitli üniversitelerde görev yapan altı çevrimiçi yabancı dil olarak İngilizce dersleri veren öğretim elemanının çevrimiçi derslerinde etkileşimi artırdığına inandıkları faktörlere ilişkin görüş ve tutumlarını araştırmayı ve ilgili literatüre katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. İşbirlikli araştırma kapsamında, amaçlı örnekleme tekniğinin kullanılması ve katılımcılarla yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelerin yapılması, koronavirüs pandemisi (COVID-19) nedeniyle bir acil uzaktan öğretim ortamında çevrimiçi eğitim vermek üzere görevlendirilen bu öğretim elemanlarının tutum ve görüşlerinin betimlenmesi için en iyi fırsatı sağlamıştır. Nihai sonuç, çevrimiçi derslerinde kişilerarası etkileşimi etkilemeyi amaçlayan deneyimli ve deneyimsiz çevrimiçi öğretim elemanları tarafından kullanılabilir etkileşimi etkileyen çeşitli faktörler ve stratejiler içermektedir. Tüm katılımcılar çevrimiçi kurslar sırasında daha kaliteli etkileşim sağlanması gerektiğini ifade ederken, istenen etkileşim düzeyine ulaşma çabalarında karşılaştıkları engeller görüşmelerin ana gündemini oluşturmuştur. Görüşme verilerinden ortaya çıkan kodlar halinde kategorize edilen ana temaları oluşturan ders yapısı faktörlerinin, çevre ve medya etkilerinin, geri bildirim ve değerlendirme tekniklerinin ve söylem kolaylaştırıcılarının rolünü tartışmışlardır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Faktörler ve stratejiler, kişiler arası etkileşim, çevrimiçi kurslar

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INTRODUCTION

Interaction has been defined by Anderson (2003) as a complicated and multifaceted concept in all types of education. Classroom-based dialogue was found to be the main focus of interaction between teachers and students; however, the concept of interaction has been extended to contain intermediated synchronous conversation at a distance (web-enhanced instructions, new communication media, and audio/videoconferencing) and this has brought a new dimension to education by leading to quality enhancement to online education. Interactivity is designated as a crucial learning process by Smith and Diaz (2004) and its quality influences the quality of computer-mediated instruction. Computer-mediated resources contain substantial tools that can be used for applying the curriculum integrated into the course structure (Godwin et al., 2008).

York and Richardson (2012) have described the interaction as a crucial factor that affects the learning and motivation of students to learn in online classes. In their research on the significance of interaction in online courses, results have indicated that online courses where interaction cannot be achieved adequately lead to a feeling of isolation, unproductive learning experiences, and higher rates of dropouts. The results of their study with online instructors have also shown that online instructors think that some particular components enhance the level of interpersonal interaction in online courses. These components are likely to be affected by various factors. So, what are the components that influence interaction in online courses? There are likely to be additional unidentified or unreported factors in literature affecting interaction in online courses.

Studies have revealed that it is extremely difficult to establish the rapport required for effective learning when both teacher and students are unable to use their body language, facial emotions, and voice when speaking. In the research by Huss et al. (2015), the majority of the participants voiced their displeasure about how the online format appears to prevent teacher-student connection. It is fair to say that meeting the diverse needs of learners is a difficult task for teachers in face-to-face education, but it is far more difficult in online education, besides the fact that time constraints, lack of body language, and monitoring difficulties could all be listed as factors affecting interactivity (Zhang, 2020). Inspired by the importance of identifying these problems mentioned in the literature and the factors affecting them, the present study centers on the investigation of the affective, social, technical, and educational factors that might have an impact on interpersonal interaction in online courses by addressing the following research question: "*What are the factors that might impact interpersonal interactions in online EFL courses?*". When the relevant literature is reviewed, learner-centered interactivity was categorized into four forms of interaction in online education: learner-to-content, learner-to-interface, learner-to-learner, and learner-to-instructor.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

Studies have revealed that it is crucial to recognize and investigate key factors that may promote or obstruct technology integration into education, which is directly impacted by the interaction during online courses, in order to support teachers in successfully adjusting to the state-of-the-art technology in their classrooms (Chen, 2008; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). The purpose of this study was to explore affective, social, technical, and educational factors that might influence interpersonal interaction in online courses by addressing the following research question: "What are the factors that might impact interpersonal interactions in online EFL courses?". This study will contribute to the pertinent literature by providing a better understanding of the identification of the underlying factors that can promote and hinder interpersonal interaction in online classrooms, which may enable instructors to consider the conditions more critically.

Learner-to-Content Interaction

Interaction of learners with the subject in question to internalize the meaning and associate it with personal understanding is referred to by most researchers as learner-to-content interaction. Learner-to-content interaction was defined as a process of learners' mentally interacting with the course content that leads to changes in their perceptions and perspectives (Moore, 1989, as cited in Abrami et al., 2011). This form of interaction may include reading expository writings to construct meaning, watching videos of instructions, using multimedia sources to interact, practicing through simulations, working on collaborative projects in groups, etc. Learner-to-content interaction is a form of interaction in the online education process that embraces various means and methods to introduce the subject to the learners and could be in the form of any material used for teaching (Yueh et al., 2014).

Malinowski et al. (2012) investigate the strategies for providing meaningful learner interaction with the content in online education. The researchers present the suggestions of participants to support this basic form of

interactivity by reporting that learners improve and construct knowledge with direct exposure to the content material. Based on the findings of the study, the researchers report that thanks to the opportunities provided by technology, the content materials can be easily stored, indexed, and distributed, which changes the direction of learner-to-content interaction in a positive way.

Learner-to-content interaction has been found to be the key indicator of student satisfaction in online courses by Kuo et al. (2014). This finding suggests that the design of course content and proper delivery through technology should be considered by instructors and curriculum designers as the most essential items to be cared about in totally online settings. The organization of online course content should be presented and effortlessly accessed by online learners through various media or technology interfaces (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, as cited in Kuo et al., 2014). They claim that the chance of learner satisfaction should be increased by the incorporation of media sources and interactive videos into the course content. They also express the importance of encouraging instructors to frequently use discussion boards and reply to questions of learners regularly to enhance the level of interaction with students.

Learner-to-Interface Interaction

Findings of a study conducted by Ehrlich (2002) show that the success of online courses generally depends on how easy and intuitive the interface is to use and how familiar students are with the use of technology. Over 90 percent of the student participants recommended that online courses should include additional orientation and provide more practical experience for both instructors and students. Taking the findings of this study into consideration, they state that it should not be too troublesome and intimidating for students to use the technology for educational purposes. Students having no experience in studying through technology may have difficulty dealing with technical problems and this can become tiring and dissuasive for them.

The interaction between the instructor and technology is also crucial for the general success of online courses. In their analysis, Danesh et al. (2015) found that the instructors' knowledge and practical use of the technology for the synchronous online sessions make the course more exciting and interesting. Student participants of their study stated that instructors having the skills of using technology with ease had more influential classroom discussions. They also mentioned that instructors should develop skills in involving, engaging, and controlling the students so as to make the students feel an important part of the class. While expressing the importance of the relationship between the instructor and the interface, the researchers of the study particularly underline that the interaction between the student and the interface has an important role in the learning process. The knowledge and skills of the student about the technology interface are the interaction between the student and the technology in which instruction takes place. Brown et al. (2013) focused on the risk of any disconnections between the learners and the interface services provided by the school administration, which will cause inefficacy for many first-time distance learners. He argues that the interaction between student perceptions of distance education and relevant technical support services is the key to improving the engagement, participation, and achievement of first-time online learners. Considering this argument, Mladenova and Kirkova (2014) suggest that the decision on which technology interface to be used for online courses should be given depending on the ease of use of the technology. A user-friendly interface plays a significant role in increasing the chance of personal success of individual learners.

Learner-to-Learner Interaction

Liao (2006) argues that interactivity can become at its highest level if learner-to-learner interaction becomes completely collaborative when learners work and learn together. The study analyzed the impacts of learning in small groups when learners use computer technology to work together. Based on the analysis of the study, it was stated that learners' experience of group work and the instructors' strategies of cooperative learning are significant factors that affect the learning outcomes of students when they work in small groups through the use of technological tools. The results of the study indicate that students need practice in collaborative work in groups and training in how to work and learn together in collaborative activities. The need for collaborative working practice and training is also highlighted in another study conducted by Kanuka (2011) who claims that this practice and training enables learners to acquire skills for effective group work. Both researchers express the responsibility of learners for both their own learning and helping the other group members learn.

Vrasidas and Zembylas (2003) refer to the share of responsibility as a positive interdependence that promotes interaction among learners to process information more successfully by motivating them to achieve mutual goals. That is, the paper contributes to our understanding of collaboration by presenting the possible benefits of promotive interactions that provide an exchange of thoughts, sharing knowledge, distributed thinking,

giving and receiving elaborated explanations, and collaborative discussions which may also support learner-to-content interaction and learner-to-instructor interaction as well.

Learner-to-Instructor Interaction

How instructors and students interact with each other has been found to be influential in the flow of online interactions by the results of a study conducted by Flottemesch (2000). The researchers stated that improved discourse and quality interaction may lead to improved academic achievement among learners. In her doctoral dissertation, (Keeler, 2006) also discussed that the means of interaction and the style of discourse might play a major role in the cognitive learning of students and their self-confidence during online interactions.

Sharp and Huett (2006) reflect the interaction between learners and instructors as critical for both learners and instructors. The researchers suggest that instructors should stimulate attention and motivation, organize the learning process of all types of learners, and encourage each learner to establish a quality interaction with them. In their analysis, Bernard et al. (2009) found that the guidance of instructors through activities and assessments stimulates or at least maintains learners' interest and motivation to learn and develop their skills. This point of view is consistent with the findings of Dennen et al. (2007) who reveal that in online environments learner-to-instructor interaction through synchronous videoconferencing or asynchronous communication provides motivational and psychological support to the learners and the means of interaction are not restricted to lectures, feedbacks or assessments.

METHOD

The research was designed as a qualitative multiple case study involving the online interviews conducted with the study group via video-conferencing held in English with varying duration since its main purpose is to explore the opinions and attitudes of online EFL instructors regarding the factors they believe increase interaction in their online courses along with the reasons for their pedagogical practices and strategies and to contribute to the pertinent literature. The study is exploratory in nature, the purpose of which is to somehow satisfy a curiosity, to explore and enable a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon that is under review, and to provide a more accurate understanding of it (Babbie, 2013). Considering the exploratory nature of the problem, a multiple case study method was conducted in the study through the social construction of the participants. To understand the participants' shared experiences and opinions of the phenomenon, the study aimed to represent the participants as much as possible rather than considering them as the passive subjects of the researcher (Creswell, 2013).

The Study Group and the Sampling Method

The study group consisted of six EFL instructors working at various universities in Turkey who were selected with a purposive sampling technique which is described by Hibberts et al. (2012) as a technique used when the researcher knows the characteristics of the target population and relies on their own judgment for selecting specific individuals having those characteristics to include in the sample. The small sample size was not irrational since a heterogeneous group of three to fifteen individuals is highly recommended by Creswell (2013) for such cases. All the participants were selected through the researchers' social network among those with a desire to improve and possibly change their personal practices. Some of the participants do not have much experience in online education, as they did not provide long-term online education before the pandemic process. The goal for choosing instructors working at different universities and having varying levels of familiarity with the online education system depending on their years of online teaching experience and number of online teaching hours was a selection of a variety of cases regarding the phenomenon of interest. All the participants met the following criteria: being currently active in the field of online teaching, and/or having some online teaching experience, and working at different institutions. The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Opinions of School Principals on Emergency Distance Education in the Covid-19 Process

Participants	Gender	Age	Years of Teaching Experience	Teaching Context	Online Teaching Hours	Years of Online Teaching Experience	Kind of Syllabus Followed	Kind of Materials Used	Teaching and Assessment Techniques
P1	Male	33	11	Preparatory school at a state university in a small city	12	6	Skill-based syllabus	Interactive course book and workbook, web-based resources	Online teaching and assessment
P2	Female	29	7	Preparatory school at a state university in a big city	16	3	Content-based syllabus	Interactive course book and workbook, web-based resources	Online teaching and assessment
P3	Female	31	8	Preparatory school at a foundation university in a big city	10	4	Skill-based syllabus	Interactive course book and workbook, web-based resources	Online teaching and assessment
P4	Female	32	8	Preparatory school at a state university in a small city	13	5	Structural syllabus	Interactive course book and workbook, web-based resources	Online teaching and assessment
P5	Female	28	5	Preparatory school at a foundation university in a big city	13	3	Skill-based syllabus	Interactive course book and workbook, web-based resources	Online teaching and assessment
P6	Male	36	14	Preparatory school at a state university in a big city	15	7	Skill-based syllabus	Interactive course book and workbook, web-based resources	Online teaching and assessment

Data Collection Instrument

Background questionnaires and semi-structured online interviews conducted via video-conferencing held in English with varying duration were used as data collection instruments to examine instructors' opinions, attitudes, and pedagogical strategies. Semi-structured interviews were assumed to be quite reasonable for this study as Flick (2002) stated that semi-structured interviews allow the researchers to examine the views, opinions, attitudes, and perceptions of participants in detail and give the instructors some flexibility in clarifying the significant issues. The background questionnaire was a quite simple form asking participants about their age, educational background, teaching experience, and familiarity with the online education system depending on their years of online teaching experience and number of online teaching hours.

During the interviews, the following questions were asked to the study group:

1. What methods do you follow in your online courses to promote instructor-learner and learner-learner interaction?
2. What is the biggest challenge you generally encounter while trying to promote interaction in your online courses?
3. What recommendations would you give to an online instructor who intends to enhance interpersonal interaction?
4. What are the factors that you believe raise the level of interpersonal interaction in online courses?

The validity of the data collection instruments was verified by presenting the questions of the interviews and background questionnaire to the opinion of three field experts working at the English Language Teaching Department at a state university. Appropriateness and clarity of the questions were confirmed by the field experts.

Consequently, it was assumed that data saturation was reached to meet the general objective of the study. The procedure of gathering data was launched when the required modifications and adjustments were performed.

Data Collection Procedure

The study group was informed via phone calls and e-mails that they should participate voluntarily with an entire understanding of the purpose and nature of the study and that their right to privacy would be respected throughout the whole study process. They were also informed that the role of the qualitative researchers was to attempt to access the opinions, feelings, and perceptions of the participants. While sharing the interview questions with the participants days before the interviews to allow for their preparation, the researchers asked for their permission to record the video conferences as well.

Data Analysis

The background questionnaires were analyzed to explore the demographic features of instructors concerning their age, educational background, teaching experience, and familiarity with the online education system depending on their years of online teaching experience and the number of online teaching hours. The records of videoconferences held in English with varying duration were examined and then transcribed by the researchers for inductive content analysis. The steps for inductive content analysis were then followed as explained by Elo and Kyngäs (2008). The interview transcriptions were coded within the texts and categorized based on significant statements, terms, repetitions, and keywords in context. The data to be used for each code regarding the factors that influence interpersonal interaction in online courses were presented in a scheme under the titles of relevant themes. The open coding schematized assisted the researchers and the reader in understanding and revealing the findings to describe all aspects of the content. The schematization and interpretation of the codes and themes were completely done by the researchers. The lack of an independent inter-rater during the data's coding procedure may have an impact on the reliability of the drawn codes and themes.

Every phase of the study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards. The interviewees were required to sign an informed consent form before the interviews could begin. The identities of the participants were also kept confidential throughout this research article. Every source used in this study was properly cited in accordance with APA guidelines.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the background questionnaires inquiring the instructors about their age, gender, teaching experience, online teaching experience, educational background, and semi-structured interviews addressing the research questions enabled the researchers to reach several important findings about the instructors' opinions and attitudes to the factors that influence interaction in online education along with the reasons for their pedagogical practices and strategies. Findings acquired in the present study indicate that EFL instructors expressed an overall belief in the role of strategies to be used for increasing interaction in online courses although some of them stated they find it much more difficult to keep the interactivity in online courses than in face-to-face courses. Such a discrepancy was owing to the troubles that learners and instructors experience in adapting to online education, and the gap between course structure and the focus of exams.

The data were analyzed with special attention to privacy issues as derived from the interviews and indicated that more variables contribute to interpersonal interaction in online courses than in face-to-face courses. Factors that influence interaction seem to be more complicated than persistent studies indicated in the literature. Significant statements extracted from the interview transcripts were categorized into codes and themes and presented under the titles of the relevant theme. Four themes emerged from the interview findings concerning the factors influencing interpersonal interaction in online courses: course structure factors, environment and media effects, feedback and assessment techniques, and discourse facilitators. These themes captured the main principles of interpersonal interaction in online courses as discerned and practiced by the six instructors interviewed. Multiple factors participants believed impact online interaction together with the interpretations of the researchers are embedded within these four themes. The interview findings presented under the title of each theme are then discussed in respect of the factors within the context of the literature. The themes and codes in which the findings were categorized are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes and Codes

Theme	Code
T1: Course structure factors	C1: Collaborative activities
	C2: The use of a variety of activities
	C3: Discussions
T2: Environment and Media Effects	C1: Psychological attitudes towards technology and issues of privacy
	C2: Internet connection
	C3: Computer communication literacy
T3: Feedback and Assessment Techniques	C1: Instructor/peer feedback
	C2: Online assessment techniques
T4: Discourse Facilitators	C1: Social communication strategies
	C2: Immediacy behaviors

Course Structure Factors

Factors related to course design and structure that could impact interaction emerging from the instructors' responses to the interview questions are categorized into the following codes inferred from the significant statements and terms: collaborative activities, the use of a variety of activities, and discussions.

Collaborative Activities

Practices and recommendations of participants regarding collaborative activities included both obligatory and voluntary participation. For instance, one of the participants requires her students to participate in collaborative activities and pair them with different students to increase their chances of interaction based on their needs. By doing this, she expects her students to learn from each other and get different perspectives by breaking the walls:

“During collaborative activities, I try to pair them with different students almost every time considering their needs so that they can interact with each other, learn from different people, and hear from different brains. I tell them that participation is obligatory... It can raise interaction through collaboration because you are somehow breaking the walls...” (P-4, female, 32 years old, with 8 years of teaching experience).

On the contrary, another participant believes the participation should be voluntary and the collaborative activities can be in the form of debates, role-playing, competitions, project works, finding mistakes, or reflecting on students' writings as a whole class activity:

“We can prepare conversations to help them collaborate. One student is asked to write a question and the other one is going to answer the question... Debates, role-playing, competitions, project works, or maybe finding mistakes... I do not force them to participate. I can reflect a student's writing on my screen and as a whole class we can find the mistakes.” (P-3, female, 31 years old, with 8 years of teaching experience).

Having eleven years of teaching and six years of online teaching experience at a state university, one of the instructors commented on some difficulties he encountered that hinders him from using more collaborative activities in his online language-teaching context. The difficulties encountered were ‘the unwillingness of students to do collaborative assignments at first’ and ‘time restriction’. He also suggests that collaborative writing, virtual mediated interaction, role-play activities, and text chat can be useful for student engagement. His evaluation of the course and the interpersonal interactions in his courses made the researchers believe that the instructors needed to support collaborative learning by teaching students how to communicate online:

“At first they complained about collaborative activities and they didn't want to do video recording assignments. But when I had interviews with them, they said that they are so helpful for them and they can practice... I can't tell that I generally have time in my online courses for collaborative activities but I can definitely say collaborative writing is possible if we teach our students how to communicate online... virtual mediated interaction can also be useful. Role-play activities may also be possible and text chat can also be useful...” (P-1, male, 33 years old, with 11 years of teaching experience).

He also discussed the role of personal engagement in improving interactivity in the online learning process, accomplished through different formats of collaborative activities that require division of responsibility among group members. He expressed his fondness for students working together and sharing their perspectives:

“... I believe in the role of personal contribution to improving interactivity in collaborative activities. Everybody can add some things from their perspectives. That’s why I intentionally give assignments that require collaboration because that’s the key to student engagement.” (P-1, male, 33 years old, with 11 years of teaching experience).

As conveyed in the excerpt below from one of the instructors’ comments, she expresses that she is aware of the role of group-works in learners’ accomplishment although she talks about the difficulties she encounters while doing group-work activities due to the microphone problems students have:

“...group works can be done, but in my case, I cannot do them very well because of the microphone problem they have. However, if the teacher has a chance to do some exercises based on group works, there are some platforms that students can use simultaneously like Google Docs...” (P-5, female, 28 years old, with 5 years of teaching experience).

From these responses of participants, it can be concluded that scaffolding communication with collaborative activities such as debates, collaborative writing, virtual mediated interaction, role-play activities, competition, project work, and text chat as a constituent of interaction facilitation, is another factor that might impact interaction in online education.

The Use of a Variety of Activities

The statements of the interviewees generally indicated their beliefs on the importance of enabling distributed participation by providing a variety of activities. One of the participants considers the use of various kinds of activities as the key to attracting the attention of all types of learners:

“As teachers, we can do something to promote interaction and to foster it. For example, we can provide a variety of activities that attract students’ interest. If we can get the interest of all types of learners, we can easily have distributed participation among learners.” (P-3, female, 31 years old, with 8 years of teaching experience).

As her sensitivity to the issue can be perceived from her expressions, the attitude of a participant to the use of various activities in online courses seems to be a consequence of her own experience as a language learner. She prefers encouraging her students to interact with each other in a comfortable atmosphere without hesitation during different activities. Her experience as a foreign language learner must have made her believe that she should just let students jump in and say, whatever they want to say:

“...I mean when students have their chance to answer when it requires one speaker at a time, I prefer to involve everybody one by one so that nobody will be left out. But sometimes when we have a whole-class discussion, I let it go as the conversation unfolds. I mean, imagine that we have a whole-class discussion, students can easily jump in and say whatever comes to their mind. At that point, I kind of step back and leave them to say whatever comes to their minds freely. This is how I try to enable distributed participation in these varieties of activities.” (P-4, female, 32 years old, with 8 years of teaching experience).

Discussions

Having different expectations for discussion participation, instructors shared some of their personal practices and recommendations to start a controversial topic for discussion and to keep it going on. One participant commented on the unnecessary use of discussion boards: *“Students will not appreciate it if you just do discussion board for the sake of keeping the discussions going.”* He also emphasized the need for a better organization: *“I do my best to put everything together so that students can easily link to different topics to keep the conversation.”* He conveyed how he looks for alternative options to the traditional discussions: *“I love the idea of assigning someone as a kind of moderator for their group every week and the moderator then starts a whole-class discussion and manages the whole class as a representative.”* (P-6, male, 36 years old, with 14 years of teaching experience).

Another participant interviewed underlines that when students actively participate in the group discussions and talk about themselves and their personal ideas on the discussion topic, the psychological distance among them that is caused by distance education is more likely to be reduced and:

“I have a lot of students who participate orally in lessons. I start some discussion topics and I try to make my teaching topics personalized. I ask them to give personal examples from their own lives. The psychological distance among them is

reduced when they start to talk about themselves and their ideas on a controversial topic for discussion.” (P-3, female, 31 years old, with 8 years of teaching experience).

Considering the comments, it is possible to say that students actively participating in the discussion during online courses develop a better sense of social presence with their immediacy behaviors by decreasing the social and psychological distance among them. From the perceptions of the interviewees we can conclude that course structure, whether well-organized beforehand or applied along the way, is a crucial factor that might influence interpersonal interaction during online education.

Environment and Media Effects

Three codes emerged from the data around the main theme: psychological attitudes towards technology and issues of privacy, internet connection, and computer communication literacy.

Psychological Attitudes Towards Technology and Issues of Privacy

An important code emerging from the data concerning environment and media effects is the psychological attitudes of learners toward learning through technology and their unwillingness to participate due to privacy issues as illustrated in the following excerpt:

“The biggest challenge is their unwillingness to participate. Because as far as I understood, they don’t see me as a real teacher. They don’t want to participate in and say something. Maybe this situation is related to the recording issue. Therefore, they may hesitate to say something wrong. They consider it as a chat, not as a real class environment. They see these kinds of things as a threat. In this case, instructors should use a casual communication style to encourage unwilling students...” (P-5, female, 28 years old, with 5 years of teaching experience).

The role of creating a sense of community and belonging among students in learner engagement and interaction during online education is also emphasized by some instructors:

“Therefore, sometimes, I am not sure whether they are in front of the computer or not... Physically they don’t feel like they belong to the class because of the online system. Therefore, they may not want to join in the sessions or communicative activities.” (P-5, female, 28 years old, with 5 years of teaching experience).

“We ask them to use their microphones always so that we can regularly check what they think about a particular issue that has been covered. Because you know it doesn’t feel like interaction if you don’t see a person much, right?” (P-4, female, 32 years old, with 8 years of teaching experience).

It can be concluded from the statements of interviewees that since online interaction does not feel like real interaction and students may not have a sense of belonging, they may not consider the online conversations as an actual part of the class despite being assessed on their participation.

Feeling the hesitation in the eyes of learners while communicating through technology, another participant states that she tries to facilitate their interaction and motivate the students expressing that they don’t get the same taste in online courses as in face-to-face courses:

“... I feel the hesitation in their face. Of course, there are many reasons behind it. But as a teacher, I’m trying to facilitate that process by making some jokes... Students say ‘We are not getting the same taste while learning English in the classroom in our online courses, so we gave up. That’s why ensuring interactivity in our speaking lessons is one of the biggest challenges that I encounter in my speaking classes.’” (P-2, female, 29 years old, with 7 years of teaching experience).

Considering the perceptions of participants, it is clearly seen that they mainly focus on how the students feel during online education and how instructors can change their feelings towards this new medium of education. They recommend instructors use a more casual communication style to let them feel that they are ‘at the same level’. Issues of privacy play a crucial role in their interactivity in the computer-mediated communication atmosphere. Under these conditions, they need more time to become familiar with and develop trusting relationships with each other.

Internet Connection

Four of the six participants describe the internet connection problem as one of the biggest challenges they encounter while trying to promote interaction in their online courses since it interferes the communication:

“Internet connection is also one of the main problems. You know, for example, you are focusing on a communicative task that they are supposed to talk a lot, but in the middle of the activity the internet connection went... The interaction is interfered... Distraction can be another problem because they login in and log out throughout the session.” (P-5, female, 28 years old, with 5 years of teaching experience).

“Some of our students do not have a stable internet connection. Sometimes the students say that they run out of internet quotas... So, the sound and the video may not be synchronized... The voice quality is also a problem because sometimes it may lead to misunderstanding... Sometimes we have the buzzing sound and nobody understands what is...” (P-4, female, 32 years old, with 8 years of teaching experience).

“Even if you try to encourage them to shoot some videos, assign each speaker, or address them in person, still they have limited time to interact. They find some excuses like they don’t have an internet connection. They say they can’t hear me because of the unstable internet connection.” (P-2, female, 29 years old, with 7 years of teaching experience).

“The biggest challenge is an internet connection. I do not have such a problem, but most of my students have a problem like that. It’s really distracting. So, to solve this problem, the students should try to join the session again, and then you have to create the same atmosphere to sustain the activity.” (P-1, male, 33 years old, with 11 years of teaching experience).

The reason why these participants mention the instability of the internet connection as one of the biggest challenges is that it causes distraction among learners, disturbing sounds, and misunderstanding due to synchronization problems.

Computer Communication Literacy

Analyzing the instructors’ comments on the role of computer communication literacy and prior experience with computer-mediated communication, the researchers interpreted that EFL instructors believe in the feasibility of computer networks to provide interpersonal interaction. They stressed the importance of prior experience with computers and proficiency in using the synchronous conference system for both instructors and learners. The data obtained from the interviews support this interpretation:

“The main point I think is having an idea of how to integrate the affordances of technology into the course. So, you have to know how to use the system to communicate. So, the interaction can be based on the content of the lesson, and also it can be related to digital literacy. They may not have enough information related to how to use technology. The lack of keyboarding skills can also be troublesome in synchronous sessions.” (P-5, female, 28 years old, with 5 years of teaching experience).

“Online courses are new to them. First of all, to promote interaction, we thought that it is best to teach our students how to behave in such an environment in such an atmosphere. Because this is their first time, they need to understand the conventions of this particular medium. So, we started to work on teaching them how to use this platform effectively. We need to be an expert on what we are doing at the same time.” (P-4, female, 32 years old, with 8 years of teaching experience).

“I think in general as instructors we need to have much more insight about digital environments and online teaching. Because it’s so new for us and we have such a long way to come over. So, I think we need to read and search for some different tools to communicate online.” (P-1, male, 33 years old, with 11 years of teaching experience).

“Students having limited prior experience with computer-mediated communication feel intimidated when other students use emoticons and paralanguage to interact with each other. Participating in synchronous conferences is quite more challenging for them. Teachers can provide remedial extra studies for those students to teach them how to use the conferencing software. Another solution could be pairing them with more experienced users to make sure that they can get help from their partners when they need it.” (P-6, male, 36 years old, with 14 years of teaching experience).

As conveyed in the excerpts from four of the instructors' explanations, the use of emoticons and paralanguage by the experienced users seems to cause non-experienced learners or instructors to feel ignorant or overwhelmed for not knowing their meanings or how to use them properly to be able to keep up with the interaction going on. Some students and instructors are not 'natives' in the area of technology and using educational technology is a new struggling departure for them from the traditional teaching environment which they are familiar with. The lack of body language or voice intonation to show sarcasm or humor is possibly the reason why the experienced ones feel like they need to compensate for that with the use of these facilities. They search for expressive ways to convey their feelings despite the lack of social contexts in interaction online. Keyboarding skills also seem to impact learners' efficiency in synchronous interaction since immediate responses are expected. Solutions for these troubles suggested by some participants include: teaching students how to use the platform efficiently, reading and searching for some different tools to communicate online, providing remedial extra studies for non-experienced students, and pairing them with more experienced ones to ensure that they can get assistance when necessary.

Feedback And Assessment Techniques

Another theme emerging from the data obtained is feedback and assessment techniques as a factor that influences interaction in the online education process. The theme is categorized into two codes depending on the content and focus of statements: instructor/peer feedback and online assessment techniques.

Instructor/Peer Feedback

Sharing about the troubles they encounter while giving feedback to learners or creating an atmosphere to let them give feedback to each other, some instructors stated that they make use of technology and web-based educational sources as they don't think the synchronous online classroom atmosphere is enough for providing timely feedback, whereas one of them stated that there is no need for peer-feedback to enhance interaction among learners:

“Actually, in online courses, if you talk about synchronous Zoom meetings, it is a bit difficult to give feedback... The only feedback I can give in online classes is to try to identify vocabulary errors or grammar errors while they are speaking. Because we have limited time, you know... They can see their progress through feedback and they feel more motivated to interact.” (P-3, female, 31 years old, with 8 years of teaching experience).

The participant admitted that she cannot provide enough feedback in synchronous online meetings because of time constraints. She believes that timely feedback should be provided to students' contributions to the course to motivate them and let them see their progress through feedback.

“To foster interaction among learners, we can create an environment for the students to give feedback to each other. In the past when I was a university student, we had a system. It was called so common at that time 'Moodle'. We wrote some comments about our classmates' writings.” (P-1, male, 33 years old, with 11 years of teaching experience).

“Whenever they want, they can give feedback to each other. But they are not supposed to do it. I mean they are not required to do that. Because you know imagine that they have 20 hours every week for each lesson... So it is a kind of burden on them. So, I can't expect them to give feedback to each other as well to increase interaction between them.” (P-4, female, 32 years old, with 8 years of teaching experience).

From the explanations of interviewees, providing immediate instructor/peer feedback or integrating a variety of feedback delivery systems into the course context does not seem to be possible in online settings due to time restrictions.

Online Assessment Techniques

Assessment is such a critical constituent of interactivity that including assessment in the context of online courses is reported by one of the instructors as the most efficient way to keep them involved during the online courses:

“...include assessment. So, they participate more and they know that they have to interact more. Because at the end of the term they will pass or they will fail. If they obtain good results in tests, they can believe in the efficiency of online classes and they will be willing to interact...” (P-3, female, 31 years old, with 8 years of teaching experience).

“Maybe they attend but the issue, while they attend, is just grades. They need to take good scores, so they attend but they are not willing. The only way to promote interaction is to threaten them with online exam scores.” (P-1, male, 33 years old, with 11 years of teaching experience).

Both instructors admitted that they consider the online assessment as the only way to threaten their students so that they feel like they have to participate and interact more. The pedagogical correspondence of this attitude of instructors becomes highly questionable although they expressed their desperation to enable students to participate in the class and interact with each other.

Discourse Facilitators

Discourse facilitation allows the conversation to move along without taking sides by asking questions about controversial topics, asking for clarification, and guiding the participants by encouraging them to ensure the accuracy of their understanding. Considering its purpose of questioning and encouraging participation, it becomes evident that it can be a factor that impacts interpersonal interaction. Factors regarding the theme ‘discourse facilitators’ emerging from the interview data are categorized into two codes: social communication strategies and immediacy behaviors.

Social Communication Strategies

Although not explained in detail during the interviews, most of the participants generally touched upon the role of interpersonal skills of instructors or students in establishing good relationships with each other and increasing interpersonal interaction as conveyed in the following extracts:

“...interpersonal skills are really important in interaction, too. As a teacher, you must be open to changes and you must prepare something new for the students. But if you still follow traditional ways in online teaching, actually it doesn’t work. You should add a variety to your classes.” (P-3, female, 31 years old, with 8 years of teaching experience).

“...in face-to-face classes, I did not face any problem like that because generally when I encourage them like giving feedback, a smiling face, or being in a good mood, they were joining the classes. However, in online interaction, although I have tried again and again the same things like establishing a good relationship with them, and trying to be closer with my mood and statements, I haven’t got enough attention yet.” (P-5, female, 28 years old, with 5 years of teaching experience).

“First of all, I greet each student at the beginning of each lesson like hello, good morning, welcome, like that. Because it really affects their psychology, I mean, you’re smiling, you look energetic... it is not interaction. It indirectly affects it. And also after greeting them, I address them in person. So, I can easily see their names and it also helps me not to miss out on the chances to involve each student in the class.” (P-4, female, 32 years old, with 8 years of teaching experience).

From the comments, it can be inferred that how a participant talks, greets, addresses their names, gives feedback, etc. influences the interaction and participation of learners during the online courses. These kinds of behaviors are defined by York and Richardson (2012) as affective verbal immediacy behaviors that affect the overall flow of conversation. When combined with self-disclosure and anecdotes, these behaviors may bring along a more conversational style of discourse and entails an enhanced level of interpersonal interaction during online education.

Immediacy Behaviors

Immediacy behaviors in an online setting are non-verbal actions that include reducing the physical distance that is caused by distance education, displaying relaxed postures and movements by using mimics and gestures, the intonation of voice, and keeping eye contact during interactions. These actions influence the flow of online interactions as expressed by two participants:

“As a teacher, as for me, I don’t see their faces. I don’t hear their voices. So, it also affects me while interacting with them. Because sometimes I’m just talking, just talking to whom? This is the biggest challenge for me. I cannot make eye contact. I just make eye contact with my image on the camera.” (P-3, female, 31 years old, with 8 years of teaching experience).

“...now I see your eyes and it feels like we are together, right? Eye contact is very important. When the cameras are on, we speak and behave as if we are face-to-

face, right? So, it gives us this feeling... To raise the level of interpersonal interaction, first of all as an instructor you need to stay focused. You need to dress as you do in face-to-face courses. You need to give your students the chance to talk and participate as much as possible, open the webcam, and look them in the eye. Even if they do not open their webcams, they look at the screen and get the feeling that you are looking... So, even if they can't see you physically in the class, you can still use your body language, facial expressions, and mimics as effectively as possible to increase the quality of interaction.” (P-4, female, 32 years old, with 8 years of teaching experience)

The immediacy behaviors mentioned seem to be used by the participants as ways of projecting physical presence into online education through non-verbal constructions.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Speaking of the pursuit of a higher quality interaction in distance education, the instructors acknowledged that they try to fill a communication gap during the whole education process. Likewise, they are quite disappointed that they made extensive efforts to meet the need to build quality interactions throughout their web-based courses, but often they get frustrated because of the obstacles they face in achieving the quality of human relations they achieve in face-to-face education. Most of the obstacles mentioned during the interviews were presented in the section of findings regarding the third theme related to the problems with the learning environment and media effects.

Consistency exists between the data obtained from the interviews and the literature that course design and structure is a factor that affects interaction in online courses. As the details of the data discussed in the findings section, the social and psychological distance between the students is decreased and they develop a better sense of social presence in the online course atmosphere when the course structure includes discussions to let them give personal examples from their own lives. In a study on learner-to-content interaction, Malinovski et al. (2012) found that learners improve and construct knowledge when they are directly exposed to the content material. When the course content includes activities promoting many learners to participate by talking about their opinions and feelings, the learners feel satisfied and part of the lesson. Another study conducted by Kuo et al. (2014) indicated that learner-to-content interaction is the key indicator of student satisfaction in online courses. Thus, one can regard learner-to-content interaction as a factor that influences learner satisfaction and interactivity in online courses.

Another factor that is discussed in the interviews is computer communication literacy, which is affected by prior experience with computers and proficiency in using the synchronous conference system. Some students and instructors struggle with adapting themselves to the new technology learning environment since they are not ‘natives’ in the area of technology. These non-experienced ones feel ignorant or overwhelmed when they see that others have the skills to keep up with the interaction going on. Discussing the findings of his study, Ehrlich (2002) suggests that the efficiency of online courses largely depends on how easy and intuitive the interface is to use and the student’s familiarity with the use of technology. It was stated that the interface should not be too challenging and intimidating for students to use the technology for educational purposes. This perspective is consistent with the findings of Danesh et al. (2015), who revealed that interaction with technology is key to the success of online education and that knowledge and the use of technology make the lessons more interesting and exciting for learners.

Discourse facilitators such as social communication strategies and immediacy behaviors that include using gestures, mimics and eye contact have been found to be one of the factors that influence interpersonal communication in an online setting. Interpersonal skills and immediacy behaviors may influence the flow of online interactions and reduce the social and physical distance that is created by distance education. The role of discourse facilitator factors in online interaction is another finding of this study that is consistent with the literature which reveals that how instructors and students communicate can impact the interaction between them. Reviewed in the literature, the results of a study conducted by Flottemesch (2000) have shown that improved discourse and quality interaction in distance learning environments may bring about improved academic achievement. In her doctoral dissertation, (Keeler, 2006) also argued that the mode of interaction and the use of discourse play a major role in the cognitive learning of students and their self-confidence during online interactions.

Some factors mentioned during the interviews appeared in the literature. However, many factors were not elaborately discussed in the literature. For example, online assessment techniques were explained by two participants as the most influential way to keep learners involved since assessment is a crucial factor that impacts

interaction in an online setting. Both participants confessed that they use the online assessment scores to threaten their students so that they feel like they have to interact and participate in the lesson. As discussed in the findings section, this attitude of instructors is pedagogically questionable despite their explanations about their despair to enable students to participate in the lesson and interact with each other. In addition; using a variety of activities to ensure distributed participation by attracting the attention of all types of learners, internet connection problems that interfere with interactions and cause distraction, the obstacles instructors face while doing collaborative activities online, psychological attitudes towards technology, and issues of privacy, creating a sense of community and belonging to engage learners, providing immediate instructor/peer feedback or integrating a variety of feedback delivery systems into the course context were also the factors discussed during the interviews but not in the literature.

Indeed, most of the participants were sincere in disclosing that they need to improve their computer communication literacy and achieve more proficiency in using synchronous conferencing systems more interactively. They revealed the need to provide extra remedial work for non-experienced students to help them keep up with the interactions going on. Two participants candidly confessed that they threaten their students with online testing scores but also mentioned that it is almost impossible to keep them motivated in an online teaching environment. They are aware that this attitude is traditional and pedagogically questionable; however, they expressed that the problems of interaction and motivation in online education forced them to do so.

When the findings of the present study (Table 2) aiming to address the research question that investigates the factors that might impact interpersonal interactions in online EFL courses are examined, it becomes clear that both novice and experienced online instructors can employ a range of factors and interaction-influencing strategies when attempting to affect interpersonal interaction in their online courses. While all of the participants acknowledged the need for greater quality interactions throughout the online courses, the main focus of the interviews was on the challenges they experience in trying to achieve the appropriate degree of involvement. The key topics that emerged as codes from the interview data included the role of course structure factors, environment and media effects, feedback and assessment techniques, and discourse facilitators. In accordance with these findings, the research by Ehrlich (2002) found that the success of online courses often depends on how simple and user-friendly the interface is and how tech-savvy students are, which can be seen as a component of course structure factors and media effects. Over 90 percent of the students who took part in the research advocated for the inclusion of more orientation and practical training for both instructors and students in online courses. When the results of this study and the present study are taken into account, it can be concluded that using technology for educational purposes shouldn't be too troublesome and intimidating for students and instructors.

Implications for Practice

The recommendations given by the participants to the online instructors aiming to increase the level of interaction in their courses, and interpretations of the researchers are neither prescriptions nor instructions for practice. The interview data obtained in this study do not attempt to give prescriptions for how online courses should be structured, nor do they attempt to give details of all the factors that might affect interaction in online education. They are only recommendations based on the observations and experiences of six participants, most of whom believe that they need more training and experience in distance education. Researchers and practitioners must decide on the relevance of the findings and whether they are applicable to their cases.

From the literature review and this research study, it is possible to draw several educational implications about what language teachers should do to promote interactivity in online courses. First and foremost, educators should focus on teaching strategies and new technologies that integrate various forms of engagement into online learning environments. The learner's online education experience will be enhanced as a result, and this will enhance learning outcomes. Secondly, language instructors should be aware of the fact that multiple, varied, and consistent communication and interaction with the learner are critical components of any online education course. In the context of online education, both the learner and the instructor are responsible for the learner's motivation and excitement. Finally, the instructors' use of social communication strategies is critical because the findings from interviews suggested that the use of various social communication strategies by the instructors such as initiation of conversation, greeting, praising, using appealing tones, and so on, improves interactive communications. Initiation of communication demonstrated to the recipient that the correspondent was eager to form a connection and discuss issues. People felt kinder, more approachable, and warmer as a result of this.

Limitations and Further Research

As discussed in the literature review part of the study, there are various theoretical perspectives that reply to the research questions. The present study focused solely on determining the factors that might influence interpersonal interaction in online courses. It has only scratched the surface of the general construct of interpersonal interaction as perceived by the active users of the online education system. It would have been ideal to interview more participants within various contexts to provide the study with a richer degree of data. Further discourse analysis of the interview transcripts could elucidate how the concepts of power and control function in online courses and traditional face-to-face classroom environments. Further detailed research to explore the factors within multiple contexts, find out what discourse says about power and control, and investigate how interaction shapes power and control in an online education atmosphere could be useful for researchers to reconsider the concepts we take for granted and gain a deeper understanding of interaction in online environments.

Statements of Publication Ethics

The authors of this article declare that the research has no unethical problems and observe research and publication ethics.

Researchers' Contribution Rate

The first author managed the entire flow of the article and study design, organized the data collection tool, and collected and analyzed the data. The second and third authors contributed to the interpretation of the findings. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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