【Research Brief】

Developing social presence in online classes: a Japanese higher education context

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Abstract

This paper reports on research that explored two English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' experiences developing social presence in online learning at one private university in Tokyo, Japan. Qualitative data were collected through teacher reflections and analyzed through the lens of the social presence model (Tu & McIsaac, 2002) and cultural dimension theories (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980). The paper begins with a brief background on social presence and cultural dimension theories. The teachers will then present their reports on their efforts to develop social presence in their online activities within the dimensions of these models. Finally a discussion presents key themes on how technology and pedagogical activities mediated social presence online in the Japanese context. The findings suggest that technology and pedagogical activities expanded and mediated social presence, and that social presence is reflexive to the frequency and depth of interaction. The theoretical implications result in a proposed modification to the social presence model to reflect a reflexive relationship rather than the one way arrow that currently depicts the relationship.

**Keywords:** *EFL, higher education, Japan, online learning, social presence*

Introduction

Social presence, "the ability of participants to identify with a group, communicate openly in a trusting environment, and develop personal and affective relationships progressively by way of projecting their individual personalities,"(Garrison, 2016, p. 25) is a critical component of effective instructional design. With the rapid growth of the internet and emerging new online forms of communication and learning, social presence is receiving increasing attention in education and communication research and has been examined both qualitatively and quantitatively (*See, e.g.*, Biocca et al., 2003; Oztok & Brett, 2011; Richardson et al., 2017). Research demonstrates its influence on student participation (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007; Swan & Shih, 2005; Tu & McIsaac, 2002) course satisfaction (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Hostetter & Busch, 2006; Swan & Shih, 2005) and both actual and perceived learning (Hostetter & Busch, 2006; Joksimović et al., 2015).

Different students have different social preference strategies and needs (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that perception of social presence and how it is mediated through technology can have some cultural influence (Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Although there is some research that investigates cultural differences in the perception of social presence (e.g. Lowry et al., 2010; Tu & McIsaac, 2002) the vast majority of research investigating social presence is conducted in Western educational contexts with white participants. Yet online education, and computer mediated forms of intercultural communication are rapidly expanding globally, not only in education but in all industries. As such, this research examines two teachers' attempts at developing social presence in a Japanese online context.

Dimensions of Social Presence

Synthesizing the research on social presence in the online environment, Tu and McIsaac (2002) conceptualized a model consisting of two components of social presence (intimacy, and immediacy) that can be broken down further into three dimensions (social context, online communication and interactivity) (Figure 1). *Intimacy* refers to physical proximity (e.g. maintained eye contact, body leading forward, etc.), while *immediacy* refers to the psychological proximity that can be communicated both verbally and nonverbally (Tu & McIsaac, 2002, p.134). This model suggests that by improving the three central dimensions (interactivity, social context, and online communication), intimacy and immediacy are enhanced, thus affecting social presence and consequently interaction.
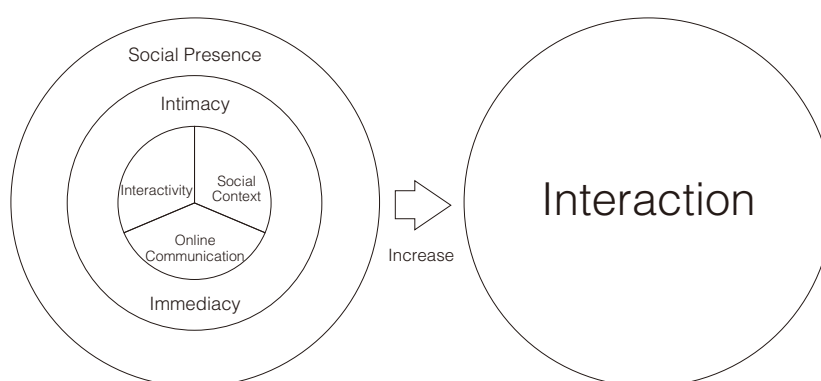
Figure 1. Dimensions of Social Presence
Note. Reproduced from Tu and McIsaac (2002, p.132)

Interactivity refers to the types of activities, communication style, and the degree of interaction (Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Immediacy is related to this dimension whereby faster and more frequent feedback can positively influence student perceptions of teacher social presence (Bialowas & Steimel, 2019) . The way teachers and students communicate with each other can also affect social presence (Oyarzun et al., 2018; Yildiz, 2009).

Social context consists of elements such as task orientation, topics, social relationships, and social processes. These elements have been found to influence the degree of social presence. For instance, the more public and focused on a task communication is, the more social presence will decrease (Tu & McIsaac, 2002, p.134).

Online communication refers to familiarity and comfort with the language and the attributes of communication online. When students receive training and are familiar with online communication there is an increased degree of social presence (Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Also, typing speed or concerns about how to communicate, or the process of receiving information can affect their social presence (Tu, 2002).

Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede's (1980; 2010) cultural dimensions theory and Hall's (1976) intercultural communications framework, two models widely used in extensive research across many different fields, describe aspects of intercultural communication (Hofstede et al., 2010; Kirkman et al., 2006; Kittler et al., 2011). Although there is some overlap in the concepts, they describe a spectrum of dimensions across cultures. Japanese are placed on the high end of the dimensions with the characteristics in

Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1
Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Dimension	High (Japan)
Power Distance -degree to which hierarchies exist and are accepted	Hierarchies
Uncertainty Avoidance – degree of tolerance/avoidance of risk	Risk intolerant
Group vs Individual Orientation	Collectivism – group harmony, non-competitiveness prioritized
Restraint vs Indulgence	Restraint

Note. Adapted from Hoftede et al. (2010) to include dimensions focused within this study.

Table 2
Intercultural communication dimensions

Factors	High (Japan)
Context	Covert indirect messages
	Non verbal codes
	Reaction held
	Strong in and out group distinction
Time	High commitment
	Monochronic (single task orientation)
Space	Private space large

Note. Adapted from Hall and Hall (1990).

Teacher Reports

This section reports on how two teachers develop online teaching activities based on the dimensions of social presence (Tu & McIsaac, 2002) and culture (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980)

Incorporation of Social Presence Dimensions

1. Online communication – familiarity and comfort with using technology.

Teacher 1: Satchie Haga – *assume no prior knowledge & step by step instructions*

Every time I use a new technology or introduce a new task I assume students have no prior knowledge. Not only do I walk them through the task/tool, and do it together, I also create an example task or question that tests their ability to do it in class so I can answer any questions immediately before they work on a real assignment. I also have students work together in groups in breakout rooms so that they can help each other resolve their issues.

Teacher 2: Joshua Rappeneker – *technology use through applied activities*

In the first week of class in Advanced English (a twice a week course designed to develop academic English skills in the first year of university) I create groups randomly, and assign them the

task of creating a presentation within a single lesson. The theme is that they must explain a natural phenomenon, such as magnetism or rainbows to an audience of elementary school children. The requirements of the task mean that the students must learn to use Zoom to communicate, use shared documents such as Google docs to work on their slides simultaneously, and must be able to exchange information with each other via the chat function of Zoom, or via email.

In the second class the students give the presentations, and then other groups take turns asking follow-up questions. This brief task allows students to experience and overcome most of the technological hurdles that they will encounter during the semester, whilst working within a group. Working in these groups also means that students have an incentive to use their cameras and microphones as much as possible, which I deeply encourage. Unlike Satchie above, I do not model the use of the tools, but rather leave the students to solve the issues themselves in their groups and observe – only stepping in to help if the students are truly 'stuck'.

2. Interactivity—degree of interaction.

Teacher 1: Satchie Haga – *synchronous (real-time classes), frequency and depth of interaction*

I make an effort to enhance *immediacy* through *interactivity* by conducting my classes on Zoom synchronously (in real time) with about 75% of the time spent engaged in interactive activities in breakout rooms. This allows students to quickly ask me questions either using the chat feature or after class. Also, I want them to have a way to interact with each other whilst working on tasks, including those that don't require speaking, so I put them in breakout rooms in small groups where they can work together with camera on or off. This way they can ask each other questions if they need help or contact me using the help button and I will go to their room immediately.

I also noticed that classes such as debate or discussion with frequent interaction enabled more opportunities and deeper exploration of ideas compared to classes such as eLearning where students interacted only a few times. This limited opportunities to develop social presence and consequently the depth of discussions remained superficial.

Teacher 2: Joshua Rappeneker – *use of online discussion forums*

Before the first class I have students write a brief self introduction on a 'Getting to know you' forum. I make sure they include photos of things that interest them, and then ask each other follow up questions. Also, each week students write their answers to discussion questions on a shared class forum, and they then reply to at least 3 other students (ideally those who have no replies yet). The use of forums has the added benefit of 'levelling the playfield', so to speak. Whilst the more extroverted and confident speakers tend to speak up more in Zoom sessions, forums (as an asynchronous medium) allow students to compose and communicate their thoughts at their own pace.

3. Social context—task orientation to social topics, relationships, and processes.

Teacher 1: Satchie Haga – *encourage student camera use, develop social relationships beyond the classroom*

In order to develop the *social context* I strongly encourage turning the camera on. I respect students' preferences to have the camera off if they do not feel comfortable, or have technical issues that affect communication over video (e.g. poor wifi connection). However, I promote the social benefits of using video (i.e. that it can make it easier and more comfortable for others to speak when they can see your reaction). Prior to entering every breakout session, I remind them of the benefits of turning on the camera. This results in the vast majority of students speaking with cameras on during chat sessions. Like Joshua describes below I have small breakout rooms, however, I had not considered students not feeling comfortable with only one partner, so I often had one-on-one rooms as I wanted them to speak more deeply with each other. The time in one-on-one rooms is limited usually to a maximum 5 minutes like in my face-to-face classroom tasks. After reading Joshua's report I realized that this might cause some anxiety for some students who may be partnered with someone they are not comfortable with, and have since changed the instructions I provide to students prior to entering the breakout rooms to include informing them of how long they will be in the room for, and to remind them of the help button they can use to contact me if they would like some assistance or feel anxious.

I also enhance the *social context* and reduce psychological distance by encouraging communication outside of classes. In the first class I conduct a survey to see if they want a class LINE group. I find that the vast majority of students want a LINE group, so I ask for a volunteer to set up a group. This is a group I am not a member of, but a place where they can get in touch with each other if they have concerns or questions outside of class, and participation is voluntary. Also I create social tasks at the beginning of the course and during breaks where they can meet each other. These tasks are not graded because the sole purpose is social where they meet each other to develop their social relations. For example, I ask them to meet with 3 people in the class to interview them. I provide them with similar interview questions used in a face-to-face class interview activity, however rather than ask them to do it in class I ask them to arrange to meet in their own time so that they can talk as long (or as short as they wanted). Although my classes are conducted in English I do not set language requirements in these tasks so they can communicate freely in their preferred language.

Teacher 2: Joshua Rappeneker – *small breakout rooms, microphones on, avoid one-on-one rooms, and lighthearted atmosphere that encourages experimentation*

In breakout rooms I always strongly suggest that the students keep their cameras and microphones on. The reason for cameras is to maintain eye contact, or it's Zoom equivalent. I have noticed that students are more readily able to maintain conversational rhythms when they can see each other. The reason for microphones being on the entire time, if feasible, is that it allows for more natural reactions in conversation, for example laughing, gasping, etc. It's been my experience that this reduces the mechanical nature of Zoom discussions.

I also try to make sure to keep breakout rooms between three and four students if possible. I

avoid one-on-one rooms for the most part, because unlike a classroom, in which students are aware of the space and others around them, being in a one on one break out room can feel a little claustrophobic. As I am unable to monitor all breakout rooms simultaneously, I think it's safer to make sure at least three students are in a single room. Conversely, rooms with more than four students often end up with at least one student silent for the majority of discussions.

Drawing pictures together

Another small and somewhat silly activity I like to do in early classes is to screen share a 'whiteboard' via Zoom and during a short interval allow students to draw doodles on the board. It has been my experience that students quickly warmup to the task, and feel somewhat relaxed afterwards. It has the added benefit of teaching students how to annotate shared screens when working on projects together.

Playing Werewolf

In the first few weeks of a class I try and play the social game "One Night Werewolf" via Zoom at least a couple of times. The game is very simple – it involves secret roles and deception, and the main purpose of the game is to discuss which of the players is potentially a werewolf. The first time I play the game in class I explain the rules to the students, and then tell them that it's okay to use Japanese. Whilst the end purpose of the game is to practice English conversation, the secondary purpose of playing is to create an entertaining atmosphere, and encourage social ties between the students.

Incorporation of Cultural Dimensions

Teacher 1: Satchie Haga – *collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, public and private space*

In terms of the cultural dimensions, I noticed how Japanese students prefer to work in groups or with a partner. This works well with establishing social presence as they are keen to know about each other and interact together. However, it seems due to uncertainty avoidance, fear of losing face, and fear of breaking harmony it may be difficult for them to make the first move to create a LINE group or connect with others. Also I noticed public and private domains have different meanings for Japanese whereby public space is an area where people can communicate to develop relationships, but also there is a risk of losing face or breaking harmony in public forums (e.g. discussion boards, or in front of the class).

As such, I use technology to negotiate public and private space, where I collect their "true" opinion via anonymous forms or have them speak together in breakout rooms before revealing a *public* opinion to the group. For example in the debate class I would have groups discuss together their analysis of the debate they watched prior to revealing a *public* group decision about their analysis. The objective of *public* social tasks (e.g. discussion boards on Blackboard) is to enhance harmony with others (e.g. revealing similar interests).

I also noticed that online tools create public space that can be perceived as more concrete than space created whilst speaking with someone in person. It seems that technology enables permanence of video or text that can mediate communication. For instance, although some students appeared to

be comfortable showing their face during video discussions, they were reluctant to be recorded. In two of my classes I started the semester using FlipGrid, but I stopped using it when two students asked me for alternatives for posting their video to the site. They did not mind posting videos to a shared folder in Google Drive that only they and I would see, but did not want the video to be posted where everyone in the class could see it. Even whilst working on written collaborative documents, I noticed that students preferred to work in breakout rooms to discuss what suggestions they were thinking of adding to the text rather than editing the document through the tracked changes features outside of class.

Teacher 2: Joshua Rappeneker – *restraint*, *collectivistic*, *public versus private space*, & *risk intolerance*

Even more so than in a physical classroom, students appear reticent to answer questions posed to the class on Zoom. Instead of singling students out who may not be comfortable answering a question and thus potentially alienating the student, I first have the students break out into small rooms and discuss their answers. Upon returning from the breakout rooms, I ask students first about their group discussion, and only then about their own opinions.

For classes with a lot of group work, after the first couple of projects I have students answer a form with two questions: 'Who would you like to work with on the next project?', and 'Who would you not like to work with on the next project?'. The answers are kept secret. I then form the project groups making sure everyone is in a group with at least one person they would like to work with, and with no person they do not wish to work with. So far, I have not had an unsolvable combination of likes and dislikes (although one student listed themselves as someone they would prefer not to work with!) The reason I make sure to do this when teaching online is that the social cues that make assigning groups that will work together well in person are much harder to pick up over Zoom.

Discussion

This section discusses key themes based on the findings explained above.

Technology and pedagogical activities <u>expanded</u> social presence and "public" space

Technology expanded social and public space by providing more locations to communicate (e.g. discussion forums, recorded videos, collaborative online documents) and increased permanence, so that it could be viewed over time (e.g. recordings or text based vs spoken comments). When considered in terms of social presence this can expand opportunities to develop social relationships through increased interaction regardless of physical location and time. However, expanding opportunities to develop social presence also results in increased tensions in terms of private versus public face whereby there may be concerns about future problems arising out of recorded text (e.g. misunderstanding of peer review comments) or videos made today. Thus, pedagogical activities can be used to expand social presence through technology. However, teachers should be cognizant that although this expansion affords benefits, it can also increase opportunities for social tensions.

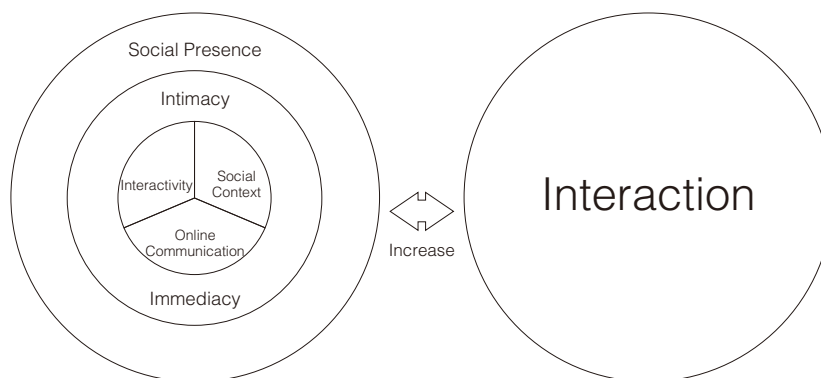## Technology and pedagogical activities <u>mediated</u> social presence and "public" space

Technology mediated social presence and public space both positively and negatively. Sound and

physical distance between people online is different from when meeting someone in person. Teachers noticed that students were more reticent to share their opinion openly in front of a class on zoom than a class in person. When all sound is muted the speaker is spotlighted so that both in audio and video they are on a more public display than if they are speaking from their seats and looking at the teacher and responding to a question. Also, reactions are muted and technical issues affect communication between people consequently affecting the psychological distance.

However, technology also enabled sharing opinions with reduced risk of losing public face through collecting private opinions efficiently and anonymously through online forms and polls. As such pedagogical activities that incorporate this negotiation of public and private space can enhance social presence through encouraging more active anonymous participation. In addition, activities spread out over time on online discussion forums appeared to enhance participation of students who may be more reticent in speaking activities, and encouraged more depth to topics which required more thought. As such, teachers should consider the social and psychological mediation that occurs with the medium they choose to deliver the task.

The relationship of social presence and interaction is reflexive

This study confirms the relationship between social presence and interaction in the social presence model (Figure 1) whereby increased social presence enhances interaction. In early online classes students are reluctant to turn on the cameras, but after a couple of classes cameras are turned on almost immediately when in the breakout rooms. In other words, increased social presence affected willingness to communicate and trust, supporting previous research (e.g. Lowry et al., 2010). However, this study found that the frequency and depth of interaction also affects social presence. The quality and extent of interaction between students affected their trust and willingness to communicate and thus social presence. As such, we suggest the following modification (Figure 2) to the model where the arrow indicates a reflexive relationship rather than one way flow.

Figure 2. Proposed Modified Dimensions of Social Presence Model
Note. Our proposed modification to Tu & McIsaac's (2002) model.

Conclusion

This study found that technology and pedagogical practices expand social space and mediate communication. Social presence was enhanced online not only through increasing interactions but also by removing face threatening barriers. Teachers can mediate the "private" and "public" views of

communication through the media through which they choose to deliver activities. As teachers we may understand our position of authority in the classroom and require our students to participate in activities (e.g. video recordings or technology use) that may have a strong pedagogical value, however these activities can also encroach on students' privacy. More research that explores how to balance privacy, pedagogy, and social presence online is recommended. Also, this research confirmed that social presence influences interaction, however we found that the frequency and depth of interaction also influences social presence. More research on the recursive relationship between interaction and social presence is recommended. Although this research is limited to the impressions of two Western educated English teachers, the findings may have pedagogical implications for those in similar contexts such as in other institutions in Japan, or other collectivist cultures with high uncertainty avoidance and large private space, such as those in Asia and the Middle East.

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