

Chapter 83

Power Distance and Teacher Authority in an Online Learning Environment: Does Culture Affect Student Reactions to Instructor Presence?

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ABSTRACT

Computer-aided instruction has assumed a prominent role in language teacher preparation programs, as educators increasingly turn to online environments to extend learning beyond the classroom, stimulate critical thinking, and motivate future language teachers to “think outside the box” and take responsibility for their own learning. In online educational settings, instructor presence plays a significant role, and its impact has been extensively explored. However, the majority of the research has been carried out in Western countries, where the cultural norms of individualism, low power distance between teachers and students, and a high level of acceptance of instructor feedback typically play a positive role in online student-teacher interactions. Few studies have looked at the issue of instructor presence in Eastern cultures, where teachers are traditionally granted a high degree of authority, and learners often have a lower tolerance for situations where independent thought and creativity are called for – as is often the case in online learning.

INTRODUCTION

Within the confines of the traditional classroom, the role of the teacher has been clearly delineated. Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) set forth three main functions of teaching: (1) designing and implementing an appropriate learning curriculum; (2) creating an effective learning environment that meets the cognitive, social and affective needs of students; and (3) stimulating the dynamic

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acquisition of knowledge through effective instruction (p. 3). Together, these three functions comprise what is referred to as *instructor presence*; which, when properly implemented, establishes a positive framework for learning (Baker, 2010; Mandernach, Gonzalez, & Garrett, 2006). In doing so, Reupert, Maybery, Patrick, and Chittleborough (2009) emphasize that it is the “person of the instructor” (p. 47) that allows for the development of the empathy and interpersonal communication that are needed to generate meaningful learning.

However, as Internet-based instruction has assumed a more prominent role in many areas of education, the traditional role of the classroom teacher has taken on a new dimension. Andresen (2009) points out that, in the distinctive context of online learning, there has been a substantial shift in the interpersonal dynamics between students and teachers. In the virtual classroom, the instructional environment takes on “the form of a dialogue where learners can interact with peers or mentors who challenge and scaffold their learning” (Zhu, 2006, p. 453). Within this framework, the need to establish meaningful instructor presence has taken on a new importance, as teachers are required to create an empathic relationship with students and develop a sense of community without relying on the benefits of face-to-face interaction (Palloff & Pratt, 2011). Based on this understanding, Mandernach et al. (2006) have identified three key elements of instructor presence as they apply to Internet-based learning. These are defined as *social presence*, *instructor immediacy* and *teaching presence*.

SOCIAL PRESENCE

Vygotsky (1978) argued that all learning takes place not only on an intellectual plane, but also on an affective and social level; as such, teaching and learning can be construed as essentially social activities. With this in mind, social presence, which is established both by the efforts of an individual to interact with others and by others’ interpretation of these efforts (Kehrwald, 2008), is considered as a major factor in successful learning; particularly in online environments where visible participation and interpersonal communication are the only indicators that the instructor is involved. Therefore, Aragon (2003) stresses that responding to questions and posts in a timely fashion and making conversation is needed in order to promote a community mentality. Beuchot and Bullen (2005) take this idea a step further, suggesting that course instructors should put forth a positive effort to develop interpersonal relationships with students in an online learning environment; while Kehrwald (2008) likewise holds that building rapport and trust between the instructor and class members can help to establish a sense of belonging. This sense of community, fostered by a high level of instructor engagement, is indicated by Oblinger (2014) and Rapp and Anyikwa (2016) as supporting greater learner achievement.

INSTRUCTOR IMMEDIACY

Numerous researchers (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Eom, 2006; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003; Richardson & Swan, 2003) have argued for the relevance of instructor immediacy, or the apparent availability of the course instructor in an online setting. As Richardson and Swan (2003) and Paran, Furneaux, and Sumner (2004) explain, students who perceive their instructor to be actively involved in an online discussion tend to express that they have learned more in a given course; whereas in instances where the instructor is seen as having a minimal presence, Reupert et al. (2009) contend that a sense of isolation and lack of

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