



# Teaching Presence in Online EFL Courses: A Study of Community of Inquiry Model in Iranian Context

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**Abstract**

By the arrival of technology into the world and how it touches learning contexts, it seems of cardinal importance for educational centres to participate in a systematic study of making the optimal learning available for their future students. The present study examines the effect of the Community of Inquiry Model of Online Learning on EFL learners' perceived learning and sense of community. The purpose was to figure out how teaching presence affected EFL learners' perceptions of learning and sense of community in online EFL courses. Pertinent data were collected from EFL students and selected teachers. There were significant relationships between the teaching presence elements and students' sense of community. It was discovered that there was a small but significant relationship between the students' perceptions of learning and their sense of community. Directed facilitation and satisfaction with course length were both statistically significant in predicting a sense of community. As claimed by EFL learners, there were statistically significant correlations between teaching presence, perceived learning, and sense of community. The instructors demonstrated similar positive relationships with no significant differences when the student and instructor data were compared.

**Keywords:** Community of Inquiry Model, Teaching Presence, Sense of Community, Directed Facilitation, Perceived Learning

**Introduction**

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) suggested a community of inquiry model of online learning, which was a conceptual framework founded on the evidence that the community of learners' success is associated with the interactions between instructors and content, among students, and between students and instructors as evinced by three factors: 1) cognitive presence, 2) social presence, and 3) teaching presence. They were believed to be vital rudiments of successful online learning and available in all higher education learning experiences. In the community of inquiry model, teaching presence was well-defined as the instructional design and organization, facilitation of discourse, and direct instruction incorporated and utilized throughout a course.

Cognitive presence, one of the elements of the community of inquiry model, "is related to the simplification of critical reflection and discourse" (Garrison, 2003, p. 49). Internal cognitive processes like reflective thinking, construction of knowledge, and external cognitive processes happen when critical discussions happen among students and between students and teachers. Those actions were believed to be vital fundamentals of cognitive presence and could not arise deprived of interactions. The inevitability of the interaction constituent to the community of inquiry model is thoroughly related to Dewey and Vygotsky's opinions on constructivist learning theories (Wertsch & Tulviste, 2005). Students intermingle with the content, with their thought procedures, and with other students to construct meaning. Cognitive presence was observed per a vivacious section in distance education, where meaningful learning results were predictable. Both mechanisms, critical reflection and discourses in an intellectual climate, had to be nurtured through an instructor's role and peer interactions for the construction of knowledge to occur.

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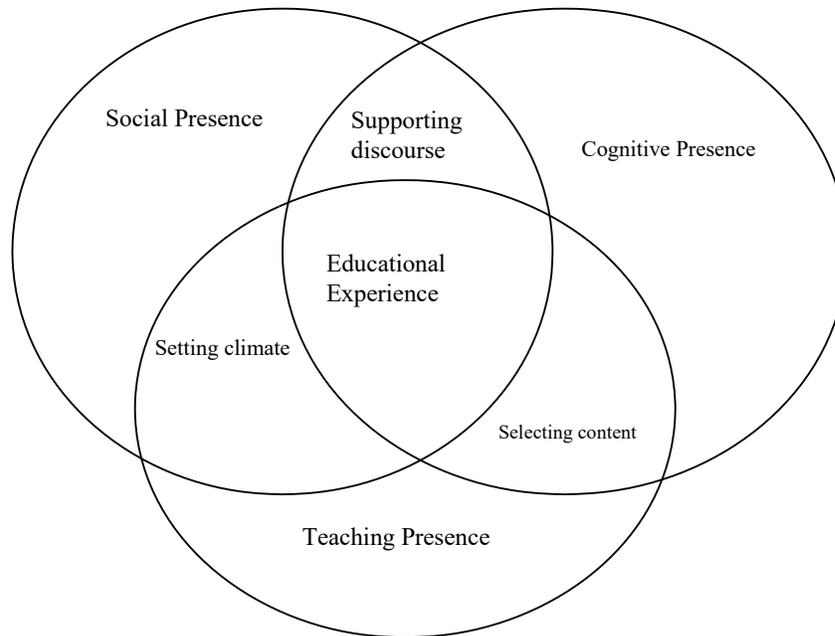
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## Communication Medium

**Figure 1**

*The Community of Inquiry Model (Adapted from Garrison et al. 2000)*



The second element of the community of inquiry model is the social presence which is well-defined by Garrison et al. (2000) as the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to illustrate themselves socially and emotionally, as ‘authentic’ individuals, through the medium of communication being used” (p. 94). Social presence pertained to cognitive presence since it facilitated the interactions vital to creating cognitive processes, hence aiding a community to make meaningful learning results that were smoothed by a teaching presence. Rourke et al. (2001) well-defined social presence as the potential of students to depict themselves socially and emotionally in a community of inquiry. As defined by Swan (2003), social presence becomes influenced by peer interactions or student-student interactions. Numerous studies have found encouraging relationships between student satisfaction, learning effectiveness, and social presence (Picciano, 2002; Tu & McIsaac, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003).

Teaching presence is the superglue that seizes a community of inquiry together as it begins and keeps an environment where social and cognitive presences could embellish. The three foundations of teaching presence, instructional design and organization, smoothed discussion, and straight coaching, were united in espousing and cultivating social and cognitive presences. The three factors were understood as overlapping, entwined, and similarly significant in evolving a community of inquiry that simplified learning.

In online courses, the utilization of teaching presence to create elegant, prearranged courses, where discourse is understood and invigorated as well as having a sense of the teacher being nearby through direct instruction, has been revealed to unswervingly associate with students’ perceived learning and sense of community (Arbaugh, 2001; Shea et al., 2006; Lu & Jeng, 2006; Arbaugh & Rau, 2007). Teacher propinquity behaviours, also called teaching presence strategies, have been revealed (Scott, 1994; Scott, 1995; Collins, 2005) to be appreciated by pupils in online courses. Teachers of online courses practice online discussions and small group projects to produce communication among students, enabling the construction of knowledge rather than informing knowledge through lecture formats. Instructors in online courses might utilize these policies and others to exploit the online nature of courses and the interactivity accomplished in online courses.

## Literature Review

In a mixed-method study conducted with pupils of information technology at an Iranian university, taking an English for specific purposes (ESP) online writing course, Asoodar et al. (2014) established the impact of using blogs for educational purposes. They utilized the blog-buddy application to permit interaction among the students, the instructor, and the application. Moreover, Moodle, email, chat rooms, and Adobe Acrobat Meeting Pro were utilized. Outcomes stated that students exhibited higher levels of gratification concerning their

discussions in the computer-generated course since they could share their knowledge and experience with their peers. The students were also able to comprehend other arguments in a collaborative and highly striking format, and they considered the elasticity of simulated classes as a positive feature; in the meantime, they could gain access at any time and from any place.

Asoodar et al. (2014) utilized the community of inquiry agenda to perceive the construction of the community, and through quantitative analysis, established that participants with a “higher sense of community” (social presence) displayed improved academic performance and better scores (cognitive presence). The social presence was chiefly attained through chat communication. Instant communication encouraged social presence, as contributors felt relaxed with the context of the class. This study was confirmed to be pertinent to ESOL; meanwhile, it planned an advanced way to prepare language educators by means of technology.

Arnold and Ducate (2006) carried out a mixed study with two groups of foreign language educators in methodology courses (face to face classes and online discussions) at two institutes of higher education. Electronic discussion boards were utilized to boost interaction among participants from both institutions. The conclusions depicted that the level of social presence was higher than the level of the cognitive one. Concerning cognitive presence, electronic discussions endorsed learning as partners’ contributions uncovered diverse viewpoints and explanations of ideas. While the outcomes were statistically positive, the resolution phase was not touched. Deliberately, instructors only contributed by preparing an activating incident but did not participate in the discussion; therefore, the instructor’ said they might be an essential component to achieve the integration phase.

Another thought-provoking study is that by Randrianasolo (2013). This research showed a scheme to reform a writing course at Purdue University in Indiana, USA. The course would comprise the practice of technological tools such as “Blackboard, Adobe Connect, Skype, Google Hangout, and social media such as Facebook and Twitter, to develop course activities such as online discussion, peer review, and composition” (social presence) (p. 182). The author claimed that the exclusive features of international students, about their educational background, culture, and language proficiency, made this approach appropriate for this course. Although online education provides flexibility, students often notice that online courses were more difficult than traditional ones. Such is the case of the qualitative study conducted by Chen (2021). Chen analyzed the efficiency of teachers’ courses in terms of development, implementation and evaluation. The findings showed that technical issues such as platform unpredictability and audio and video resource letdown were weaknesses.

Conversely, personality, “organization skills, and learning styles were features related to productive pupils, though innovative personality, strong organization, and superior technological skills were connected to instructors” (p. 64). The application of tasks and assignments that might be utilized to practice with included operative components that motivated students “to reach the resolution stage” (p. 98). Conclusions of this study stated that the community of inquiry framework demonstrated to be practical, albeit there are educational contemplations to boost.

In Lomicka and Lord (2007), 14 teachers took part in a study conducted at two institutes of higher education in the United States. Three experimental groups were examined in terms of social presence. The first group worked on traditional journals, and no feedback was given. The second one wrote their journals and received peer feedback. The third group published the journals in an electronic discussion setting; every participant had access to it; accordingly, they could provide feedback. Intentionally, the teacher did not contribute to any of the groups. Outcomes depicted that the emotional component was more evident in the group that worked the journals electronically; some indications were stating feelings, self-constructive comments, representing susceptibility, giving advice and opinions, asking questions, agreeing, using names and salutations.

A study meticulously related to the development of language skills was conducted by Olesova et al. (2021). This study encompassed 39 students and two teachers who developed a five-week online reading project. Both teachers gave written feedback. The study described a somewhat higher level of fulfilment in getting audio feedback, which made the students feel part of the course. A stimulating outcome was that EFL students described a higher understanding of the instructor’s voice than ESL students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

One model of online learning has directed this study, and it was the Community of Inquiry Model. Garrison et al. (2000) proposed a Community of Inquiry Model of online learning, a conceptual framework based on the significance of the community of students being efficacious that depended on the interactions between instructors and students, as evinced by three aspects: cognitive, social, and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000). In the Community of Inquiry Model, teaching presence was well-defined as “the instructional design and organization, facilitation of discourse, and direct instruction” (p. 67). Shea, Li, and Pickett (2006) found a “clear connection between perceived teaching presence and students’ sense of learning community” (p. 184), with 62% of the variance for classroom community elucidated by perceived teaching presence.

In online courses, teaching presence was more essential for simplifying social and cognitive processes since there was no setting to help pupils progress without it. In online courses, the practice of teaching presence to

make elegant, prearranged courses where discourse was perceived and invigorated as well as having a feeling of the teacher being close through direct instruction has been revealed to directly correlate with students' perceived learning and sense of community (Arbaugh, 2001, Shea et al., 2006, Lu & Jeng, 2006; Arbaugh & Rau, 2007). However, the purpose of this study was to understand how the Community of Inquiry Model of online learning impacted the sense of community and perceived learning in Online EFL courses. The following sections provide the research questions as well as the methodology of the current study.

### **Research Questions**

1. Is there any significant relationship between the three components of The Community of Inquiry Model, i.e., teaching presence, cognitive presence and social presence?
2. Do teaching presence components have a statistically significant impact on students' perceived learning and sense of community?
3. Is there any significant relationship between perceived learning and sense of community?
4. Is teaching presence predictive of student perception of learning and sense of community?

### **Instrumentation**

The Teaching Presence Scale (TPS) developed by Shea et al. (2003) was used for the three components of teaching presence. Shea et al. validated the scale and checked for reliability. Sense of community was measured utilizing the Classroom and School Community Inventory (CSCI) developed by Rovai et al. (2005). Perceived learning was assessed using a single question based on the Student Perceived Learning Instrument used by McCroskey et al. (1996). Demographic questions were also used to collect student gender, age, course information, distance from campus, and employment.

### **Sampling Procedures**

There were 123 students registered for online FL courses in Bahar Institute of Higher Education, Mashhad, Iran. All students joined an online EFL course, and all of the instructors were requested to complete the online survey. Again, the tools employed were based on the Teaching Presence Scale (TPS) and Rovai's Classroom and School Community Inventory (CSCI) (Shea et al., 2006) and modified to fit the student or instructor.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection was done through two online surveys, one to the instructor and one to the students. The interviews with designated instructor were coded and prepared into themes to regulate whether they stated similar information to what the survey analyses revealed. Analyses focused on teaching presence and satisfaction as well as course length. The dependent variables were examined consistent with perceived learning and sense of community. Next, the associations between demographic variables and teaching presence, sense of community, perceived learning, and satisfaction with course length were analyzed. The effect size was computed to figure out sample size and its association to power.

As for the reliability, a comparison was carried between the internal consistency of the survey findings and previous studies that utilized the TPS (Shea et al., 2006) and CSCI (Rovai et al., 2005) survey items through Cronbach's Alpha. Rovai et al. (2005) calculated construct validity of the sense of community scales for a classroom. The reliability index for the classroom scale displayed Cronbach's alphas of .84. Cronbach's alphas for social community and learning community subscales were .92 and .89, respectively. The inventory also exhibited constancy in pre- post-test correlation with a Pearson  $r$  of .94.

The following item was added on the Classroom and School Community Inventory for the student perceived learning scale (Rovai et al., 2005); "On a scale of 0 to 8, how much did you learn in this course, with 0 indicating you learned nothing and 8 showing you learned more than any other course you have had?" adapted from the student perceived learning instrument used by McCroskey et al. (1996). They reported test-retest correlational reliability of .85.

Shea et al. (2006) also utilized the classroom community instrument and reported Cronbach's alphas for the learning community scale and its subscales (.95), for connectedness (.92) and learning (.92). Shea et al. (2006) also described reliability coefficients for the teaching presence scale and its components, instructional design and organization, and directed facilitation had Cronbach's alphas of .99, .96, and .96, respectively. The data was collected using the Teaching Presence Scale (TPS) (Shea et al., 2003) and the Classroom and School Community Inventory (CSCI) (Rovai et al., 2005). The gender of the participants consisted of 32 males and 91 females. The age of the survey sample was skewed toward the aged student, with 57.2% being 20-years old or older. University data disclosed that 41.7 % of the online student population was 18-years of age or older.

### **Constructs of Teaching Presence from Student Data**

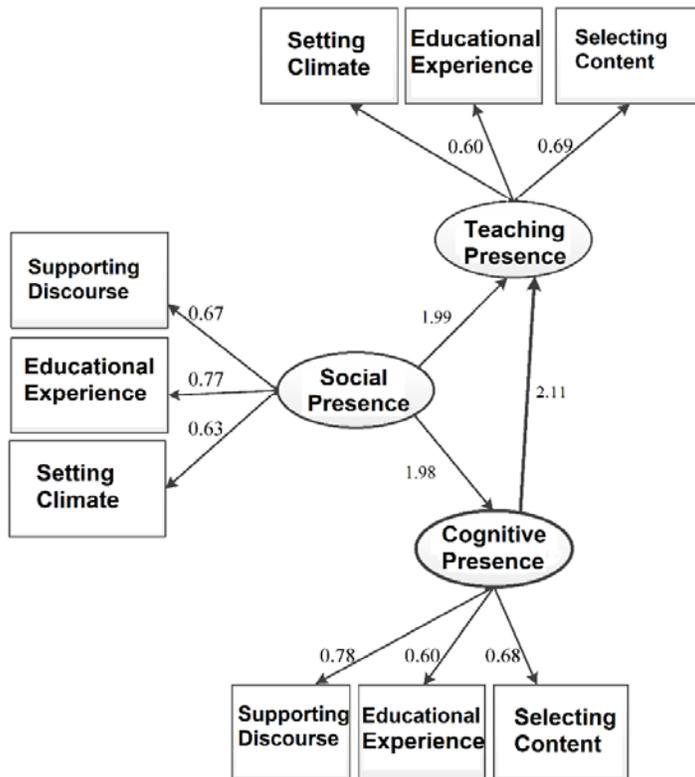
To scrutinize the construct of teaching presence, Kaiser normalization and a principal component method with

Varimax rotation were employed. Consistent with the work of Shea et al. (2006), whose findings showed the same matrix for teaching presence, the present study also employed analysis of the component score coefficient matrix and found out the two factors of (1) directed facilitation (DF) and (2) instructional design and organization (IDO). It was also figured out that the teaching presence correlations were greater than .51 for all items. Those two components accounted for 79.7% of the variance of the teaching presence construct; directed facilitation accounted for 47.9%, and instructional design and organization accounted for 34.3% of the variance in teaching presence. To estimate the reliability of the subscales of teaching presence, sense of community, and satisfaction with course length in the student survey data, a Cronbach's Alpha was utilized. All of the Cronbach Alpha scores were above 0.7 and believed to be suitable measures for internal consistency.

### Interpretation of Results

**Figure 2**

*The Relationship between Three Components of the Community of Inquiry Model*



To answer the first research question, a modelling approach using SEM was utilized to figure out the degree of the relationship between the three components of The Community of Inquiry Model, as well as that the relationship between each component and its latent variables are estimated. As depicted in figure 2, there is a significant relationship between the three components of The Community of Inquiry Model, i.e., teaching presence, cognitive presence and social presence.

In order to obtain meaningful statistics for each teaching presence component, a mean score of the questions related to each component was calculated. MTP refers to the mean score of teaching presence. IDO stands for instructional design and organization; DF refers to a combination of facilitated discourse and direct instruction from the factor analysis. Mean scores for perceived learning (PRLN), sense of community (SC) and satisfaction with course length (CorLn) are also given in table 1.

**Table 1***Summary of Mean Scores of Teaching Presence, Sense of Community, Perceived Learning and Course Length*

	<b>N</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Variance</b>
<b>MTP</b>	123	.81	5.00	4.5613	2.15683	2.548
<b>IDO</b>	123	.00	5.00	5.766	2.2349	2.326
<b>DF</b>	123	.00	5.00	4.2451	2.3107	2.871
<b>PRLN</b>	123	.00	8.00	6.845	3.4311	4.760
<b>CorLn</b>	123	.00	5.00	4.5669	1.8765	1.711
<b>SC</b>	123	.00	5.00	4.6601	1.9875	1.986
<b>Valid N</b> <b>(listwise)</b>	123					

Potential relationships between teaching presence components as identified through students' perceptions of perceived learning and sense of community are presented below in Table 2.

**Table 2***Correlations for Teaching Presence Components, Sense of Community, Course, Length, and Perceived learning*

	<b>IDO</b>	<b>DF</b>	<b>CorLn</b>	<b>SC</b>	<b>PRLN</b>
<b>Instructional Design &amp; Organization</b>	-				
<b>Directed Facilitation</b>	.821**	-			
<b>Course Length</b>	.654**	.562**	-		
<b>Sense of Community</b>	.766**	.649**	.439**	-	
<b>Perceived Learning</b>	.423**	.425**	.477**	.428**	-

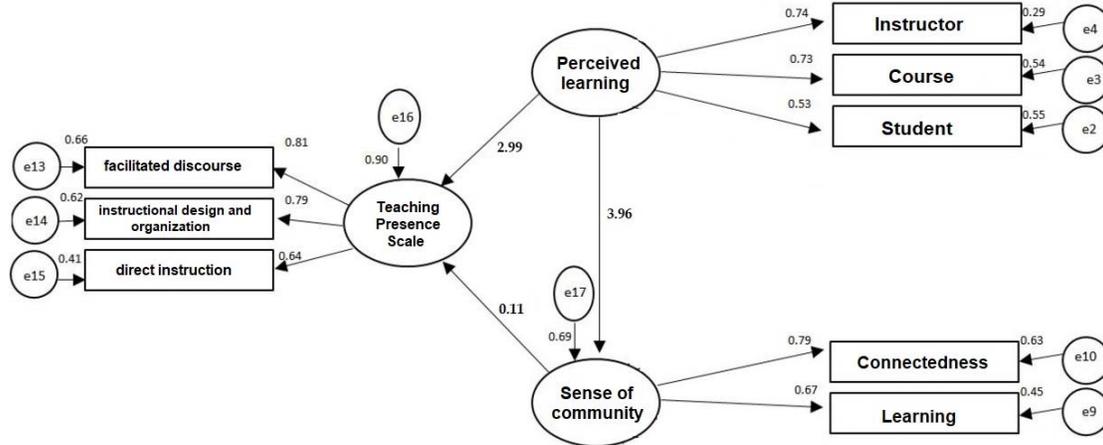
\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

### Research Questions Two and Three

A Pearson correlation was conducted on the three teaching presence constituents: facilitated discourse, instructional design and organization, and direct instruction, and students' perception of learning. Significant correlations were found between the teaching presence components and students' perceptions of learning. Moreover, in the present study, only 7.71% of the variance was found in the correlation between Instructional Design and Organization and Perceived Learning, giving an effect size of  $r^2 = .078$ . The variance of 6.51% was elucidated by directed facilitation and perceived learning, with an effect size of  $r^2 = .075$ .

There were statistically significant correlations at the .01 level between the teaching presence elements and students' perception of a sense of community. The effect size for the correlation of instructional design and organization with a sense of community was  $r^2 = .47$ ; FD with a sense of community was medium, as described by Cohen (1988), as  $r^2$  was between .09 and .49, and the effect of directed facilitation with a sense of community was large,  $r^2 = .41$ . It was discovered that there was a small but significant relationship between the students' perceptions of learning and sense of community,  $r = +.278$ ,  $n = 123$ ,  $p = .000$ . The hypothesis that perceived learning and sense of community were correlated has been confirmed in the Community of Inquiry Model (Garrison et al., 2000).

**Figure 3**  
*The Relationship between Teaching Presence, Perceived Learning and Sense of Community Using SEM*



#### Research Question Four

The first regression analysis was conducted on three factors, i.e., directed facilitation (DF), instructional design and organization (IDO), and course length (CorLn), and the dependent variable was perceived learning. The results showed that the model was significant,  $F(4,982) = 19.813$ ,  $p < .001$  and accounted for 13.6% of the variance. A second regression analysis was run with the identical factors using the sense of community as the dependent variable. This model also was significant,  $F(4,532) = 81.184$ ,  $p < .001$ , and it accounted for 39.2% of the variance for the sense of community. Directed facilitation and satisfaction with course length were statistically significant in predicting a sense of community.

#### Data from the Instructor Surveys

The Teaching Presence Scale (Shea et al., 2003) and Classroom Community and School Index (Rovai et al., 2005) were utilized to inspect selected members of the instructors teaching online EFL courses. Of 21 instructors, 19 returned data. Nineteen students' responses were selected haphazardly and were compared to the instructor responses. There were no significant differences in teaching presence from the responses in a comparison of means using t-tests. However, there were statistically significant differences in perception of satisfaction with course length (64.346,  $p = .018$ ), with students who were more satisfied with course length than were the teachers, and also in the perception of learning (53.532,  $p = .001$ ), where the instructors believed a greater quantity of learning had occurred than the students stated.

#### Discussion

One of the most common definitions for teaching presence describes it as the design and direction of cognitive and social procedures to determine personally meaningful and academically worthwhile learning results. Instructors whose teaching experience has all happened in a physical classroom may not know what it means to "teach" online. One of the most widespread points stated by teachers about online teaching is that they realize the immediacy of discussion with students and cannot imagine how they can teach, and students can learn without it. The Community of Inquiry model (Garrison, 2020) gives a system for considering the central angles of compelling online learning that can offer assistance demystifying what it implies to instruct online. The show proposes a Venn graph of three covering habitations – cognitive nearness, social nearness, and educating nearness. This instructing tip looks at the measurements of instructing nearness characterized within the model. Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2020) inquire about instructing nearness in online learning utilizing a relationship to instructing in a one-room school building. This comparison makes the point that distant from being an undetectable and inert performing artist, the online teachers play a crucial and multi-faceted part. This characterizes educating nearness as the plan, help, and course of cognitive and social forms to realize essential and instructively beneficial learning results. Each of these three capacities, in turn, incorporates numerous exercises. Experienced online instructors know well that up-front course design is more prominent in online teaching than classroom teaching. Course design includes locating and building curricular materials, sequencing lessons, writing assignment guidelines and evaluation criteria. In the most effective courses, these elements are presented so that what Anderson et al. (2020) call the "grand design" of the course is evident. Facilitation means monitoring and commenting on students' work to maintain their interest, motivation, and engagement in the

course. In this activity, the instructor plays a pivotal role in modelling the type of contributions they tend students to make. In the third activity, directing the cognitive process, the instructor “provides intellectual and scholarly leadership” (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 8). Many people have heard the adage that online instruction involves being a “guide on the side” rather than a “sage on the stage.” Taking on more of a guidance role does not mean that instructors should step back from offering their greater content knowledge to confirm understanding, help students correct misconceptions, and offer resources. The bottom line of teaching presence is that faculty play a vital role in online students’ learning, both in the up-front planning of well-aligned learning experiences and the support of learning processes through ongoing communication.

In the present study, all of the teaching presence components were thought to be meaningfully related to students’ perception of learning, albeit the effect size was trivial. It is believed that further study would be appreciated to find out whether teaching presence was a contributing factor for constructive insight into learning. Was a causative relationship to exist between teaching presence and learning, instructors presumably could influence student learning by making vicissitudes to their teaching presence, and that would prepare the ground for further studies; what outlines teaching presence, how is it achieved, when should it be presented, and does the level of student impact their learning?

Facilitated discourse and sense of community were strongly correlated. Because the sense of community specified a link between students and an instructor, the content and other students, it was anticipated that discussions and group tasks would relate to a sense of community. Since the sense of community displayed a connection to perceived learning, this relationship between facilitated discourse and sense of community was well-thought-out to mean that teachers who insert facilitated discourse into online courses impact community and perceived learning.

The relationship between students’ perception of learning and sense of community illustrated a trivial but significant relationship. A link occurred between teachers who combined teaching presence mechanisms intentionally to boost a sense of community among students and the component of students who professed that learning happened in those courses. This conclusion is significant as rising students’ sense of community through tasks ameliorates a feeling of relationship probably impacted students’ perceptions of learning. Accordingly, it would fit teachers involved in directing online courses to attempt to interpolate their presence, but constructively, so the contributors have a sense of being involved with peers and teachers. This point justifies special attention with additional research.

Rovai et al. (2005) found no significant disparity in perceived learning between online and on-campus pupils in courses where teachers utilized social constructivism and raised a sense of community. The increasing body of research into the sense of community in online learning (Lear, 2007, Shea et al., 2003; Rovai et al., 2004; Rovai et al., 2005) has led to a belief that sense of community and perceived learning are associated. More studies that investigate this ostensible association are desired. Course length was meaningful in predicting perceived learning and sense of community, which meant that gratification with course length was a significant aspect and ought to be paid attention to when designing and teaching online courses. The conclusion was that directed facilitation was important in predicting a sense of community.

Finally, to further comprehend the relationships between the student and the instructor surveys, a random sample of student responses was compared to the instructor survey responses. There were no significant differences in teaching presence from the responses in a comparison of means using t-tests. Nevertheless, there were significant differences in gratification with course length, with students being more pleased with course length than the instructors, and in the perception of learning, the teacher imagined a greater quantity of learning taking place than the students. These findings were confirmed by student and teacher answers to the open-ended survey items. The analysis showed positive links between teaching presence, perceived learning, and sense of community in online courses.

Satisfaction with course length also showed a meaningful relationship with perceived learning and a sense of community. Course length disclosed a predictive propensity for perceived learning through understanding of the regression analysis. More research of these relationships would be advantageous to teachers designing online courses to determine the incentives and other parameters elaborated on in these results. Extra study of the effect of format would be valuable to instructors since they design courses and administrators contemplate supporting programs that use various course lengths. On account of the advent of technology into the world and how it affects learning opportunities, it seems of overriding significance for educational institutions to involve in the systematic study of how to make the optimal learning involvements available for their future students while pursuing to make the most of their existing resources.

## **Conclusion**

The present study investigated the teaching presence in online EFL courses considering the community of inquiry model of online learning. To meet this end, factor analysis on the teaching presence components was carried out with the results depicting two factors contributing significantly to perceived learning. Those two items were instructional design and organization and directed facilitation, a combination of facilitated discourse

and direct instruction. Shea et al. (2006) likewise stated an overlap of the components of teaching presence in online courses. Facilitated discourse initially was postulated as a distinct component by Garrison et al. (2000); nevertheless, the findings from the current study substantiated Shea et al.'s (2006) work confirming that the component of facilitated discourse could be considered as direct instruction as long as students regarded an instructor's role in simplifying discussion to be a part of their instruction. It is hypothesized that the resemblance of outcomes to the previous Shea et al. results might be owing to how the participants understood the survey items, which means there was a dearth of difference between facilitated discourse and direct instruction. More investigations are valuable in responding to this question of how much facilitated discourse and direct instruction overlay. Overall, there were meaningful associations between the teaching presence factors and students' sense of community. It was also revealed a trivial but important relationship between the students' insights into learning and a sense of community. The data collected from EFL learners reported significant connections between teaching presence, perceived learning, and sense of community. The tutors verified similar positive associations with no difference when the student and teacher data were compared.

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