

**Exploring Remote English Language Instruction Using the  
Communities of Inquiry Framework**

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### **Abstract**

Emergency remote instruction brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic has required a substantial shift in teaching practice within American English programs. Although online learning in higher education has been widely researched, little is known about how to create a sustainable community of engaged learners in a remote language learning context. Using the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework, this case study investigated how one intensive English program adjusted to remote instruction, including whether teachers made substantive adaptations to support COIs in their courses. Results show that teachers changed their courses to include more structure and multimodal means of communication but struggled to facilitate social interaction and assess cognitive engagement of their students.

*Keywords:* Emergency remote instruction, Community of Inquiry, English for speakers of other languages, case study

## Introduction

Since early 2020, American English language programs have faced a rapidly changing educational landscape due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With little preparation or training, instructors began delivering classes remotely, and students, confined to their rooms and computer screens, had to quickly adapt to a new learning environment. This rapid shift was described as “crisis teaching” in an editorial by Oskoz and Smith (2020), a term that reflects the fact that the transition from in-person to remote instruction was not a product of normal times.

Although distance learning technologies like learning management systems (LMS) have been available for several decades, the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to an urgent need to explore best practices regarding students’ engagement in their remote classes (Garrett et al., 2020; Oskoz & Smith, 2020). Although classes with an “online” designation are typically planned 6-9 months in advance and are optimized for online study, remote courses are held in response to emergency situations and are typically considered temporary in nature (Moser et al., 2021). The rapid shift of so many face-to-face (classes to remote learning made it clear that not all face-to-face courses are easily transferable to online settings. In a study of teacher perceptions of online learning, Shearer et al. (2020) found that teachers were generally unsatisfied with online courses that were simply adapted from face-to-face courses. Similar to many faculty members in the early months of emergency remote instruction, the teachers in Shearer’s study noted a need for a paradigm shift in the online environment to promote more interactive and engaging experiences for learners.

For American English language programs, the move to remote instruction has been particularly challenging. Face-to-face language classes tend to rely heavily on interactive tasks like games or class discussion that encourage spontaneous language production and build trust

between learners (Gleason, 2013). Without advance planning and academic support, such activities can be difficult to recreate in a remote classroom, where there is often an increase in independent or asynchronous work and a decrease in the amount of time and opportunity for interactions with classmates or the instructor before, during, and after synchronous (live) classes.

Perhaps because of the difficulty of reimagining an interactive language classroom for the online environment, training and professional development were largely absent for many language instructors prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Russell, 2020; Smith & Oskoz, 2021). This trend has begun to shift since the switch to emergency remote instruction, with many language programs now providing professional development around online course design; unfortunately, these developments have not come without a good deal of stress on the part of teachers and students (Moser et al., 2021). Due to a lack of experience and training in the best practices of online language instruction, many teachers found themselves prioritizing basic instructional needs, like content delivery, over innovating new ways of engaging students in their remote classes (Cheung, 2021). It was not only teachers who were challenged by the remote environment. Language students also struggled with anxiety (Russell, 2020), disengagement, and lack of accountability (Bozavlı, 2021; Moser et al., 2021) throughout the pandemic, with many feeling as though their experience in remote classes was substandard in comparison to in-person language learning (Bozavlı, 2021).

While many teachers reported developing confidence in online pedagogies throughout the year and a half of remote instruction (Moser et al., 2021; Smith & Oskoz, 2021), the lack of student engagement in remote language classes is worrisome. It is necessary to identify ways of creating a sustainable community of engaged online language learners because the shift to remote instruction will likely leave a lasting impact on the instructional design of language

programs. Although many programs have now returned to in-person classes, multiple terms of remote instruction have demonstrated the possibility of greater incorporation of online and hybrid education in language instruction (Smith & Oskoz, 2021). With this in mind, faculty members and program managers should consider how the transition from face-to-face to remote courses can both support language development and keep learners engaged.

### **Conceptual Framework**

According to Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (1999), the engagement of learners in online classes can be assessed using the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework. COI uses three essential elements (cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence) to assess the potential for creating a collaborative community of online learners. The first of these elements, cognitive presence (CP), refers to activities that help students make meaning and deepen their understanding of course materials, usually through discussion and reflection (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). Social presence (SP) relates to the interaction and sense of belonging students gain from a course, focusing on how connected students feel with their classmates and how much they trust each other. Finally, teaching presence (TP) asks how present the teacher is in the class, including how well they facilitate activities fostering CP and SP, as well as how students perceive their presence in a course. Research investigating the presence of COI in online, blended, and distance classes has found that CP, SP, and TP are positively correlated (Stenbom, 2018) and that students experiencing greater levels of each element earn higher grades in their classes (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016).

Although the COI framework is frequently used in the study of online teaching and learning (Castellanos-Reyes, 2020), research demonstrating its applicability to the language teaching context is limited. One of the few existing studies researching the COI model for

language teaching was conducted by Mo and Lee (2017), who surveyed students enrolled in a blended (or hybrid) English composition course in South Korea. Based on their findings, the authors argue that successful online language learning communities require instruction focused on helping students recognize that they should participate and support each other to have a “mutually successful learning experience” (p.29). These findings support research that SP and TP are essential, related elements of student success in online classes; they also show that these elements need to be built by language instructors through explicit instruction and intentional lesson design. It is therefore important to understand how language instructors adapt their courses in ways that are unique to the remote language learning classroom and how students are responding to these adaptations.

To further investigate the use of COIs in remote language learning classrooms, this study asked the following research questions:

1. How have the teachers in this study adapted their classes to the remote learning environment? To what extent were the three aspects of online learning conceptualized by the COI framework included in these adaptations?
2. How have students responded to teacher adaptations in their remote courses?

### **Data and Methodology**

This single-case study investigated how one intensive English program (IEP) coped with the phenomenon of remote instruction brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, including whether teachers made substantive adaptations to support COIs in their courses. A holistic single-case study design was used due to the bounded nature of the unit of analysis at one study site (Yin, 2018). The use of remote instruction in this IEP was the bounded context for the study and the holistic design examined the “global nature of an organization or of a program” (Yin,

2018, p. 52). This case study drew on interviews with instructors, student surveys, and analysis of syllabi to present a detailed account of this unfolding experience. This study was approved in October 2020 by the author's university human research protection program.

### **Setting**

This study was conducted in an intensive English program (IEP) at a large public university in the Pacific Northwest. The program shifted from all face-to-face classes to all emergency remote instruction in March 2020, between winter and spring quarters, with spring 2020 as the first fully remote quarter. At the same time, this IEP was also grappling with a rapidly declining student population. Between January and September 2020, the student population fell from 233 to 45, with many of the remaining students leaving the United States to continue studying from their home countries.

### **Participants**

The primary source of data for this study was in-depth interviews with seven instructors in the IEP. To select participants, we sought instructors who taught remote classes in both spring and fall terms, 2020. Of the 12 instructors who met our criteria, seven agreed to be interviewed for this study. As Table 1 shows, all participants were experienced instructors who had taught between 10 and 21 years in the program.

**Table 1***Overview of Teacher Participants*

Teacher (pseudonyms)	Terms teaching remotely	Years in the program
Kate	spring, summer, fall	22
Leigh	spring, summer, fall	20
Daniella	spring, fall	16
Eve	spring, summer, fall	14
Shea	spring, summer, fall	14
Leif	spring, fall	11
Stephanie	spring, fall	10

In addition to teacher interviews, we distributed online surveys to students enrolled in the IEP during fall term, 2020. According to internal documents, the students in fall 2020 were enrolled in one of four levels, from upper intermediate (CEFR B1+) to advanced (CEFR C1); most intended to complete an academic degree at the same university. Approximately 75% of these students were continuing from previous remote terms (spring and/or summer 2020). We distributed surveys to all 45 students enrolled in fall 2020 via Qualtrics and received 14 completed surveys, a response rate of 31%. Because of the small size of this IEP (some levels had only two students), we did not collect demographic information about student level or country of origin to preserve anonymity. According to internal program data, most students in the program are 18–25 years old and hail from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or China. Details about the student survey are provided in the Data Collection and Analysis section that follows.

### **Course Syllabi**

Teacher interviews and student surveys were supplemented with syllabi from our teacher participants' classes. These syllabi were used to better understand the teachers' experiences with remote instruction in the IEP, primarily in answer to our first research question. We collected a

total of 15 syllabi from the same five classes in face-to-face (one from each class) and remote (two from each class) terms. When possible, we collected syllabi from the same instructor before and after the beginning of emergency remote instruction. When this was not possible, we used a syllabus from another of our participants for that class. In the syllabi, we looked for evidence of changes in course design and communication around expectations of social and cognitive presence.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The primary data for the two research questions were drawn from 90-minute semi-structured interviews with seven teacher participants, conducted over Zoom during fall term, 2020. Through these interviews, we sought to understand the participants' lived experiences as teachers in the emergency remote learning environment (Seidman, 2019). In the interviews, teachers reflected on their general experiences of teaching remotely and on how elements of the COI framework manifested in their courses.

Our interview questions were based on the COI survey instrument developed by Arbaugh (2008) to measure teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence (Appendix 1). Because of the qualitative nature of our study, we adapted these questions to focus on understanding the experience of teaching online in relation to the COI framework. The interviews began by asking teachers to reflect on the best and most challenging parts of remote instruction. The questions then focused on how components of the COI framework had manifested in their classes. For example, to measure teaching presence, we asked teachers to describe how the ways that they communicate information about class structure, keep students on task, and provide feedback to students had changed between in-person and remote terms. To evaluate social presence, we asked teachers questions such as, "How has the way you facilitate

classroom community changed between in-person and remote classes?” and “How well do students engage with each other? Do they seem comfortable engaging in class discussion?” To evaluate cognitive presence, we asked questions focused on how well students engaged with or incorporated new material in their coursework and on assessments. During these interviews, we also asked our participants to describe or share their course shells created through the university LMS for further context.

The surveys distributed to students in the IEP were primarily used to answer the second research question but also provided some context for the first research question. These surveys included a mix of 16 Likert and open-ended questions, also adapted from Arbaugh’s (2008) COI survey instrument. The five-point Likert scale questions asked students to evaluate different aspects related to the design and organization of their courses (due dates, expectations of homework assignments), their sense of belonging in their classes (getting to know other students, feeling like they were being listened to), and how well they were able to engage with or use the material (interest in lessons, confidence using English). Open-ended questions asked students to elaborate on their Likert scale answers and provided space for additional reflection. For example, questions focused on student belonging asked, “How well do you feel like you got to know the other students in your classes?” and, “How well do you feel like you can express your opinion to the other students in your classes?”

To analyze the data, we began by using structural coding on the interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2016), using the three COI elements (teaching, cognitive, and social presence) as provisional codes. We then used open coding to group themes from the interviews and syllabi related to the changes that teachers made in their remote classes. Once we had established themes from the interviews, we reviewed the student surveys, comparing their responses with the

teacher interviews to uncover areas of concurrence and divergence in their answers. We later returned to the interviews for a final round of coding focused on the themes described in the following results section (e.g., curricular changes, new classroom management strategies).

### **Results**

The results of this study showed that teachers made substantial changes to their courses in response to the emergency remote environment. Of the COI elements, teachers seemed most comfortable adjusting the ways they used teaching presence (TP) to create greater structure in their courses and maintain connection with their students. However, they continued to struggle with the cultivation of social presence (SP) and the assessment of cognitive presence (CP). Students seemed to have adjusted to becoming more independent learners, but, in general, did not feel socially engaged in their classes. Below, the results of this study, organized around the focused themes from our coding process, are presented in relation to the research questions.

**RQ 1: How have the teachers in this study adapted their classes to the remote learning environment? To what extent were the three aspects of online learning conceptualized by the COI framework included in these adaptations?**

Despite changing some classes to asynchronous lessons, all teachers continued to hold the majority of their classes live. For our participants, live lessons were important for building a sense of community and, by extension, for supporting student learning. Leigh described weighing synchronous versus asynchronous instruction and finding that her students were more satisfied with synchronous lessons:

They want synchronous face-to-face engagement. They need their teachers. And that was something that really hit home to me that, obviously, in a face-to-face environment, the teacher is important. In the remote environment, the teacher is important. They really needed me and that first term, I tried to do a mix of the synchronous and asynchronous. And I just don't think it was as successful as when I received feedback from learners and made a shift to meeting them more frequently on well, basically every class on Zoom...

The continuation of synchronous teaching allowed the instructors in this IEP to establish TP in a familiar way, through live interaction with students in a virtual classroom. However, the establishment of TP in the remote environment also required new strategies that led to substantive changes in many teaching practices. These changes fell into two primary categories: changes to curricula and changes in classroom management strategies.

### **Curricular Changes**

Teachers made several changes to their curricula, ranging from lesson structure to student assessment. In our interviews, four of the seven teachers reported expecting students to be cognitively overloaded by the phenomenon of remote learning and the experience of living through a global pandemic. As Kate said, “I’m expecting students to be stressed out. I’m expecting them to not be taking notes while they’re listening to me...or I expect them to be not fully attending. That’s not their fault.” Because of such expectations, IEP teachers implemented two types of changes. First, they simplified curricula and restructured their lessons to have more consistent patterns. Second, they modified the grading criteria in their classes to prioritize participation over formative and summative assessments.

The first curricular change that was evident in interviews and syllabi was the abridgement of student learning objectives (SLOs). Teachers reported decreasing the number of SLOs to account for additional time constraints in the remote classroom and to slow down the delivery of information in favor of building more comfort with online learning. Shea mentioned,

I feel like as an instructor, we’re supposed to cover all these SLOs. Well, in remote instruction, it’s impossible. So I feel like some of those have...basically been dropped completely and according to what I think is important or not.

The analysis of course syllabi reflected teachers’ concerns. Pre-pandemic syllabi tended to include more SLOs, and the pre-pandemic class calendars listed more textbook units or chapters to cover. In contrast, the syllabi and class calendars distributed during remote terms tended to include fewer learning objectives, textbook chapters, and related assignments.

Teachers also made changes to their teaching style. Some, like Shea, seemed to have developed a heightened awareness of the effect of TP on student learning and engagement. She explained how her teaching presence had become more visible to herself and to students, saying,

It's much more prominent: my formative assessment, my chunking of pieces of information, my intentional pausing, my scaffolding, my modeling of information, I feel like those have become much more prominent in online teaching or remote teaching.

TP also became more prominent for teachers in the ways that they planned their lessons. Five of the seven teachers reported implementing increased structure in their lesson planning, including, as Kate said, “advanced calendaring,” meaning planning lessons, due dates, and homework ahead of time. She elaborated:

My style of assigning work has, for better or for worse, been pretty fluid and adaptive to how today's class went...But I'm seeing now that I've got...to plan everything in advance...There's so many things working against everybody...There's got to be more structure, and it's got to be planned in advance, so that they can plan their time better.

Teachers also increased the structural consistency of their lessons, centering them around the same daily formula. Such consistency helped students manage the content and helped teachers manage the new format of online instruction. As Leigh said, “I think that kind of consistency and sense of what's coming is important for students, and it helps me guide my teaching.” For teachers like Leigh, increased consistency decreased the amount of decision-making, and therefore, time required for planning a lesson in a new format. Such changes in teaching style point to more prominent TP in terms of guidance, where consistency began to take precedence over fluidity in how teachers structured their lessons and course calendars.

Another curricular modification that instructors introduced in their remote classes related to grade weighting for assessments. Although most grading categories remained the same in the remote syllabi, the weight distribution was often modified. In pre-pandemic syllabi, the final exam was typically weighted between 25–35% of the total grade; in remote classes, however, the

final exam tended to be weighted substantially lower (usually 10%). Three instructors chose to eliminate their final exams altogether. These changes appear to be due to the challenges of remote assessment. Leigh reported that she hadn't "completely figured out how to assess in the same ways that I might in a face-to-face classroom." Other teachers' comments pointed to more specific challenges in designing online assessments. For example, Leif had stopped giving formative online assessments, like quizzes, because of the time commitment required to construct them. Kate attributed the challenge of online assessment to the lack of test security, saying that she not only constructs tests differently, but she also has to "think about how many points I want it to be worth given that test security's impossible."

From these comments, it is clear that traditional assessments in remote classes were seen as both time-consuming and unreliable without additional security features, indicating that this is an area where many teachers lack professional expertise. Hence, teachers turned to a greater reliance on non-evaluative formative assessments of student performance in remote classes; grading categories including on-time attendance, participation, preparation, and remote engagement became more heavily weighted (up to 25% of the overall grade) in syllabi for remote classes. The shift towards these participation-based grading categories highlights the importance of social interaction in language learning. Indeed, without social presence, students' cognitive presence may also falter, a connection that we explore further in relation to our second research question.

### **New Classroom Management Strategies**

Another area where teachers made changes in their remote classes was to encourage group cohesion and participation (SP) through classroom management strategies (TP). Teachers

generally felt that connecting with students was more challenging in remote classes, both during and outside of class. As Leif said,

I feel like I'm less connected with students when [I] don't meet them face to face, especially students that tend not to use their cameras in class. They're just a black box with a name as far as I'm concerned.

The most commonly mentioned factor in this lack of connection was students' reluctance to use their cameras during synchronous classes. Several teachers described the challenges of connecting with students when this was the case. To encourage student participation, teachers carefully laid out expectations around classroom behavior in their syllabi and tried to connect with students through multimodal forms of communication.

Because of challenges in connecting with students, teachers developed new ways of using class policies to establish relationships. The syllabus analysis found that all pandemic syllabi included a list of reminders highlighting expectations for a virtual learning environment. These sections detailed policies around cameras, encouraging students to keep their camera on, especially when entering the remote classroom, participating in class discussions, and collaborating with classmates in breakout rooms. Adding and highlighting this information on class syllabi is another example of teachers using TP in new ways as they sought to establish and strengthen their relationships with students, with the objective of building a stronger classroom community (SP). Teachers also became more explicit about ways that students should interact during class. For example, Daniella described how explaining breakout room behavior was necessary for students to understand the value of active participation:

During class, I think it's very important to go into the breakout rooms...I remember my first quarter doing that I would go into a breakout room, and it'll be silent, like nobody would be talking. And I'd be like, so what's going on here?

Daniella's description of silence in breakout rooms was echoed by many of the teachers. Most also described an improvement between spring and fall terms, both in the instruction they provided students, and in subsequent student participation. Leigh frequently described feeling as though her presence and direction were important for her students, implying that prominent TP was essential in helping students understand how to navigate the online environment.

Teachers also reported changing the ways they communicated with students, both during and between classes. Prior to the pandemic, instructors used tools like whiteboards or paper handouts as primary teaching modalities. To communicate information about homework, they would post information on a wiki or LMS but would rarely use other means of reaching out to students between classes. However, this information was often communicated to students informally, through spontaneous hallway or after-class conversations. In contrast, throughout the pandemic, all teacher participants reported being more intentional about reaching out to their students to facilitate engagement and to make sure they understood how to complete assignments. This meant more outreach to students to remind them about homework and due dates, as well as more explicit explanation of grades and requirements during class. Leif mentioned,

I'm touching base with them by email more often. Because I want to make sure that I'm connecting directly to students. And so for example, I'm letting them know, when I've graded some things, and encouraging them to go in and look at my feedback...I've given grade reports more often, just because I think it's important for me to know exactly how students are doing at any point in the term and for them to know.

Such increased communication with students was a common addition to remote courses, in comparison with the types and frequency of communication in pre-pandemic classes.

During their remote classes, teachers used a number of strategies to keep students engaged, including online learning tools such as polling software, games, and interactive editing

platforms. One notable change was the encouragement of cell phone use to democratize the learning experience. Both Kate and Leigh described encouraging cell phone use in ways they had not in face-to-face classes. As Kate said,

Now I'm saying hey...Get your phones out, guys. Look this up...And that's been kind of fun. And then they say in the chat window what they're finding. So, technology is open for everybody. It's not just me only the teacher...There's a lot a lot more cooperative effort happening in some lessons...It feels like we're kind of all on the task together.

Outside of class, six of the seven teachers reported giving feedback and directions in multiple forms, via text (emails or comments on drafts), but also in video and audio feedback.

Teachers like Shea believed that multimodal approaches reached a wider range of students. She said,

...I'm using way more modes of communication to communicate with my students. So for example, I'm doing video messages. So I will send a video and remind the students of maybe what's due, or I'll send a video saying what we're going to do the following week. I'm also using [the LMS] to do the same thing. So the reminders are up there. If students log on, they can see that I do audio messages, sometimes with the same information.

Through multiple modalities, Shea focused her TP on connecting with students, with the objective of increasing their sense of belonging (SP) and their ability to interact with the class content (CP). In the student survey, participants confirmed that multimodal learning opportunities helped them learn and understand information. Videos taken of remote class sessions, as well as those used to communicate information, seemed popular with students in the survey. 79% of students referenced “videos” as a tool that they “strongly agreed” helped them learn in their remote classes.

The curricular and classroom management changes that teachers made to their remote classes indicate that they used TP as a tool to facilitate SP by helping students develop a sense of belonging and investment in their classes. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, this teacher-driven social engagement also worked to facilitate CP; as the following section demonstrates,

students were engaged and learning, even though many teachers were hesitant to affirm this, due to their reduced use of traditional testing strategies.

### **RQ2: How have students responded to teacher adaptations in their remote courses?**

In response to this second question, results indicate that students surveyed were able to adapt to both the technology required to operate in the remote environment and the need to be self-directed in their learning. However, many had still not adapted to the different types of social interaction required by the remote environment. Despite the small number of student participants, the survey responses were generally consistent with teacher observations and added valuable perspectives on student experiences in remote classes.

#### **Comfort with Remote Learning**

In general, students grew in their comfort with online learning throughout the period of emergency remote instruction. Four of the seven teachers reflected on student adaptability to the remote environment. They indicated that students in fall 2020 were more independent and more comfortable with the technologies used in remote learning than those in previous remote terms. The responses from student surveys support this observation. In the student survey, 71–90% of fall term students agreed or strongly agreed with questions focused on the navigability of their classes, such as whether they were able to locate their grades or understand their homework.

According to the instructors, some students even thrived in the remote classroom; two instructors pointed out that some student work was more thoughtful and that students were engaging more deeply with the material. These instructors saw this improvement as the result of students' ability to take additional time to produce thoughtful responses in remote classes. For example, Eve reported that her students performed better on written assignments in remote classes, saying,

What I noticed was in the Zoom classes, if they're asked to respond and write a paragraph about something, it's more thoughtful. Whereas in the face-to-face classes, I don't get such successful responses.

Another factor that teachers identified was that many students had become more self-directed in their learning. Several teachers described increased student independence in following directions and processing feedback on assignments. As Leigh said,

I think they have this sense of needing to be more responsible with finding out what they need to know...as opposed to a classroom where they come in and they think, okay, I'm just going to get everything I need today in this hour-long class or two-hour long class right here. And it's the teacher who's responsible for giving me the information.

Leif attributed greater student independence to having a consistent platform (the LMS) that included both instructional tools and feedback, in contrast to face-to-face terms, where instructions and feedback were presented both through the LMS and on paper. In commenting on student responses to feedback in remote compared to face-to-face terms, he said,

I'd say it's even better, because...they may not have been as familiar with [the LMS] or with where I'm leaving feedback in [the LMS] ...So, if anything, there's improvement there, they're paying more attention to the feedback that I leave them on [the LMS] because that's where the course is.

Leif's perspective suggests that the consistency of his TP through the LMS had a positive impact on students' abilities to become more self-directed learners. In the student surveys, participants' responses support the effectiveness of clear and consistent messaging. Many students strongly agreed that they were able to find information about due dates (46.15%), how to monitor their grades (53.85%), and how to complete (53.85%) as well as submit (76.92%) homework assignments. However, a few still expressed concern about the difficulty of tracking information in remote classes. In the comments, they shared a desire for clear expectations about deadlines at the start of the course. One student wrote,

It was really hard to track the due dates of each assignments. I think that instructor should let the students know the due dates of each assignments and instruction of finals in the

first week of class (even it can be changed later).

This response indicates that teacher-directed TP can support student TP. According to Garrison, et al. (1999), TP is not only found in the presence of the teachers, but also can be represented in how students teach themselves. Indeed, clarity in course design and advance planning by teachers can be helpful for students' development of self-direction, especially as they navigate new learning experiences. Although a large portion of the students in this program had returned from previous terms, there were still new students studying online for the first time. These students may have needed extra support in navigating the expectations of several different teachers in their remote courses.

Despite these challenges with remote teaching and learning, students were still learning and engaged in their classes. In their survey responses, students responded positively to questions regarding their engagement with their classes and the course material. Over 80% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they had expanded their use of and confidence with the English language. The same number of students also reported that the things they had talked or read about in class made them interested in learning more. These responses, combined with increased student comfort with online navigation, suggest that language students can and do adapt to remote learning environments. However, as the following section indicates, the ability to adapt does not necessarily indicate a student preference for online learning.

### **Missing Social Interaction**

Although fall term students seemed to have mostly found their footing with regard to the mechanics of remote learning, many still struggled with the lack of social interaction. When asked what would improve connections between classmates, one student wrote, "I think we should meet in person to improve the connection between us." This sentiment was not missed by

faculty, many of whom noticed their students' disappointment with the lack of what Stephanie called the "physical embodiment of learning." As Daniella said, "I think that for some students, this is very hard, because they want to be around people. And they need to be in a classroom, a physical classroom, to be engaged." Daniella's observation reflects a student preference for the in-person language learning experience. Leif added,

I'd say there's definitely less engagement with each other. There's no pressure for them to learn each other's names...they do get together in breakout rooms and they do interact with each other there. But I just don't see the kinds of relationships developing among students in this remote environment that I see in the classroom.

Leif's perspective was confirmed in the student surveys. Only four of the 14 respondents reported that they got to know their fellow students well. One student wrote, "The effect of online courses is not as good as the feeling of being in a classroom, and my grades are also affected. There is no real feeling, and there is no atmosphere to study together." For this student, lack of SP had a direct relationship on their CP; indeed, students who do not feel connected to a learning experience may not be as cognitively present in their classes and may perform poorly as a result.

The challenges students faced in connecting with each other may also have been due to technology issues, such as internet connectivity or lack of proper equipment (i.e., cameras, microphones). According to teachers, the use of cameras was a major factor in how students interacted with each other and how engaged they were with their classmates. When the majority of students in a class used their cameras, teachers reported feeling more of a classroom community and witnessing more interaction between students. As Stephanie explained,

...when I would ask them to put their cameras on at the beginning... they'd be like, hey, Sam, what's up? I haven't talked to you in a while, how are you doing? So then sometimes they would have these little like, mini interactions. But I felt like it only happened when their camera went on.

Students also reported difficulty interacting with their classmates when visual cues were missing. One student in the survey reported that it was “...a little difficult to understand classmates personality and body language for better interaction” in the remote environment.

Unfortunately, SP seemed to be the hardest for teachers to recreate in the remote environment. Four instructors lamented that they did not do enough to build SP in their classrooms, due to time constraints or their own cognitive overload in finding new ways to teach online. Kate mentioned that she wanted to build class community, but,

...the community part is a real weak point. I have only so much brain. And I haven't gotten to that yet... I'm still figuring out how best to engineer that kind of task...I'm doing my best. I don't know about the community part.

In contrast, Leif did not see community-building as part of his teaching agenda and did not attend to it specifically in class. He shared,

Certainly there are other things I could have done to try to foster relationships, but I'm kind of a let's get down to business instructor and the relationships have always just come out of the teaching and learning that we have done together.

In our interview, Leif frequently referred to the relationships that naturally arose in face-to-face classrooms as a key part of his love of teaching. In other parts of his interview, he contrasted this experience with certain aspects of online learning, such as online test-taking or more individualized, self-directed learning, which he felt did not provide the same opportunities for social cohesion in his remote classes. This lack of SP was demoralizing for Leif and many other teachers, especially for those who struggled to establish SP in their classes.

Of the seven faculty members we interviewed, only one seemed satisfied with the development of SP in her classes. Prior to the pandemic, Eve had taken a leading role in the IEP in researching online instruction and felt comfortable designing and teaching remote and hybrid courses. Eve's comfort with online teaching and learning extended to her lesson planning, which

also seemed less regimented than the planning described by the other teachers we interviewed.

She described her lessons, saying,

I just set up a consistent pattern that I would, the students had to do the homework beforehand, to complete the puzzle in the breakout room and there was always a writer, a leader and a timekeeper in each of the breakout rooms. So they, they knew the pattern, they knew what they were going to be doing. And one of the students said to me... I love coming to your class, because I know I get a chance to socialize with my friends and do puzzles.

From Eve's response, it appears that students appreciated having the space and time to socialize with friends and that the careful implementation of such opportunities facilitates student engagement. While many teachers did not, because of time or personal constraints, prioritize SP in their class plans, they did notice a lack of social engagement as a result. Students also noticed and missed SP in their classes, which emerged as a predominant obstacle in their ability to fully embrace online learning.

### **Discussion**

One of the most prominent challenges that the IEP teachers faced in the remote environment was student engagement. Since a face-to-face classroom has TP and SP built into the environment, there is also built-in social pressure for students to be socially and cognitively present. In a remote environment, if students are not self-motivated, they have fewer visible external pressures, and are thus more likely to disconnect. It was challenging for the teachers in this study to develop the right kinds of structures to encourage accountability, but also allow for the flexibility that students in the remote classroom needed. This confirms Mo and Lee's (2017) assertion that language teachers need to be explicit about the purpose of social engagement in a remote environment, but also points to the challenges of doing so. Lack of accountability structures and subsequent detachment of students seemed to have a negative impact not only on student cognitive engagement, but also on instructor morale.

The cognitive load linked to remote teaching and learning appeared to be overwhelming for the teachers and students who participated in this study. Teachers tried to reduce cognitive load by eliminating SLOs, simplifying assignments and calendars, and making lessons more consistent. Simultaneously, many teachers felt the need to repeatedly communicate with their students via written, audio, and video instructional messages. In their interviews, teachers admitted to sending a great number of email reminders in addition to posting relevant information on their class websites in multiple formats. Their intention was for these modalities to reach a broad number of students and help them stay on track with their coursework; it is unclear, however, whether this increased communication actually counterbalanced the curricular efforts teachers had made to reduce student cognitive load.

Finally, lack of time and stress related to remote teaching were common themes in many interviews. Teachers felt their teaching had to be more streamlined and therefore had less room for distraction, resulting in less classroom space for spontaneous social interaction. Such streamlined lesson planning may have facilitated learning to some extent, as it standardized the way that information was conveyed and reduced cognitive load for both teachers and students. However, interactive language classrooms are important for spontaneous language production and the development of classroom community (Gleason, 2013). The lack of such activities appears to have decreased both student and teacher engagement. Although students did seem to be learning in their remote classrooms, many teachers did not get the feedback they needed to feel positive about their students' learning experiences. These feelings of insecurity were also identified by Moser et al. (2021), who found that language educators without prior online teaching experience were less confident about their students' remote learning than were more experienced online teachers. Such feelings of stress and isolation could very well lead to

instructor burnout, especially for those who cannot find ways of connecting with other faculty or students online.

Almost a full year since shifting to the remote setting, teachers and students seemed to have become accustomed to remote teaching and learning, despite the many challenges of doing so. Most teachers in this study had, as Shearer et al. (2020) suggested, engaged in a paradigm shift, as they re-evaluated how they taught and what they prioritized in their lessons. At the time of our interviews, teachers had begun to develop new systems for promoting student learning and new routines in their lesson planning or course structure for their remote classrooms. Students also seemed better able to navigate online systems and, as a result, became more adept at the type of self-directed learning required in a remote environment. Despite the external stress of studying at a distance, living through a pandemic, and a host of other challenges, the cognitive load of attending and teaching online classes did become more manageable for both students and teachers.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The aim of this study was to explore teachers' and students' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities that arose due to a sudden shift to remote teaching and learning. Using the COI framework, this study confirmed that while all three presences, TP, SP, and CP, were present in remote instruction, the differences between face-to-face and remote classes made it difficult for teachers to establish SP and assess CP in remote courses. Even with these challenges, students who chose to enroll in fall 2020 did adapt to the remote learning environment, even demonstrating stronger performance in some areas.

The results of this study should be interpreted with caution, due to the following limitations. The study was conducted on a small number of teachers from one intensive English

program. The number of submitted student surveys was also very limited and responses are likely skewed towards representing students who were willing and able to persist in remote language learning during a global pandemic. Hence, the future research would benefit from a larger number of student responses in order to more accurately compare the student experience with the perspectives of the teachers. It would also be helpful to ask a larger group of students about their experiences with and attitudes toward technology pre-pandemic to better understand their adaptability to the remote learning environment. Future research could also compare the experiences of instructors at different institutions or with differing levels of online teaching experience in order to better understand how institutional support and training might help the design of remote or online language courses.

Despite the limited nature of this study, the COI framework presents a useful model for how remote language courses can foster students' social and intellectual engagement. As some remote courses are developed into more permanent offerings, course designers will need to prioritize structured opportunities for students' social engagement to promote the sense of belonging and trust necessary for spontaneous language production. However, this burden should not fall only to instructors. This study suggests that the stress of restructuring face-to-face classes for effective remote learning could contribute to teacher burnout. To support the sustainable development of online language courses, programs need to support teachers by funding professional development around online assessment and providing institutional subscriptions to technologies that can engage students in remote learning.

While the COVID-19 pandemic will, hopefully, someday fade, it is unlikely that online language instruction will do the same, considering the potential for global access to the English

language and increased opportunities for international collaboration. It is therefore important to remember these lessons in building sustainable online language classrooms.

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## Appendix 1

### Teacher Interview Protocol

Think about your experience teaching classes remotely. You can think about this term, summer, and/or spring term.

#### Overall experience:

- What have been your best experiences in remote classes?
- What have been your worst experiences in remote classes?

#### Specific teaching strategies:

- Overall, how have your teaching strategies been affected by the switch from face-to-face to remote instruction?
- I'm going to ask you about several different aspects of how teaching classes in the remote vs. face-to-face environment has changed your teaching strategies. In doing so, could we look at your LMS shells together for some context?
- Could you talk to me about how these aspects have changed in the switch from face-to-face to remote instruction?
  - The way you communicate information about the class structure (course objectives, due dates, how to participate in learning activities) to students;
  - The way you keep students on task;
  - The way you provide feedback to students;
  - The way you encourage students to engage with new material or new ideas;
  - The way you facilitate classroom community.
- Is there any other aspect of your teaching that you feel has changed since switching to remote instruction?

- In general, how well are your students coping with remote learning?
  - How well do students seem to understand information about class structure?
  - How well do you think students stay on task in class?
  - How well do students respond to and incorporate your feedback?
  - How well do students seem to understand the course material?
  - How well do students engage with each other? Do they seem comfortable engaging with each other in class discussions?
- Considering the topics we just covered, what do you think the biggest differences are in your interactions with students between face-to-face and remote teaching?

**Reflection:**

- Considering what we've recently been talking about, what has your experience of moving to remote teaching been like for you?  
What are the biggest challenges in delivering the classes remotely?

## **Appendix 2**

### **Student Surveys**

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-a9pEqobMDNcfRvxzTFLoqtg2FYmHraM/view?usp=sharing>