The Skype EFL Classroom: What's Not Said…

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Abstract: Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is often promoted as an exciting new educational medium that will be attractive to students. As it is commonly assumed that contemporary youth are as comfortable in virtual worlds as in face-to-face contexts, one might expect that a social presence naturally emerges within online educational environments that automatically generates student involvement and increasingly motivates them to actively participate in the ongoing online conversation. However, observations of a Skype EFL classroom at a Japanese university in which small groups of four or five students met with Philippine instructors twice a week over an academic year suggest that even among contemporary university students accustomed to an abundance of online communication platforms in their daily lives, the social presence of a virtual world cannot be taken for granted in online language-learning environments but must be actively managed. This paper discusses social presence in online educational environments and suggests ways in which teachers can actively frame instruction to harness the possibilities of CMC in foreign language contexts by creating both a meaningful and effective learning environment online.

Key words: English as a foreign language, computer-mediated communication, Skype, social presence, Japan

1. Introduction

Over the past couple of decades, the Internet has increasingly changed the ways in which learning is conceptualized and facilitated. In particular, language education worldwide has benefited from advances in computer-mediated communication (CMC) that have offered new avenues for authentic communication. This rapid expansion of online educational environments has been especially attractive to teachers in foreign language settings in which the target language is not spoken outside the classroom in broader society. CMC brings the promise that the wider world can now readily and economically be brought into the far-flung classroom, motivating students to actively develop their communication skills and global cultural literacy through authentic conversation in the target language.

CMC is also often promoted as an exciting new educational medium that will be attractive to students, the implicit assumption being that, aside from a newfound ability to communicate with peers worldwide, contemporary youth are inherently attracted to and adept at navigating new technology such that the promise of technology will outweigh any communication challenges. If contemporary youth are as comfortable in virtual worlds as in face-to-face contexts, for example, then one might expect that a powerful social presence will

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naturally emerge within an online educational environment that will automatically generate student involvement and increasingly motivate them to actively participate in the ongoing online conversation. However, observations of a Skype EFL classroom at a Japanese university in which small groups of four or five students met with Philippine instructors twice a week over an academic year suggest that even among contemporary university students accustomed to an abundance of online communication platforms in their daily lives, the social presence of a virtual world cannot be taken for granted. Just as in a traditional classroom, an online language-learning environment does not automatically appear but must be actively managed, thus reducing somewhat the cost benefit for which online platforms are often marketed to educational institutions.

Furthermore, the introduction of synchronous CMC within the traditional classroom creates an additional social context, and this complex social space possesses important boundaries that must be negotiated by students, providing both challenges and, if recognized by educators, learning opportunities for students in the socio-pragmatic aspects of language that are difficult to provide authentically in foreign language contexts but which become salient at the boundaries of the real and virtual worlds. Thus, upon close inspection, it appears that the costs and benefits of online educational environments may differ from those commonly assumed. This paper discusses social presence in online educational environments and suggests ways in which teachers can actively frame instruction to effectively harness the possibilities of CMC in foreign language contexts and create meaningful and productive learning environments for students online.

2. Context

The context for this discussion focuses on an undergraduate general education English language course that was piloted during the 2013 academic year at a private university in the Kanto region of Japan. The chief aim was to develop a curriculum that would promote student academic literacy in English in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, following the direction offered by multiple ongoing reforms by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). One such reform, the University Reform Action Plan, ambiguously calls for "nurtur[ing] students to be capable of corresponding to globalization" (MEXT 2012), while another, the Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development, was established "to foster human resources who can positively meet the challenges and succeed in the global field, as the basis for improving Japan's global competitiveness and enhancing the ties between nations" (MEXT 2012). The push to cultivate these "global human resources" (*global jinzai*) equipped with advanced language and communication skills is not limited to the university level, but extends throughout the educational system from elementary to upper secondary school. The English Education Reform Plan outlines more specific suggestions for high schools, including to "nurture the ability to understand abstract contents for a wide range of topics and the ability to fluently communicate with English speaking persons", and to conduct classes in English with "high-level linguistic activities (presentations, debates, negotiations)" (emphasis in original, MEXT 2013). Amid this climate of reform, the pilot course discussed here sought to foster students' critical thinking skills, promote their academic reading and writing skills by developing their abilities to interact with and respond to texts, and improve their skills in discussing social, political, economic, and cultural issues.

The curriculum comprised two semesters (spring and fall) of English communication courses that met twice weekly, with each 90-minute class meeting divided further into two 40-minute components: a reading and writing section co-taught in the classroom by two university faculty members, and a speaking and listening section taught

by four instructors via Skype (For details see Grimes-MacLellan & Varden, 2014). The reading and writing component emphasized the development of students' academic vocabulary and reading skills through topics ranging from culture, environment, business and technology along with academic writing that progressed from paragraph writing to narrative and argumentative essay writing. The speaking and listening component emphasized active student participation through interesting discussion topics and confidence-building exercises to improve listening skills. The two 40-minute components were separated by a brief five-minute transition period to allow students to move between the two adjacent classrooms where the respective classes were held.

An important and novel feature of the speaking and listening component was the implementation of synchronous computer-mediated instruction (SCMI) in the form of Skype lessons, and this will be the focus of this paper henceforth. Twice a week for 40-minute lessons, small groups of four to five students met virtually through Skype with one of four instructors from Waku Work Online Teaching Services based in the Philippines. In consideration of the perpetual challenge in language learning classrooms to balance class size with providing students as many opportunities as possible to actively practice the target language, this approach substantially increased students' communicative opportunities compared to standard classrooms with a student-teacher ratio of 20:1 or more.

In addition to the advantages of smaller groups allowing students more individualized instructor attention and opportunities to speak, another rationale for implementing Skype lessons was a desire to alter the entrenched teacher-directed approach to English language education in Japan that commonly propagates a classroom environment whereby students tend to be reticent, speaking only when spoken to in many cases. In this way, Skype lessons were also seen as an opportunity to introduce students to a different vision of language learning that placed them at the center of the activity and encouraged them to recognize their individual responsibilities for participation and progress. To support this shift in expectations and participation, stated aims of the Skype lessons were to develop students' confidence and boost their motivation through a more intimate, less intimidating setting, to allow students to work intensively on their communication skills and strategies, to engage students in intercultural communication with a teacher from another cultural background while maintaining each group's attention on speaking English throughout each 40-minute lesson.

With the curriculum finalized, eighteen freshman students (nine women and nine men) who were International Business majors participated in the pilot curriculum. Their TOEFL ITP range was 430–440 and their English educational background was typical for Japanese students, having studied English as a compulsory subject in junior and senior high school where the curriculum focused largely on grammar, vocabulary and reading. Two students had experienced homestays abroad in English-speaking countries, but these were limited to two and four weeks. Although student backgrounds did not demonstrate unusual interest in the study of English, a survey conducted at the outset of the semester found that two-thirds of the students reported high motivation to participate in the pilot courses and the remaining one-third expressed neither high nor low motivation.

3. Early Assessment of the Skype Curriculum

An early assessment of the program at mid-semester was positive. While there were, at times, challenges due to technical problems such as dropped connections and poor sound quality, these diminished over time through enhancements in broadband and speaker equipment. University faculty responsible for implementing the program observed positive learning exchanges between instructors and peers and, based on their participation patterns,

smiling expressions and laughter, students appeared to be genuinely enjoying communicating in English. When students struggled with communication, the chat board feature in Skype was used by instructors to clarify their meaning through type-written text, and this feature was also used to explain and correct grammatical errors. Group members were also observed cooperatively sharing ideas and helping peers as needed and, overall, Skype lessons had a notably positive impact in promoting a participatory learning environment and engaging students in communicating with their instructors.

Student feedback on post-semester surveys as well was overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic about Skype lessons. Class efficacy was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree", and all students "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that Skype lessons were useful to their learning of English, with the vast majority (88%) responding that they used English more during Skype lessons than regular lessons and the remaining students (12%) "not sure". Similarly, class enjoyment was rated positively by students. In response to the prompt "I like studying English in a small group (4–5) students", 94% of students "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the remaining 6% "not sure", while 81% of students responded positively to "I enjoyed doing online Skype lessons more than regular lessons", with the remaining 19% "not sure". However, although no student reported negative attitudes toward Skype lessons in terms of usefulness or enjoyment, these strongly positive evaluations were not reflected in responses concerning student confidence in studying English. Only 57% of students responded positively to the question "I feel confident communicating with my English teacher on Skype", while 43% were "not sure" or "disagree[d]". This is despite the fact that the Skype lessons did not appear to be excessively challenging, with only 31% of students responding positively to the prompt "It is difficult for me to learn English via Skype", while 69% were "not sure" or "disagree[d]". These results suggest that while Skype English lessons were attractive, manageable and perhaps even motivating to students, a lack of confidence in English ability remained strong even after having completed a semester of Skype lessons.

4. A Closer Look — What's Not Said

Despite generally positive attitudes expressed toward Skype lessons by on-site regular faculty during their brief observations and by students in their self-reports, more detailed observations of lessons and summative course feedback from the remotely-located Skype teachers on individual student performance both suggest a need to attend to the importance of developing a sense of commitment and community in supporting students' online language learning. This need became readily apparent during an extended observational period in which the following episode was recorded in fieldnotes after students had been taking Skype lessons for more than three months:

> The 10:55 a.m. bell signaling the beginning of second period classes has rung. Only 11 of 18 students are present, and none of the students are seated around their computer stations. Instead, students are standing and milling around the classroom, greeting one another and chatting in Japanese. At about 10:58, the sound of incoming calls through Skype can be heard at each of the four computers. Or can they? As I observe while the calls are ringing, students do not disperse to their computer stations. They do not look around, but continue chatting with their classmates. I count eight rings, nine rings… but students do not take notice. Finally, the teaching assistant for the class period scurries around the room from one computer to the next, clicking each large screen with a mouse to pick up the calls. Only at that point, at about 11:02, do students slowly make their way to their groups and sit down. When everyone is finally seated to greet their Skype teacher, 15 of the 18 students are present.

The lack of student initiative in this episode was striking. The ringing of the incoming Skype call did not signal students to move to their computer stations, take their seats and answer the calls to begin their lessons. Moreover, there was a lack of any observable response or recognition that incoming calls were even ringing. Only after the teaching assistant had moved from computer to computer to pick up the calls did students then slowly move to their regular workstations. Meanwhile, the Skype instructors in the Philippines were left waiting on a live telephone call until students settled down and opened their textbooks.

This episode highlighted a need to examine the Skype classroom from the perspective of what was not happening during lessons — the inactivity or silence — that could potentially impact student learning. The nature of the EFL classroom environment and the goal of Skype communication lessons to enhance opportunities for students to improve their speaking and listening skills had focused all attention on tokens of talk and activity to the exclusion of tokens of silence and non-responsiveness. Tannen and Saville-Troike (1985, p. xi) write that silence is a "relatively neglected component of human communication". They note further that, "silence is most often an out-of-awareness phenomenon — the ground against which the figure of talk is perceived" (Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985, p. xi), but that by studying it we gain access to its complex nature, and its various types, meanings, and functions.

Further observations of the Skype classroom and comments from Skype teachers in their individual student evaluations revealed at least four forms of recurring silence or unresponsiveness during lessons: (1) absence or minimal levels of communication, (2) unengaged body language, (3) off-task behavior, and (4) lack of response to the computer technology such as the incident previously described. Of these, an absence or minimal level of communication was frequently observed throughout the Skype lessons. Many students spoke in English only when directly responding to the Skype teacher's questions or prompts, and these responses usually consisted of a single word such as "yes" or "no". Some students spoke in Japanese during the lessons even though the Skype teachers did not understand Japanese. When a communication breakdown, misunderstanding or other miscommunication occurred, most students did not attempt to ask clarification or follow-up questions to signal their lack of understanding or need for additional information. Often this lack of understanding was expressed in the form of perplexed expressions with minimal or no verbal response to the teacher's questions. When one late-arriving student, for example, was asked by her Skype teacher why she was late, her only response after tilting her head to the left (a common Japanese gesture suggesting confusion) and looking up at the ceiling for over a minute was "ba-su", the Japanese pronunciation for "bus." When the Skype teacher responded, asking if she meant that the bus had been late, the student — still with head tilted — offered no response or acknowledgement of the teacher's question. Finally, meeting only silence at the other end of the line, the teacher said "I see." and moved on with the lesson and another student.

The body language of students also reflected their degree of engagement in lessons. While a few students sat close to the computer screen and leaned forward when spoken to, others backed their chairs away from the speaker, making it difficult for their voices to be heard. Still other students placed their heads down on the tables, causing Skype teachers to note on their summative reports that too many students were tired much of the time and unable to concentrate on the lessons. Meanwhile, other students even pushed their chairs out of view of the camera on the screen so that teachers could not see them well or at all. These students in particular tended to eat or drink during class and engage in the off-task behaviors discussed below. One Skype teacher went as far as evaluating a student in the following way: "There are times that she's physically present, but mentally absent."

While students' body language demonstrated a range of engagement, frequent off-task behavior was

unequivocal. Most often, when one student answered a question from the Skype teacher, other students were tuned-out, not paying attention to that communication. It appeared that students interpreted their English class time as the portion in which they were actively interacting individually with their teacher, consisting of approximately 20% of the 40-minute Skype lesson. Skype teachers noted that some students were not good listeners to classmates' opinions, instead, tending to chat with one another in Japanese, check their cell phones, do other work or even play air guitar. Moreover, some students regularly did not bring their textbooks or completed homework to class and as a result, subsequent students were often not prepared to answer even the same question that had already been asked of a previous student. Due to this lack of attentiveness, whole group discussion with the Skype teacher often did not evolve beyond a simple single question-and-answer format. This off-task student behavior was not missed by the Skype teachers. One teacher, for example, noted that a specific student "is usually late and sometimes absent in class. There was a time when she came to class two minutes before the class ended. She also does something else during the lesson. She uses her mobile phone and she answers papers which are not part of the class."

Another way in which students displayed a lack of responsiveness during lessons concerned technical problems encountered with Skype connections and computer hardware. At the beginning of the semester, students received instruction about what to do when technical difficulties occurred. When connections were disrupted, students were told to discuss among themselves the questions that were intended to be discussed with the Skype teacher and to submit a written summary of what was discussed at the end of class. However, when connection problems inevitably did occur, students did not follow those instructions. During one such occasion, a student from one group rose up from her seat and walked to her backpack to check her cell phone. Her peers in the same group remained seated, chatting in Japanese about sports. This was a typical response when calls were dropped either for short or longer periods of time. On one occasion in another group when the large computer screen tipped over, students laughed and did not move to set the screen upright even though the Skype teacher was calling to the students asking what had happened. In the several minutes before the teaching assistant came over to manage the problem, group members laughed and joked about the situation in Japanese and even when face-to-face communication was re-established with their Skype teacher, the students continued to giggle when asked what had happened. Finally, precipitating further laughter, one student responded "fall down".

By listening for and observing what is not said in the Skype EFL classroom, salient problems that impact learning become illuminated, as silence and unresponsiveness deliver their own meanings. Student reticence, disengagement and apparent disinterest may stem from feelings of unease or lack of confidence. Alternatively, silence may be used pro-actively as a strategy by students, with ignorance feigned in hopes that he or she will be called upon less and less. These responses may be influenced by a confluence of larger structural or cultural dynamics, the immediate context and peer group relations. In regard to Japanese students, passivity or reticence is a widely documented cultural characteristic in language classrooms (Cutrone, 2009; Doyon, 2000; Anderson, 1993). Schooling in Japan, for example, is frequently teacher directed and students are not usually encouraged to participate in class discussions, and this classroom culture carries over to the EFL classroom. Peer relationships between senior and junior students and between genders also prescribe behavior that is often counter-productive to the participatory demands of speaking and active interaction that is commonly associated with learning a foreign language. However, although the local cultural context no doubt contributes to the challenges of foreign language learning in Japan, the extent to which lesson time is characterized by absent or minimal communication, non-participatory body language, off-task behavior, and lack of responsiveness to the technology, ranging from

ringing calls to connection breakdowns, strongly points to a lack of engagement in and commitment to a community ethos required within the learning environment. In many ways, student involvement in Skype computer-mediated communication could be characterized less as an engaged interaction with a teacher and peers and more as background noise from a TV during a lunch-time chat among friends in the school cafeteria.

5. Social Presence in Online Educational Environments

Despite students' reported enthusiasm for Skype-based EFL lessons (English Education Reform Working Group, Meiji Gakuin University 2013), findings from observations and Skype teacher evaluations suggest that student interest and enthusiasm alone are not sufficient for the development of a successful CMC-based communicative classroom environment. In particular, even for contemporary students adept in the latest communication technologies and comfortable interacting in virtual worlds, students also need encouragement and support to recognize, develop and maintain social presence within the CMC learning environment. Short, Williams, and Christie (1976, p. 65) define social presence as the "degree of salience of the other person in a mediated communication and the consequent salience of their interpersonal interaction." In other words, social presence refers to the quality of the relationship between interlocutors in social interaction. A classroom with a high level of social presence among students helps to establish a socially-engaged learning environment, whereas a low level of social presence tends to result in a less personal, less motivating, and ultimately less participatory learning context.

While all classrooms can benefit by promoting students' social presence, facilitating this in CMC settings is particularly challenging due to its inherently impersonal nature. For example, Aragon (2003, p. 59) writes, "The challenge in online learning environments is facilitating this degree of interpersonal contact with the instructor and other participants. When individuals participating in online learning events are separated by physical or geographic location and sometimes are working in isolated conditions, the ability to establish interpersonal contact with others greatly diminishes because all contact is electronic."

Observations of the Skype classroom noted a lack of sustained involvement in the communication process, both in verbal and nonverbal actions. This suggests an absence or insufficient sense of intimacy and closeness among participants, particularly between students and Skype teacher, along with a weak sense of immediacy, two factors that Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) indicate are associated with social presence. This lack of intimacy is reflected explicitly in the distance from the computer screen of some students (sitting back or even out of sight), but also in the lack of participation as a group and in peer interactions with the instructor. Moreover, Gunawardena and Zittle's (1997, p. 9) reference to immediacy as a "measure of the psychological distance that a communicator puts between himself or herself and the object of his/her communication" is reflected in Skype teacher comments about students being "physically present" but "mentally absent". While social presence is not the only significant factor in establishing a successful online learning environment (others include student-teacher ratio, group dynamics, individual learning motivation and so forth), in the case of the Skype learners discussed here, it would seem that attention to helping students cultivate their social presence is a first step to taking greater advantage of this learning opportunity.

6. Cultivating Social Presence in Skype Lessons

While there is great potential for language learning in the Skype EFL classroom, the above discussion

suggests that intimacy and closeness among participants and, ultimately, social presence within the communicative environment, does not naturally occur and therefore cannot be left to chance. Rather, it needs to be intentionally facilitated in order to counter the inherently impersonal nature of CMC contexts. In the Skype EFL classroom discussed here, it was recognized during the early stages of implementation that attention to developing the classroom as a community of learners had been overlooked. Despite lower student-teacher ratios that provided more opportunities for students to use the target language, these smaller groups did not spontaneously provide a warm and intimate learning experience encouraging students to actively and positively engage with the teacher and peers. Based on this study, five strategies for creating social presence in the Skype EFL classroom have been identified and will be discussed in turn.

6.1 Create Guidelines and Instruct Students in Expectations for Lessons

Students need to be explicitly guided in the use of Skype for educational purposes. Rules about responsiveness should be clear and explicit. This is particularly important in Japan, with its teacher-directed educational culture and importance of practice and preparation for important activities. In Japan, the lack of explicit guidelines conveys to students a lack of importance.

6.2 Spend Time Building Rapport between Teachers and Students and among Peers

First and foremost, a level of comfort must be created within the learning environment so that students feel at ease around the instructor and peers. Although this is an explicit aim of many teachers in traditional classrooms, it tends to be forgotten in online situations. It does not usually occur spontaneously however, and so there is a need to establish an initial rapport and then continually foster a sharing environment beyond the first day of class. This is particularly important if we consider student confidence, for while students reported that they were motivated to learn English via Skype, they nonetheless also reported that they did not feel confident or comfortable in doing so.

Where possible, some educators in CMC environments attempt to establish social presence through a face-to-face meeting before the online course begins. While this is not possible when the teacher and students are remotely located, as in the Skype EFL course, other means of establishing and maintaining rapport include encouraging five minutes of small talk at the beginning of lessons for students and the teacher to get to know one another. Addressing everyone by name and drawing on students' interests and activities during lessons, sharing personal stories and experiences, and including humor in the lessons can also ease the discomfort of social distance. The Skype teacher, by inquiring about students' lives, can come to understand the students more closely, and by encouraging students to strike up conversations on their own, can re-direct off-task conversations back into the lesson.

6.3 Structure Collaborative Learning Activities

In the Skype EFL course, most interactions were structured as one-to-one communicative events between teacher and a single student and this inadvertently promoted alternating "on-stage" and "off-stage" student communicative behavior, and much of the observed off-task behavior occurred during perceived student "down time". Rather than structuring the group-based Skype classes as sequential individual interactions with the teacher, social presence can be enhanced by developing collaborative activities that engage all participants in communication simultaneously.

6.4 Address Cases of Sociopragmatic Failure

In the Skype EFL course, students appeared to understand that their opportunity for English-language

communication existed only during the periods when their Skype teacher was visible on the computer screen. Reframing the educational experience to include managing the infrastructure can allow students to take advantage of sociopragmatic learning opportunities that are especially difficult to replicate in EFL contexts.

Linguistic and lexical knowledge is not sufficient for competency in a foreign language, as pragmatic competence (the ability to understand and be understood in varying communicative contexts) and sociopragmatic competence (the ability to accomplish and respond to social maneuvers through language) are also important aspects of using a language effectively (Takahashi & Beebe, 1993; Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983). What was observed in the Skype EFL classroom were multiple pragmatic and sociopragmatic failures. Students did not possess, for example, the knowledge as to how to vary their language output in speech acts according to different situations and/or social considerations. Not only were some students unable to accomplish the pragmatic speech act of apologizing when they were late to class, they also apparently were not attending to the sociopragmatic need to apologize. While pragmatic failure leads to unintelligibility, sociopragmatic failure (which in this case may be related to the lack of social presence) leads to even more negative consequences, as these failures often lead to attributions of personal character as they are seen by their interlocutors as social failures rather than as language failures. The technological features and problems associated with managing the CMC environment provides additional opportunities for students to develop their pragmatic and sociopragmatic language skills by learning how to properly answer calls, engage with the instructor and peers, tackle technological challenges and establish their own social presence. In the Skype EFL class, all of these conversational contexts for language learning had been overlooked.

6.5 Promote Student Responsibility for Their Own Learning

While this case suggests that educators must actively facilitate the initial establishment of online conversations, students should also be held accountable for contributing and eventually initiating conversations. This can be achieved through such mechanisms as assigning one student to be the small-talk initiator at the beginning of each class. This will help students to build skills in initiating conversations and, with the support of the teacher, gain confidence in doing so.

Lower teacher-student ratios provide additional opportunities for students to speak in Skype EFL classes compared to traditional classes. This can subsequently promote stronger engagement in discussions whereby students can delve deeper into topics of study, making important connections and constructing their own learning. A more personalized learning environment can also promote student motivation and provide more opportunities for authentic language exchange. Perhaps the most important impact of Skype in the language class is having students perceive the importance of learning a language as a communication tool. Being taught by diverse international teachers, students can learn about different cultures, develop a more nuanced understanding of cultural differences, and experience diversity in language use within the English language itself.

However, in order for some of these potential outcomes to be reached, students require guidance and management in developing their social presence and exercising sociopragmatic language use. Such strategies are not novel, as teachers attend to these issues in traditional classrooms, but there appears to be a tendency to take such issues as social presence for granted in online environments, assuming that these issues will take care of themselves, when in CMC learning environments, such efforts may be needed over a longer period of time to help students establish their social presence. Further, the benefits of guiding the development of students' social presence are important not just in the short-term, but learning how to actively interact is a step toward more

autonomous language learning and promoting students to take some initiative and control over their continued progress.

7. Conclusion

CMC is often promoted as an exciting new educational medium that will be attractive to students. As it is commonly assumed that contemporary youth are as comfortable in virtual worlds as in face-to-face contexts, one might expect that a social presence naturally emerges within online educational contexts and that this automatically generates student involvement and increasingly motivates them to actively participate in the ongoing online conversation. However, as discussed above, observations of a Skype EFL classroom at a Japanese university in which small groups of four to five students met with Philippine instructors twice a week over an academic year suggest that the social presence of a virtual world cannot be taken for granted in online language learning environments, but must be explicitly taught and actively managed. While Skype might imply conversation, it does not accomplish it without the active support of teachers.

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