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Fostering Community of Inquiry in Public-Private English Language University Settings in Kurdistan (Iraq)

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ABSTRACT

At two higher education institutions in Kurdistan (Iraq), English as foreign language (EFL) programs aim to provide adult learners with language skills development that they need to excel in their majors and as professionals. A framework called the Community of Inquiry (COI), based on interactionist and constructivist-learning theories was used to create a needs analysis tool to inform the design, delivery, and evaluation of a collaborative mini-conference hosted by the two institutions during and post-COVID pandemic. The current study explores the use of the needs assessment, which measured instructors' beliefs following the sudden transition to online learning during the pandemic, and their awareness of principles of teaching and learning for EFL learners in particular within the context of Kurdistan Iraq. There are opportunities in and beyond the current setting to address issues of equity, capacity for integrating tech skills with pedagogy, and more empathy between public and private institutions of higher education that support EFL learners. The study gathered critical evidence through qualitative and quantitative research methods that assessed institutional, faculty, and student needs during the transition of online learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Most, if not all, institutions were impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, which swept across the globe. Educational institutions in particular felt the biggest impact socially, economically, and in academic progression. Over 1.2 billion children from 186 countries were out of classes, causing traditional face-to-face classes to be delivered remotely, by educators utilizing various online platforms to deliver content (Li & Lelani, 2020). Some countries were able to move their education online swiftly due to institutional preparedness and having the financial means to do so. However, the majority of countries in the world had to enter a new way of learning and teaching and had to adapt to remote learning to avoid social and economic inequalities, specifically Iraq and KRG higher education. Though online or remote learning for higher education has existed for decades, Iraq has had challenges in implementing technology-based or remote learning due to learners not having access to proper technological tools or proper internet connectivity and institutional preparedness to deliver such classes.

Currently, Iraq has 35 public universities and 45 private institutions in which 850, 000 students are enrolled. The KRG, which is a federal state in Iraq, currently has 18 public universities, 30 private institutions. During the early months of the pandemic, total lockdowns were imposed, causing a major impact on both private and public universities' educational process for many learners who hoped to complete their semesters. Non-governmental institutions took the initiative to move online immediately, and soon, public institutions in the KRG followed suit. The shift from traditional teaching to online learning has presented similar challenges for Iraqi and KRG universities: institutional and learners' readiness for online learning and sustaining educational equity.

As the pandemic forced instructors of higher education to practice online, learners in English as a foreign language (EFL) setting may have experienced particular hardships, including studying without an immersive context, a loss of social connection through online tools, and an overreliance on text-based modes of delivery may pose a greater challenge for second language (L2) readers.

Description of Two Settings

To identify the challenges that a collaborative conference can help address, this section will compare two EFL programs in higher education institutions (public and private) in Kurdistan (Iraq).

Description of a private EFL program.

A team of lecturers from a private and local university in Sulaimani department formed a collaboration by leading an online conference/workshop to reflect on challenges experienced during online learning and teaching by referencing the Community of Inquiry Framework, with emphasis on institutional and learner readiness, social and emotional needs with online learning, and tech literacy.

The first university in the collaborative partnership is a private university, whose medium of instruction is English. Prior to taking courses in the undergraduate program, students must complete a placement test to determine their level of English. Students whose English level is deemed insufficient for undergraduate studies take courses in the Academic Preparatory Program, where they are taught academic English skills focused on reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Based on the test results, students are then placed in the appropriate English level. At least 90% of the student population participates in the preparatory program, therefore, its importance is in its ability to act as a feeder to the undergraduate programs.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), which required a rapid shift from face-to-face delivery to an online apparatus (Patel, 2021), took place. The university, like thousands of other universities and schools throughout the world, moved its courses to an online format in mid-February 2020 when the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) mandated all institutions of higher education to transition to online courses. Previously, the private university did not offer any online

education offerings as part of the curriculum. However, for a significant amount of time prior to the COVID pandemic, faculty had utilized aspects of online education, such as the use of an LMS (Learning Management System) to post readings, activities, and videos, so students and faculty had a basic familiarity with using online tools. While many faculty had at least some familiarity with online aspects and included them in their regular face-to-face courses, a majority of the faculty had never taught a 100% online course. Therefore, the requirement to move to a completely virtual environment in a rapid manner provided a significant challenge for faculty. In order to follow the mandate, faculty needed to receive training on not only transitioning their courses to an online format via the university LMS and but also on general concerns and aspects related to online teaching and learning.

The transition to online learning at a private institution. This change from a physical environment to a virtual one led to certain flexibility that teachers and students had never had before since courses took on both synchronous and asynchronous forms. However, the "unprecedented rapidity and extent of the transformation from face-to-face to remote modes, especially for those who had never given, or received, an online lesson before the current crisis" caused numerous challenges (Allehaiby & Al-Bahlani, 2021, p. 4). As a result, teachers had a lack of time to design an online course that addressed the particular challenges ERT presented. This rushed transition led to an absence of the key components of learning and required educators "to understand the characteristics, the processes, the outcomes and the implications of online practices" (Carrillo & Flores, 2020, p. 467) in a quick manner.

Within a physical classroom setting, "the teacher can transform understanding, performance skills, or desired attitudes or values into pedagogical representations and actions" (Shulman, 1987, p. 7). However, in an online form, key components of the learning process, such as "the social activity, the relationship building, the problem-solving, the dialogue and generation of ideas, and the students' own discovery of other content" (Fawns, Jones, & Aitken 2020, p. 2) can be notably absent. This was especially true when the circumstances of the pandemic required educators, many of whom had not had formal training in developing or delivering online courses, to move their traditionally in-person courses to an online format.

Due to the absence of these learning components within an online environment, there was often a lack of connection and engagement between the content and developing a realistic presence between teachers and students (Patel, 2021). The transition from face-to-face to online education brought on by the global pandemic also interrupted the social aspects of education and illuminated numerous inequalities, which often affected classroom policies and access to campus facilities (Mitchell, Cours-Anderson, Laverie, & Hass, 2021). As mentioned, online learning experiences are perceived positively by online learners when their needs for "social, teaching, and cognitive presences" are met (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2020; in Hamansour, et al. 2022a).

Therefore, the implementation of online education went through two phases during the pandemic: (1) The initial phase focused on material accessibility and providing learners with internet access; and (2) expanding the use of methods to create more online learning spaces, to meet students' need for social and teaching presences in particular (Authors, 2022a). These methods included adding Zoom sessions to recorded YouTube lectures. To further facilitate students' need for cognitive presence and a time-bound sequence of learning objectives, a flipped classroom model of assigning pre-Zoom work was applied. This is in contrast to the resources available at a public EFL program in the same setting, explained next.

Description of a public EFL program.

In the same region, a public university was included, as ongoing reports suggested that greater hardships and issues related to unequal access to online learning occurred (personal communication, December 10, 2020). The public university hosts a variety of programs which are taught in English, but for professional purposes, like English teaching, translation, literature, and language courses. The Languages

and Cultures department houses these disciplines. Unlike the private university above, this public university is not a residential campus, and its student body is much larger (27,000 vs 1,400, respectively). This requires students to commute to campus. An important characteristic of the institution is that its cost of attendance is much lower for students to attend, and class sizes are larger. Relying more on in-person teaching approaches means that it faced some challenges when the switch was made to online learning at the start of the pandemic.

The transition to online learning at a public institution. The change to online learning was more gradual for the public institution due to the initial lockdowns and establishing online solutions for education which it was less equipped to handle. Most students had smartphones to continue their studies, but fewer devices per family (personal communication, June, 2020). When the switch to online finally commenced, a number of additional challenges were reported in the news, such as teacher strikes and students demanding more accommodation, and eventually, the return to in-person classes much earlier than at the private university.

Statement of the Problem and Aims

Higher education institutions retell their transition to online learning, initial accounts vary in severity, but both public and private are consistent with the challenges and hardships found in the literature. The purpose of this paper is to identify solutions related to the challenges of online pedagogy for English as a foreign language (EFL) instructors and learners. Mainly, learners' own lack of self-directed learning skills, a familiar (physical) learning environment, and instructors' lack of ability to provide interaction required for the development of second language (L2) skills will be explored through the construct of the Community of Inquiry (COI) (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000; 2020). While the COI model stems from content courses offered to adult online learners whose English is their first language (L1), and who elect for online learning, our setting includes a broader population of EFL instructors and learners who simply did not have a choice in the matter.

The literature points toward a need for a more "humanized" online learning experience for EFL, and it provides more explanation for how and why online learning is a challenge for the general population in the current setting, and for EFL students in particular. This knowledge informed the authors' cooperation to design, carry out, and evaluate an online professional development mini-conference. This paper has two main aims:

1. A review of the literature will define COI as an important model that informs how instructors can facilitate a better online learning experience for students. Interactionist and sociocultural perspectives for L2 development are proposed to inform a more EFL-responsive COI model.
2. A needs assessment will be created and distributed to teachers in both settings. Adapting an existing COI teacher inventory (Garrison et al., 2020) with EFL needs in mind can inform best practices and next steps.

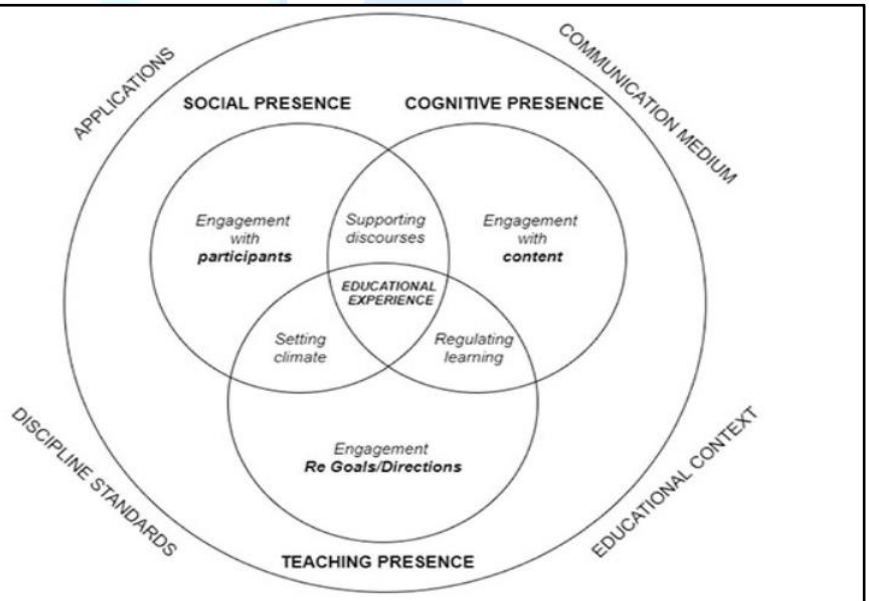
Literature Review

The challenges of online learning have been identified in online courses built for non-traditional learners who choose to study online degrees for economic or other reasons. In the context of the pandemic, efforts to support online teaching and learning have tended to return to the core principles of constructivist and learner-centered pedagogy. One such framework, called the Community of Inquiry (COI) boils down online needs to three "presences:" social, cognitive, and teaching (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2020). The framework is explored next, followed by a discussion of the model through the lens of online English as L2 learners.

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework

The CoI is rooted in Dewey's Theory of Inquiry, which views inquiry as "transactional, open-ended, and inherently social" (Schön, 1992, p. 122), and the central focus of the framework describes the learning community as a social activity that helps activate deeper learning (Zulu, 2022). Within a traditional classroom setting, students are often able to feel that they are not only members of a community, but they also have the ability to form interpersonal relationships with classmates in which ideas can be exchanged, challenged, and discussed in a fluid manner similar to in-person interactions. However, while a variety of learning strategies can successfully encourage critical thinking skills in the physical environment, it is not always possible to replicate these same strategies in an online environment due to technical or other constraints (Kanuka & Garrison, 2004).

In order for students to have a successful learning experience, the CoI requires the activation and collective working of the three core groupings of cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence (Aykol & Garrison, 2008; Arbaugh, 2008; Richardson, Maeda, Lv, & Caskurlu, 2017, as cited by Fiock, 2020). Figure 1 shows the interaction between the three important concepts. When these presences work in unison, meaningful learning is able to take place (Honig & Salmon, 2021) since reflection and dialogue occur, and that in turn allows ideas to be discussed and challenged and new perspectives to be developed (Hagaman, 1990).



Note. From "About the Framework: An Introduction to the Community of Inquiry," by Centre for Distance Education at Athabasca University, 2021 (http://thecommunityofinquiry.org/coi). CC BY-SA 4.0.

Figure 1. The COI framework (in Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000).

Social Presence.

Social presence is the second of three core components and focuses on the ability of a student to be a "real" person in an online environment by "projecting their personal characteristics in the Community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as 'real people'" (Garrison et al, 2000, p. 89). This ability to project themselves as real people helps decrease feelings of isolation and other negative emotions "including withdrawal, loneliness, boredom, and dissatisfaction" (Bowers & Kumar, 2015; Tirell & Quick, 2012, as cited by Nasir, 2020, p. 486) since a lack of social presence has

resulted in less participation and possibly course failure. In an online learning environment, this is important since social presence helps give a voice to students who might otherwise not be able or have difficulty expressing it.

Since it is not always possible for teachers and students to see visual cues and body language due to cultural or technical constraints in a virtual environment, other symbolic displays of emotion allow students to express their feelings in a manner that is not always possible in a traditional text message or forum. For instance, the use of emojis, which can represent not only various feelings of the human experience but also occasions and events (Zareen, Karim, & Khan, 2016), allow students to express a variety of emotions, thoughts, and feelings in an easy manner. In addition, various facial expressions and finger/hand signs, such as the "thumbs up" or "waving" sign can assist with building social presence within a learning community. For instance, a teacher can ask students to give a "thumbs up" emoji to determine whether material is clear, and a "waving" hand emoji can be used to indicate that the person is raising their hand and wants to say something. However, it must be noted that emojis are open to interpretation, and their use and meanings could have different meaning to different people depending on the context, and that could lead to "non-consistency of message interpretation based on the personalities, emotional attachment levels, relational importance and many other behavioral factors interplaying between…individuals" (Zareen et al, 2016, p. 260). Even though emojis have the ability to increase social presence while online, care must be taken to make sure that all participants understand the meaning of each emoji within the classroom setting.

It is also important to note that while students must have the ability to portray themselves as "real people" to feel the sense of being present in a classroom and part of a learning community, teachers must also develop an online instructor presence by creating an environment in which discourse can occur (Conklin & Dikkers, 2021). To build upon instructor's social presence, effective communication, which can include emoticons and humor (Conklin & Dikkers, 2021), and open communication, in which the instructor recognizes and responds to questions and acknowledges contributions, can be utilized (Conklin & Dikkers, 2021). In addition, the use of audio and video feedback can also "set the tone for a caring, constructive learning environment among participants as well" (Jones-Roberts, 2022, p. 105).

Garrison et al (2000) also put forward areas of emotional expression, which allows learners to share personal viewpoints, and open communication, which allows learners to "develop aspects of mutual awareness and recognition" (Fiock, 2020, p. 137), and group cohesion, where learners "build and sustain a sense of group commitment" (Garrison et al, 2000 as cited by Fiock, 2020, p. 137). Social presence also has a direct impact on learning since class participants can achieve their learning goals through "a shared experience for the purpose of constructing and confirming meaning," (Garrison et al, 2000, p. 95) and finding the material personally interesting and worthwhile. Ultimately, social presence serves as a key support for cognitive presence by "indirectly facilitating the process of critical thinking carried on by the community of learners" (Garrison et al, 2000, p. 89).

Cognitive Presence.

Cognitive presence is the first of the three core components of the CoI Framework and focuses on "the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained discourse in a critical community of inquiry" (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 11 as cited by Sadaf, Wu, & Martin, 2021, p. 1). Cognitive presence is based on the Practical Inquiry Model put forward by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) that starts with a triggering event, which is when a problem is first identified, and a learner is made aware of it (Garrison et al, 1999). Exploration is when the learner searches "for information, knowledge, and alternatives that might help make sense of the situation or problem (Garrison et al, 2000, p. 98). After the learner has explored the problem, the information and knowledge is integrated into a coherent form, and this focuses on "gaining some understanding of the acquired

information and knowledge" (Garrison et al, 2000, p. 98). The final aspect of the Practical Inquiry Model is resolution, which focuses on the application of the idea to the problem (Garrison et al, 2000).

Within the CoI Framework, an online environment that is based on deep learning permits a student to think critically, and this helps increase educational effectiveness (Lin, Hung, & Lee, 2015 as cited by Yildrim & Seferoglu, 2021) since this is a "vital element…that is frequently presented as the ostensible goal of all higher education (Garrison et al, 2000, p. 89). Kanuka and Garrison (2004) state that critical thinking is based on a relationship between a student's personal world, which is reflective in nature, and a shared world, which is focused on collaboration and knowledge based. In a 2004 study, Kanuka and Garrison (2004) examined internal and external constructs that play a role in developing a cognitive presence in an online CoI, and the results showed the methodological constructs were in line with the facilitation of critical thinking, and combinations of the constructs are needed to facilitate critical thinking in an online environment.

Therefore, in order to have active learning that encourages critical thinking, educators must make sure to activate all presences and not focus on one particular aspect. Yet, it is important to recognize each learner might have different expectations, and this can affect success, so the CoI must be flexible since "learners contribute to the improvement of the community through their skills and knowledge while teachers design learning experiences and make necessary changes in building a community of inquiry" (Yildrim & Seferoglu, 2021, 149).

Teaching Presence.

Teaching presence is the final aspect of the three core components within the CoI Framework, and it focuses on the ability to design and build understanding among classroom participants (Marshall & Kostka, 2020). Taken as a whole, teaching presence helps drive cognitive recognition of learning which helps encourage social processes, and those processes ultimately support learning in an online environment (Garrison et al, 2000). When broken down, Garrison et al (1999) separate teaching presence into two main groupings; the design of the educational experience, which is primarily facilitated by the teacher and which "includes the selection, organization, and primary presentation of course content" (Garrison et al, 2000, p. 90) and facilitation, which helps assist in achieving educational outcomes. In addition, as mentioned in the previous section, the continuous presence of a teacher who acknowledges student contributions and provides feedback helps sustain teaching presence (Garrison et al, 2000), and this improves learning motivation and reduces feelings of isolation (Conklin & Dikkers, 2021).

During the pandemic, a humanization of the learning process by communicating via various messaging apps, such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, encouraged not only more engagement from students by requiring regular responses but also allowed teachers to continue to build relationships with students in a more personal and human manner (Zulu, 2022). This ultimately helped build and sustain teacher presence, which in turn led to a sense of connectedness since students could contact their instructors and receive timely responses to questions (Conklin & Dikkers, 2021). Here, the authors argue that a strong, sustained teaching presence allowed discourse and deeper learning to occur.

This humanization of the learning process also helped integrate the three core presences and showed that "the development of high-order cognitive skills required not only strong social presence but also the ability of the teacher to guide students' collaborative efforts in the transition from content reflection to critical reflection" (Kreber & Cranton, 2000 as cited by Carrillo & Flores, 2020, p. 477). In addition, teachers also utilized social media as a way to sustain teaching presence and social presence. Elverici (2021) found the use of social media helped increase social presence since students "were happy to use a social media tool as part of their curriculum with their peers in the academic realm" (Elverici, 2021, p. 142). This ultimately resulted in a stronger sense of social presence among the students, and by working in conjunction with teaching presence, this helped facilitate learning, discourse, and critical thinking online.

Measuring COI to Benefit Instructors

Based in part on Dewey's (1933) practical inquiry and reflective learning framework, Garrison, Anderson, & Archer (2000) describe the COI as a series of principled stages that learners pass through for a positive learning experience. The authors defined indicators that instructors can look for in learner behaviors. For cognitive presence, the authors suggest that a learner can benefit from learning that is initiated by a "triggering event, exploration, integration, [and] resolution" (p. 98-99). The authors argue that the four stages are consistent with Dewey's (1933) model of practical inquiry. Citing a need for instructors to seek evidence for best practices, the authors provide indicators for each stage, as shown in Figure 2. As noted, a "triggering event" (what the authors call Dewey's pre-reflective stage) is indicated by a "sense of puzzlement" by learners. To help students reflect and cope with new knowledge, an indicator is "information exchange," and so on.

Elements	*Categories*	*Indicators (examples only)*
Cognitive Presence	Triggering Event	Sense of puzzlement
	Exploration	Information exchange
	Integration	Connecting ideas
	Resolution	Apply new ideas
Social Presence	Emotional Expression	Emotions
	Open Communication	Risk-free expression
	Group Cohesion	Encouraging collaboration
Teaching Presence	Instructional Management	Defining and initiating discussion topics
	Building Understanding	Sharing personal meaning
	Direct Instruction	Focusing discussion

Figure 2. CoI Coding Template (reprinted from Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 89).

One tangible impact that COI had on teaching was the validation of a survey instrument to help define effective pedagogical practices for online instruction. Swan, et al. (2008) used the authors' indicators in an instrument with a Likert scale that captures Garrison, Anderson, & Archer's (2000) concept map for COI. Statements of agreement range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The survey has been made an open-source tool for action research. Figure 3 shows the instrument's "cognitive" presence items (reproduced from Swan et al., 2008):

Cognitive Presence

Triggering Event

23. The problems I pose in the course increase student interest.
24. Course activities pique student curiosity.
25. Students feel motivated to explore content-related questions.

Exploration

26. Students use a variety of information sources to explore problems posed in the course.
27. I provide opportunities for students to brainstorm and locate relevant information that helps them resolve content-related questions.
28. Online discussions are valuable in helping students develop different perspectives.

Integration

29. Students combine new information to help them answer questions raised in course activities.
30. Learning activities in the course help students construct explanations and/or solutions.
31. Reflection on course content and discussions helps students understand fundamental concepts in the course.

Resolution

32. Students test and apply knowledge created in this course.
33. Students develop solutions to course problems that can be applied in practice.
34. Students can apply knowledge created in this course to their own work or other non-class related activities.

Figure 3. Cognitive presence items on the instructor survey (from Swan et al. 2008).

Online Learning and Second Language Acquisition

Aspects of CoI can guide English language pedagogy. For teaching presence, the teacher as a facilitator of tasks also occurs in CLT-informed classes (Ellis, 2003). Social and cognitive presences are consistent with a variety of second language acquisition (SLA) perspectives. The interactionist and sociocultural theories are explored briefly.

Interactionist perspective. The interactionist perspective argues that language input and output drive learning (Long, 1991; Swain, 2006; both cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013). While the interactionist hypothesis can help provide a social presence, it is rooted in the cognitive perspective in SLA literature, which implies that the learner is an individual, who processes and produces information as a computer does (Hall, 2011). For this reason, cognitive presence in CoI can be supported by cognitive SLA studies related to working memory and information processing (VanPatten, 2007; McLaughlin, 1991; Nation, 2013). When online course design includes clear tasks, gradual sequencing or staging, or clear outcomes and objectives that students know they must complete, the instructor is using practices that help learners in all teaching modes, online or in-person.

When modifying teaching methods in ELT, cognitive aims include making it easier for students to learn, remember, use, analyze, and generate new language and knowledge. For example, helping students develop their own patterns for learning can happen if tasks and procedures occur repetitively, with progressively higher levels of complexity over time, and time allotted for reflection or revisiting a previously learned concept or language point. Such delayed retrieval is thought to promote long-term memory (Nation, 2019; Nation & Macalister, 2020). In online learning, aspects that challenge EFL students include the replacement of a human interface with a digital or highly text-based context. From a students' perspective, the ability to ask real time questions, receive timely feedback, and even follow daily or weekly instructions through texts or tables/schedules instead of in-person face-to-face communication may require a higher cognitive load because reading is a cognitively demanding process (Grabe & Stoller, 2020). A challenge for EFL instructors in the current setting involves arranging the information so that students can understand, follow, and learn from what is presented (personal communication, June 10, 2020).

While studies are in progress to evaluate the efficacy of Zoom and other online meeting platforms on EFL learning outcomes, current studies indicate that EFL and ESL students benefit from live face-to-face interaction because there is a negotiation of meaning and a process to create meaning during spoken dialog. Yet, if such feedback is only written and delayed, it may not always lead to self-correction by EFL students (Erlam, Ellis, and Batstone, 2013). Tien and Diem (2021) found that IELTS scores and student motivation rose when a live meeting platform was used to facilitate L2 reading for academic purposes. In EFL settings where the internet is available, more studies will likely further support the use of meeting applications for better language skills outcomes.

The interactionist perspective helps predict why. Social interactions that occur (through speaking or writing) between interlocutors may help each develop communicative competence, as they receive modified input (Long, 1991), comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981), produce language output (Swain, 1986), engage meaningfully with partners and texts repeatedly for different purposes for fluency development (Nation, 2013; Folse, 2006), and learn when and how to use language in a variety of situations for pragmatic competence (Canale and Swain, 2009). Therefore, cognitive, social, and teacher presence can be supported.

Sociocultural theory (SCT). SCT is another SLA perspective that may support social presence. From an SCT perspective, learning is relational, not merely an increase in knowledge or language use through individual cognitive processing. Here, learners enter a zone of proximal development (ZPD) when they relate with an expert peer, target material, or the constraints of the environment; this relational dyad is required for the individual to reach their next stage of learning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). While ZPD was originally part of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory for general education, the concept of scaffolding and its use in EFL pedagogy has flourished (Erlam, Ellis, and Batstone, 2013; Grabe & Stoller, 2020). Shared or

collaborative language tasks may also drive relational learning, and well-sequenced tasks with clear instructions and monitoring by a teacher can satisfy cognitive and teaching presences simultaneously.

Setting Conditions for Online L2 Learning

The online learning experience can mirror the principles of pedagogical best practices for L2 learners if online tasks are shared. As stated above, when possible, Zoom or another live meeting platform can create conditions that allow more interaction between "mixed level" or expert/novice student peers. This brings up an important issue: Online EFL instruction that aims to support cognitive, social, and teaching "presences" should realistically incorporate live meeting platforms to some degree. With the onus on institutions, individual instructors, and learners to provide their own internet and devices, shared online connectivity is not always realistic. Equity and access may play as large of a role as knowledge and skills, so closing this gap remains a big hurdle. Bridging the gap between the "haves and have-nots" could help. Based on the promise of a more humanizing form of online instruction offered by the COI and SLA perspectives, two tertiary-level English language institutions responded to a needs assessment tool to help set priorities for professional development for better online learning in Kurdistan (Iraq).

Conditions for Online Interaction

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Institutional Readiness for E-Learning. The majority of higher education in Europe and America were able to move online because online education has been part of distance learning in many private and public institutions. The majority of institutions in America were able to provide hybrid, blended, or completely online courses through learning management systems and online platforms. However, inequality globally has meant that many settings are without the resources to provide online infrastructure or devices that students needed once the pandemic hit. Besides addressing specific needs in the setting, the current study seeks for solutions related to equity in higher education on a larger scale.

Purpose and Research Questions

Comparing the needs of instructors across public and private higher education institutions in the current setting can be a path toward solutions that may benefit online EFL instruction beyond the setting. Based on the literature and knowledge of the setting between one public and one private institution of higher education in Sulaimani, Kurdistan (Iraq), the current paper seeks to identify similarities and differences in the professional development needs of faculty in Kurdistan and report results of a needs-based conference as an effective (and sustainable) solution to address inequity in the setting. From a needs assessment instrument based on the literature, the following research questions (RQs) are explored:

(1) What are the self-reported perceptions (beliefs) of local teachers who taught English language courses online in Kurdistan in a public and private higher educational institution?

(2) What self-reported behaviors do faculty practice as online English language instructors in public and private higher educational institutions?
(3) How well do instructors practice the tenets of COI, and what gaps remain that need to be addressed? What predictions does the literature offer to inform future interventions, such as workshop topics that can benefit both institutions?

Hypotheses

RQ1. We predict that the issues of online teaching/learning would be similar, with issues related to equity, self-efficacy, a loss of sense of community, and tech literacy in particular. For

RQ2. There could be a gap in instructors' knowledge and their actual practices. The reasons for this gap could be related to a lack of internet or devices, time scarcity, or even capacity or skills for adapting what works in-person to online modes of delivery.

RQ3. The needs identified from the assessment tool may reveal tips such as building rapport, a need for more EFL pedagogical practices (such as a modified form of COI), and equipping students for online readiness through tech training or implementing flipped classes.

METHODOLOGY

This section describes how the pilot needs assessment was developed, its distribution to two samples of instructors who taught online for at least one semester in 2020, and how results were coded to clarify findings.

A Pilot Needs Assessment Tool

First, a survey instrument based on Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2020) was used to create a survey that had four sections. Appendix A shows the consent form that was used. Appendix B shows the question items for sections 1-4.

Section 1. This section featured only demographics and related factors (e.g., educational background, access to devices, etc.).

Section 2. This section asked a series of questions that asked about instructors' own beliefs about teaching and online learning. Respondents answered using a Likert scale (from 1 = disagree to 5= agree).

Section 3. This section asked a series of questions that asked about instructors' own actual practice (stimulated recall) and the strength of agreement about which practices actually occurred. A similar Likert scale was used. This section focused on constructs which are related to the three presences in COI (teaching, social, and cognitive). More questions were added to support the needs of English language learners (ELLs) which are thought to be consistent. For instance, the "interactionist" perspective (Long, 2000; Canale and Swain, 2006) makes sense as part of a "social presence" of learning because interactions are generally social in nature. Table 1 shows each of the three constructs and how each is divided into smaller sub-constructs that support online learning for ELLs. See Appendix B for the specific questions which were asked.

Section 4. Finally, open response items were given, to improve the reliability of the responses. Respondents answered questions related to what they did well, didn't do well, their professional development needs, and resources they feel they didn't have.

Table 1. Section 3 of the COI/ELL Needs Assessment. CoI Coding Template (reprinted from Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 89).

Elements	*Categories*	*Indicators (examples only)*
Cognitive Presence	Triggering Event	Sense of puzzlement
	Exploration	Information exchange
	Integration	Connecting ideas
	Resolution	Apply new ideas
Social Presence	Emotional Expression	Emotions
	Open Communication	Risk-free expression
	Group Cohesion	Encouraging collaboration
Teaching Presence	Instructional Management	Defining and initiating discussion topics
	Building Understanding	Sharing personal meaning
	Direct Instruction	Focusing discussion

Distributing the Assessment to Both Institutions

The survey was distributed online using G. Forms after an institutional review board approval from both institutions. To facilitate accurate elicitation of responses, teachers from both private (n=6) and public (n=13) institutions attended short "orientations" to explain the directions of each survey and its purpose. Respondents understood that the survey was voluntary, and confidential, and would be used toward addressing needs through future interventions such as possible workshops. Teachers were given an explanation in their local language. Local teachers received some explanation of the questions in Kurdish to minimize misunderstandings, and the survey was written in English. Respondents (n=19) had around two weeks to complete the survey. Results were recorded and organized in G. Sheets and Excel.

Coding the Responses

Both institutions' results from sections 1-4 were analyzed for trends, including similarities and differences across the two institutions. Findings to support each RQ are presented next. Three authors analyzed the data independently and reached conclusions as a collaborative process to improve the confidence of findings.

RESULTS

Each research question (RQ) below is reported with its relevant findings. Sections 2 and 3 of the inventories were analyzed and compared with section 4 (open responses) to elicit persistent gaps.

Self-reported beliefs of online language teaching.

Demographically, the sample included mostly "experienced" teachers who have eight or more years of experience. Tech literacy is rated as sufficient to carry out an online course (e.g., Zoom, applications, and devices). There is a disparity in the prep time needed for coursework, ranging from 5-35 hours a week. It is important to note that the samples were selected based on teaching courses that involve English. The preparatory program is a fully-intensive English for academic purposes (EAP) institution, while the public institution offers courses in English literature and translation, but does not offer a fully-intensive program for the English language. Figure 4 shows a possible change in teachers' top five priorities which they consider "important" for successful teaching as the environment shifted from in-person to online. Notable is that "student online literacy skills" and teacher-centered instruction seemed to dominate after shifting to online.

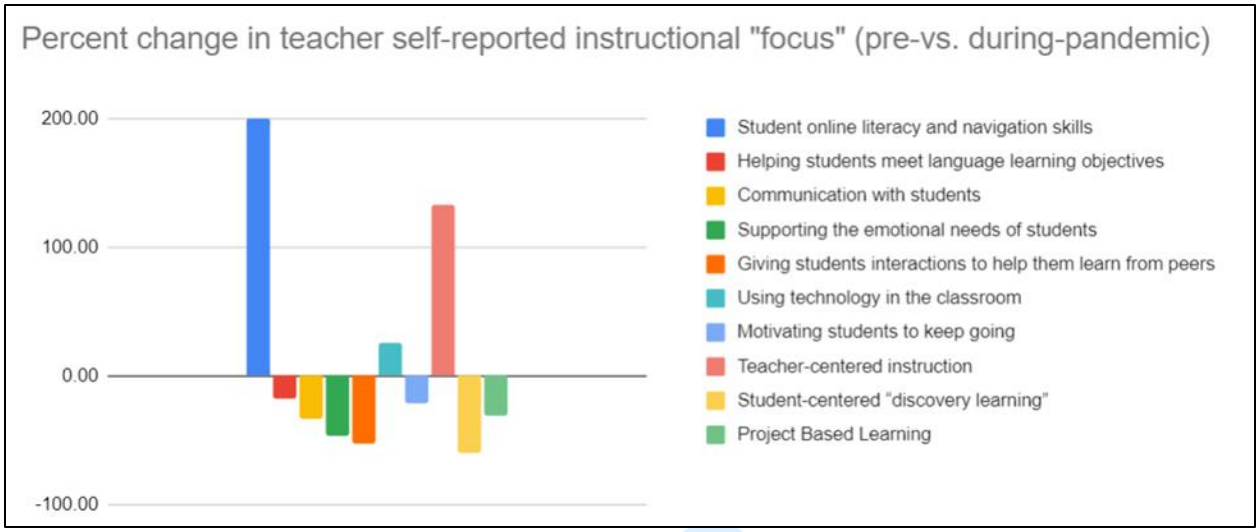

Figure 4. Percent change in self-reported instructional focus after the pandemic started.

In section 2 of the survey (beliefs), teachers most frequently believed that the challenge of online instruction for ELLs is not enough time for teaching, learning, and second language pedagogy to occur well. A large majority of respondents also believed that the biggest challenge for students who study online is access to equipment, which can be tied to poverty. At the public university, faculty reported the two most common factors for successful online learning are "access to devices" and the ability to "provide engaging lessons." In contrast, from the private setting, respondents selected "students' self-regulated learning." Both settings ranked "supporting students' learning styles" among their top priorities.

Self-reported online teaching practices. The most commonly reported practice in the sample (n=19) was in the teaching presence category. Specifically, a majority rated their use of direct teaching, facilitation, and their own self-awareness of teachers to be strong. Self-reported gaps were in their expertise in online learning; 78% of the sample do not consider themselves "experts" to support online learners. The lowest self-reported category was "social presence." For instance, only 10% said they regularly helped students do "group assignments," or felt that students were regularly interacting online. Only 20% of respondents gave students "choices" to show they were learning through different possible modes, and a similarly low response rate was for supporting speaking skills and providing an environment online which felt supportive to students. Finally, in the "cognitive presence" category, only a third of respondents say that their students see "value" in online learning, and only 40% say they help students use "all of their language skills."

In open responses (section 4; see Appendix A), the main obstacles were equity and access (Internet, devices, facilities), low student tech skills (educational applications), and low student comfort toward online learning. Strengths that teachers reported include how information is shared clearly with students. These 'strengths' seem to be largely about supplying input for students while teaching online. Whether such input and knowledge-focused delivery imply the production of language, interaction, and generation of new knowledge is unclear.

Persistent gaps in both settings. Four gaps stand out are related to equity and access to devices, students' and teachers' comfort zones with tech literacy, a lack of interaction and "engagement" that students experience, and a lack of "practice and feedback" that teachers can provide, and students can receive. For ELLs, these four items are crucial for L2 development, as meaningful feedback in particular during writing and modified input during speaking are considered essential ingredients for timely learning (Hall, 2011).

Interestingly, only two respondents want workshops perse, while the biggest "want" seems to be strategies to introduce speaking and interaction online. One hurdle which keeps popping up is accessibility and equity. These two factors are important because not all students can access classes (and may not be able to access all aspects of lessons which are communicative, such as Zoom). A stronger orientation (IT, tech, internet needs analysis, and self-study expectations clearly set by the teacher) is another large lack and want for APP and SULI teachers. Finally, students' perceptions of online learning and their attitudes/motivation/ability to continue studies online (even when their larger goal is time-sensitive/time-bound) deserve further study. The current survey also indicates that teachers feel students' social/emotional needs, sense of community, and personhood (identity, individuality) is less felt online. What are students' perceptions of these presences? How closely do they match what teachers perceive? Implications and future research directions are discussed next.

DISCUSSIONS

The involvement of multiple stakeholders is challenging for any project. Furthermore, limitations of the current study included the omission of students' responses, which would have provided further comparison. In addition, the survey featured self-reporting on a Likert scale and open response items, but a semi-structured interview with a sample of respondents may have strengthened our confidence in the findings. Reported teaching/learning practices can vary simply by the difference in item type used for measuring it (Rodgers, 2017). Finally, the survey could have been translated into local teachers' L1 (Sorani Kurdish) to minimize comprehension issues.

Despite the limitations above, an important aim of the project was to practice diplomacy between two "worlds" of higher education (public and private) and look for ways we could see common challenges to solve. We were able to find similarities between the two institutions with regard to students' relative lack of readiness for tech, and access to devices/the internet, and there was a gap in teachers' beliefs when they knew they "should" provide engaging and interactive online lessons for students, but their own technological expertise sometimes led to pedagogical limitations.

In open-ended responses, many reported that this mismatch between training and mode of delivery had a negative effect on their morale, but most remained hopeful that the challenges could be overcome. Teachers indicated they did not typically give group work or have time for interactions (S-S or T-S). To what extent does interaction and output (production) occur? How do teachers see their role in these other areas of L2 instruction online? More data or follow-up interviews would help clarify this. Respondents reported in the open response section that doing the needs assessment itself gave them ideas about what they can or should do as online teachers, which was an encouraging result from the instrument itself. In particular, section 3 provides a "checklist" that instructors can use to rate their own strengths and weaknesses.

Importantly, the respondents indicated a willingness to attend an interactive workshop and in follow-up interviews felt positive that their needs were being asked (personal communication, Nov 10, 2020). Thus, one impact that the needs assessment had was that it gave respondents a feeling of 'being heard.' Such institutional involvement can be an important part of the change or innovation diffusion (Christenson & Stoller, 2012). Here, the organizers' desire to continue such collaborative work, and may have strengthened a belief that fostering social change and equity can happen through collaborative efforts shared by teachers, administrators, and institutions.

CONCLUSIONS

While the teaching beliefs and practices from the needs assessment tool are considered universal for online learners, it is suggested that a similar instrument be used in more settings to gain confidence in its effectiveness. Teachers believe in giving students interactions, choices, and adapting to meet their language needs online, but they say their students need more interactions for the development of their speaking skills. In the current setting, an online conference was planned for teachers from both settings and an active participatory structure depended on the language ability of those present. The following priorities are supported by the literature and the setting's needs from the assessment instrument:

1. Training for how to support interactive lessons by using Zoom and other applications;
2. The use of checklists such as the COI inventory provided in the current study as a self-check for goal setting;
3. Building alternative routines, such as "flipped classes," flexible deadlines and how to implement them;
4. Incorporating strategies that improve equity, such as visual note-taking and other ways to help students "follow" the lesson better;
5. The use of applications such as WhatsApp to add communicative aims into lessons;
6. Incorporating strategies to build rapport online so that students feel seen and heard;
7. Looking for ways to simplify the input that students process while building students' own self-efficacy through offline tasks with clear prompts and possibly group work;
8. Forming a community of practice through regular workshops or "mini conferences" that teachers maintain and help lead over a sustained period of time
9. Inviting other stakeholders who have power to influence policy and budget decisions to allocate resources to better support ELL needs in particular (e.g., improving access to devices and data for students to interact and speak online).

The suggestions here are not exhaustive but are based on the findings from the needs assessment tool used in the current study. Future workshops can be planned between the two institutions with participation from both public and private educators.

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