

In search of Indonesian EFL learners' view of social presence in online learning: how do they perceive it?

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ABSTRACT

Social presence is one of the key elements in developing a personal connection and encouraging collaboration, which supports a meaningful online learning. Understanding how students interpret social presence in this setting is crucial. This study aims to investigate how EFL learners at an Islamic institution perceive social interaction in online learning. This study also analyzes how male and female students view social interaction in online learning. Grounded in a quantitative approach, a cross-sectional survey design was used in this study by distributing to a nine-item survey on the social presence questionnaire to 131 learners in an Islamic university in Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that most of the subjects perceived the social presence in online learning negatively. They also show that the perception of males and females differ significantly in which male students perceived that social interaction most likely occurs in online learning, whereas their female counterparts did otherwise, the interaction is limited. The findings of this research offer a crucial understanding of how EFL instructors might improve social presence in online learning.

Keywords: EFL learners, Community of Inquiry, online learning, social presence

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Introduction

During the COVID-19 outbreak, online learning experienced various problems, especially the lack of expertise and experience among lecturers in implementing online learning to foster social interaction (Oktaria & Hadiwinarto, 2021). For this reason, it is crucial to examine social presence in online learning through the eyes of the learner's perspectives in the present situation to provide recommendations for the lecturers.

Social presence is part of the learning community's framework suggested by the experts in the field (i.e. (Garrison, 2016; Garrison et al., 2010). The learning community framework is a popular theory which is called the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. The CoI framework was created as a manual for online instructional activities and research (Garrison, 2016). Garrison (2007)) have classified social presence into three areas that each contain a number of items: "affective

expression, open communication, and group cohesion". Affective expression involves expressing feelings, employing humor, and being honest with oneself. Meanwhile, open communication entails carrying on a conversation, quoting from or openly referencing the statements of others, asking questions, offering compliments, expressing gratitude, and expressing agreement. In addition, cohesive consists of the vocative, address or address the gathering using salutations, inclusive pronouns, and phatic. Social presence can be seen from the beginning of the course with ice-breaking activities, followed by online discussions using collaborative tools and video for interaction (Sweany, 2020).

The classification of social presence is very significant and valuable in the process of teaching and learning. Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) stated that social presence is a widely used concept to explain how social interaction

works in online learning. Social presence also provides opportunities for meaningful learning by making interaction that facilitates communication by using learning tools (Mehri & Izadpanah, 2017). Moreover, social presence is the main key to developing and increasing cooperation among learners (Lee & Huang, 2018). Additionally, social presence is key in engaging and supporting learning experiences for students (Poth, 2018). Social presence is considered as the extent to which a learner in an online learning community feels personally linked to other students and the instructor (Sung & Mayer, 2012). Previously, it was introduced by Garrison et al. (2000) as a student's capacity to act as their emotional and social representative as "real people" in an online learning community. Referring to its definition, social presence has a very significant role in online learning. It is one of the important things that show the results of student outcomes (Andel et al., 2020). Molinillo et al. (2018) argue that students' active learning is positively impacted by social presence and teacher-student interactions, both formally and informally by way of emotional involvement. Thus, teachers should be able to create and maintain social interaction in teaching and learning activities because low levels of learning contact are correlated with low social presence (Bali & Liu, 2018).

Provided by the significance and value of social interaction in learning, it has become a very interesting topic of research until recently. In fact, a lot of growing number of studies on online learning focus on enhancing the social presence has been available (Bali & Liu, 2018; Kear et al., 2014; Molinillo et al., 2018). However, this growth research mainly focuses on the impact of social presence on the student's learning potential and how social interaction is related to other variables. For example, Molinillo et al., (2018) examined the influence of social interaction, social presence, and emotional involvement in online learning. They found that students active learning was positively impacted by the social presence and teacher-student interactions, either directly or through emotional engagement. In another study, Fattah & Sujono, (2020) analyzed social

presence in the *Ruangguru* application on social media (Instagram). The results of their research describe *Ruangguru* as a place that promotes a positive social presence built on three criteria“(social context, online communication, and interactivity”) when it is used on social media, including Instagram.

A growing number of studies have contributed to our general understanding of social presence. However, none of the studies above explores how EFL learners perceive social interaction in online instruction, particularly during COVID-19 online instruction. To fill out this empirical gap, this study is aimed to explore the perception of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners towards their interaction and involvement in online learning. The purposes of this study is to explore the EFL learners' perception of social presences in online learning and to investigate the way male and female EFL learners perceive social presence.

Research method

Research design

This study sought to investigate how EFL learners perceived social presence in online learning at one of Indonesia's Islamic universities. This study used a quantitative approach using a cross-sectional survey design. The cross-sectional survey design is to used gauge people's views or behaviors (Creswell, 2012). In this study, we collect data to examine the EFL learners' view of social presence.

Population and sample

There were 131? learners who are enrolled at one of the Islamic universities in Indonesia participated voluntarily in this study. These EFL learners have taken online courses during the COVID-19 outbreak (from the first semester of 2020 to the first semester of 2022). The participant's demographic data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. EFL learners` data profile

No	Characteristics	variables	n	%
1	Gender	Male	26	19.8
		Female	105	80.2
2	Major	English Education	88	67.2
		English literature	43	32.8
		S3	23	32.4
3	Semester	Seven	27	20.6
		Five	69	52.7
		three	35	26.7

It was noted that almost three-thirds (105 students or 80.2 %) of the respondents were female, and only one-fourth of the respondents were male (28 students or 19.8%). It was also noted that almost two third of the respondents were from English education (88 students or 67.2 %) and one-third of the respondents were from the English literature department (43 students or 32.8 %). The respondents based on the semester level were dominated by the fifth semester (69 students or 52.7 %) followed by the third semester (35 students or 26.6%). Whereas the respondent from the seventh semester was only 27 students or 20.6%.

Instrumentation

The instrument for data collection which was used in this study was a survey questionnaire adopted from the original questionnaire of the Community of Inquiry (CoI). This questionnaire was originally validated by (Swan et al., 2008) and is available online. The CoI questionnaire consists of three main categories, namely: "Social presence, Cognitive presence, and Teaching presence". In this study, the social presence construct was used to explore the EFL learner's perception of online learning. this construct consists of nine items of a five-point Likert scale of social presence statement. Using Cronbach's alpha (α) test, the questionnaire's reliability was investigated in the SPSS version 24. The overall reliability of the instrument is 0.865 which is higher than 0.50 (> 0.50). Accordingly, the

reliability of the questionnaire was achieved for this study. Besides the reliability, the instrument was validated using expert judgment (Furwana, 2019). Three lecturers (Alfi, Dedi, and Nopra (pseudonym) which are considered the experts were asked for their opinion about the clarity, content, relevance, and accuracy of the instrument.

Procedures of data collection and data analysis

In collecting the data, the questionnaire was designed in the form of Google Form which consists of demographic information and the main questionnaire. The questionnaire also accompanied the purposes of the study informing the students about the study and asking about their willingness to participate in the study. For ethical behavior, it is written that the students are asked to participate voluntarily in the study and their names do not appear in any publication. The Google Form link of the questionnaire was distributed in the second semester of 2022 with the help of EFL lecturers through the *Whatsapp Group* (WAG) of EFL learners. After receiving the responses from the participants, the excel form of the responses was downloaded and the data were exported to the Statistical Product for Social Science (SPSS) software version 24 for further analysis.

To determine the frequency, the mean and standard deviation, or other numerical characteristics, descriptive statistics were used. The results of the male and female responses

were determined using inferential statistics (independent sample t-test). In determining the positive and negative perception of the EFL learners, the following criteria are used: If the mean score is ranging from 1.00 to 3.50 (Strongly disagree to neutral), the perception is negative, and if the mean score is ranging from 3.51 to 5.00 (agree to strongly agree), the perception is positive) (Rahman, 2020).

Results & Discussion

Table 2. Mean and std. deviation of social presence scale and subscales

	N	Min	Max	M	Std. D
Social Presence	131	1,11	5,00	3,44	,71
Affective expression	131	1,00	5,00	3,56	,78
Open communication	131	1,00	5,00	3,39	,87
Group cohesion	131	1,33	5,00	3,39	,79

As it is noted in Table 2, the overall mean score of social presence is 3.45 which is lower than the mean score of positive perception (M >.3.51). This indicates that the EFL learners perceived very low social interaction indicating a negative perception of social interaction in online learning. In relation to each subscale, the learners also tend to have a negative perception in their responses to the each of social presence subconstructs. It is only the affective expression subconstruct (M= 3.56, SD = .78128) that indicates the positive perception, while the open communication subconstruct (M= 3.39, SD = .87166), and group cohesion subconstruct (M= 3.38, SD = .79616) demonstrated the negative perception indicated by each mean score is below 3.51. This indicated that the learners mostly perceived a very ineffective view of social

The overall perception of Social Presence

Descriptive statistics were run on the SPSS application to calculate the mean score and the standard deviation of the overall social presence scale and each subscale (“Affective open communication, and group cohesion”). Table 2 displays the outcomes of the data analysis.

interaction in learning. In order to explore the EFL learner’s perception based on the social presence subscale, the descriptive statistics were run on each item, as presented below.

The perception of Social Presence based on the scale

The affective expression

Using the SPSS program, descriptive statistics were conducted to determine the average score and standard deviation for each item on the Affective expression subscale. The average score and the standard deviation of each item on the affective subscale are presented Table 3.

Table 3. The average score for each item on the affective expression subscale and its standard deviation

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. “Getting to know other course participants gave me a sense of belonging in the course”.	131	3,81	,99
2. “I was able to form distinct impressions of some course participants”.	131	3,63	,89
3. “Online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction”.	131	3,25	1,13

Table 2 presents the average score of each item on the affective expression subscale in which the highest mean score is that “getting to know other course participants gave me a sense of belonging in the course” (M= 3.81, SD= .985). This is followed by item no. 2, “I was able to form distinct impressions of some course participants” (M= 3.63, SD= 0.897). The lowest mean score is “Online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction” (M= 3.25, SD= 1.132). Based on the interpretation of the mean score, two items (items 1 and 2) show that the EFL learners have a positive perception of knowing the other participants and forming a distinct impression of course participants. However, the

participants have a negative perception of online web-based communication which can be interpreted that the medium of web-based communication is ineffective for facilitating social contact.

Open communication

Open communication subscales on each item were also analyzed using descriptive statistics. It was found that two items on the open communication subscale are below 3. 50. It is only one item above 3.50 as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4 Average score and Std. Deviation of each item of the open communication subscale

Item	N	Mean	Std. D
1. “I felt comfortable conversing through the online medium”.	131	3,30	1,16
2. “I felt comfortable participating in the course discussions”.	131	3,69	,88
3. “I felt comfortable interacting with other course participants”.	131	3,19	1,15

The item on the open communication subscale indicates a mean score above 3.19. However, only one item shows a positive perception in this subscale. The positive perception is found in the item with the highest mean score “I felt comfortable participating in the course discussions” (M. 3.69, SD= .878). The other two items indicated a negative perception based on the mean score, namely, the item “I felt comfortable conversing through the online medium” (M= 3.30, SD= 1.155) and the item “I felt comfortable interacting with other course participants” (M= 3.19, SD= 1.151). The mean

score in the open communication subscale indicates that the interaction and making conversation in the online platform did not run well because the EFL learners feel uncomfortable.

Group Cohesion

The group cohesion subscale was also calculated to find the average score on each item. The item’s mean score on the group cohesion subscale is presented in table 5.

Table 5. The average score and Std. Deviation of each item of the group cohesion subscale

Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. “I felt comfortable disagreeing with other course participants while still maintaining a sense of trust”	131	3,56	,88
2. “I felt that my point of view was acknowledged by other course participants”.	131	3,41	,94
3. “Online discussions help me to develop a sense of collaboration”	131	3,18	1,14

Table 5 indicated the perception of the EFL learners on each item of the group cohesion construct. Two of the items show a negative perception of the group cohesion scale. It is only one item showing the positive perception of this scale. For example, "I felt comfortable disagreeing with other course participants while still maintaining a sense of trust" is the highest mean score ($M=3.56$, $SD=.878$). The two lowest mean scores are "I felt that my point of view was acknowledged by other course participants" item ($M=3.41$, $SD=.935$) and "Online discussions help me to develop a sense of collaboration" ($M=3.18$, $SD=.796$). The negative perception of the item of group cohesion subscale shows that the EFL learners or the participants in online learning do not pay attention to their opinion when they are doing a discussion. In addition, it seems that online discussion cannot build a learner's sense of collaborative learning. In another word, online learning would not form a cohesive collaboration.

As it was noted above that the two components among the three components of social presence show a negative perception from the students, Our findings demonstrated that affective expression was perceived as positive by EFL learners. This demonstrated the satisfaction of the students with the use of the technology-mediated environment for communication because one of the significant contributors to affective expression is the use of web-based communication and media. Sher (2009) argues that technology is essential for a learning experience that is comparable to one in a face-to-face session. The positive perception of the affective expression found in this study supports the previous findings (i.e. Saadatmand et al., 2017). Saadatmand et al., (2017) found that the participants reported experiencing affective expression, which includes feeling a part of the class community, being at ease speaking their minds, and participating in class discussions.

Our findings related to affective expression especially the use of web-based technology suggest that interaction between students and between instructors is substantially facilitated and improved by the usage of communication technologies integrated into an online learning environment

(Sher, 2009). Furthermore, Sher (2009) argues that the efficient and effective use of web-based communication is of critical importance to learning to enhance social presence. One of the findings related to the open communication subscale indicated that the participants perceived that it is slightly uncomfortable to speak up and make interaction with other participants in the online medium. These findings are closely related to the characteristics of most Indonesian EFL learners which are not confident and tend to be passive and committed to shyness in learning (Alfian, 2021; Rinekso et al., 2021; Sukandi, 2014). The shyness to start a conversation in English does not only occur in online classes but also in offline classes. Previous studies have shown that Indonesian EFL learners are not confident speaking up in English because they are shy to make mistakes (Rinekso et al., 2021). In addition, the feeling of being uncomfortable in making conversation and interacting with other people may also relate to passiveness (Nurchalis et al., 2022; Rinekso et al., 2021). For instance, Rinekso et al., (2021) argued that the passiveness of Indonesian EFL students is not only present in online learning but also in traditional or face-to-face classroom settings.

Another factor that makes students uncomfortable in making interactions and conversations is related to the tools and applications used in online learning. EFL learners in the current research are newly familiar with the use of technology in learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, it may make them feel worried if the application user has a problem. These findings show that it is online learning tools and students' passives and shyness that make students feel uncomfortable in conversing and interacting, as well as engaging in online learning.

Perception by gender

The independent sample t-test was used to examine how males and females perceive social presence differently. The independent sample t-test results showed that there were gender-based differences in the perceptions of social presence, which are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. The result of the Independent Sample t-test

	Gen der	N	M	SD	SE	F	Sig.	t	Sig. (2- tailed)
Social	Male	26	3,78	,62	,12	1,031	,312	2,755	,007
Presence	Fema le	105	3,36	,71	,07			2,982	,005

From the table, it is shown that the number of males who participated in this study is 25 and females is 105. Thus, males and females perceive social presence differently than one another when learning online. Given the mean score interpretation, it is stated that there are differences in the EFL learner's perception in which males have a positive perception towards social presence in online learning ($M= 3.78$, $SD= .62$). On the contrary, females perceived that there is very little social interaction in online learning ($M= 3.36$, $SD=.71$). In order to see whether both genders have significant differences in perception, an Independent sample t-test using Levene's Test is used to indicate whether both samples have equal variance or not.

As indicated above that the Sig. Levenes Test for Equality of variances is. $312 > 0.05$. Thus, the data variances between males and females are homogeneous (Sujarweni, 2014). In other words, there is no difference in variances between males and females or they are equal. The T on Equal Assumed is 2,755 with a Significance of $.007 < 0,05$ indicating that the perceptions of social presence between men and women differ significantly. The considerable perception gaps between men and women, as seen by the males' mean score of 3.78 and the females' mean score of 3.36. Thus, it can be concluded that males reported having a favorable view of social presence in online learning, while females reported having a negative perception.

The findings related to the different gender perceptions of social presence in online learning showed that men and women have quite diverse views of the medium. The findings showed that although women thought there was little social connection in online learning, men thought there was more of it. This finding is in line with the finding of Tasir & Al-Dhelea (2019) who conducted a study to

explore the student's perception of social presence when utilizing a Web 2.0 application for learning-based interaction. Their findings demonstrated that male students felt they had a stronger social presence on Web 2.0 tools. The significant differences in the perception of social presence between males and females found in this study are related to the reality that the preferences for using technology show the digital gender gap in technology Dixon et al., (2014). In fact, the likelihood of having a computer in one's own room is higher in men. and males have taken more technology-related classes (Dixon et al., 2014). Thus, it is not surprising that males who like to use technology positively perceive online learning.

Conclusion

This study has provided insight into social presence in online learning, where the results showed that EFL students felt there was little social interaction. In this study, there was a dearth of social interaction in online learning influenced by several factors, such as teachers` knowledge in facilitating and creating a meaningful online learning environment, students' passiveness and shyness in learning, and learning facilities, such as internet connection. Another finding demonstrated that males perceived a stronger social presence compared to female learners in virtual learning. Thus, the study's findings have significance for the development of online learning that maximizes social interaction and improves online learning. As there is a growing trend to offer online and blended learning models in educational institutions in higher education after the COVID-19 pandemic, designing and managing online learning environments to enhance social interaction is very significant. Furthermore, the lecturers should also facilitate the learning throughout the learning process which fosters interaction and content by

adopting and using the affordance of new technology, including Web-based communication and other social media in online learning to optimize learning.

This study was conducted in one of the universities in Indonesia, thus the sample of this study is very small. It probably cannot be generalized to other different contexts. In addition, we investigate social presence which is part of the presence in building a learning community. It is suggested that further study on learners' perception of social presence should incorporate teaching and cognitive presence components. In addition, further studies are suggested to accommodate a large number of participants across the universities involving EFL learners. In addition, mixing qualitative and quantitative techniques of data collection would enrich and provide a better insight into the study.

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