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“I took physical lessons for granted”: A case study exploring students’ interpersonal interactions in online synchronous lessons during the outbreak of COVID-19

Mari Alger *, June Eyckmans

Ghent University, Groot-Brittannelaan 45, 9000, Gent, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus pandemic presented a unique opportunity to observe how students interact and relate to each other in a new learning environment. This exploratory case study examines students’ interpersonal interactions which occurred in online synchronous lessons during the initial stages of the outbreak. The language-focused content analysis of text-based chat data and thematic analysis of reflection answers collected from 40 students enrolled on an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university course in Belgium is guided by the concept of social presence (SP) from the Community of Inquiry (CoI) theoretical framework and further complemented by a qualitative interpersonal pragmatics approach drawing on relational work. While all of the SP indicators were observed across the eight lessons, explicit acknowledgement of others in the learning environment was the most prevalent and seemed to boost affective and cohesive effects. Furthermore, the findings illustrated the importance students placed on having in-class opportunities to express their frustrations. A linguistic analysis of one such “venting” episode illuminated how a relational chain of events unfolded through students’ use of a variety of SP indicators. Despite exuding a negative quality at first glance, the indicators generated immediate, positive relational effects such as enhancing students’ feelings of belongingness.

1. Introduction

In the sudden, unprecedented, and all-encompassing shift to online education across the globe during the outbreak of COVID-19, students found themselves navigating a very different learning journey to what they had set out on: arguably, a more solitary and undefined one. During this emergency-induced transition from traditional on-campus lessons to online teaching and learning solutions, the overriding aim was to provide students with temporary access to education and support (Hodges et al., 2020). There was little time for educators to familiarise themselves with the technology and approaches needed to enable meaningful opportunities for students to learn with and from others through interpersonal interaction.

Even when online learning is a meticulously planned and anticipated part of a study programme, the move from face-to-face classrooms to computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments entails that students undergo a role adjustment (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2007; Garrison et al., 2010). Taking on a new role means engaging in “the expected and generally accepted ways of behaving, acting, and interacting” (Knuttila, 2002, as cited in Cleveland-Innes et al., 2007, p. 5) in this new environment. Interaction in...
an online learning environment is shaped by the mode (e.g. asynchronous or synchronous), the medium (e.g. communicating via the written word) (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2004, p. 64) as well as people’s use of language to initiate, maintain, and extend relations with others to support learning (Kehrwald, 2008).

Synchronous online learning is a relatively new phenomenon, and one could argue that the role adjustment it requires is not as extreme as in the case of asynchronous learning. Indeed, “the conversational characteristics of chat discourse reflect face-to-face classroom exchanges that are familiar to learners and faculty, hence facilitating the transfer of formal patterns of behaviour acquired in physical classrooms to virtual learning environments” (Crook & Light, 2002; as cited in Ling & Sudweeks, 2008, p. 172). This being said, students still need to adapt to expressing themselves via the written word, while non-verbal communication is severely reduced or even non-existent. Consequently, the social role of the online learner is somewhat undefined and ambiguous, and students may “grapple with requirements, looking to their own reasoning, other students, and the instructor for direction about the right things to do” (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2007, p. 5).

What makes the context of the present study particularly unique is that at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, neither students nor teachers had experience of or clear expectations for learning and teaching online. While students had to adjust to the new role of online learner, we, as higher education teachers, had to simultaneously adjust to the new role of online teacher.

As linguists, we set out to gain rich qualitative insights into students’ socio-emotional behaviour in a learning environment completely new to them and their teacher against the backdrop of social isolation that has characterised the coronavirus pandemic. While learning is a cognitive process, it is also “emotionally and motivationally loaded and situated within a social context” (Jarvelä, 2012: p. 3139). The COVID-19 pandemic heavily influenced the social context in this study; the social needs of many students were likely not being fully met due to the coronavirus restrictions, which in turn likely affected their motivation and emotional well-being, which potentially impacted their learning.

Moreover, we regarded the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom as a particularly interesting context for investigating interaction for three reasons. Firstly, the communication patterns found in language classrooms are different to those found in other subjects; “language is both the focus of activity, the central objective of the lesson, as well as the instrument for achieving it” (Willis, 1992; as cited in Walsh, 2006, p. 3). In other words, social interaction is fundamental to language development. Secondly, and perhaps stemming from this need to participate, language classrooms have been found to invoke intense emotions, from anxiety (Horwitz, 2017, pp. 31–47) to enjoyment (Devaele & MacIntyre, 2016). Finally, through interpersonal interactions in language classrooms, learners practise their pragmatic competence, i.e. their “ability to convey and interpret meaning appropriately in a social situation” (Taguchi, 2009, p. 2), and in so doing, develop their relationships.

The aim of the present exploratory study is thus to gain a picture of EFL students’ socio-emotional behaviour in synchronous online classes during the first weeks of COVID-19-induced emergency education. As CMC technologies were the primary means through which students could interact during this unanticipated period of spatial separation, they offer an important site to observe how students sustained and developed relationships whilst adjusting to a new learning environment and communicative norms. The concept of social presence (SP) has been widely used to uncover patterns in students’ interpersonal interactions in a range of planned online learning contexts including synchronous language learning classes (see e.g. Fayram, 2017; Tolu, 2010), but has not yet been applied to emergency education situations. Furthermore, the complex and context-dependent nature of SP continues to generate a multidisciplinary appeal, with language-focused micro-analyses of discourse bringing forward an ever more nuanced understanding of its diverse relational functions. Our research hopes to contribute to this understanding via a novel approach; by complementing an investigation of SP with a fine-grained linguistic analysis drawing on relational work.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Interaction in computer-mediated learning environments: the development of social presence

Perhaps the most widely used construct to understand the ways in which people socially interact and develop relationships in CMC environments is the theory of social presence (Lowenthal, 2009, p. 125). SP was initially viewed as a quality of communication media, which differ in their capacity to convey social information (Lowenthal, 2009). While people supplement their verbal communication with a diverse range of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and gaze in non-mediated face-to-face interactions (Short et al., 1976, p. 43), limited access to these social cues in text-based CMC led early researchers to regard it as a medium better suited to task-oriented than interpersonal-oriented communication (Walther & Parks, 2002; as cited in Lowenthal, 2009).

With the provision of distance education came the realisation that people can and do use CMC in social ways. For example, Gunawardena’s (1995) interaction analysis found that while students from different universities engaged in mostly task-oriented talk in the initial weeks of academic computer conferences, as time went on their text-based messages signaled social and relational behaviours such as humour and phatic communication. Similarly, in a mixed-methods study which sought to understand students’ perceptions of SP, Tu and McIsaac (2002) observed that the more familiar participants were with each other, the more likely they were to use informal language and disclose personal information. By initiating a conversation, participants indicated their willingness to further develop interpersonal relationships. All in all, research shifted away from SP as merely a quality of communication media towards SP as something which can be cultivated by people (Lowenthal, 2009) through meaningful interactions. Interestingly, this rejection of a priori technological determinism and the ensuing emphasis on the complex social factors influencing communication in online settings is a focus of ongoing research on language in CMC (Herring, 2004; Locher et al., 2015).

At the turn of the century, SP was operationalised alongside two other presences – teaching and cognitive – in Garrison et al.’s (2000) Community of Inquiry theoretical framework. Based on a socio-constructivist concept of learning, the CoI has framed a plethora
of research studies on online learning in the higher education context over the last two decades. Despite having its beginnings in the asynchronous online context, the framework has proved “robust enough” to be applicable to emerging technologies (Anderson, 2017) such as synchronous tools (e.g. Fayram, 2017; Tolu, 2010; Tomadaki et al., 2010). As Tolu and Evans (2013) succinctly explain, “the CoI framework combines two critical constructs for learning: community, which explicates social dynamics, social interaction and collaboration to create an environment to support the second construct, inquiry” (p. 54). Ultimately, SP has been consistently found to play an “exceedingly important” role in predicting student outcomes (Richardson et al., 2017, p. 412). While acknowledging that it is only one part of the dynamic puzzle of a student’s learning experience, we find the CoI concept of SP useful for an analysis of interpersonal interactions as it emphasises socio-emotional dimensions of learning and also offers a way to measure SP.

2.2. Measuring social presence and exploring relational behaviour

SP is defined by one of the original CoI authors as “the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities” (Garrison, 2009, p. 352). This definition focuses on students’ abilities and willingness to interpersonally interact and build meaningful relationships in CMC environments, which consequently fosters an environment conducive to learning. SP can thus be regarded as “performative”, demonstrated by “visible activity” which “indicates both students’ ongoing attendance in the environment and their availability for interactions and interpersonal relations at any given time” (Kehrwald, 2008, p. 96). Interpersonal interaction can therefore essentially be understood as a precondition for SP (Kehrwald, 2008). However, the relationship between the two is undeniably complex. For example, a student may observe and even contribute to an ongoing interaction, but this may not always result in a feeling of belongingness or identification with others (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2014).

Empirical investigations of SP often begin with Rourke et al.’s (1999) coding scheme to conduct frequency counts of three types of communicative action in online learning environments: affective, interactive, and cohesive. These are further divided into SP indicators, which include micro-linguistic features (e.g. pronouns), unconventional use of symbols and typography (e.g. exaggerated punctuation and emoticons), and discourse-pragmatic features (e.g. humour) (Luzón, 2014, p. 241), with the latter being more difficult to identify because it involves subjective interpretation (Herring, 2004; Rourke et al., 1999).

To explore the possible social effects of an individual’s message, “a careful analysis of the [SP] indicators in their context” (Luzón, 2014, p. 243) enables an enhanced understanding of what participants achieve together across stretches of discourse i.e. how one person’s behaviour potentially influences another’s. Luzón’s (2014) investigation of social and antisocial behaviour in science blog controversial exchanges combined a quantitative analysis of SP with a qualitative linguistic analysis. The findings exemplified diverse relational functions of SP indicators; for example, that paralanguage, verbal expression of emotions, and vocatives can not only be used as markers of positive social behaviour (e.g. to show solidarity) but also negative behaviour (e.g. to boost attacks). In a similar vein, when investigating the nature and role of SP in audiographic, synchronous online language learning contexts, Fayram (2017, p. 234) observed that not all aspects of SP are intrinsically positive and/or positive in their impact on others; while one may regard their own self-disclosure as a positive relational strategy, others may construe it as dominating behaviour which negatively affects group dynamics.

2.3. Interpersonal interaction in synchronous online (language) learning

As explained, the CoI concept of SP enables researchers to examine how interpersonal interaction is characterised in various online educational settings. Furthermore, studies using a myriad of other theoretical and methodological perspectives tend to reach similar conclusions regarding the nature and importance of socio-emotional interactions in CMC for academic purposes (e.g. Peeters, 2018; Peeters, 2019; Peeters et al., 2020). Here we will focus on research on synchronous online learning because the present study is situated within such a context. Real-time interactions within synchronous environments have been widely found to foster a sense of community, enhancing students’ perceptions of connectedness and feelings of belonging (e.g. Tolu, 2010; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Peterson et al., 2018). In an online language classroom, where students may feel a greater sense of exposure due to having to communicate in another language, facets of SP such as feeling comfortable help to facilitate language learning (Fayram, 2017).

Being together in the same online learning space at the same time helps to recreate a face-to-face classroom experience. Interactive SP indicators tend to be the most salient in synchronous settings; students answer questions and thus acknowledge their teacher and peers, (dis)agree with each other, ask for clarifications, and show appreciation (Tolu, 2010; Tomadaki et al., 2010). However, students who communicate through text-based chat still have to adjust to expressing their ideas and emotions and acknowledging others via the written word. For example, in a live online class in which the teacher has their webcam on but students have theirs off, when the teacher asks the class whether they can hear him/her, it is important for at least one student to explicitly type an answer because non-verbal cues such as a smile or shake of the head are not available. Furthermore, as the teacher cannot physically see the students and cannot therefore gauge their understanding by assessing facial expressions, the onus is placed on students to inform the teacher or to ask questions if they are unsure. Interacting through text-based chat thus requires conscious effort (Satar, 2011).

Synchronous learning environments also generate interesting opportunities for students to proactively offer peer support. For example, during (semi-)synchronous text-based language exchanges through WeChat, although students were explicitly asked to provide corrective feedback, many of them added emoticons and stickers, resulting in a friendly atmosphere (Wang et al., 2016). Tolu (2010) found that during online classes, students sometimes answered each other’s questions in the text-based chat before the teacher had time to verbally respond. This signals a situation in which students had grasped the affordances of the medium (i.e. the possibility to reply to questions without flouting turn-taking rules) and seemed to feel comfortable to adopt an additional role of teacher’s
assistant. In Peterson’s (2009) investigation which examined EFL learners’ text-based interaction during a collaborative task without the presence of a teacher, students provided assistance which often contained teacher-like feedback. However, Fayram (2017) observed that while most students valued three SP indicators – namely, advice, encouragement, and praise – for boosting confidence in an online language classroom context, a minority regarded these same behaviours as ‘inappropriate’ and even ‘patronising’ when enacted by peers and not the teacher (p. 136).

The same study (Fayram, 2017) also had interesting results regarding self-disclosure; a SP indicator which demonstrates openness and intimacy (Rourke et al., 1999). Although some students commented that self-disclosure by their peers led to stronger group cohesion and made online learning a “more human experience”, a greater number emphatically said that it was either not necessary or was inappropriate, especially the disclosure of feelings (Fayram, 2017, pp. 135–136). Similarly conflicting findings were shown in students’ attitudes towards teacher’s use of self-disclosure. If we view these examples through the relational work perspective, it could be argued that such negative evaluations may occur when students’ role-related expectations are not met; i.e. they perceive their teacher or peers to be breaching norms of appropriateness for an academic context. Indeed, some of the original authors of the CoI contend that there may be such a thing as too much SP if social and polite behaviours prevent the development of critical discourse (Garrison, 2017, p. 47).

Conversely, if students perceive too little SP, they may not reach the required level of comfort to (continue to) engage in interaction. SP thus appears to have a “self-perpetuating quality” (Fayram, 2017, p. 179). In Nippard’s (2005) study of secondary school students, much of their peer- and teacher-interactions occurred in virtue of spontaneous digressions from the curriculum. Peterson (2009) observed that off-task talk “contributed to the creation of a low-stress atmosphere that enabled the subjects to establish and maintain collaborative interpersonal relationships that supported the production of coherent TL discourse” (p. 314). While Darhower (2013) found that off-task talk only occurred in the absence of a teacher, Satar (2011) highlighted the pivotal role of teachers in enabling it. Teachers indeed have a “unique responsibility” for facilitating not only cognitive processes but also social processes, which includes projecting their own SP (Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017, p. 88) because teacher SP has been shown to positively impact students’ perceptions of SP and student satisfaction (Song et al., 2019; Swan & Shih, 2005).

Finally, when reflecting on his experience of facilitating online chat activities, Ng (2004, as cited in Ng, 2007, p. 3) found participants’ communication anxiety to be a weighty issue. Indeed, real-time text-based interaction requires immediate responses, and this, as well as delays in replying to messages may make some students feel anxious (Ng, 2007). Though humour, an affective SP indicator, is widely lauded for cultivating a relaxed atmosphere, language learners may not always recognise attempts at humour or how to appropriately react to it. Except for the acronym “lol” and interjection “haha” (Tol, 2010), it is infrequent in chats because of the potential for misinterpretation in the absence of non-verbal cues (Fayram, 2017). Furthermore, in an online language class, the pressure to quickly respond can result in students making language errors (Yamada, 2009) which could further trigger anxiety, although proactively self-reflecting on errors can positively cultivate SP (Vandergriff, 2013). However, when students lack confidence in producing language they may “go quiet”, and this reduced interaction can negatively impact SP (Fayram, 2017, p. 139).

2.4. Relational work in interpersonal interaction

Here we draw a parallel between SP and the second perspective which drives this study. Interpersonal pragmatics focuses on the relational side of language in use (Locher & Graham, 2010), with “relational work” (RW) covering “all aspects of the work invested by individuals in the construction, maintenance, reproduction and transformation of interpersonal relationships among those engaged in social practice” (Locher & Watts, 2008, p. 96). Relationship development, the projection of identity, and identification with the community are crucially important in online learning environments, and this is reflected in the CoI definition of SP (presented above). Humour, self-disclosure, small talk, expression of emotions (through words or CMC cues such as emoticons), and expressing agreement – all of which happen to be indicators of SP (Rourke et al., 1999) – have been found to be among the RW strategies people use to strengthen social bonds in educational and work contexts online (Darics, 2010; Arendholz, 2013; Vandergriff, 2016) and offline (Çiftçi, 2015).

RW underlines the discursive nature of developing meaningful relationships through interpersonal interaction; an individual sends a message, and their message is interpreted (and potentially acted on) by others. How a message is written, interpreted, and responded to is shaped by norms, i.e. what is considered as appropriate within a specific community and context, and these norms are negotiated and renegotiated and thus change over time (Locher, 2006, p. 264). By adding a RW lens to an analysis of SP, it may be possible to deepen our understanding of interpersonal interaction online by exploring how students use SP indicators to create, sustain, and transform relationships. For example, using SP indicators in an unexpected way (i.e. going against the norms for that community and context) may result in negative relational effects.

2.5. Research questions

At the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, students and teachers had no choice but to continue education in a completely online setting, and this transition happened rapidly. While this was indeed a novel learning environment in which students largely interacted through the written word, students were not strangers to each other nor their teacher as they had started the semester in face-to-face conditions; something which can have an “accelerating effect on establishing social presence” (Garrison, 2017, p. 48). They had thus acquired norm expectations for the specific course in question (albeit, within a face-to-face medium). Even though synchronous online learning environments share similarities with face-to-face classroom conditions such as enabling real-time interaction, we are interested in whether students seized these opportunities to interpersonally interact with each other and their teacher during this
challenging time and exploring what happened when they did. Emerging research undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that interaction in synchronous online classes is not a given. For example, Resnik and Dewaele’s (2021) study compared language students’ perceptions of online and face-to-face classes and found that students experienced less interaction and did not get to know their peers and teachers well in the former setting. The lack of interaction was a common antecedent of boredom in Derakhshan et al.’s (2021) study of EFL learners, and frequently mentioned solutions to boredom were “creating a more energetic class atmosphere, encouraging student participation, and improving interpersonal relationships” (p. 11).

To summarise, this study explores students’ interpersonal interactions through the complementary concepts of SP and RW, and seeks to answer the following research questions:

- Which social presence indicators can be found in students’ interpersonal interactions during emergency online synchronous classes?
- How are these indicators used by students to build, maintain, and/or transform relationships?

3. Methodology

3.1. Context, participants, and data collection

In February 2020, a total of 75 students (14 of whom were exchange students) were enrolled on an English vocabulary course at a university in Belgium. Students were on average aged 18 with a B2 proficiency level. The mandatory course, which is part of an Applied Languages Bachelor programme, has a duration of 12 weeks (with one 1-h lesson scheduled per group per week). The aim of the course is to systematically expand students’ vocabulary through a combination of collaborative and individual tasks. The first five weeks of the course took place as planned on campus in face-to-face lessons, with the cohort divided into 4 smaller groups. On 13th March, all teaching activities with physical attendance of students were suspended due to the outbreak of the coronavirus. In place of the scheduled lessons, materials and independent-study tasks were uploaded to the university’s online learning platform in weeks 6–9. Online synchronous lessons (the focus of this study) were offered in the final three weeks of the course via the web-conferencing tool Bongo Virtual Classrooms. While the teacher used a webcam and audio throughout the lessons, students were asked to use the text-based chat tool as the primary means to communicate with the teacher and with each other to avoid the potential chaos of overlapping audio. Furthermore, as only a limited number of student cameras could be simultaneously shared, the teacher felt it more fair for all students to be in the same condition (i.e. cameras turned off). Being able to see the interlocutor’s image can promote consciousness of presence and raise communication comfort levels (Yamada & Akahori, 2007). However, this may have also possibly created an imbalance whereby students more easily perceived the teacher’s SP and thus demonstrated more social behaviour towards the teacher than their peers.

In the first week of online synchronous lessons, all four groups were asked to join simultaneously to discuss possible solutions to the asynchronous learning tasks and logistics for the exam. Unfortunately, the first few minutes of this lesson were not recorded. In the second week, the lesson consisted of a vocabulary revision game based on the British TV show ‘Pointless’. After hearing each quiz question, students were put into breakout rooms in small groups to recall target words. In the breakout rooms, students tended to use camera and audio which likely helped to increase their perception and demonstration of SP, but these moments were not recorded. They were then asked to present their answers in the main room. In the third and final week, students took a mock exam. The lesson was a test-run not only for students but also for the teacher to resolve any technical difficulties. Due to timetable clashes and reduced teaching moments (resulting in three instead of four groups), some students were not in their usual groups in the second and third week.

All in all, the transcript dataset consists of transcripts from the eight online synchronous lessons mentioned above, which were downloaded and transferred to Microsoft Excel. As the transcripts only contained students’ text-based chat messages, the first author watched the video of each lesson and added transcriptions of students’ audio communications to the Excel file (of which there were very few). All text-based messages that were sent during the lessons were kept as a reference to provide necessary context, but only messages with ethical consent were analysed and presented. Due to the “intersubjective” nature of both SP (Öztok & Kehrwald, 2017) and RW (Locher & Watts, 2008), succinct summaries of the teacher’s verbal utterances (including some verbatim quotations) were also added to the file for the coding of the SP indicator “acknowledgement” (see 3.2.1) and to offer deeper context for the RW analysis.

The second source of data was derived from answers to reflection questions (Appendix A) which sought to gather students’ experiences of the transition to online learning. These questions were shared with the students who had attended at least one of the three online synchronous lessons (59 out of 75 students) and were sent after the course and end-of-term exam had been completed to reduce social desirability bias and so as not to add to students’ stress during this difficult time. As the transition to online learning happened under extraordinary circumstances, an exploratory, qualitative approach with “broad open questions” (Brown, 2009) was deemed most appropriate to solicit a wide range of potential responses and to capture unexpected phenomena (Meulenbroeks, 2020). Such an approach “leaves all the thinking to the respondents” (Brown, 2009, p. 204). The response rate was 67%. The 40 students who voluntarily answered the questions comprised the final participants for the study. These students gave informed consent for their data to be analysed and reported for academic research purposes in anonymised form.

At this point, it is important to mention that the first author was the teacher of the course. Having a dual role of teacher and researcher poses challenges and opportunities. One of the challenges is that personal involvement may cloud judgements and lead to biased assumptions. To help counter this negative effect, we used triangulation to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1999). Information from two data sources (lesson transcripts and answers to reflection questions) were converged, a dual analysis (language-focused content analysis and qualitative linguistic analysis, explained below) was conducted from the
| Paralanguage | Emotion | Humour | Self-disclosure | Acknowledgement (students) | Acknowledgement (teacher) | Agreement / disagreement | Approval | Invitation | Personal advice | Greetings, salutations, phatics | Vocatives | Group reference |
|--------------|---------|--------|-----------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------|-------------|----------------|-----------------------------|-----------|------------------|
| 96.1         | 98.7    | 96.1   | 92.2            | 81.8                      | 68.8                     | 89.6                     | 83.1     | 92.2        | 100            | 88.3                        | 100       | 100              |
perspectives of two distinct yet complementary fields (online learning and interpersonal pragmatics), and two researchers were involved in the analysis. Furthermore, we saw it as beneficial that the first author was part of the context as this offered an insider’s perspective, especially with regard to judgements on appropriate behaviour.

3.2. Data analysis

3.2.1. Coding of interaction types

In the first analysis, the concept of SP offered the means to quantify our observations and thus get a bigger picture of students’ interpersonal interactions in online synchronous lessons. As Garrison et al. (2006) state, the transcript coding method is “an invaluable technique to understand interaction patterns and the quality of the discourse in online communities of inquiry… It is through the use of transcript analysis that educators can investigate beyond what students say they do to reviewing what they actually do” (p. 8).

Regarding the first analysis, the first author took the time to closely familiarise herself with the data and the literature, then used a blend of Rourke et al.’s (1999) and Swan and Shih’s (2005) SP indicators to code each student message (see Appendix B). Messages ranged in size from one word (e.g. “yes”) to multiple sentences. Most messages contained more than one indicator (e.g. “And we’re all trustworthy students, I think” was coded for self-disclosure, teacher acknowledgement, group reference, and paralanguage). The “acknowledgement” indicator was expanded to reflect salient aspects of synchronous communication (e.g. answering or reacting to another’s message), and was divided into “teacher acknowledgement” and “student acknowledgement” in an attempt to identify who students directed their messages to. Interjections were added to the “paralanguage” indicator because they, too, can indicate emotion, as can single exclamation marks in instant text-based chat situations (Hancock et al., 2007, p. 931).

The second author independently coded the first transcript, and based on the high coder agreement for this transcript (Table 1), the remaining transcripts were subject to a negotiated agreement process (Garrison et al., 2006).

3.2.2. Analysis of relational work

While transcript analysis offers a systematic way to uncover patterns of the types of interpersonal interactions in online lessons, counting students’ individual actions in this manner does not account for the complexity of class dynamics. Exploring the social functions of students’ interpersonal interactions thus entails a qualitative analysis in which relational strategies are identified and discussed within their context (Luzón, 2014). As part of the analysis, we drew on common themes from students’ reflection answers to calibrate our understanding of socio-emotional behaviour and to guide our attention to salient examples of RW within the transcripts. We focused on questions 6 to 11 (Appendix A) which addressed the role of social interaction, the provision of peer and teacher support, and how community was perceived and achieved, as these closely relate to social and relational aspects of online learning. Finally, we triangulated students’ experiences with the teacher’s experience. The teacher was an important part of the context not only because several messages were directed towards her, but also in virtue of her status as teacher she was able to reflect on what could be considered (in)appropriate behaviour.

4. Results

Before presenting an analysis of the interpersonal interactions observed in emergency online synchronous lessons, we will provide a quantitative assessment of student attendance and participation as a means to interpret engagement (Herring, 2004). In terms of attendance, the majority (70%) of the total number of 40 student participants attended all three sessions (the introductory session, revision game, and mock exam), 15% attended two out of the three sessions, and 15% attended one of the three sessions. 92% of the messages sent across all eight transcripts could be analysed (a total of 671 messages; 658 text-based chat, 13 audio). As shown in the histogram below (Fig. 1), the majority of students sent between 1 and 27 messages, with the average number of messages per student being 16 (6 per lesson). However, three students did not send any messages (one of these students only attended one lesson, whereas
two students attended two lessons). The two students with the highest participation sent 50 and 63 messages over the course of three lessons. Group sizes ranged from 7 to 44.

4.1. **Social presence indicators**

The first step was to gain a bigger picture of the interpersonal interactions observed in emergency online synchronous lessons. Fig. 2 below presents the total number of SP indicators found in each transcript as well as the average.

Similar patterns were revealed across the eight transcripts. The most frequently observed SP indicator in all of the transcripts was teacher acknowledgement. Paralanguage, student acknowledgement, and self-disclosure were among the most common in the majority of transcripts, whereas emotion, personal advice, and vocatives were consistently infrequent, with some transcripts having zero instances.

When considering differences between the transcripts, what is immediately clear is that transcript 4 contains a significantly higher raw number of SP instances; 569 compared to 52 in transcript 8, and scores highest on 11 of the 13 indicators. Students also expressed their willingness and availability to stay for an extra 13 min, thus indicating that they were eager to prolong social contact.

As there was some variance in lesson duration, and much variance in the number of messages within each transcript, we followed Rourke et al. (1999) in calculating the SP density for each indicator in each lesson transcript. Because the unit of analysis in this study was the text-based (or audio) message (as opposed to a longer asynchronous forum post), this involved dividing the total number of an indicator’s instances by the total number of messages (instead of the total number of words), then multiplying by 100 to get a percentage indicating proportions (rather than multiplying by 1000 to represent a unit of incidents per 1000 words). These choices were made to aid comparison in terms of each indicator’s prevalence, and to get an idea of the overall tone of each transcript. The results of this analysis are shown in Fig. 3 below.

Overall, Fig. 3 once again indicates similar patterns across the eight transcripts. However, it also brings to light some subtle differences between the types of interactions observed and the primary purpose of each lesson. For example, in the introductory session and mock exam session, under five per cent of the interactions had a humorous element, whereas the revision game seemed to offer more space for humour with 14–17 per cent of interactions coded as such. In the introductory session and mock exam sessions, students were more focused on asking questions (invitation) than in the revision game. There were fewer instances of self-disclosure and advice giving in the revision game as well as the final two mock exam sessions. This was probably because initial questions regarding the exam had been dealt with in the introductory session, and because the technical feedback explicitly asked for by the teacher and consequently given by students in the first two mock exam sessions had been implemented in time for the final two mock exam sessions, thus providing these students with a smoother experience. An exception was, once again, transcript 4, which contained over three times as many instances of self-disclosure compared to the other two revision game sessions.

4.1.1. **Interactive indicators**

As synchronous online lessons enable real-time interpersonal interaction, and as this was a practical language course in which students were encouraged to participate, it was not surprising that most of students’ messages were acknowledgements; they reacted to what was said or asked by the teacher or continued the ideas of their peers. Between 57 and 90 per cent of student responses were coded as teacher acknowledgement. The majority of these responses were what Nippard (2005) classed as “mechanical interactivity”; simple responses to the teacher’s content-related questions. For example, in the mock exam sessions, the teacher went through the exam questions one-by-one and asked students for the answers. As the focus was on vocabulary items, answers tended to be short. While Nippard (2005) argued that these types of interactions did not add to students’ perceptions of SP, Fayram (2017, p. 161) commented that “it was unclear whether or not respondents equated any form of interaction (i.e. even mechanic language practice)
with the projection of SP’.

In online language classes, a lack of teacher acknowledgement can have various reasons “from technical problems to a lack of L2 skills on the part of the learners, and a general reticence or shyness” (Stickler, 2019, p. 125). Additionally, in this emergency online learning context, we cannot assume that students were immediately able or willing to type a message in response to the teacher’s questions. Those who did, though, provided “evidence that others are attending” (Swan & Shih, 2005, p. 117); a criterion of interactive SP. One student commented “knowing that other people are present and active too maintained the group feeling”, while another stated that this participatory presence was “reassuring and motivating”. Explicit signals of ongoing attendance (Kehrwald, 2008) may have served as encouragement that others were still working towards the same ultimate goal of persisting with their studies, and thus potentially had a cohesive function in addition to an interactive one. Simple acknowledgements as well as more affective responses (discussed in 4.1.2) in synchronous online lessons seemed to help students sense that their peers and teacher were near thereby reducing feelings of isolation, as exemplified in one student’s words:

Only when there were live lessons, I felt part of a community of students, because only then I really saw people interact, and the teacher who was talking to us. It was a moment during which I knew all my friends were doing the same thing I was and that was really nice. I don’t remember a specific moment, but in general, during all online ‘live’ courses there was some kind of interaction, and people sharing their opinions and even their emotions. That made me feel less alone, and it gave me some hope that I was not the only one struggling with the situation.

However, communicating in this new learning environment could also be perceived as intimidating or strange. As one student commented, “in order to reach your classmates or teacher, you either had to type a message or switch on a microphone. That felt like a barrier”. A possible consequence of this barrier is silence, which Fayram (2017) found can negatively impact cohesion: “the absence of visual cues problematizes the experience of silence for both learners and tutor as the nature and function of silence can be less easily ascertained than in a face to face environment” (p. 208). Indeed, silence seemed to be viewed by some students as awkward: “Sometimes when an instructor asks a question and nobody answers, I feel a kind of obligation to answer the question in an attempt to make the situation less uncomfortable”; “Giving an answer when noone else feels like it … was easier in real life, because you could actually see others’ body language”. This further supports the idea that even “mechanical” interactivity may have helped to maintain cordial student-student and student-teacher relations as it left less room for silence and its negative consequences on group dynamics, especially when communicating in a synchronous text-based CMC environment where non-verbal cues were unavailable.

Teacher acknowledgement not only consisted of mechanical interactivity. The teacher’s informal, off-task related topics generated further interactivity, as found in Nippard’s (2005) and Tolu’s (2010) research. For example, when the teacher recommended a particular yoga channel on YouTube (Yoga with Adriene), students aligned with her by showing their agreement “I really like that youtubechannel too!” and emotion “I love Adriene!”.

4.1.2. Affective indicators

As discussed above, although students seemed to value instances of people sharing their “feelings and even their emotions”, they rarely expressed emotion explicitly through words. However, they appeared to be comfortable with using paralanguage (e.g.
emoticons and exaggerated punctuation) and interjections such as “hooray” which shed some light on their emotions. Reflecting previous research, the smiley face emoticon’s meaning was highly context-dependent, consequently having a diverse function (Vandergriff, 2013), from boosting compliments (“Thank you for the list, it is very useful”), to indicating positive interest (“how many do you have?”) to softening potentially face threatening acts (Beijwenger & Pappert, 2019), for example, pointing out corrections to the teacher (“It’s already on [name of learning platform]”). These contributed to the creation of a friendly atmosphere as in Wang et al.’s study (2016). Although expressions of humour were infrequent, perhaps because of the potential for misinterpretation in the absence of non-verbal cues (Fayram, 2017), humorous interjections such as “haha” which implied laughter and enjoyment were much more numerous, mirroring the findings of previous studies (e.g. Tolu, 2010; Fayram, 2017). During the revision game session, students were asked to come up with a team name, and several groups took this opportunity to engage in language play. For example, one group named themselves the “Academic Word Ladies” (instead of the Academic Word List they were studying as part of the vocabulary course), while another group innovated a covid-related term “quaranteam”. Finally, self-disclosure mainly took the form of sharing study-related problems and expressing confusion (Nippard, 2005; Tolu, 2010), or expressing personal opinions.

4.1.3. Cohesive indicators

As mentioned above, and as documented within other studies (e.g. Nippard, 2005; Tolu, 2010), students seemed to appreciate teacher-initiated informal chats and reciprocated with small talk and phatic communication: “The small chatty session before our vocabulary class really made me smile. When you’re studying at home all the time, you sometimes get the feeling you’re just a machine that’s studying at home. Talking about our new hobbies and things like that really took my mind off things and I appreciated that.” Interestingly, this comment refers to “our vocabulary class”, with the personal pronoun suggesting the sense of group commitment students experienced during the online classes. As also found by Tolu (2010), students tended to almost always use inclusive pronouns in their questions: “Do we also need to know definitions of words?”. The revision game likely facilitated students’ heavy use of the personal pronoun “we” because the task required them to state whether their group had the particular vocabulary item on their list. Therefore, students often answered on behalf of their group (e.g. “we had that”). Personal pronouns were indeed most numerous in the revision games.

4.2. Relational work

The second step was to further explore students’ interpersonal interactions by conducting a qualitative linguistic analysis of localised snapshots through a RW lens. The aim was to gain a glimpse of how students used SP indicators to discursively manage relationships. In the thematic analysis of students’ reflection answers, almost half of the students (17/40) commented that the times when they most felt part of a community during the online learning sessions was when they were given the opportunity to “complain” (four students used this verb), “blow off steam”, share their “struggles”, or explain how they felt. One student observed how social interaction “was certainly important for some students so they could vent some emotions and feel understood and supported by the teacher”. Due to the prevalence of this answer, we searched through the transcripts for evidence of it occurring in situ.

The verbatim messages below (see Appendix C for full extract) are from the last 8 min of transcript 4 (‘Pointless’ game lesson) and illustrate the longest stretch of “venting”. As explained above, transcript 4 contained the highest raw numbers of SP indicators by far. It also provides the clearest representation of interactional behaviour, because 100% of the messages could be analysed. However, only 11 out of the 40 participants attended this lesson.

To briefly set the scene for Excerpt 1, the revision game had gone over the expected time because students had expressed their willingness to stay for another two questions. Around the time that the teacher was playfully communicating the final scores, students were mirroring this playfulness with affective and interactive SP indicators (e.g. Pappert, 2019), for example, pointing out corrections to the teacher. The small chatty session before our revision game lesson) and participation in the discussion, using the pronoun “we” to speak on behalf of the group. Once again, student 2 speedily agrees with the teacher. To briefly set the scene for Excerpt 1, the revision game had gone over the expected time because students had expressed their willingness to stay for another two questions. Around the time that the teacher was playfully communicating the final scores, students were mirroring this playfulness with affective and interactive SP indicators (e.g. Pappert, 2019), for example, pointing out corrections to the teacher. The small chatty session before our revision game lesson) and participating in the discussion, using the pronoun “we” to speak on behalf of the group. Once again, student 2 speedily agrees with the teacher. To briefly set the scene for Excerpt 1, the revision game had gone over the expected time because students had expressed their willingness to stay for another two questions. Around the time that the teacher was playfully communicating the final scores, students were mirroring this playfulness with affective and interactive SP indicators (e.g. Pappert, 2019), for example, pointing out corrections to the teacher. The small chatty session before our revision game lesson) and participating in the discussion, using the pronoun “we” to speak on behalf of the group. Once again, student 2 speedily agrees with the teacher.

Excerpt 1

Transforming student-teacher relationships, and building/maintaining student-student relationships.

| Time  | Message                                                                 |
|-------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 10    | 01:06:10 Student 3: to be honest, i think it’s outrageous that we don’t know yet |
| 11    | 01:06:13 Student 2: yes                                                |
| 12    | 01:06:24 Student 2: especially because it will take place so soon       |
| 13    | 01:06:40 Student 3: we have like 4-5 exams in that two-week period       |
| 14    | 01:06:45 Student 5: we have so many exams in week 13, but we don’t know anything |
| 15    | 01:06:48 Student 2: exactly                                            |
was at odds with the norms she had for a classroom context. The CMC environment also provided an opportunity for new communicative behaviours in that students were able to type messages to each other while the teacher was speaking about something else, yet these messages would eventually be seen by the teacher and thus necessitated a response from her. From a power perspective, she was in an exposed position; students could view her facial expressions via the camera, while they remained faceless to her. She felt conflicted because while she could empathise with the students, she also empathised with her colleagues who had the complex task of scheduling the exams. As Hyland and Hyland (2001) explain, “teachers often have to weigh their choice of comment to accomplish a range of informational, pedagogic and interpersonal goals simultaneously” (p. 187).

We regard this example as evidence of relationship negotiation in interaction because it shows how the participants navigate a (potential) breach of norms. Although it is not possible to ascertain student 3’s precise motivations or intentions for this specific comment, we can “base our judgments on parameters which are comparatively easy to access: hearer’s reactions, which mirror their evaluations of the appropriateness of utterances at least to some degree” (Arendholz, 2013, p. 96). In this sequence, the high emotional involvement signaled by quick responses from two other students suggests that they either found the comment appropriate in this emergency context, or despite potentially finding it inappropriate, they nevertheless took the risk to align themselves with their peer and publicly show their solidarity. Additionally, the reflection answers revealed that several students used private chat to interact with their friends during lessons, so the fact that they decided to use the public chat in this specific instance carries some weight. It seems that they wished to share their emotions with a wider circle of peers, and strongly suggests that they wanted to be heard and supported by the teacher.

Triangulating this with student 3’s reflection answers, social interaction was perceived as more important during online learning because “it felt like the only opportunity to have some contact” with peers, and a sense of community was achieved when “everybody participated” and “when we got the opportunity to explain how we felt”. It appears that they considered their peer’s (student 2’s) question about the exam and/or the teacher’s response as one such opportunity to express their frustration. Similarly, student 2 felt part of a community when “everyone was honest about their feelings and struggles”. Regarding social interaction, “everyone struggled but being alone all the time and not knowing the local students I often felt like I am the only one struggling. The social interactions helped me to put things into perspective. Afterwards, I felt a little bit less like a failure”. These answers thus support what is observed in this excerpt, hinting at how a mix of SP indicators such as “negative” self-disclosure, expression of strong emotions, and explicit and immediate agreement with peers were instant antidotes to isolation, helping students to maintain relationships and also potentially opening doors to new emotionally satisfying relationships for student 2.

More evidence for relationship building can be observed in Excerpt 2. While student 5 makes their stress known, student 4’s question “wow 5 exams??” in reaction to their peers’ previous messages could be seen as a conscious effort to create positive relationships with the other students, because this student was usually in another language group and hence had a different exam timetable. The exaggerated punctuation and interjection indicates an incredulous reaction to their peers’ busy exam schedule, thus showing empathy.

The unanswered question regarding the two excerpts is how does the teacher respond to the students? She begins to express concern (e.g. “oh gosh!”) just before Excerpt 2, but becomes more engaged as the discussion goes on by demonstrating interest to sustain contact (e.g. asking questions “so it’ll be crammed into three days?”) and continuing to sympathise with students (e.g. “hang in there is all I can say”). Before the start of Excerpt 3 (below), through asking yet another question (“all in week 13?”; message 26, Appendix C), the teacher further reinforces her involvement and thus signals the appropriateness of this discussion, perhaps prompting two new students – 1 and 6 – to join in by answering her question. As a new participant to the discussion, student 1 seems to be directing the comment containing several affective SP indicators (“But yeah, it’s very frustrating;”) to the teacher. Through the students’ continued disclosures of negative experiences and emotions and through the teacher’s live involvement and empathy, it could be argued that these interactions transformed student-teacher relationships in a positive way to be more open, informal, and trusting.

Message 46 (Appendix C) sent by student 1 about a minute later could be considered as the closing remark to this “venting” episode (“Yeah, we know you can’t help it of course, but it’s very stressful;”). We regard it as positively marked and evidence of relationship transformation because the student seems to recognise the teacher’s feelings of helplessness (“there’s nothing I can really do”) and takes the conscious step to speak on behalf of the other students (“we”) to validate the teacher’s feelings of discomfort and to implicitly indicate that they did not blame her for the stress they were experiencing.

In the remaining minutes, the teacher’s efforts to lighten the atmosphere by using humour (e.g. surprising students with her knowledge of the foreign language they briefly code-switched to and thus showing sameness with students) is likewise responded to with humour (e.g. “hahaha”) and approval (e.g. “ooh!”), demonstrating the “self-perpetuating” nature of SP (Fayram, 2017, p. 179) and indicating a mutual desire to maintain cordial relations. At the very end of the lesson, four students who did not participate in the “venting” still took the time to say “bye” (cohesive SP indicator) and thus signal their continued commitment to the group.

5. Discussion, pedagogical implications, and concluding remarks

This exploratory study set out to document how EFL students interpersonally interacted in a learning environment completely new

Excerpt 2

Building relationships.

| Time | Message |
|------|---------|
| 17   | 01:06:58 Student 5: It is really stressful |
| 18   | 01:06:58 Student 4: Wow 5 exams?? |
to them and their teacher amidst the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. We not only wanted to explore patterns within the content of students’ text-based chat messages during synchronous online lessons, but we also wished to deepen our understanding of what they achieved socially and emotionally through interaction. To examine the former, we coded students’ messages following the CoI concept of SP, and supplemented these findings with students’ perceptions and experiences of social and relational aspects of online learning. These invaluable insights also provided the foundation on which to begin the latter: a qualitative linguistic analysis, where we used an interpersonal pragmatics RW approach to gain insights into how students used SP indicators to build, maintain, and transform relationships with each other and their teacher.

Regarding the first research question, and when considering the full dataset (transcripts from 8 synchronous online lessons), all of the SP indicators could be observed. This is consistent with past research undertaken in non-emergency synchronous online language learning environments (e.g. Fayram, 2017; Tolu, 2010). While there were similar patterns across the eight transcripts, some subtle differences between them could be partly explained by task type, as also found by Fayram (2017) and Satar (2011), thus hinting at the importance of task design in activating and sustaining SP. While we acknowledge the complexity of SP, and that interpersonal interaction does not necessarily guarantee all aspects of SP (e.g. identification with the community), we agree with Kehrwald (2008) in that SP “cannot be established, indeed cannot exist” without it (p. 97). Students most likely require a “motive” to interact, and this is “provided by either need, as in the case of learning tasks that require interaction, or interest, as in the case of relations that motivate ongoing interaction” (p. 97). Indeed, in this study, all three sessions – but especially the revision game – could not have been properly actualised had it not been for the students’ participation signaled (primarily) by text-based messages.

Our results also point towards the crucial role of acknowledgement, that is, reacting to or building on what the teacher or peers had said or answering their questions. While this, too, is in line with previous research (Tolu, 2010; Tomadaki et al., 2010), and is hoped for, if not expected, in synchronous online learning environments, “even” mechanical interactivity (or witnessing “some kind of interaction” between teachers and students) was regarded as reassuring by some students in this study and apparently made the classes feel more “normal”. While the teacher in this study generally tries to implement a learner-centred approach, she admits that the “initiation-response-feedback” (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) interaction pattern commonly found in classrooms is also prevalent in hers. Therefore, norm expectations were fulfilled through such instances of mechanical interactivity, with students’ explicit participation during online lessons providing “evidence” that other students were attending (Swan & Shih, 2005, p. 117). This being said, although one student commented that “seeing other students answer as well” made them feel part of a community, they also added “or just seeing that they’re online and present”. While we maintain that SP is generally “performative”, simply knowing that their peers were in the same place at the same time by seeing their names on the list of online participants may have been a sufficient indication of their “availability for interactions and interpersonal relations at any given time” (Kehrwald, 2008, p. 96).

As in other studies (e.g. Nippard, 2005; Satar, 2011; Tolu, 2010), students also seemed to appreciate and respond to off-task talk usually initiated by the teacher. As eloquently articulated by one student in our study, “In a normal school year we talk before and after class, during the break, we get a ‘good-morning’ from the school’s cleaning staff and from passing teachers and students. But in the online classes we only had the online classes.” Therefore, due to the social isolation experienced in the coronavirus lockdown, students generally longed for an avenue in which they could maintain or further develop the relationships they had built on campus, and the synchronous online lessons were “basically the only chance” they had to interact with their peers. This greater need for warm and enjoyable interpersonal interactions which promote feelings of belongingness and mattering has also been reported by research undertaken during the pandemic (e.g. Besser et al., 2020; Resnik & Dewaele, 2021).

In extension, unlike in Fayram’s (2017) study where some students viewed self-disclosure as unnecessary or even inappropriate, self-disclosure as well as other affective indicators of SP such as expression of emotions (mostly through CMC cues such as emoticons, but also with explicit emotion words) was considered a bonus by many students in this study. Previous research has likewise shown the positive relational effects of self-disclosure as well as demonstrated students’ use of “negative” self-disclosure to express confusion and stress (Nippard, 2005; Tolu, 2010; Satar, 2011). Our RW analysis of a rather lengthy stretch of “venting” shows how just one instance of a student’s self-disclosure with strong emotion can provide a crucial springboard for others to express their harbored frustrations, thus elucidating how affective SP indicators not only generate further affective SP, but can additionally impact interactive and cohesive SP (Fayram, 2017, p. 220). Despite such behaviour conceivably exposing students to social risk (Kehrwald, 2008, p. 98) due to a possible breach of classroom norms (and thus having the potential to transform student-teacher and/or student-student relationships), it is unlikely that students would take such a risk unless a safe online environment had been established (Kehrwald, 2008, p. 98) through interactive and cohesive responses (Tolu, 2010, p. 335). Furthermore, as explained above, synchronous online classes may have been the only chance some students had to interact with others, so this also may explain why they may have taken the “risk” to speak so openly.

Nevertheless, the RW analysis demonstrated that for the “venting” to continue, certain conditions had to be met. Firstly, other students were very quick to respond. One student immediately expressed their agreement, and in this sense, we agree with Satar (2011, p. 251) that agreement also has a cohesive function. Others reciprocated with self-disclosure of their experiences and opinions, in

| Excerpt 3 | Transforming student-teacher relationships. |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------|
| 27        | 01:07:41 Student 1: Week 13 and 14         |
| 28        | 01:07:44 Student 6: I have the 2ne and 3rd week of the exam period free |
| 29        | 01:07:45 Student 3: 13 and 14 and in week 15 we have 2 examinations too |
| 30        | 01:07:48 Student 1: But yeah, it’s very frustrating;(
addition to using the personal pronoun “we” to signal group identification. A student who was usually in another group engaged in behaviour which could be argued to show (attempts at) relationship building by asking a question. The gradual involvement of the teacher, who asked questions to students and offered sympathy, may have helped the discussion to reach a natural and satisfactory end. Furthermore, while almost half of the students commented that they felt most part of a community when they could “complain”, many of these comments hinted that it was within the teacher’s power to “allow” this type of interaction to occur: “when our teachers let us blow off some steam during the online classes” [italics added]. Finally, one specific comment by a student boldly acknowledged the teacher’s feelings of helplessness, which we regarded as evidence of positively transforming student-teacher relationships in interaction. Through such episodes of venting, these EFL learners were not only able to discursively manage their relationships by contributing to lively, personally relevant discussions, they also found themselves in a genuine situation in which to practise their pragmatic competence. Ultimately, our RW analysis illuminated how a relational chain of events unfolded through students’ use of SP indicators, and despite these SP indicators perhaps exuding a negative quality at first glance, by participating in or witnessing such interpersonal interactions, students tended to feel less alone and likely became a stronger cohesive unit.

We realise that literature tends to class “venting” as a negative coping strategy. While this is also the case in MacIntyre et al.’s (2020) examination of teachers’ coping strategies during the COVID-19-induced transition to online learning, they also noted that it unexpectedly contributed positively to growth. A proposed explanation was a possible link between the expression of negative emotions and a “hope for a better future” (p. 11). In our study, because students themselves stressed the importance of having opportunities to “complain” and because we observed evidence of the creation, maintenance, and transformation of relationships in such “venting” episodes, and most importantly, because venting was connected to a sense of community and a reduction in feelings of loneliness, we regard it as a vital short-term strategy to boost affective and cohesive effects. Furthermore, with regard to pedagogical implications, it seems that students simply wanted to be heard by their teachers. If this venting had only happened in students’ private interactions, we as teachers would not have been given the opportunity to offer our empathy or possible solutions (and thus take part in RW ourselves).

While we agree with the original CoI authors in that social interaction should generally be directed towards achieving specific learning outcomes (Garrison, 2007), when external factors such as the stress, uncertainty, and isolation being faced by students in this specific coronavirus context make the (language) learning process more difficult than usual, there appears to be an increased need for the provision of emotional support and moments for informal small-talk to compensate for the lost on-campus experience; a need that learning outcomes (Garrison, 2007), when external factors such as the stress, uncertainty, and isolation being faced by students in this RW ourselves).

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While we agree with the original CoI authors in that social interaction should generally be directed towards achieving specific learning outcomes (Garrison, 2007), when external factors such as the stress, uncertainty, and isolation being faced by students in this specific coronavirus context make the (language) learning process more difficult than usual, there appears to be an increased need for the provision of emotional support and moments for informal small-talk to compensate for the lost on-campus experience; a need that is indeed emerging from COVID-19 research (e.g. Derakhshan et al., 2021; Resnik & Dewaele, 2021). After all, if such instances provide some students with the sense of community needed to persist with their education, they could indeed be argued to be purposeful and meaningful interactions that contribute to learning.

At the time of writing, almost two years after the start of the pandemic, despite having returned to on-campus lessons, we, and our colleagues not only in Belgium, but further afield, are still experiencing (what we hope is) the aftermath. That is, some students are struggling more than others in what continues to be uncertain times. Here, we underline the crucial role of the teacher in enabling opportunities for students to openly discuss their fears or problems and to experience feelings of being valued and validated by others (Besser et al., 2020). Even in times when there is no pandemic, experiences either directly related to education or external situations may negatively impact a student’s learning journey. Teachers can make “it less stressful by just acknowledging that it can be stressful” (Tolu, 2010, p. 279).

Regarding the limitations of this study, the language-focused content analysis of SP indicators and the RW analysis only provided localised snapshots of students’ interpersonal interactions and the findings cannot therefore be generalised. Almost half of the students enrolled on the course did not participate in this study, so we were not able to investigate the socio-emotional behaviours, or perhaps more importantly, the attitudes and experiences of these students. Similarly, while we inferred from some of the students’ comments that silence likely has a negative effect on cohesion, our analysis did not extend to “absences as well as presence” (Johnstone, 2018, p. 70). We also did not collect student performance data so we cannot make any conclusions about how interpersonal interactions affect (language) learning. While our data touches on how the teacher’s actions and perceptions may have influenced those of the students’, these phenomena were not explicitly accounted for. Furthermore, we acknowledge the limitations of retrospective self-reports. Despite categorising students’ messages into distinct indicators of social-relational behaviours, we recognise that there are no clear-cut boundaries because these are complex phenomena which often interrelate and interdepend on each other and our beliefs, values, and experiences may have impacted the fine-grained coding decisions and interpretation of results.

CRediT author statement

Mari Alger: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing: Original Draft, Visualization.

Prof. Dr. Eyckmans: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing: reviewing and editing, Formal analysis.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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constructive comments on this manuscript.

Appendix A

Reflection questions.

1. When you found out that learning would take place online, what were your first thoughts and/or emotions?
2. How did you experience the sudden shift to online learning?
3. What made the transition to online learning easier and/or more difficult for you?
4. Which aspects of online learning did you find surprisingly positive?
5. Which aspects of online learning did you particularly struggle with?
6. What made you feel part of a community during the online learning sessions? Can you remember a specific moment when you felt part of a community?
7. In what ways did you support your peers during the online learning sessions?
8. In what ways did you receive support from your peers during the online learning sessions?
9. Did you feel that there were opportunities for you to assist the instructor during the online learning sessions? When?
10. Do you think social interaction was important during the online learning sessions? Why/why not?
11. Do you think social interaction was more important in the online learning sessions than in ‘normal’ face-to-face lessons? Why/why not?

Appendix B

Social presence coding template based on Rourke et al. (1999) and Swan and Shih (2005) with verbatim examples from our data.

| Social Presence | Indicators | Examples from our data |
|-----------------|------------|------------------------|
| Affective       | “expression of emotion, feelings, and mood” (Rourke 1999, p. 57) and “beliefs and values” (Swan & Shih, 2005, p. 117) | Paralanguage & interjections: features of text which convey emotion i.e. emotions, exclamation marks, exaggerated punctuation or spelling |
|                 | Emotion: use of words to express emotional state | thank you!! woooo; That’s a good one; hooray! byeee; They only think I found a bit **”annoying”**; wow |
|                 | Humour: e.g. friendly teasing, irony, sarcasm | It is really stressful; I feel quite confident; I really like that you tube channel too! |
|                 | Self-disclosure: presenting personal attitudes/values/beliefs, expressing vulnerability, showing some level of uncertainty | I took physical classes for granted haha; I assure you we won’t bite or anything; There is no such things as too many plants; haha |
|                 | Acknowledgement (of student responses): referring to other students’ messages, building on what another student said previously, answering/reacting to another student’s question | To be honest, I think it’s outrageous that we don’t know yet; I don’t really understand how it works hahaha; And we’re all trustworthy students, I think! |
|                 | Acknowledgement (of teacher): answering/responding to teacher’s content or non-content related questions, reacting to something that the teacher said | A student asks ‘shall I pick one?’ and another student responds with ‘sure!; a student proposes a group name, and another student acknowledges ‘okay, not bad!’ |
|                 | Agreement/disagreement: expressing agreement or disagreement with others | Teacher asks students whether they have time for one more question and a student answers ‘sure!; Teacher explains the exam instructions and a student reacts with ‘that sounds scary haha’ |
|                 | Approval: offering thanks, praise, encouragement, compliments | Same; me too; me neither; no worries indeed; Yes I do that every evening! A first letter would definitely help |
|                 | Invitation: asking questions or asking for advice, or otherwise inviting/requesting a response | Thank you; congrats; great idea; that was perfect; when teacher says you can do it ‘You can too!’ |
|                 | Offering personal advice/suggestions | I was wondering if there was a key to the AWL exercises on p 57–68 of the syllabus; Do we always get the first letter of the word on the exam? |
| Interactive     | “express a willingness to maintain and prolong contact, and tacitly indicate interpersonal support, encouragement, and acceptance of the initiator” (Rourke 1999, p. 58) | it’s outrageous that we don’t know yet; I don’t really understand how it works hahaha; And we’re all trustworthy students, I think! |
|                 | “provide evidence that others are attending” (Swan & Shih, 2005, p. 117, p. 117) | A student asks ‘shall I pick one?’ and another student responds with ‘sure!; a student proposes a group name, and another student acknowledges ‘okay, not bad!’ |
|                 | Greetings, salutations, phatics: greetings and closures, interactions which serve a purely social ‘small talk’ purpose | Teacher asks students whether they have time for one more question and a student answers ‘sure!; Teacher explains the exam instructions and a student reacts with ‘that sounds scary haha’ |
|                 | Vocatives: addressing people by name (or ‘team name’) | Same; me too; me neither; no worries indeed; Yes I do that every evening! A first letter would definitely help |
|                 | Group reference: using personal or inclusive pronouns | Thank you; congrats; great idea; that was perfect; when teacher says you can do it ‘You can too!’ |
| Cohesive        | “build and sustain a sense of group commitment” (Rourke 1999, p. 59, p. 59) | I was wondering if there was a key to the AWL exercises on p 57–68 of the syllabus; Do we always get the first letter of the word on the exam? |
|                 | Greetings, salutations, phatics: greetings and closures, interactions which serve a purely social ‘small talk’ purpose | Bye; how is your crocheting getting along? Good luck to you to, and enjoy your meal; taught my brother that one too |
|                 | Vocatives: addressing people by name (or ‘team name’) | @forest: are we going with the B-word or the R-word? I also did not find the one with ‘hen’ @ [Name]; @ [Name], jup! |
|                 | Group reference: using personal or inclusive pronouns | We are ‘The Forest’; One person couldn’t hear us |
Appendix C

Extract 1: Student “venting” episode (final 8 min of transcript 4)

1 01:04:47 Student 1: Who’s the official winner?
2 Teacher (AUDIO) laughs and apologises for forgetting to communicate this very important information, ‘drumroll please!’
3 01:04:51 Student 2: do you already know when the exam takes place?
4 Teacher (AUDIO) announces the final scores in a dramatic way
5 01:05:22 Student 3: criiiiiiihahaha
6 01:05:45 Student 1: Yay!
7 01:05:47 Student 3: congrats!
8 01:05:49 Student 4: well done!
9 Teacher (AUDIO) explains that ‘unfortunately not yet, there’s still some scheduling going on, it really should be very imminent’. Starts explaining what will happen in next week’s lesson.
10 01:06:10 Student 3: to be honest, i think it’s outrageous that we don’t know yet
11 01:06:13 Student 2: yes
12 01:06:24 Student 2: especially because it will take place so soon
13 01:06:40 Student 3: we have like 4-5 exams in that two-week period
14 01:06:45 Student 5: We have so many exams in week 13, but we don’t know anything
15 01:06:48 Student 2: exactly
16 Teacher (AUDIO) starts reading and reacting to students’ responses ‘oh gosh’
17 01:06:58 Student 5: It is really stressful
18 01:06:58 Student 4: Wow 5 exams??
19 Teacher (AUDIO) Yeah that’s really heavy. And also, isn’t week 13 the week that officially has a couple of holiday days, so it’s going to be crammed into I guess 3 days?
20 Yeah, I can’t imagine how stressful it must be for you all at the moment. Hang in there is all I can say.
21 01:07:20 Student 5: Yes, we should be studying then
22 01:07:26 Student 4: We only have one for Dutch writing skills
23 01:07:26 Student 2: I don’t know what I should prepare first
24 01:07:27 Student 3: writing for dutch, phonetics, vocabulary, speaking
25 01:07:32 Student 2: because I don’t know which exam takes place first
26 01:07:36 Student 5: and (foreign language)
27 Teacher (AUDIO) sympathises with students ‘aww’, asks ‘all in week 13?’
28 01:07:41 Student 1: Week 13 and 14
29 01:07:44 Student 6: I have the 2ne and 3rd week of the exam period free
30 01:07:45 Student 3: 13 and 14 and in week 15 we have 2 examinations too
31 01:07:48 Student 1: But yeah, it’s very frustrating:(
32 Teacher (AUDIO) But then do you have any exams at all in the actual official exam period?
33 01:07:52 Student 2: 3
34 01:07:53 Student 5: but we can’t schedule anything
35 01:07:54 Student 6: i don’t know for the other groups
36 01:07:55 Student 1: Yeah, another 5 or so haha
37 01:07:58 Student 3: yes! the first week we have some already
38 01:08:01 Student 5: Yes we have 6 or so later
39 01:08:01 Student 6: but maybe it can be postponed?
40 01:08:05 Student 4: I have 6 in the official period
41 Teacher (AUDIO) sympathises with students. ‘Well of course it’s not easy for you at all, and I’m sure my colleagues are doing all they can to schedule things as fast as possible, because we know that you need to know as soon as possible. Erm. Unfortunately there’s nothing I can really do about this situation but I’ll keep you informed with whatever information I receive’. Tries to encourage students e.g. ‘couragé’
42 01:08:36 Student 3: and also the [foreign language] exam’s in 13 & 14 too, i forgot
43 01:08:47 Student 4: Wow
44 01:08:51 Student 5: how could you forget about [foreign language])
45 01:08:57 Student 3: [colloquial response in foreign language]
46 Teacher (AUDIO) gosh you do have a lot going on. Then begins to change subject and tries to cheer students up by saying some words in the foreign language
47 01:09:05 Student 1: Yeah, we know you can’t help it of course, but it’s very stressful:
48 01:09:12 Student 1: ooooh!
49 01:09:15 Student 3: very nice!
50 01:09:20 Student 3: hahahaha
51 01:09:21 Student 1: ahaahaha
52 01:09:31 Student 5: hah, the most important [foreign language] sentence
53 01:09:37 Student 3: taught my brother that one too
54 01:09:48 Student 4: Haha didn’t understand a word
55 Teacher (AUDIO) apologies for the stress and wishes the students luck
56 01:09:57 Student 4: Thank you!
57 Teacher (AUDIO) goes on to provide more information about the exam, starts to wrap up lesson ‘I hope that you stay healthy and well and keep up the positive spirit’
58 01:10:58 Student 1: You too!
59 Teacher (AUDIO) shows students pine tree ‘Pineapple wishes you good luck too! Ok, we’ll leave on that slightly crazy note’
60 01:11:07 Student 6: hahahaha
61 01:11:08 Student 4: Ohhh
62 01:11:09 Student 4: cute

(continued on next page)
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