The Problem of Interactive English Language Learning in the Distance Mode

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Abstract: The article elaborates on an interactive approach to language learning applied in an online EFL classroom. It presents a new insight into implementing interactive methods to develop students' communicative competence. In conditions of world integration, the formation of communicative and life skills is indispensable. Eventually, such an approach to English language learning in distance mode is the most accessible way for teacher-learner(s) interaction to acquire general linguistic expertise and upgrade specific language skills.

The study results show that an interactive approach facilitates live communication in online EFL settings, enhances learners' motivation and autonomy, and fosters quick decision-making reactions. Contemporary computer technologies offer boundless opportunities for interactive methods application in the online foreign language learning context. A skillful instructor is called to masterly plan computer-mediated classroom activities, creating space to fully realize each student's cognitive and communicative potential. Students learn to debate, substantiate their viewpoints, brainstorm ideas, do projects, and work individually or collaborate in comfortable learning settings.

Keywords: *Interactive approach, online EFL classroom, communicative competence, students' motivation and autonomy, computer-mediated classroom activities.*

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Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, which came as "an abrupt shock" (Panasenko et al., 2020, p. 123) to global society, has called for the integration of innovative teaching-learning modes into education and posed serious challenges to academic communities. In the meantime, in conditions of natural disasters and social crises, resilient higher education institutions adapt to continue teaching and research (Ayebi-Arthur, 2017, p. 259). In this regard, the application of technology has become urgent and unavoidable to accelerate learning efforts (Alcalde Peñalver et al., 2021, p. 30) and enhance multi-functionality in distance learning. Their ubiquitous use permeates almost every sphere of the academic landscape, facilitating the educational process and learning outcome.

In a globalized economy, the command of a foreign language becomes a necessary requisite to promote efficient and productive professional activity. Indeed, learning English with its "genuine global presence" (Crystal, 2003, p. 190) becomes indispensable for "securing better opportunities in a globalised world" (Cancino & Avila, 2021, p. 24). Nowadays, one can trace the employment of both conventional and innovative language teaching methods. However, the effects of their use vary. For example, traditional methods do not always stipulate the students' interest in mastering a specific subject or gaining specific skills. Moreover, a student often appears to be demotivated in an active collaboration, interpersonal communication and shared problem-solving.

Since communicative competence in professional settings is always in demand, conventional EFL teaching strategies need substantial improvements. Furthermore, in compliance with general European recommendations on language education (2019), constructing utterances in a foreign language concerned with universal and nationally specific issues is high on the agenda.

The communicative turn in EFL teaching-learning practices attaches particular relevance to the interactive approach. The problem of interactivity is a primary concern in the EFL classroom. The interactive approach regards the development of specific language skills and expertise , boosting students' mobility, autonomy, and competitiveness. Since education is person-oriented, not just focused on the service rendered with all that it implies (El Guessab et al., 2021, p. 496), the teaching-learning process should forward the initiative, interpersonal and intercultural communication, and critical thinking.

The issue has grown in importance in the light of recent research emergence in the field of language teaching and learning (Brown & Lee, 2015; Delen et al., 2014; Hampel & de los Arcos, 2013; White, 2017; Nerubasska & Maksymchuk, 2020; Nerubasska et al., 2020 Onishchuk, 2020; Sagita, 2018). Together these studies outline theoretical and practical aspects of an interactive learning environment, integration of computer technologies in educational settings, and the role of a teacher as the facilitator of interaction.

In their major study, Hampel & de los Arcos (2013) trace the tendencies of customizing the technologies used for holding online conferences. The scholars use the sociocultural concept of the learner–context interface to emphasize the significance of both learners and context in delivering technology-supported language courses. Delen et al. (2014) highlight the need for interactive tools to promote self-directed learning and allow user choice. They believe that their use enhances "processing, recall, and learning of information" (Delen et al., 2014, p. 313).

Brown & Lee (2015, p. 43) adopted a broad perspective, stating that "language techniques are designed to engage learners in pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes". However, fluency and accuracy are seen as complementary principles determining communicative strategies. The teacher's role is thus not restricted to the mere bestower of knowledge, but he/she acts as rather a facilitator of the interaction process. In the same vein, Sagita (2018, p. 98) notes that a teacher-facilitator has to introduce learners to a new language and create an interactive climate in the language classroom. Conversely, White (2017) argues that educators and learners are physically separated. In her view, technology is used "to mediate the teaching-learning processes within the presence of an educational organization (distinguishing it from private study)" (White, 2017, p. 134). However, what is not yet clear is the impact of the interactive approach on EFL learning in distance mode.However, what is not yet clear is the impact of the interactive approach on EFL learning in distance mode.The proposed paper *aims* to define the benefits of incorporating contemporary computer technologies into distance foreign language learning to promote interaction.

Our theoretical set-up is partly based on hypotheses proposed in the aforementioned research works. However, this study provides a window of opportunity to advance understanding of interactive language learning, its forms, and strategies applied in the distance mode. Firstly, it identifies the effects of the interactive approach on communicative competence development in the distance mode. Secondly, it explores the participants' collaboration in the virtual educational environment. Furthermore, the

research on interaction in the EFL classroom is focused on the teacher-learner interaction modes. Therefore, a deeper insight into the problem may shed light on the lucrative EFL classroom management.

The peculiarities of online language learning

Implementing distance learning in higher educational establishments is unavoidable in contemporary social conditions. Mishra et al. (2020) believe that globalization of education has been seriously undermined due to limited mobility and limitedly confined intercultural exchange of academic programmes during the COVID-19 lockdown. In this respect, the integration of computer-assisted practices into foreign language teaching and learning provides an array of benefits. Their function is not restricted to a mere display of audiovisual matter or demonstrating the task-based material in class. On the contrary, technology "has revolutionized the way we produce and exchange information and developed new modes of communication and socialization" (Darvin, 2017, p. 17).

Cunningham (2015, p. 1-2) maintains that digital media enhance the transformation of traditional pedagogical techniques used in face-to-face instruction. However, it cannot fully substitute one-to-one communication forms. Undoubtedly, employing new communicative media provides "new spaces to learning" (Carvalho, 2015, p. 134). The renewed approach to language classroom management in the remote mode is necessary since the shift from one-to-one communication to distance learning "superimposes an extra virtual, or immaterial, layer in the initial situation" (Bertin & Grave, 2010, p. 37).

Although the significance of communicative output to language learning and its acquisition has thus far been acknowledged, it has only recently received much interest in research concerning distance language learning. Funk et al. (2017, p. 27) point out that "language acquisition describes a process commonly taking place outside a language classroom and without a fixed curriculum, while learning is often geared towards attaining learning goals, determined by a curriculum within an institutional or educational frame." Consequently, language learning should be directed towards productive output, backed by students' intentions and based on conscious decisions, requiring learners to be self-directed and engaged (Delen et al., 2014, p. 312).

In distance learning of a foreign language, virtual immersion will involve several participants and the media. The latter become "active agents in co-constructing the real classroom teaching and learning" (Li, 2020, p. 25). The primary peculiarity of foreign language teaching is the necessity to

facilitate the learners to interact, communicate and exchange their thoughts. Therefore, the instructor creates situations for the student to take an active stand, demonstrating his/her creativity, initiative, and productivity.

In her book, White (2003) outlines distance-learning opportunities within cultural, institutional, and educational settings. The scholar differentiated between various distance learning language contexts (Fig. 1).
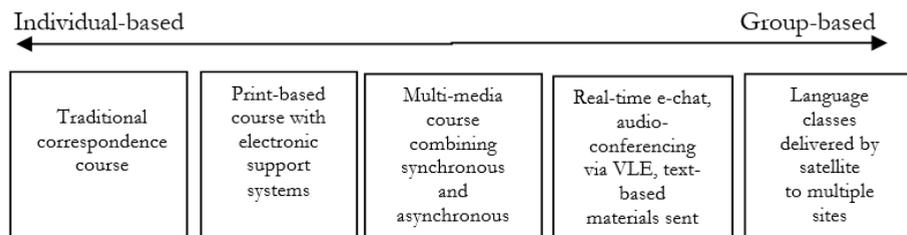
Individual-based ←————————————|————————————→ Group-based

| Traditional correspondence course | Print-based course with electronic support systems | Multi-media course combining synchronous and asynchronous | Real-time e-chat, audio-conferencing via VLE, text-based materials sent | Language classes delivered by satellite to multiple sites |

Fig. 1. *Distance learning language contexts*
Source: White, 2003

As shown in Fig. 1, specific dimensions such as the type of media, form of interaction, sources of support, and others distinguish distance language learning opportunities. Although there is a difference between individual-based and group-based language learning, the instructor can successfully integrate them into contemporary online EFL classrooms, creating an equal opportunity for students to be engaged in the active learning process.

Among the foreign language distance learning models, two forms – asynchronous and synchronous – are differentiated. The former is believed to be widely implemented in traditional classroom settings. Synchronous distance learning takes the form of real-time communication and involves virtual interaction assigning each participant a definite function. Internet technology changes the nature of instruction and critical dimensions of the task situation (Chappelle, 2003, p. 23). In contemporary online EFL classrooms, the priority is given to tasks that demand the speaker process the attained information to respond immediately, shaping ideas into sentences. This approach outweighs the interpretative one, concerned with the mere processing of input. Tutors can engage students in cognitively demanding tasks through "consciousness-raising exercises and strategy training" (Hinkelman, 2018, p. 62).

Foreign language learning is regarded as a dynamic process in terms of linguistic knowledge accumulation and language as a medium for interpersonal communication (Gu, 2018, p. 8). Therefore, learning resources and pedagogy should be eligible for systematic instruction directed towards relevant feedback. Such a precise and thorough compilation of teaching resources and giving prominence to a well-thought and balanced methodology facilitates students' language acquisition autonomously via a computer and allows for participants in the educational process interaction. Furthermore, guiding learners to use resources may help "develop the mindset and familiarize them with the methods for such independent learning" (Navarre, 2019, p. 5).

To summarize, technology improves the language learning experience by shifting traditional methodological approaches to accommodating innovative teaching methods and introducing interpersonal and collaborative learning modes.

Revisiting online interactive language learning and instruction strategies

A successful synergy of online EFL teaching and learning depends on appropriate teaching-learning context, strategies used in the classroom, and participants' cultural and cognitive peculiarities. According to Landau (2019, p. 54), the classroom can be arranged as "a space for inquiry in which what is central are the learning processes that are possible to unfold." Among various pedagogical opportunities suggesting a successful solution to this problem, the researchers highlight using an interactive approach to foreign language learning.

The term "interactive" deals with communication directly since it presupposes talking together or cooperating. In the traditional classroom setting, interaction is viewed as "a united exchange of thought, feeling or ideas between a teacher and learner or a learner and other learner consequent in complementary effect on each other" (Huriyah & Agustiani, 2018, p. 61). In the same vein, Kahu & Nelson (2018, p. 58) regard the educational interface as a tangible way of representing the complex interactions between students and institutions and how those interactions influence engagement.

Beatty (2010, p. 13) claims that interaction refers to "a software program in which the learner has some degree of choice" in a distance learning environment. The introduction of interactive methods backed by information technologies stimulates learning audiences to construct utterances consciously in the foreign language and master essential life skills.

Furthermore, they learn to collaborate, leaving space for personal initiative, compatibility, rapport, and mutual adjustment. Nowadays, interactive language learning methods focused on realizing the learner's creative potential and ability to react instantly, producing comprehensible output, are spreading quickly. Moreover, they open a real possibility to combine individual, pair, or even group tasks to develop students' cognitive abilities and motivation.

Interactions in EFL classrooms have recently received much attention in scientific works. An analysis of teacher-learner talk in the English classroom made by Huriyah and Agustiani (2018) raised the issue of teachers' dominance in speaking, highlighting the insufficiency in students' freedom to communicate their thoughts. Vattoy & Gamlem's research (2020) addresses the quality of teacher-student interactions and feedback. The scholars report that the dialogue's quality and questions are essential indicators of feedback that make students feel confident in their foreign language abilities. In the same vein, Some-Guiebre's findings (2020) demonstrate that interaction mainly depends on teaching techniques and a well-balanced methodology, yet they might often limit many communication opportunities.

In their research, Al-Zahrani & Al-Bargi (2017) focus on questions as an effective way of promoting extensive classroom interaction. The data provided in their study were thoroughly selected from video recordings of EFL classrooms with intermediate-level English students at the English Language Institute in Saudi Arabia. Finally, Girija (2020) examines the benefits of the Flander system used for classroom interaction analysis in the teaching and learning process.

The interactive approach offers various benefits compared to the traditional educational setting. Firstly, many students can be engaged to work in a team. This practice favours the development of better judgment, communicative and critical thinking skills. However, working in distance learning mode, the instructors often overlook the communicative component in designing the tutorials, limiting students' activity to coping with the assigned written tasks. Consequently, this practice does not ensure the development of communicative competence. The diversity of interactive technologies pervading our lives today can substantially help attain this goal. The former can boost the learners' interest in the studied subject and activate cognitive information processing. Moreover, interactive learning of a foreign language motivates students to have educational autonomy.

Due to the distance learning mode, specific changes in the instruction delivery have been introduced. They are primarily concerned

with transmitting knowledge to the class and receiving feedback. The teacher is no longer bound to explain lengthy subject matter portions, prescribing carrying loads of exercises afterward. After this, students are engaged to work on individual tasks and might lack communication with others. Scrivener (2011, p. 17) believes that "part of the enjoyment of being a student in a good classroom is in sharing the unique personal identity, style, skills, and techniques that a teacher brings to a lesson." Undoubtedly, rapport plays a crucial role in the EFL classroom.

Using technology, the learner can engage in interpersonal, intrapersonal, and learner-computer interaction (Chappelle, 2003, p. 56). However, many scholars working on the subject overlook the significance of learner-computer interaction. Consistent with Beatty (2010, p. 146-147), "the computer sometimes assumes functions beyond traditional materials and accept that its interactivity mirrors at least some of the functions of the teacher, especially when it is used autonomously, even though it cannot pretend to duplicate the teacher's range." Thus, the learners are offered an excellent opportunity to choose on what to learn and how to learn, often guided by their intuitive feelings and educational intents. Furthermore, they can learn how to manage their time efficiently to get a better outcome. Nevertheless, teacher-learner interaction gives far-reaching and more lucrative results.

Interactive learning of a foreign language often presupposes modelling true-to-life situations to find a common solution to the problem and scrutinize a simulated scene. Furthermore, it stimulates the development of value systems and collaborative environments, simultaneously placing a share of responsibility on the instructor. Hampel & de los Arcos (2013) claim that interaction, learning communities, metacognition, literacy, affect, and learner support are essential in foreign language learning. Thus, it can be assumed that the dominant features of interactive learning are the teacher-learner and learner-learner cooperation, variability in learning strategies, high motivation, and development of both mentally and socially 'mature' personalities.

The learning practice of accumulating linguistic knowledge without its active usage is quite frequent in the EFL online classroom. In this respect, interactive technologies might serve as an indispensable tool to communicate what they want and when they want. A set of in-class activities might be offered to instill confidence and achieve fluency. Role-plays with cards, buzz groups, picture difference tasks, pyramid discussions, brainstorming, simulation, designing projects, and talk shows turn out to be the best interactive pedagogy. The latter might be used both at the initial

stages of mastering the subject and when the teacher wants to 'recap' the accumulated knowledge. Teachers might be involved in all activities yet avoid dominating speaking and dragging attention to themselves. Instead, they can "prompt covertly, introduce new information to help the activity along, ensure continuing student engagement and generally maintain a creative atmosphere" (Harmer, 2007, p. 348).

The suggested above classroom activities have many advantages over traditional methodology to build good reception skills. Firstly, they enhance the active use of lexical units and grammatical speech patterns. Secondly, interactive activities develop the ability to interpret the given context bearing in mind relevant cultural and extralingual factors. Thirdly, they help synchronize perception and speech training involving split attention and memory.

Recently, great many higher education establishments started to implement telecommunication technology. The latter takes the form of interactive lectures, online workshops, online learning programs, mobile phones, electronic apps. All of these contribute to a productive cognitive and intellectual activity, accumulating valuable facts and educational content, extending outlook, and heading to the perspective, social development. A contemporary tutor gets access to various computer software that allows organizing the education process efficiently, representing the subject matter visually, and fostering interaction between students. Learning English online can also be backed by displaying a topic-related video with further comprehension, putting together presentations, audiovisual materials to imitate the prosody and intonation patterns, and learning new vocabulary.

The dissemination of information and the person's constant exposure to it through computer technology makes the instructors invent different strategies for accumulating knowledge. For instance, designing shared projects or preparing group presentations serve as an excellent interactive technique and requires creativity for each student engaged in the activity. The former drill on the generalization and synthesis of acquired knowledge. Furthermore, the represented ideas are coherent and appear in a particular order. Thus, in creating any project, students use expressions and ideas to build the macro-level of speech or the cohesive utterance.

Whenever we communicate with one person or a whole group, we need to receive feedback. Thus, the learners should be disposed to "interpersonal tasks" (Navarre, 2019, p. 51) involving both input and output. Undoubtedly, presentations and projects have a true educational value and are often used in online EFL settings, yet they should be supplemented with lengthy group or round-table discussions apart from passive contemplation

or visualization. Moreover, any communication experience affects a person and causes the reaction to our speech (feedback). The latter is very important in interaction since it can spark new insights into the problem, increase knowledge of the subject, and reconsider former opinions.

Most studies confirm the interactive approach's positive impact on the EFL learning environment. However, regardless of its many advantages, distance learning may pose serious challenges to student-to-instructor interactions. Pokhrel & Chhetri (2021) are concerned with the weaknesses of online teaching infrastructure, limited teacher exposure, unproductive learning environments, assessment strategy, and the need to improve computer literacy skills. They point out that even the most effective pedagogy will not yield fruitful results if the tutors are technologically backward.

Wut and Xu (2021) outline the obstacles preventing interaction for language development. Figure 2 pinpoints strictly the issues arising in online EFL learning.
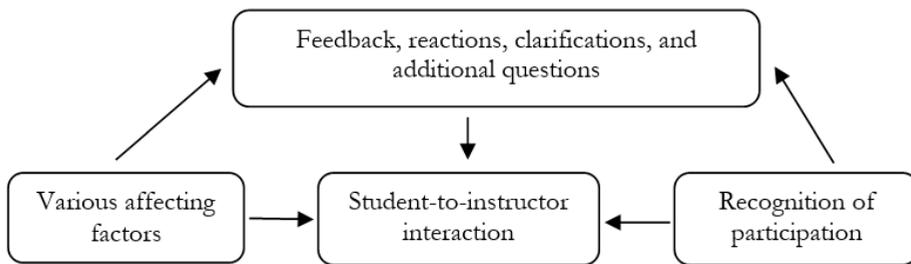

Fig. 2. *Challenges hindering student-to-instructor interactions in online classrooms*
Sorce: Wut & Xu, 2021

Fig. 2 summarizes the data based on students' responses to online foreign language learning questions. Among the fundamental difficulties, the interview participants delineate the inability to precisely understand the learning outcomes through feedback and communication filling up the virtual space. Another possible drawback is linked to the cognitive and emotional load placed on the instructor. The latter is expected to demonstrate high dynamics by providing non-verbal clues and actively manipulating teaching techniques. Furthermore, the inefficiency of online EFL learning may result from the tutor's and learner's inexperience in managing virtual classrooms. Finally, the fear of posing questions in public may also cause a break in teacher-learner and learner-learner interaction.

Since the participants engaged in the EFL online classroom present a definite educational community, a successful learning environment should unfold cognitive , instruction, and social presence (Garrison et al., 2010; Whiteside & Garrett Dikkers 2016). According to Wei et al. (2012, p. 529), "lack of social presence may lead to a high degree of frustration, an unreasonably critical attitude toward the instructor's effectiveness, and a lower level of effective learning." The term "social presence" can be roughly explained as the degree determining the interlocutors' perception of each other in a mediated communication setting. Murphy (2015, p. 48) claims that social presence incorporates open communication, group cohesion, and effective expression. However, these cannot be easily retained in online EFL classrooms and require much effort on the teacher's and learner's part.

The challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak have induced instructors to reassess the benefits of interactive methodology in the distance mode for a foreign language study. They allow focusing on the specific language and life skills development, implementing fully automated educational infrastructure, and adopting both individual and group-oriented approaches.

Conclusion

The proposed paper identifies the effects of interactive language learning in distance mode on communicative competence development. Besides, it explores how the interrelation of participants in virtual educational space facilitates effective EFL interaction.

The use of information computer technologies in the EFL classroom caused a dramatic and unexpected turn in language teaching methodology. Firstly, it has boosted multifunctionality in the teacher-learner environment. Secondly, the learning process has become more person-oriented rather than content-centered. Finally, the implementation of interactive pedagogy has radically changed the teacher's role, avoiding his/her dominating in speaking and giving much autonomy to the student. Thus, the instructor should possess profound digital , linguistic and cultural competencies. The students are thus eligible to take an equal position with the tutor to foster both teacher-learner and learner-learner communication. Moreover, such equality enhances favourable interactive climate in the EFL classroom and helps build trust.

The overwhelming advantage of applying interactive methods is realizing students' communicative potential and modifying traditional methodological tools to adapt to students' individual needs, classroom efficiency, and pragmatism. As a result, the teacher develops students'

analytical thinking and identifies new opportunities for participants in the learning process, improving their competencies and imparting values.

The findings of the proposed study demonstrate that communicatively filled educational content, varied ethnocultural situational contexts, different speech production exercises, proactive communicative and innovative approaches, and virtual immersion may provide a powerful mechanism for attaining educational goals in the distance mode. Furthermore, integrating these elements boosts students' motivation, develops their life and interpersonal skills, fosters critical thinking and problem solving, and enhances cognitive and social presence.

Future work should focus on studying theoretical and practical aspects of online EFL assessment strategies using contemporary digital tools.

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