

## **Collaborative Flipped Learning through CALL: A Recipe for Realizing Social Presence in Virtual Learning Environments**

Mohammad Hossein Hariri Asl, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Foreign Languages, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

*hariri.mhha@gmail.com*

S. Susan Marandi\*, Associate Professor, English Department, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran

*susanmarandi@alzahra.ac.ir*

Parviz Maftoon, Associate Professor, Department of Foreign Languages, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

*pmaftoon@srbiau.ac.ir*

### **Abstract**

From the dawn of the third millennium, the utilization of state-of-the-art technology for educational purposes, especially computers and the Internet, has become prevalent across the globe. In this regard, flipping EFL classes appears to be an effective approach to practicing second/foreign languages through computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in order to extend the class time to asynchronous activities outside the class, and make the students more autonomous and actively engaged in the painstaking process of language learning. However, this question merits consideration why many current CALL programs run and taught through flipped learning do not seem to take full advantage of collaborative learning and peer-assessment, specifically taking place in asynchronous channels of communication, namely threaded comment forms and discussion boards. The present study investigates the prospect of realizing social presence as a shared feeling of community among the learners by restructuring and optimizing the existing methods for flipping language classes. Employing a qualitative research based on grounded theory and data triangulation, the researchers recorded, transcribed and analyzed 41 semi-structured group and individual interviews with 44 participants attending an online IELTS preparation course on the first researcher's website for over one year. Additionally, the same interview questions were posed in an open-ended questionnaire accessible to the participants from the website. The obtained results suggested that learner-centered flipped classes in which asynchronous student-driven content development and out-of-class peer-assessment through commenting and replying are adequately practiced can tremendously increase student interactivity, thereby fulfilling the sense of social presence.

**Keywords:** Flipped classroom, social presence, interactivity, asynchronous communication, CALL

### **Introduction**

Current approaches to language learning and teaching need some updating for the emerging requirements of SLA in the third millennium. One such change that merits consideration is flipping language classes<sup>1</sup> in which students are viewed as active discoverers of knowledge who learn best in a social context and in collaboration with other learners (Baker, 2000). Flipping language classes can make the L2 learners more autonomous (Han, 2015),

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<sup>1</sup> In the current study, flipped classrooms and flipped learning are considered interchangeable and we do not subscribe to the distinction held by Arfstrom (2014).

promote individualization and collaborative learning simultaneously (Baker, 2000) and save a considerable amount of class time for more cognitively demanding tasks and activities (Baker, 2000; Kostka & Brinks Lockwood, 2015; Mok, 2014; Wishnoebroto, 2014). Correspondingly, as argued by Baker (2000) and Warschauer and Whittaker (2002), the role of the teacher has changed from *the sage on the stage* to *a guide on the side*.

The flipped approach enjoys great popularity (Mok, 2014; Wishnoebroto, 2014), especially in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), thanks to the availability of a wide array of resources on the internet to flip L2 classes (Kostka & Brinks Lockwood, 2015). The employment of technology has empowered language schools and institutions to implement learner-centeredness (Egbert, Herman & Lee, 2015; Hung, 2017) and transformative education (Hutchings & Quinney, 2015) by means of flipping L2 classes and encouraging the learners to assume more responsibilities (Hung, 2017).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Flipped learning is not just restricted to utilizing state-of-the-art technology for learning and teaching. In fact, “it requires both teachers and students to flip the way they fundamentally view education” (Webb, Doman & Pusey, 2014, p. 54). According to Mok (2014), these days, flipped learning is primarily practiced in online magazines and some commonplace blogs instead of academic journals and conferences. As Han (2015) and Hung (2017) have argued, systematic research into the efficacy of classroom flipping in conjunction with language learning deserves greater attention due to the fact that flipping language classes is not currently comparable to flipping other classes, e.g. biology, pharmacology, and mathematics.

In this regard, creating an effective online community in which the L2 learners can maximize their interaction in online courses and activities has not been given adequate attention (Broad, Matthews & McDonald, 2004). Consequently, the realization of social presence in online learning environments, even through flipped learning, cannot be guaranteed. Social presence in online communities signifies that the members have a belonging to each other and matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that the members’ needs will be satisfied through their commitment to be together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Nevertheless, the current practices of flipping EFL/ESL classes mainly focus on learners’ individualized autonomy or independency rather than their social autonomy or interdependency (Blin, 2004).

Although many language teachers and institutions are turning the spotlight on flipping the classroom, according to Kostka and Brinks Lockwood (2015), “few pedagogically-oriented materials exist for instructors who flip or are interested in flipping their classes” (p. 2). In this regard, Baker (2000) contends that although many authors have approved the employment of technology in novel approaches to learning, only insufficient practical guidelines have been provided for the college professors and pedagogues to realize transformative education with the help of technology.

As stated above, as a result of the inadequacy of pedagogically-oriented materials and practical guidelines, only little experimental and quasi-experimental data on flipped learning exist in the literature (Webb et al., 2014).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The present study seeks to realize and consolidate the sense of social presence in virtual L2 learning environments by means of operationalizing and optimizing flipped learning. To achieve this fulfillment, the participants were encouraged to increase their asynchronous

computer-mediated communication (CMC), particularly through an interactive activity which was called *round table* in which they would watch an embedded video on the first researcher's English learning website called *LELB Society* at <https://lelb.net> and pose questions to each other asynchronously in the nested comment forms right below the embedded videos. Afterwards, in our synchronous classes on Discord, the students would focus on their own out-of-class (asynchronous) contributions in the form of comments and replies, exchanging their findings and experiences with each other in reference to the embedded videos.

The major objective of this study was to seek answers to the following research questions. It is hoped that providing in-depth answers to these questions could generate an adequate sense of social presence in the realm of flipping L2 classes by making them more collaborative both synchronously and asynchronously in essence.

RQ1. How can flipping English classes contribute to the establishment of social presence in CALL programs?

RQ2. What are some crucial steps in flipping an English class through CALL and enhancing student interactivity?

### **Literature Review**

In an education system based on flipped learning, students generally focus on less cognitively demanding and difficult tasks at home when the teacher is not available, which makes it feasible to free up a great amount of class time for using the language more productively (Baker, 2000; Bařal, 2015; Han, 2015; Hung, 2017; Kostka & Brinks Lockwood, 2015; Stanley, 2013; Wishnoebroto, 2014) because learning materials, including instructional videos, PowerPoint presentations, books, podcasts, etc., are provided online in advance (Egbert et al., 2015; Mok, 2014; Webb et al., 2014), which could elevate the students' understanding and knowledge about the assigned materials as an out-of-class activity (Egbert et al., 2015; Mok, 2014; Razak, Kaur, Halili & Ramlan, 2016).

Flipping the classroom can allow language learners to practice second/foreign languages at their own pace and convenience, e.g. by pausing and replaying the embedded audio/video players (Bařal, 2015; Kostka & Brinks Lockwood, 2015; Mok, 2014), which could facilitate the process of learning and digesting complicated subject matter even for weak students (Mok, 2014). Furthermore, as argued by Wishnoebroto (2014), some students cannot write or take notes fast enough in a lecture-oriented class directed by the teacher, which was, in fact, a major impediment to the first researcher's understanding level when he was a school and university student, particularly due to his critical and congenital visual impairment and exclusive dependency upon the braille system to read and write.

In a qualitative study whose data were collected and analyzed through an open-ended questionnaire, Bařal (2015) examined the impacts of flipped classrooms taught by 47 English teachers at a state university in Turkey.

The results of the study indicated that the implementation of flipped learning in foreign English classes could yield the following four benefits: learning at one's own pace and convenience, extending the class time and overcoming its limitations, increasing class interaction and participation, and making the students more prepared and informed.

Santikarn and Wichadee (2018) conducted a study on the effect of an advanced flipped English course in a private university in Thailand on its 40 enrolled students' perceptions and performance. As typical of any flipped class, the students would watch the prerecorded lectures before the class and then attend the class to exchange their knowledge, discuss the assigned

topics and perform tasks. Unlike this current study, the students did not have any asynchronous collaborative activities before the class with the help of threaded comment forms and discussion boards at the bottom of the assigned lessons and materials with relevant embedded videos. The findings of their study suggested that having attended the advanced English course taught through flipped learning, the students became more autonomous and their overall scores improved perceptibly.

### **Flipped Learning and Social Presence**

Short, Williams and Christie (1976, cited in Palloff & Pratt, 2007) coined the term *social presence* to indicate the degree to which a person is perceived as *real* in communication that is conducted via the use of some form of media. Unlike the pioneers of social presence, more recently, scholars, including (Cobb, 2009; Gunawardena, 1995; Hauck & Warnecke, 2013; Palloff & Pratt, 2005/2007; Picciano, 2002; Tu, 2002; Tu & McIsaac, 2002) have reconsidered the concept of social presence by giving more attention to the communicators in comparison to the channel of communication. Today, social presence is regarded as a degree of awareness of another person in a virtual learning environment and a consequent appreciation of online interpersonal relationships (Hauck & Warnecke, 2013; Tu, 2002).

In a virtual learning community endowed with social presence, the members' needs will be satisfied through their commitment to interact with each other for educational purposes, a phenomenon which is referred to as *collaborative learning* (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Picciano, 2002).

Collaborative learning and student interactivity generate the sense of social presence in computer-mediated communication (CMC) users, which is a reliable predictor of student satisfaction (Cobb, 2009; Gunawardena, 1995; Hung, 2017). From this viewpoint, flipped learning could be conducive to the establishment of social presence because it can increase the students' sense of academic satisfaction and interactivity (Gunawardena, 1995; Hung, 2017).

Hung (2017) carried out a quasi-experimental study to investigate the effect of a Student Response System (SRS) functioning as an online polling system through which the teacher could pose questions to the learners and then collect their responses. The results of this SRS-integrated flipped classroom demonstrated that flipping EFL classes could engage students in active learning through promoting their willingness to communicate (WTC) and performing peer-instruction (PI), thus increasing a sense of academic satisfaction in the learners.

Webb et al. (2014) carried out an experimental study to compare and contrast two EFL Chinese classes lasting for 15 weeks at the university level. The researchers flipped merely one of the two classes as the experimental group, while the other class as the control group was taught traditionally. The results of the investigation revealed that although the majority of the students initially showed resistance to flipped instruction, they had adopted utterly reversed attitudes toward flipped learning by the end of the study.

As implied earlier, not any flipped English class could necessarily lead to the fulfilment of social presence; and sometimes, social presence is not prioritized at all. However, according to a study conducted by Hariri Asl and Marandi (2017), optimizing student-driven patterns of interaction and asynchronous peer-assessment through commenting, voting and polling grounded on inspiring and challenging themes are the necessary prerequisites for the development of social presence.

In spite of a myriad of advantages of flipping the classroom, this relatively novel approach to education is by no means free from criticism (Herreid & Schiller, 2013; Wishnoebroto, 2014). For example, Herreid and Schiller (2013) perceive flipped classroom as

being rather time-consuming and demanding for the students who are not yet accustomed to it, because this education system requires the learners to be genuinely active at home. In addition, they point out that selecting appropriate multimedia resources for embedding takes an abundance of time and patience on the part of the teachers, which is not always feasible.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The participants of the current study were 44 students of a CALL-based English class in preparation for IELTS. These 44 students were among 287 active members of the first researcher's virtual learning community entitled *LELB Society* available at <https://lelb.net>. Forty of the 44 participants were Iranian, and the rest (9.1%) were not. Thirteen of the 40 Iranian participants (32.5%) took this virtual course from outside of Iran, mostly from non-English-speaking countries. Twenty-four of the 44 participants (54.5%) were female and 20 (45.5%) were male participants.

The participants followed this group course for over one year. They had a proficiency level of intermediate or above in English and their mean age was 27. This information was obtained through individual interviews with the first researcher before attending the course. It is important to note that in this qualitative research project, which was extracted from the first researcher's PhD dissertation, the participants have given the investigators this full consent to mention their names throughout the study whenever necessary.

### **Materials and Instruments**

To investigate the impact of flipped instruction on realizing social presence, thus increasing student interactivity in virtual learning environments, the researchers conducted, recorded and transcribed 41 semi-structured interviews under the title of *call for feedback*. These 35 group interviews and six individual interviews were recorded immediately after our 41 group synchronous classes on Discord based on flipped learning called *round tables*.

Seven questions basically developed from the research questions (Appendix A) were recursively posed in the 41 group and individual interviews (i.e., one question in each interview in approximately six iterative cycles) as the primary source of data collection. The question items were posted online right above the comment forms where the participants were expected to asynchronously and interactively contribute to the course. Thus, the participants could think about their responses in advance.

With the purpose of triangulating the data, an open-ended questionnaire falling into the genre of short-answer questions (Brown, 2001) with the same questions as our semi-structured interviews was accessible on the first researcher's website because according to Dörnyei (2007), open-ended questionnaires can "provide a far greater richness than fully quantitative data" (p. 107) as they can allow for greater freedom of expression. It is worth noting that these two instruments of data collection (i.e., semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaire) addressed the same questions (Appendix A), because some participants might not have felt free to express their opinions openly in our group interviews.

In addition, the first researcher played the role of a participant observer throughout the study so as to engage closely in the social setting of our flipped classes and fulfill an active role in them (Creswell, 2007; Duff, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998; Nunan & Bailey, 2009; Robson, 2007; Warschauer & Whittaker, 2002). Data triangulation through an amalgamation of observations and interviews is fairly typical of any grounded theory research (Briggs, 1986; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Duff, 2008; Rennie & Fergus, 2006). Through archiving

all of the class activities, the first researcher would listen to the recorded round tables as podcasts immediately after the classes while he still had a fresh memory of the class activities; he thus made an effort to fill in the gap between the data elicited from the interviews and his own speculations on the research questions.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedures**

In this qualitative study based on grounded theory, as stated earlier, data triangulation was employed in an inductive, cyclical and iterative fashion (Charmaz, 2005). Seven open-ended questions (Appendix A) were recursively raised in both 41 semi-structured interviews and an open-ended questionnaire, with the intention of *iterating* and *saturating* the data (Dörnyei, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to account for the internal validity or credibility of the study. All the questions were aimed at casting light on operational methods for realizing and perfecting flipped English classes to account for social presence.

Having transcribed all the interviews (approximately 8200 words), the researchers endeavored to elicit direct evidence emerging from the transcribed interviews and the open-ended questionnaire through moving back and forth between the old and new data “to take a fresh look as to whether this code sheds light on earlier data” (Charmaz, 2005, p. 517). The process of moving back and forth over the new and old stream of data is technically referred to as *constant comparative method* to provide a thorough description of the phenomenon under study.

### **Round Table**

In order to flip the EFL classes, the first researcher relied upon his website, *LELB Society*, build upon WordPress as a Content Management System (CMS) (Wishnoebroto, 2014) to provide the learners with an all-in-one educational package, including embedded audio/video files, nested discussion boards and comment forms, voting, polling and ranking systems, account creation to realize online privacy (Tu, 2002), viable blogging (Bender & Waller, 2013), and so forth.

Our CALL-oriented classes on the premise of flipped learning were labeled *round tables* in which the participants were expected to watch an embedded informative video before the class (i.e., asynchronously) and raise at least one question about the assigned video and topic in the comment form at the bottom of the corresponding post. Another obligatory assignment on the part of the students was to leave a reply to one of the existing questions by the other students.

Between audio and video files, the researchers showed a stronger preference for the latter because, according to Ockey (2007), language learners develop more engagement with video stimulus in computer-based listening tests in comparison with still images. As typical of flipped instruction (Baker, 2000), almost all of the embedded videos were selected from lectures given by prominent academics worldwide obtained through Google Scholar to provide the learners with authentic materials in the form of multimedia. According to Kramsch, A’Ness and Lam (2000), it is believed that authentic materials and activities can be appropriately realized in CALL programs by giving L2 learners access to an unlimited database of real-life materials through hypertext, multimedia and the World Wide Web.

The participants would watch an embedded video on a selected theme as many times as they wished before the class to become prepared for an informed discussion in our round tables (Mok, 2014). They were also encouraged to do research on the specified themes, utilizing the ever-growing database of *LELB Society* (2808 academic posts with 900 podcasts, 16000 tags and collocations, and 2250 illustrated English flashcards based on tooltip technology until November 2020) or other valuable internet resources, particularly [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org), to acquire more

information whenever necessary. According to Kostka and Brinks Lockwood (2015), leading video sharing websites provide L2 learners and teachers with an excellent comprehensive resource for finding and sharing instructive videos.

### **Vocabulary Enrichment Based on Flipped Learning**

A small proportion of the time of each class would be devoted to practicing academic vocabulary on the basis of the best-selling coursebook, *1100 Words You Need to know*. The students would be notified of the assigned unit of the coursebook in a WhatsApp group at least two days before the class so that they could have plenty of time to study the unit. Later on, in our synchronous classes on Discord, the students would take turns each reading out one sentence of the assigned unit of the coursebook, practicing peer-assessment in the form of negotiation of form (e.g., mispronunciation) and negotiation of meaning (e.g., paraphrasing the phrases or asking for clarification) in a completely collaborative fashion.

### **Collaborative Writing**

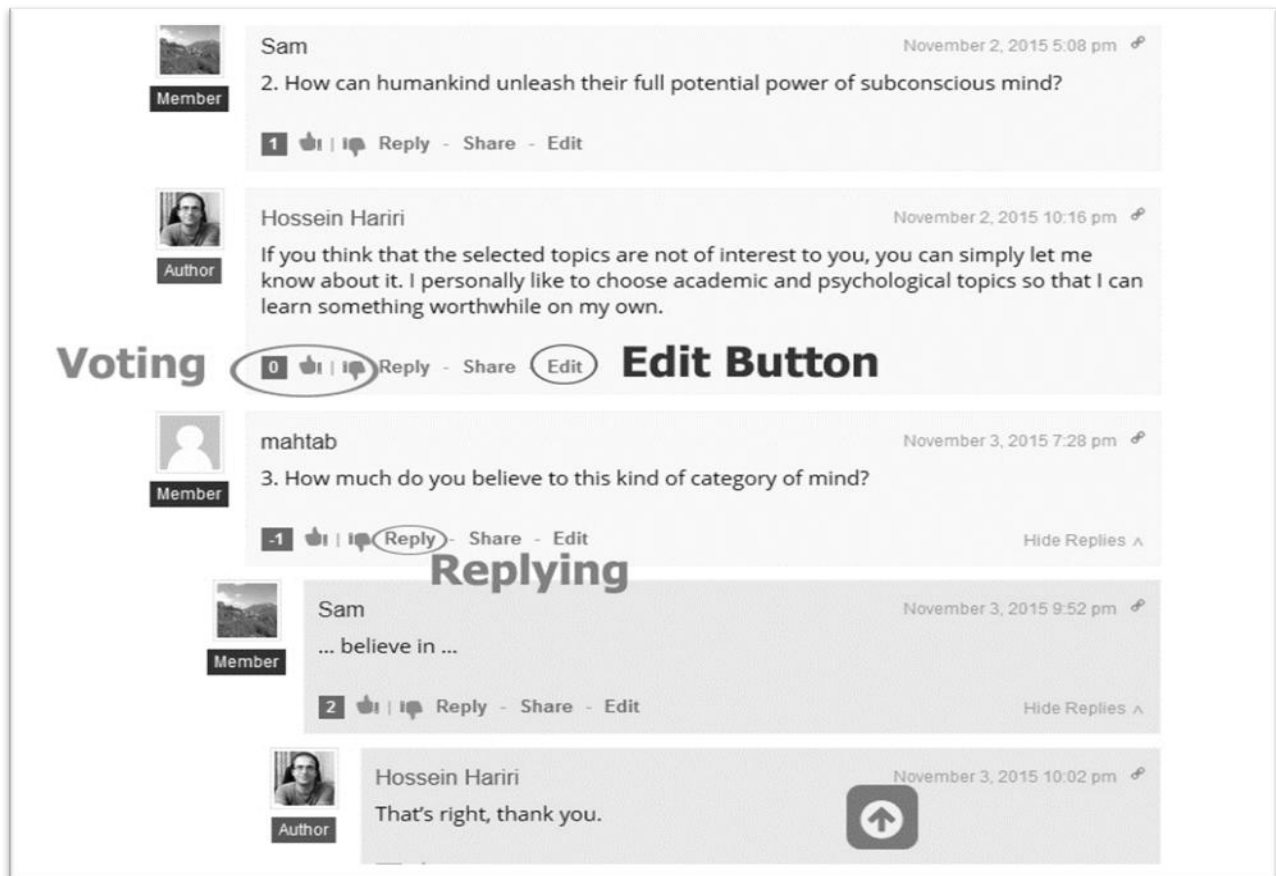
Once a week, the participants were expected to collaboratively and asynchronously compose an argumentative essay analogous to IELTS Writing Task 2; that is to say, they would refer to the post created by the teacher at *LELB Society* with a topic on top, and a comment form at the bottom of the post. The participants, as the essayists, would maximize our nested or threaded comment forms equipped with Asynchronous JavaScript and XML (AJAX) functionality to perform self- and peer-assessment asynchronously. As stated by Godwin-Jones (2014), on many occasions, the teacher did not need to provide the essayists with any teacher-assessment in the comment forms as a result of comprehensive asynchronous peer-assessment and “more interactive discussion than is possible in class” (Baker, 2000, p. 12).

For ease of asynchronous communication, the first researcher created a WhatsApp group and added all the students. Having created the posts at *LELB Society* for our round tables and *collaborative writing* activities (argumentative essays, analogous to IELTS Writing Task 2), the teacher would share the corresponding links in the WhatsApp group to notify the participants of the assigned materials.

Figure 1 seeks to portray the participants’ asynchronous out-of-class collaborative activities prior to each round table. As illustrated below, through commenting, posting, replying, thumbing up/down other comments (peer-assessment) and even editing their own comments (self-assessment), the participants could engage in enlightened negotiation of meaning.

**Figure 1**

*Asynchronous interactivity in the form of commenting, editing, replying and voting in our comment forms prior to any round table session.*

**Results**

In this qualitative study, in the Results section, the researchers mainly echoed the participants' opinions (citations or quotations) obtained from the transcript of the interviews and the open-ended questionnaire based on constant comparative method in grounded theory. Then in the Discussion section, the researchers strove to make sense of the reflected opinions and interpret them more profoundly. Hence, the content in these two sections are by no means interchangeable.

Accordingly, the themes that automatically emerged or grounded (grounded theory) through the in-depth analysis of the triangulated data on optimizing flipped EFL classrooms to promote social presence in CALL programs were as follow: raising interest in EFL learners, encouraging interactivity, increasing social autonomy or interdependency.

**Raising Interest in EFL Learners**

With the aim of getting closer to the realization of social presence by means of a flipped classroom, it is imperative to arouse the students' interest in one way or another to initiate student interactivity. In this regard, in an individual interview with the first researcher, S. Nasiri (October 6, 2016) stated, "if the students are not interested in the class, they are not going to take it



seriously.” One practicable solution to the issue of interest is a theme-based approach to L2 learning with a particular emphasis on challenging and thought-provoking topics.

In this response, almost all of the participants expressed satisfaction with our intentional selection of topics with a special emphasis on academic, instructive and challenging ones. For instance, in their questionnaires, H. Rezaei and S. Ghomi argued that they preferred instructive and enthusiastic topics that they did not have much information about so that they could learn both English and another worthwhile subject matter simultaneously. In another *call for feedback* session (September 8, 2016), Amir, who was also content with our instructive and challenging topics, complained that our class time was inadequate. This complaint, which was also made by some few other participants, appeared to be a testimony of the point that, no matter how hard the teacher endeavored to explain flipped classes to the students, particularly in our *call for feedback* sessions, a small proportion of them were still incredulous about the efficiency of flipped classes; consequently, these students did not give sufficient attention to our asynchronous activities prior to our round tables.

According to Z. Rousta (July 21, 2016), our special focus on thought-provoking and useful topics, for example subconscious mind, circadian rhythm, comfort zone, role models, *carpe diem*, etc., encouraged her to conduct further research in preparation for each round table, which was a great discovery for her. Conversely, some few participants, namely Amir, H. Hosseini, Pedram, T. Ghanooi, V. Kalhor, etc., in the same *call for feedback* session, criticized this inquiry-based approach to L2 learning for being rather demanding, time-consuming and strenuous, and it was due to this very reason that we ended up losing some students.

To be more precise, in her questionnaire, S. Nasiri contended that the compulsory task of leaving comments and questions vis-à-vis mostly educational videos required an abundance of patience and contemplation. Furthermore, in his questionnaire, S. Ghomi, an IELTS candidate, argued that student-driven content development in our round tables was not a high priority for him. On the contrary, the majority of the participants approved the effectiveness of their own active and responsive roles prior to each round table. For instance, from Bashir and Mehri’s points of view (August 11, 2016), spotlighting scholastic subject matter for flipping our classes was fairly conducive to learning a wide range of difficult and academic vocabulary, which they as IELTS candidates undoubtedly needed.

From H. Hosseini’s perspective written in his questionnaire, the students’ asynchronous collaborative activities in the form of exchanging questions and replies in our comment forms in response to the embedded videos helped them to stay focused on the assigned topics in our round tables. Comparing our round tables with ordinary English conversation classes he had experienced before, H. Hosseini reasoned that the students could not deviate from the specified central theme in our flipped classes.

In his individual interview with the researchers on the influence of our special selection of topics, H. Rezaei (June 23, 2016) expressed satisfaction with our flipped round tables because the participants of these round tables, i.e. the students including the teacher, were expected to “sit down and think deeply about the topics,” as the assigned themes were not ordinary ones. As illustrated in Table 1, in our round tables, we negotiated a variety of thought-provoking topics, initially through leaving asynchronous comments and replies in the comment forms at the bottom of the posts, and subsequently, through holding negotiation of meaning in our synchronous classes on Discord to discuss the participants’ asynchronous viewpoints and activities.

**Table 1***Selected Topics for Round Tables with Detailed Specifications*

<b>Class Date</b>	<b>Discussion topics</b>	<b>Asynchronous platform</b>	<b>Synchronous platform</b>	<b>No. of comments and replies</b>
Jun 23, 2016	Mental Gender Differences	Comment forms at the bottom of posts	Voice conference on Discord	38
Jul 21, 2016	Physical Appearance	√	√	32
Aug 4, 2016	Satire	√	√	66
Aug 11, 2016	Luck	√	√	67
Sep 8, 2016	Sixth Sense	√	√	83
Oct 6, 2016	Self discipline	√	√	81
Nov 5, 2016	Attraction Law	√	√	76

### **Encouraging Interactivity**

The prospect of socializing with non-Iranians in both in-class and out-of-class activities was very exciting for most of the participants, e.g. H. Zanjani, thus increasing student interactivity and social presence. Another factor that proved to be conducive to the realization of social presence by means of raising the level of conscious and organized interactivity was the employment of some thematically categorized discussion boards, for instance, *Students' Testimonials*, *Question-and-Answer in English*, *Challenging Questions in English* and so forth.

According to S. Ghomi (August 4, 2016), our categorized discussion boards and comment forms provided an opportunity for the students to express their opinions and questions freely and straightforwardly. As a result, they could perform asynchronous peer-assessment and learn from each other, thereby developing a sense of academic satisfaction and belonging to the virtual learning environment. From H. Zanjani's point of view expressed in her questionnaire, this collaborative flipped learning approach took place with minimum stress and maximum reflectivity, thus making the students well-prepared for the upcoming round tables.

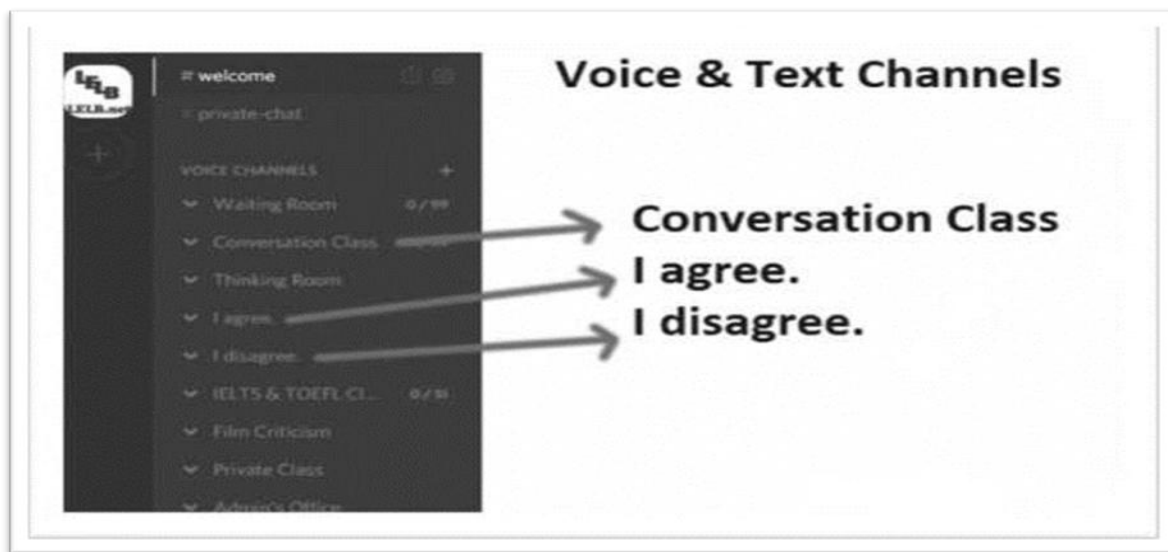
In one of our group interviews, some participants (e.g., Sooz; T. Ghanooni & Zhanara, November 5, 2016) contended that they were not fond of practicing peer-assessment in our flipped round tables, simply due to the fact that they did not trust their classmates' accuracy in English. Hence, they requested an assortment of both peer and teacher-assessment. Notwithstanding, in their questionnaires, S. Daliri and T. Ghanooni respectively enumerated some unique advantages of asynchronous communication as increasing the number of

respondents and promoting more reflectivity and criticality before hitting the *Post Comment* button.

In this regard, Z. Rousta (October 12, 2016) claimed that student-driven content development in the form of questions and replies prior to each round table had a significant effect on increasing the level of student-student interactivity, particularly owing to the fact that the students had plenty of time before each round table (i.e., at least three days) to prepare themselves for an informed discussion on challenging questions in the class on Discord as displayed in Figure 2.

### Figure 2

*Practicing negotiation of meaning on challenging topics by entering 2 opposing voice channels on Discord*



Apart from the influential roles of our specific topics and asynchronous channels of communication, it became clear that the teacher, too, contributed successfully to raising the level of interactivity among the students because, according to H. Rezaei and S. Daliri (November 5, 2016), the teacher himself was even more serious than the students in conducting further research on challenging topics and completing the obligatory assignments, that is, asynchronous and collaborative content development for the synchronous round tables on Discord.

### Increasing Social Autonomy or Interdependency

Some round table sessions would begin with voluntary English lectures delivered by the participants with regard to the assigned topics and lasting for approximately five minutes under the title of *Lecture Delivery*. Afterwards, the lecturers would give an interview to the other participants as a point of departure for our discussions. According to V. Kalhor (September 15, 2016), in this student-driven flipped approach to CALL, the students had more *authority*. F. Rezanejad and H. Zanjani, in the same *call for feedback* session, referred to the concept of *student authority* expressed by V. Kalhor as *student autonomy*.

In her questionnaire and individual interview, H. Zanjani (October 12, 2016) reasoned that by means of our collaborative flipped classes, she and her classmates could develop a better

ear for listening because they could pause, rewind or fast forward the embedded videos as many times as they wished to locate appropriate answers to their classmates' questions in the comment forms right below the embedded videos.

In another group interview, S. Daliri and T. Ghanooni (October 6, 2016), who had already experienced traditional face-to-face classes, compared our CALL-based flipped classes with traditional methods for learning English. They argued that in the flipped classes, unlike customary language classes, the students could practice not only the *what* but also the *how* of language learning, particularly through actively engaging in out-of-class activities prior to each round table. To be more precise, at the end of the study, T. Ghanooni (November 12, 2016) said that, aside from general English, she had developed a great deal of computer literacy, thanks to the out-of-class autonomy-raising activities, e.g. conducting further research, completing the asynchronous activities, and so forth.

Our collaborative writing activity to exercise both learner autonomy and interactivity in an asynchronous mode was subject to some criticism. For instance, in his questionnaire, R. Mousavi argued that this writing system lacked adequate unity and coherence as the activity required the essayists to have maximum collaboration with each other to compose an argumentative essay *en masse*, which was not a reasonable expectation. On the other hand, S. Ghomi (November 12, 2016) suggested that, in each session, just one student should write the entire essay individually while the other students, including the teacher, could practice peer and teacher-assessment. This suggestion, however, was challenged in the same *call for feedback* session by some other students, namely A. Ahadzadeh, arguing that they had learned a great deal through their interaction with their peers in our collaborative writing activity.

### Discussion

This study sought to investigate the prospect of establishing and augmenting social presence by means of collaboratively flipping EFL classes through CALL, as sheer student interactivity does not necessarily lead to social presence. In fact, student interactivity must be furnished and perfected with student awareness (Gunawardena, 1995) and student satisfaction (Tu, 2001) to develop into social presence, which is a more mature state. It was also attempted to innovate and optimize traditional flipped classrooms to inject more carefully regulated and engineered socialization into the vessels of EFL classrooms and education systems. As stated earlier, it is important to note that the content in the Results and Discussion sections are NOT interchangeable. In fact, the researchers primarily echoed the participants' opinions and feedback regarding the research questions in the Results section. Subsequently, in this section, the researchers constantly compared and contrasted (i.e., constant comparative method in grounded theory) the raw data obtained from the 8200-word transcript of 41 semi-structured interviews in 25 single-lined pages and the open-ended questionnaire so as to interpret the data profoundly and put flesh on the bones of the raw data. Consequently, the researchers were utterly cognizant of their personal opinions lest they interfere with the intact raw data. In the light of interpreting the participants' feedback on the research questions presented in the Results section, the following findings automatically emerged or *were grounded* (i.e., based on grounded theory) and organized in the following three main categories:

#### Steps in Raising Interest in EFL Learners

One of the essential ingredients of flipping language classes through CALL is the interest factor. If the students are not interested in one way or another, they will not engage in the out-of-class activities. One certain way to arouse the students' interest as a preliminary driving force is

to maximize authentic materials and motivating subject matter to set the ball of student interactivity rolling. When the learners notice that their language learning can yield useful insights into life, particularly in a collaborative mode, i.e. learning from each other, they voluntarily increase their interactivity both asynchronously and synchronously.

Our inquiry-based flipped classes on the premise of instructive and challenging topics appeared to be successful in providing the students with a dynamic (not book-centered) learning environment based on authentic (not instructional) materials. This dynamic learning atmosphere furnished with authentic materials and collaborative learning was genuinely appreciated by the students.

The findings of this study are in agreement with the results of Han's (2015) inquiry on cumulative and beneficial effects of amalgamating collaborative tasks in the classroom with the employment of user-friendly technology outside the classroom to practice all the four skills interactively. Moreover, Wishnoebroto (2014) has emphasized the efficacy of flipped learning in naturally integrating all the four language skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The results of this study, which are also in line with Herreid and Schiller's (2013) case study research, demonstrated that being a relatively novel approach to education, flipping L2 classes was not embraced by the participants enthusiastically, particularly in the initial stages of this longitudinal study. A good example of this point was the particular emphasis that the students placed on our synchronous classes on Discord, overlooking their valuable asynchronous activities. As a result, the researchers had to raise the level of interest in the participants in one way or another.

The participatory role of the first researcher as a *participant observer* in this study and his negotiated interaction with the other participants, particularly in our call for feedback sessions (Merriam, 1998; Nation & Macalister, 2010; Nunan & Bailey, 2009), was a fortuitous opportunity for him to instill this important notion into the students right at the outset of the study that our round tables were not merely restricted to the insignificant amount of time in our synchronous classes. Not accustomed to flipped English classes, the majority of the students needed to be constantly reminded about the temporal duality of flipped classes (i.e., synchronous and asynchronous).

The analysis of the collected data in this study together with the first researcher's own experience as a language blogger confirm this hypothesis that employing a viable CMS as a blogging software program to create and organize digital content, namely WordPress, Drupal, Joomla, etc. can contribute significantly to the creation of an effective online learning community. In this regard, H. Rezaei (September 22, 2016), who was also a computer programmer, appreciated the first researcher's conscious selection of WordPress as the CMS platform because posting, commenting, replying, voting, rating, polling, surveying, embedding videos, podcasting, categorizing and archiving materials, editing, messaging, account creation, profiling, etc. could all appear in one single all-in-one educational package, thanks to WordPress as a pioneer blogging system.

### **Steps in Encouraging Interactivity**

As implied earlier, any successful CALL program aimed at practicing flipped learning must furnish the online L2 learners with a friendly and inviting social context hosted on a robust server so that groups of students could maximize asynchronous collaborative activities in a smooth and comfortable manner. In their open-ended questionnaires, H. Rezaei and Peyman stated that a friendly and inviting social context built upon a viable platform to accommodate

myriads of asynchronous collaborative activities is an essential prerequisite for establishing social presence.

Flipping CALL-oriented EFL classes appeared to be conducive to the realization of social presence or “a feeling of community or connection among learners” (Palloff & Pratt, 2005, p. 7) as this approach can promote an abundance of rich social interactions (Godwin-Jones, 2014). In our round tables, which were on the premise of both synchronous and asynchronous CMC, Initiation-Response Feedback (IRF), according to which the teacher initiates the stream of class activities (Abrams, 2001; Waring, 2009) was challenged because the learners were supposed to become actively and responsively involved in a genuinely informed exchange of questions and answers among each other, initially in the threaded comment forms in response to the embedded videos, and then in the form of synchronous negotiation of meaning on Discord in the class and with direct reference to their own comments and replies.

In our round tables furnished with embedded lectures by prominent scholars worldwide, the very act of referring to the specified elapsed time of the presentations to pinpoint specific statements, expressions, technical terms, etc. proved to be essentially effective. To be more exact, the students would maximize this useful technique in their collaborative asynchronous activities prior to our round tables on Discord. In this way, the students could request or provide clear evidence for their claims respectively reflected in their questions or replies in the comment forms.

With the intention of flipping English classes collaboratively, this point merits consideration that the teacher should mindfully restrain his/her presence in the virtual learning environment. In other words, excessive assessment and error correction on the part of the teacher, e.g. in the comment forms and discussion boards, proved to be counterproductive due to the fact that immediate teacher-assessment can impede student-student interactivity as a precondition for the realization of social presence. On the other hand, the students themselves would frequently request teacher-assessment. To seek an appropriate solution to this problem, in our *call for feedback* sessions, it was settled that the teacher would perform error correction only when self or peer-assessment to account for learner autonomy and interactivity respectively did not yield satisfactory results.

It is worth noting that it may not be possible to flip just any English classes. In one round table session on the very subject of flipped learning, having listened to the recorded lecture by the teacher, S. Ghomi (November 12, 2016) stated that this approach cannot be applicable to pre-intermediate students and/or below. Later on, it was discussed that not only less proficient English learners, but also those who are too young (below puberty) or do not possess adequate computer literacy cannot take full advantage of flipped learning due to the fact that these learners might not be able to effectively participate in the asynchronous CMC activities in preparation for each class, namely conducting requisite further research, utilizing the threaded comment forms and discussion boards, and so forth.

### **Steps in Increasing Interdependency**

The informed CMC activities (both synchronous and asynchronous) in our round tables had led to the realization of interdependency or social autonomy (Blin, 2004), which is a more mature state in comparison to independency or individual autonomy, because the students were expected to depend upon each other to develop a more profound understanding of the assigned themes in an interactive context. To exemplify the sense of interdependency in our round tables in the light of flipped learning, it is worth noting that some round tables ended up having up to 90 interactive threaded comments in response to the embedded videos, which furnished the students with bona fide materials to discuss in the class. For instance, in one of our call for feedback

sessions, S. Daliri (August 4, 2016) explained that through the exchange of asynchronous questions and replies, he was able to distinguish the subtle differences between satire and comedy, which were hidden to him before. According to S. Daliri, in the same group interview, “When you notice the details of things with more scrutiny, your perspective on life differs, and respectively, the course of your life will change for the better”.

This sense of interdependency, which is a necessary prerequisite for the fulfillment of social presence in online venues (Blin, 2004), manifested itself in the form of asynchronous peer-assessment, particularly in our collaborative writing activity where the students as the essayists were supposed to compose an argumentative essay collaboratively. Consequently, it was imperative for the essayists to conduct negotiation of meaning (asking for clarification) to fulfill the collaborative task, which was thoroughly asynchronous. With regard to the concept of interdependency, in a call for feedback session, F. Rezanejad, an M.A. graduate in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (September 8, 2016) mentioned that the collaboratively flipped classes helped her to become a more profound and critical thinker and learn a wide array of useful things through the window of English to improve her life. For instance, she said, “I learned that I should listen to my friends and think about their ideas, so it made me more critical than before”. On the other hand, in his questionnaire, S. Daliri argued that the students could practice interactive brainstorming and problem-solving activities on exciting topics initially in the asynchronous communication channels, and then in our voice-based synchronous classes on Discord. It is important to note that collaborative brainstorming and problem solving as both out-of-class and in-class activities are indicators of the existence of a sense of belonging in the learners, which is an important pillar of social presence (Picciano, 2002).

In this regard, F. Rezanejad, (September 15, 2016), compared our student-driven English classes with the ones she was accustomed to as a university student, concluding that the flipped classes were more practical for learning English because the learners adopted genuinely active roles in learning from each other.

The transcription and analysis of the recorded interviews (25 single-spaced pages, approximately 8200 words) alongside the participants’ open-ended questionnaires vis-à-vis their social and individual experiences in an online class over one year were conducive to proving this assumption that, irrespective of their various learning styles and personalities, the online EFL learners can maximize both synchronous and asynchronous interactivity, increase their asynchronous reflectivity before the class and synchronous impulsiveness in the class, and exercise both collaboration and individualization in education provided that social presence is brought to fruition through flipping EFL classes collaboratively because of the social essence of language learning and the availability of the internet and state-of-the-art technology.

### **Conclusions**

The analysis of the data in this study spotlighted the significance of collaboratively flipping EFL classes through CALL in realizing and augmenting the sense of social presence, which is a shared feeling of community or connection among the learners (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). In the light of this study, it became clear that flipped EFL classes in collaboration are superior over flipped classes without collaboration for raising the level of awareness and autonomy in the learners as they learn how to learn from each other. In other words, flipping EFL classes with a particular emphasis on asynchronous student-student interactivity can promote the sense of interdependency or social autonomy (Blin, 2004), which is a more mature state in comparison to utter individualization and independency.

This valuable sense of interdependency driven by challenging, interesting and useful topics can often encourage even lethargic students to become genuinely active, because collaborative flipped classes can promote both *interactive individualization* and *individualized interactivity* simultaneously. That is to say, bearing in mind that they are assessed by their peers and not necessarily the teacher, the learners are inspired to sustain their asynchronous collaborative learning experience in a more stress-free and less teacher-driven learning environment, which is conducive to the realization of social presence. In addition, collaborative flipped classes through CALL can facilitate asynchronous joint brainstorming and problem-solving activities accompanied by skill integration and peer-assessment. As a consequence, learners will develop a sense of belonging to the online learning environment in which they experience collaborative flipped classes.

Although the significance of flipped classroom has already been investigated, the amalgamation of flipped learning and collaborative learning to practice a second/foreign language through CALL appears to have been unresearched. Considering one of the unique features of Web-based language learning, i.e. asynchronous or out-of-class activities, it appears to be reasonable to make flipped classes more interactive by motivating the learners to maximize asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC). In this regard, it is hoped that the findings of this inquiry could yield useful insights into approaching a more integrative genre of CALL in which group-based activities (Lamy & Hampel, 2007) and learner autonomy (Blin, 2004; McBride & Seago, 1996) are sufficiently practiced.

It is recommended that flipped learning, as a relatively novel approach to education, be perfected with challenging and useful topics to set the ball of student interactivity rolling, particularly asynchronously. In this regard, teacher's presence in asynchronous activities should be regulated to encourage and make room for student-student interactivity and engagement, namely out-of-class peer-assessment and student-driven content development. It is worth noting that integrative CALL places much emphasis on student engagement and group-based activities, and flipping EFL classes collaboratively could be considered a step toward the fulfillment of integrative CALL.

The analysis of the findings of this study together with its adopted procedure could be of practical assistance to CALL specialists, SLA educators, digital content developers, computer software developers and computer engineers who aim to establish an interactive learning environment to practice second/foreign languages online. It is important to note that, these days, due to the worldwide CoronaVirus pandemic, some aspects of education have undergone certain paradigm shifts, particularly in terms of distance learning according to which learners' rooms change into real classrooms equipped with technology. For instance, computer engineers and website developers could be inspired by the findings of this study to revolutionize the social context of online language environments to meet learners' emerging needs, namely the implementation of nested and asynchronous voice commenting systems like Heyoya<sup>2</sup> instead of traditional comment forms where language learners can leave both voice and text comments asynchronously and interactively. A more socially oriented online learning environment running on cloud-based servers and content delivery network (CDN) where the entire website is equally distributed and accessible throughout the globe, like the social context of this study at LELB Society, can technically transform local language institutes and universities into international educational institutions with more economic prospects for growth and dynamism.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.heyoya.com/>



Furthermore, this study could encourage collaboration between CALL experts and software developers to design better gamification systems, such as MyCred<sup>3</sup>, for language learners to increase student engagement by including game-like elements in education through which learners can perfectly track their own progress in the online social context like the system implemented at Khan Academy<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, since unmonitored over-socialization on the part of language learners could obfuscate the intended scholastic objectives, this study recommends the employment of an appropriate monitoring system, apart from gamification systems, to help language learners take steps in the right path.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://mycred.me/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.khanacademy.org/>

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## Appendix

### Question Items of Interviews

1. Please explain about the activities and methods that were used by the teacher so that you could learn English in interaction with your classmates.
2. Have you developed any sense of belonging to our society? If yes, please explain how?
3. In our classes, we practiced self-assessment, peer-assessment and teacher-assessment. What is your idea about the effect of these three assessment types on your language learning? Which one do you consider to be more helpful?
4. In our round tables, you created the main content of the course through commenting and replying. What is the impact of this flipped approach on your experience in learning English online?
5. What is the influence of our intellectual topics on your language learning experience?

6. Between synchronous and asynchronous communication, which one seems to play a more important role in generating the sense of social presence among online L2 learners?
7. Do you have any further suggestion(s) that can help us increase student-student interactivity?