



The Challenges of Online Instruction in Oral Communication: Student Perspectives

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented restrictions that reshaped daily life, including education. With the suspension of face-to-face classes in 2020, universities rapidly shifted to online distance learning, requiring adjustments in curricula, teaching methods, and pedagogical strategies. This study explored the challenges students face in developing oral communication skills in virtual learning environments and examined the coping mechanisms they employ. Guided by Garrison et al.'s *Community of Inquiry* (COI) framework, the research investigated the influence of social, cognitive, teaching, and technological presence on students' communication experiences. Using a descriptive qualitative design, one-on-one virtual interviews were conducted with students from Centro Escolar University, Manila, during the 2021–2022 academic year. Thematic analysis revealed that students struggled with social anxiety, reduced cognitive engagement, limited instructional facilitation, and technological barriers such as unstable internet connectivity. Despite these challenges, learners relied on their macro skills—reading, listening, speaking, and writing—alongside coping strategies like self-regulation, online interactions, and multimedia engagement. Based on these findings, the study proposes pedagogical and technological interventions to enhance oral communication in online classes. These include fostering social presence, adopting active facilitation strategies, integrating self-regulated learning modules, and improving ICT infrastructure. The results provide practical insights for educators, institutions, and policymakers to strengthen communication outcomes in virtual education.

Keywords: Online distance learning, oral communication skills, Community of inquiry, virtual classes, coping strategies



Introduction

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in December 2019 disrupted multiple sectors worldwide, including education. The first suspected case in the Philippines was investigated on January 22, 2020 (Edrada et al., 2020), and by September 2021, the Department of Health recorded 75,766 confirmed cases. This global health crisis triggered an urgent paradigm shift in education, prompting the World Health Organization to recommend alternative learning modalities to avoid face-to-face classes. In response, the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) issued a series of memoranda (DM Nos. 15, 21, 23, 31, and 34, 2020) establishing task forces and guidelines for implementing online and blended learning systems.

Previous studies (Hipol et al., 2020; Alea et al., 2020) reported that the national government facilitated access to online education by distributing digital devices and internet connectivity support. Educational institutions adopted relevant technologies, prepared staff resources, revised curricula, and implemented new teaching protocols. Ventayin (2018), as cited by Alea et al. (2020), revealed that Filipino teachers demonstrated a degree of preparedness for online instruction despite limited experience in distance education, showing adaptability in technical skills, time management, and online teaching attitudes. Similar levels of readiness were observed in Thailand (Ozturk et al., 2018).

Currently, many institutions employ a hybrid approach, combining synchronous and asynchronous modes (Barrot et al., 2021). While this provides flexibility for module-based and real-time learning, numerous studies (Barrot et al., 2021; Adarkwah, 2021; Shrivastava et al., 2021) highlighted persistent obstacles in home-based learning environments: inadequate mastery of technology, high internet costs, limited interaction, and reduced opportunities for socialization. The absence of non-verbal cues in virtual classrooms further affects students' perception of "social presence" (Lowenthal, 2009; Mahadin & Hallak, 2021), a critical factor in effective communication.

Oral communication is integral to the 4Cs of 21st-century skills—critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity (Hikamah, 2021). It encompasses not only verbal fluency but also social, expressive, ritual, and instrumental functions (Masdul, 2018), shaping students' ability to relate to peers, professors, and diverse communities. Despite extensive research on language learning, few studies have focused on the impact of online learning on students' spoken and verbal communication skills.

Anchored on Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2001) Community of Inquiry (COI) framework, this study investigates the challenges students face in developing oral

communication skills in online learning environments. Specifically, it examines how social, cognitive, teaching, and technological presence influence their experiences, identifies coping strategies (e.g., reading, podcasts, online interactions, gaming), and proposes pedagogical and technological techniques to improve online oral communication instruction.

Methods

This study employed descriptive qualitative design, appropriate for exploring the diverse perspectives of students regarding their challenges and coping strategies in developing oral communication skills during online learning. The research was conducted at Centro Escolar University (CEU), Manila, Philippines, during the first and second semesters of the School Year 2021–2022.

Participants

A total of 14 students from the School of Education, Liberal Arts, Music, and Social Work (SELAMS) participated in the study. All participants were enrolled in virtual synchronous classes during the period of data collection.

Sampling Technique

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, considering students from different levels enrolled in SELAMS as eligible.

Ethical Considerations

Before data collection, the study secured approval from the Institutional Ethics Review Board (IERB) of Centro Escolar University. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity.

Research Instrument

The Data were gathered using a professionally validated, researcher-made interview guide, reviewed by three experts in communication and language. The guide included open-ended questions that explored students' perceptions of challenges, barriers, and coping mechanisms in online oral communication.

Data Analysis



Transcribed data were organized and coded using thematic analysis, identifying patterns corresponding to the domains of social presence, cognitive presence, teaching presence, and technological presence.

Results and Discussion

1. Challenges in Enhancing Oral Communication Skills in Online Learning

Thematic analysis of the interviews, guided by Garrison et al.'s (2001) Community of Inquiry (COI) framework, revealed four major domains of challenges: social presence, cognitive presence, teaching presence, and technological presence.

1. www.yahoo.com

2. Social Presence

Students reported heightened social anxiety and reduced confidence during online discussions. The absence of non-verbal cues intensified fear of judgment and self-consciousness:

“I only express my opinions when I am called to recite by my professor... I’m afraid people might label me as a ‘know-it-all.’” (P1, 2022)

Other contributors included:

Social pressure from instructors’ demeanor: Strict or “terror” professors discouraged voluntary participation.

Overwhelming class sizes: Students were more active in smaller major classes (2–6 students) but hesitant in general subjects with large audiences across campuses.

2. Cognitive Presence

Participants highlighted short attention spans, mental fatigue, and difficulty generating ideas during virtual learning. Limited interaction and prolonged screen exposure diminished their ability to organize and articulate thoughts:

“I know what I’m trying to say, it’s already in my mind, but in my speech, it lags.” (P3, 2022)



Frequent mental blocks, reliance on online paraphrasing, and fatigue from overlapping academic tasks (including OJT for some) further reduced participation quality.

3. Teaching Presence

The lack of active instructional facilitation affected students' autonomy and engagement. The absence of physical monitoring also led to decreased focus and self-regulation of students. Moreover, the limited teaching strategies (e.g., reading slides without further explanation, monotonous recitation formats) reduced opportunities for meaningful oral practice. There were also recorded instances of difficulty in establishing two-way conversations; students felt discouraged when only select peers were called or when high-level vocabulary intimidated them.

“There are also professors who just read the presentations... When I get bored, I also can't answer the questions.” (P14, 2022)

4. Technological Presence

Although not part of the original COI framework, technological factors emerged as a cross-cutting barrier:

Slow internet connections caused disrupted turn-taking, lost momentum, and anxiety over missed content:

“When my internet is slow... Even if I come back to the virtual room, it feels like the moment has passed, so I would be hesitant to speak.” (P2, 2022)

Device malfunctions (e.g., lagging microphones, heavy platforms like Zoom) also undermined speaking confidence, sometimes leading peers to misinterpret broken audio as incoherence.

Coping Strategies Utilized by Students in Online Learning

Students employed a range of coping mechanisms to manage oral communication challenges in virtual classes. Thematic analysis revealed strategies across receptive skills (reading, listening, viewing), productive skills (speaking, writing), metacognitive regulation, and alternative learning engagements (online gaming, webinars).

1. Receptive Skills

1.1 Reading

Reading served as both a linguistic and psychological coping mechanism. Participants reported that reading self-help books and literature helped them adapt to online learning changes:

“Reading self-help books help me cope with the communicative challenges in online classes.” (P6, 2022)

Key benefits included:

- Vocabulary building (P2, P3): Improved synonym recognition and grammatical confidence.
- Confidence and self-expression (P4, P11): Reading provided knowledge to support active participation.

1.2 Listening

Students used listening as a means of language modeling and idea refreshment. They reported:

- Listening to podcasts (P7, P9): Boosted confidence and updated their knowledge on various issues.
- Listening to music (P12): Enriched vocabulary, especially in English, through contextualized exposure.

1.3 Viewing

Participants engaged with multimedia for oral communication enhancement:

- TED Talks (P1, P8): Provided visual models for professional speaking techniques and presentation style.
- TV shows and news (P10, P12): Helped learners observe proper word usage and expression.

2. Productive Skills

2.1 Speaking

Students practiced speaking through:

- Virtual conversations (P1, P4, P5, P6, P10): Casual talks on Discord, Messenger, and video calls improved fluency.
- In-person conversations with family (P2, P6): Provided low-pressure environments to rehearse speaking.

2.2 Writing

Use of online grammar tools (Grammarly, Quillbot, Google Docs) supported oral communication indirectly by improving awareness of grammar and sentence structure:

“Even though Grammarly is more concerned with correcting writing errors, it... helps me reflect on the correct pronouns and grammar to use, that I can apply to my speaking skills.” (P1, 2022)

However, several participants (P9, P12) noted limited direct impact on real-time oral skills.

3. Metacognitive Strategies

Students exhibited self-regulation and reflective planning to overcome communication anxiety. Examples include:

- Pre-discussion planning and mental rehearsal (P3, P8).
- Adjusting vocabulary for clarity (P9).
- Using Google Docs for spoken rehearsal (P14).

4. Alternative Coping Mechanisms

- Online gaming (P4, P12): Provided real-time verbal interaction with peers.
- Online conferences/webinars (P6, P7, P10): Expanded exposure to professional language use and boosted confidence, albeit with limited active speaking opportunities for some.

Proposed Pedagogical and Technological Techniques

Based on the identified challenges in social, cognitive, teaching, and technological presence, the study proposes a series of evidence-informed interventions designed to enhance oral communication in online learning.

1. Enhancing Social Presence

1.1 Increasing Virtual Social Engagement

Students reported that low social presence contributed to anxiety and reduced participation. Consistent with Polat et al. (2022) and Garrison & Arbaugh (2007), fostering classroom communities through structured student–student interaction, study groups, and informal exchanges can reduce perceived pressure, build belongingness, and increase oral participation.

1.2 Gradual Hybrid Integration

Participants suggested that a transitional hybrid model may ease anxiety during the shift from online to face-to-face learning:

“I prefer to say that I want a hybrid setup... not instantly. I want it to slowly and gradually become f2f.” (P9, 2022)

Hybrid settings provide opportunities for progressive exposure, helping socially anxious students adjust.

2. Strengthening Teaching Presence

2.1 Active Instructor Facilitation

The study recommends instructors adopt a facilitative role (Archbell, 2020), using methods such as:

- Interactive teaching tools (e.g., mobile polling, quizzes) to support anonymous participation (Lim, 2017).
- Blogs, discussion posts, or small-group settings to reduce intimidation (Wang, 2010).
- Increased instructor immediacy and response times (Douglas et al., 2008) to enhance student satisfaction.

3. Increasing Cognitive Presence

3.1 Integrating Self-Regulated Learning Strategies (SRLS)

Aligned with Imbriale & Wandler (2017), the study proposes:

- Self-regulation modules on goal setting, time management, and note-taking.
- Student study logs (Chang, 2007) to track progress and reflect on learning habits.
- Prompting self-reflection with short weekly questionnaires (Sitzmann & Ely, 2010).
- Text message or email reminders (Lauricella & Kay, 2013; Kim & Keller, 2008).
- Scaffolding tasks and due dates (Michinov et al., 2011) to prevent procrastination.
- Fostering help-seeking behaviors through peer and instructor channels (Cheng et al., 2013).

These approaches aim to mitigate short attention spans, mental fatigue, and idea generation difficulties reported by participants.



4. Strengthening Technological Presence

The most complex barrier—unstable internet and device malfunctions—requires systemic rather than classroom-level solutions. Based on Cha et al.'s (2020) ICT4ED framework, the study recommends:

Phased integration of ICT (preparation, initiation, implementation, and knowledge creation) to gradually enhance infrastructure and learner readiness.

Government-led improvements in connectivity and resource allocation, as classroom interventions alone cannot resolve structural limitations.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that effective online oral communication relies on the interplay of social, cognitive, teaching, and technological presences. Students' experiences revealed that social anxiety, reduced cognitive engagement, insufficient instructional facilitation, and persistent technological barriers hindered their ability to communicate effectively in virtual classrooms. Despite these challenges, learners exhibited resilience by drawing on their macro skills—reading, listening, speaking, and writing—and by adopting coping strategies such as metacognitive planning and self-regulation. These adaptive behaviors highlight the importance of structured teacher facilitation and active engagement strategies in reducing anxiety and encouraging participation. Moreover, the findings emphasize that systemic ICT-centered reforms are essential to address persistent connectivity and infrastructure issues that lie beyond classroom interventions. Taken together, the study underscores the need for pedagogical innovation and policy support to strengthen oral communication skills in online learning environments and to ensure that students remain equipped for both current and future modes of education.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, several measures are proposed to enhance online learning:

For instructors, continuous professional development is essential to strengthen digital competency and ensure effective online facilitation. Active



teaching strategies—such as interactive tools, hybrid approaches, and scaffolded tasks—should be adopted to foster participation and reduce student anxiety. Incorporating self-regulation modules into course design may further enhance learners' adaptability and engagement.

For administrators, providing reliable digital platforms, applications, and software must be prioritized. Alongside this, institutionalizing digital literacy programs for faculty and establishing monitoring frameworks will help track students' cognitive and social well-being in virtual settings.

At the educational and governmental level, practical ICT integration plans tailored to national infrastructure are critical. Regular assessments of online education implementation and strategic efforts to improve internet connectivity are necessary to address systemic disruptions and ensure equitable access.

Finally, for future researchers, extending inquiry to instructors' communicative challenges, conducting large-scale multi-program interventions, and investigating the long-term impacts of hybrid and ICT-enhanced models are recommended to broaden the scope of evidence and strengthen online learning practices.

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