Understanding Attrition Among EFL Teachers in Online Training

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Abstract

This study was an examination of factors influencing influencing attrition/ persistence among teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in online teacher training. Tinto's Community of Inquiry framework and Short, Williams, and Christie's Social Presence Model formed the conceptual framework. Six participants from 4 online courses in Latin America participated in the study.

Problem

Enrollment in **online education** is steadily **increasing** with its appeal for anytime/anywhere access, but **attrition** continues to be an increasing problem with **persistence** rates much lower than in traditional face-to-face courses (Croxton, 2014).

Despite past research identifying factors that contribute to student attrition in online settings, little research has focused on in-service teachers in online environments.

Therefore, addressing the attrition problem is critical to the success of online education, especially among in-service teachers being trained to teach in online programs. Online solutions are readily available for language learning but outcomes are still questionable.

Purpose

The **focus** of this qualitative case study was to explore **factors that inhibit attrition/promote persistence** in EFL online teacher training.

Research Question

What factors influence attrition and persistence among in-service EFL teachers in an online teacher training environment?

Relevant Literature

Seminal Work
- CoI theory was developed in an effort to understand how social presence occurs within a medium (Tinto, 1975). It was later applied to education to understand components leading to learner engagement (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000).
- Social presence theory was developed in an effort to better understand communication & interactions (Short et al.,1976).

Factors in Attrition
- Park and Choi (2009) classified attrition factors into internal, external, and demographics categories. Although, the question remained whether teachers in online training displayed similar factors.
- Guan et al. (2015) set out to understand the challenges of online learning from the perspectives of adults e-learners, and found that training is necessary prior to e-learning experiences.

Investigating Attrition
- Shea and Bidjerano (2009) used the CoI constructs to create a single instrument that measured CoI presences.
- They used the quantitative tool that emerged to measure individuals' social presence, cognitive presence, and teacher presence. However, their quantitative study lacked further open discussion with participants to better understand the phenomenon.

Procedures

The population from which the sample was drawn was a convenience sample of EFL teachers in an international network of institutions. The sample consisted of six participants.

- Online Consent (Survey Monkey): 6
- Narrative (email): 6
- Online interview questions (Survey Monkey): 6
- Interview protocol for focus groups - Online conference (Zoom): 4

Data Analysis

All data (narratives, online questionnaires, and online focus groups) served as input to analyze responses and discover emerging themes. The themes within each data set then were used to compare the frequency and intensity across the three data. This practice allowed me to arrive at most important themes across all.

Findings

CoI elements were linked to **persistence** and **attrition. CoI** found to be relevant among online students was just as relevant among teachers.

Social Presence
- Learners value more highly activities that promote social presence than pure instructional activities.
- They felt they learned more from each other than the teacher or the material at times.
- Teachers would have wanted an online synchronous component to engage with others as they did in the focus group.

Teacher Presence
- Lack of teacher presence was challenging. It led a teacher to drop out twice, and one teacher felt she failed due to lack of communication from teacher.
- Teachers who experienced tutor presence felt such presence increased motivation. One teacher, despite a car accident, and being in the hospital finished the course due to her tutor's constant communication and inspiration to not give up.

Cognitive Presence
- Teachers were divided in their feeling about interaction with the content. Half felt the content was useful but too basic. The others felt the content was engaging and motivating.

Limitations

- Anticipated limitation: lack of facial expressions during focus group.
- Voluntary participation among potential dropouts.
- Researcher's belief in online education

Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence are key components of a successful online teacher training program. These three elements can enhance course participants' experience and lead to online persistence and course completion. On the contrary, when absent or weak, the lack of such presences can be demotivating, discouraging, and even lead to attrition.

Social Change Implications

Understanding of attrition and persistence in online teacher training.

Understand how the Community of Inquiry components influence attrition and persistence.

Implementing changes could create teacher training curriculum and activities that are more engaging, interactive, and relevant.

In turn, better trained teachers could impact online student attrition and persistence.

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