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Understanding Attrition Among English as a Foreign Language Teachers in Online Training

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
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Abstract

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Abstract

Attrition among students in online courses worldwide is well-documented at the undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate levels. However, little is yet known about the reason for attrition among in-service teachers in online training. Online education aims to provide access to education for the masses, but with higher attrition rates, it may be viewed as less effective than traditional education. This study explored factors that influenced attrition and persistence among teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in an online teacher training environment. Tinto's Community of Inquiry framework and Short, Williams, and Christie's Social Presence Model provided the conceptual framework for this qualitative case study to address the research question. Six participants in Latin America from 4 online courses, selected through criterion and convenience sampling, participated in the study. Data sources included online questionnaires, personal narratives, and a focus group interview. Each data set was analyzed using open coding to identify emerging themes, selective coding for purposes of analysis, and finally axial coding to confirm overarching themes. Findings indicate that social, teacher, and cognitive presence are key to engagement in online learning and persistence, while lack of such presences can demotivate and lead to attrition. Thus, it is important to design online training that fosters all 3 types of presence. Results also included recommendations for designing more engaging online teacher training curricula. This study contributes to positive social change by providing online course designers with a deeper understanding of factors which influence attrition and persistence.

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Dedication

I thank God for the many blessings bestowed upon me including the precious opportunity to access education. I dedicate this work to my husband José Gabín and my daughters Isabel and Raquel. Without their support and understanding, I would not have been able to complete this journey. I do not take their sacrifices for granted. I thank them for believing in me even when I doubted myself.

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Infinite thanks to Dr. Kay Persichitte for all her support during this process. Her expertise and guidance have been invaluable. Her willingness to "keep up with me" and help me achieve my goals within my timeline were heroic. I thank Dr. Gary Lacy for his wisdom and ability to help me see new ideas and ways I had not contemplated. Thanks to my supervisor Gordon Lewis for his support and encouragement both in my professional and educational endeavors. Finally, thanks to my mother Antonia Tejada who taught me the value of education very early in life. She made tremendous sacrifices so that I may achieve what she was not fortunate enough to reach.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Researchers have noted the ongoing problem of high attrition levels (drop outs) among higher education students in U.S. online programs (Chakraborty & Nafukho, 2015; Hartnett, 2015). Attrition is higher in online programs than in face-to-face programs (Angelino & Natvig. 2009; Patterson & McFadden, 2009), yet online teaching remains a stable form of education worldwide (Chametzky, 2016). Despite research into the matter, the completion disparity continues (Sangodiah, Beleya, Njitham-Nuniandy, Heng, & Ramendran, 2015). Critics are increasingly concerned about the efficacy of online education and despite the growing body of research; attrition remains a significant problem for schools, educators, and learners (Hart, 2012). Thus, understanding factors that impact attrition is crucial to supporting completion and promoting persistence.

In examining this phenomenon, researchers have concentrated on undergraduate and graduate students (Ashby, Sadera, & McNary, 2011; Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004; Park & Choi, 2009; Willging & Johnson, 2004). Researchers have found several factors that affect persistence among online learners including motivation (Boston et al., 2009), technical difficulties (Sitzmann, Ely, Bradford, & Bauer, 2010), procrastination, time management, and financial difficulties (Metscher, 2014). Researchers have not focused enough on teachers as online learners (Cook, Ley, Crawford, & Warner, 2009; Guan, Ding, & Ho, 2015). This gap in research is a problem. Teachers who complete online courses may experience some of the same difficulties their students do and may be better prepared to guide their students to successful completion.

My purpose in conducting this study was to provide more understanding of attrition and persistence factors among these online educators. Understanding their difficulties can shed light on ways to offer more engaging teacher training curricula that lead to persistence for other online learners. Furthermore, with my findings, I can influence online education beyond the group studied as they, in turn, will teach online students of their own. The goal of online learning as a vehicle to provide access to education for the masses can be better fulfilled if the online medium of instruction is more effective.

I begin Chapter 1 with a brief discussion of existing research on the topic of attrition in online environments. I also present my conceptual framework. After doing so, I describe the purpose, nature of the study, pertinent definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. I end Chapter 1 by presenting my research question and a discussion of the significance of the study.

Background

Online education has been growing, and its popularity continues to increase, but attrition remains a serious threat. High attrition rates have economic and educational implications for governments, institutions, and learners (Moody, 2014; Sangodiah et al., 2015). Learners who drop out and do not complete their programs fail to benefit from online education. Institutions rely on completion rates to meet academic standards and budget expectations. Finally, governments providing loans for education may fail to recapture their investments if students do not complete programs, join the workforce, or repay their loans. The degree of attrition varies by institution, program, age group, and by

many other factors (Patterson & McFadden, 2009). In an attempt to find a relationship between dropouts and other variables, Patterson and McFadden studied campus-based and online MBA students focusing on three variables; gender, age, and ethnicity (2009). They found a significantly higher dropout rate in the online program (six times higher). Older students were more likely to drop out, as were Black students. However, gender did not present a statistically significant difference. To make matters more complicated, definitions of attrition vary thus making it difficult to compare attrition rates between programs and institutions (Frydenberg, 2007). Even within the same institution, researchers may end up comparing "apples and oranges" (Frydenberg, 2007, p. 3). During my research, I did not always find clearly established definitions. However, I have specified that in my study, attrition includes various possibilities (e.g., no shows, dropouts, withdrawals, or failures). Standardization of definitions could help in better understanding how completion rates compare between online and campus-based programs.

In the worst of cases, completion rates as low as 2% were documented in Coursera's Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) on social network analysis (Khalil & Ebner, 2014). Some experts report up to 15% completion rates in other MOOCs (Markman & Stallings, 2014). However, these online courses have such low completion rates that the public may deem them ineffective.

As of 2015, most researchers have focused on attrition among undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students taking online courses (Guan, Ding, & Ho, 2015). There has also been research in corporate settings (McMahon, 2013). For example,

Metscher (2014) intended to identify factors contributing to high attrition rates in online

programs. The Metscher sample included 732 graduate online students and 476

undergraduate online students. Metscher found that procrastination, time management,

and financial difficulties contributed to dropout rates (2014). Metscher did not study

teachers, which leaves open the opportunity to understand if the same factors identified in

his study could potentially impact in-service teachers. According to my review of the

research, the specific subpopulation of practicing teachers enrolled in online curricula has

not been adequately addressed. Educators in my population sample taking online courses

often do so in order to to expand their pedagogical skills and obtain continuing education

credits. Understanding attrition and persistence factors among teachers in training is a

crucial step in addressing the attrition problem in online education.

Problem Statement

Enrollment in online education is steadily increasing worldwide due to its appeal

for anytime or anywhere access to courses, trainings, and programs (Sitzmann, 2012).

Online education enrollment, in general, is increasing at a rate of 20% per year (Moloney

& Oakley, 2010). But, attrition continues to be a problem with persistence rates much

lower than in traditional face-to-face courses (Croxton, 2014). Angelino and Natvig

(2009) found that attrition was 10 to 20% higher in online programs when compared to

campus-based programs. Also, attrition rates are increasing faster in online programs than

in face-to-face programs (Ashby et al., 2011; Park & Choi, 2009). School administrators,

teachers, and learners may find reduced access to online education if attrition rates

continue to be so high in years to come. Therefore, it is important to lower attrition rates and promote persistence in online courses and programs.

To lower attrition rates, it is important to understand why learners drop out of courses or programs. Researchers have identified several factors that contribute to student attrition in online settings (e.g., Ashby, Sadera, & McNary, 2011; Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004; Park & Choi, 2009; Willging & Johnson, 2004). Factors affecting persistence among online learners include motivation (Boston et al., 2009), technical difficulties (Sitzmann, Ely, Bradford, & Bauer, 2010), procrastination, time management, and financial difficulties (Metscher, 2014). High attirion rates are costly to schools that may run classes with lower student numbers than anticipated. In addition, learners have the financial burden of paying tuition for courses they do not complete.

Scholars studying student attrition have focused on undergraduate, graduate, and corporate learners, but they have not studied English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in online environments. Hart (2012) analyzed factors affecting online persistence in community colleges, undergraduate, and graduate students in the U.S. and internationally. Among scholars studying attrition in online settings, McMahon (2013) studied causes of attrition among adult learners in the corporate world within the context of staff development. McMahon (2013) found that a sense of isolation was a determining factor in attrition. Few researchers studying attrition have focused on in-service teachers in online environments (Cook, Ley, Crawford, & Warner, 2009; Guan, Ding, & Ho, 2015) , leaving a gap in the research literature. Teachers who successfully complete online courses may experience some of the same difficulties their students do. The results

of my study offer advice for these teachers to better guide their students to completion in online courses or programs.

Addressing the attrition problem is critical to the success of online education. According to Volery and Lord (2000), there was great excitement for online teaching and learning in higher education as the century turned. Online programs could open access to education for new audiences, alleviate capacity issues, and capitalize on emergent technologies (Volery & Lord, 2000). However, Volery and Lord (2000) noted that effectiveness as measured by completion rates and learner performance must be documented. It follows, then, that training teachers to be successful in online teaching programs is important if online education is to fill its promises. Therefore, I believe that examining attrition among in-service teachers being trained to teach in online programs is of particular importance.

In this study, I sought to better understand factors associated with attrition and persistence among EFL in-service teachers in an online teacher training environment. Identifying factors that support or inhibit in-service teachers in the completion of online training contributes to the literature on attrition in online education. My study may also aid institutions in designing future interventions to decrease teacher attrition in their online training and support their students' persistence in online courses.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore factors that influence attrition and persistence among in-service EFL teachers taking online teacher training courses. Researchers in the current literature highlight some aspects that contribute to

dropping out and lack of persistence among students taking online courses (e.g.,

Giesbers, Rienties, Tempelaar, & Gijselaers, 2014; Wen, Yang, & Rosé, 2014). Few

researchers have studied how the causes of attrition and persistence may differ for in-

service teachers in online training (Guan et al., 2015). Guan et al. noted that

understanding the factors influencing attrition and persistence in online education is an

imperative. Designing instruction that promotes persistence could be possible through a

better understanding of factors influencing attrition. I believe that conducting research on

attrition among teachers seeking to teach online courses is especially important because

the teachers' preparation to teach online depends on the very training they are not

completing.

In providing data on EFL teachers' experiences in online training, I hope that my

research will be helpful in developing future interventions for online teacher preparation

programs. The conceptual framework that I chose to underpin my investigation was the

community of inquiry (CoI) model. The CoI is a commonly used model to understand the

dynamics of group learning (Boston et al., 2009). I also hope that my results help to

identify instructional practices that can prove beneficial to distance education delivery

and teacher professional development. More engaging online teacher training may lead to

better completion rates.

Research Question

The research question for this study was, What factors influence attrition and

persistence among in-service EFL teachers in an online teacher training environment?

Conceptual Framework

For over two decades, researchers have investigated attrition in both face-to-face and online programs (Guan et al., 2015). In my research study, I focused on identifying factors inhibiting persistence among teachers in online training courses. I used CoI and social presence as my primary conceptual models. I will explain these concepts in further detail in Chapter 2. Below is a brief introduction to each.

Community of Inquiry

Researchers have used Tinto's CoI model to examine how learners function as a collective unit in a course or group when acquiring new knowledge or skills. Tinto (1975) posited the CoI model as the foundation for the inner-works of a community. Working in the field of education, Garrison et al. (2000) applied the concept of community of inquiry to understand how a community of learners forms and works together to acquire knowledge. The CoI model is composed of three integral components: social presence, teacher presence, and cognitive presence (Tinto, 1975). Although originally Tinto's model applied to face-to-face settings, it has been an important model used to describe engagement in online settings. As such, it is an essential component of my study.

Social Presence

While all three CoI components contribute to learning, social presence plays an especially important role in online learning. The most cited element used to describe effective online learning environments is the concept of social presence (Boston et al., 2009). Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) used the concept of social presence to better understand interactions among peers, and subsequently, it has been used to study online

environments. The CoI framework grounded this study of online teacher training. Social presence further complimented my study to understand how online teachers and students engage in their online community and demonstrate social presence.

Teacher Presence

The proposition of teacher presence is as important as social presence in the CoI model. Garrison et al. (2000) found that lack of teacher presence was a primary reason for online attrition in student populations. McMahon (2013) asked learners how to improve the online course that they had taken in an effort to validate the importance of teacher presence. Learners suggested that the setup of initial meetings with the instructor was very important for persistence (McMahon, 2013). The participants in McMahon's study also wished for more guidance and encouragement throughout the course from their instructor. Thus, I included teacher presence in my study to understand its impact on attrition and persistence.

Cognitive Presence

The final component of the CoI model is cognitive presence. This term refers to learners' engagement with, and their ability to make sense of, course content while interacting with other course participants (Garrison et al., 2000). In my study, cognitive presence was important in addressing the relevance of the content presented to the in-service teachers. This population in particular is looking for content relevant to their field as they aim to apply what they learn to their own instructional practice. In fact, the participants in my study are required to apply content from their online courses to the classes they are teaching.

Researchers have studied cognitive presense in various ways. Garrison (2000) concentrated on content per se. A different approach was that of Gannon-Cook (2012), who studied online content with a focus on environment and display. Gannon-Cook aimed to discover whether content display (e.g., navigation, enhancement, and strategically-embedded graphics) had an impact on student persistence by increasing completion rates. Adult learners enrolled at a large U.S. Midwestern university responded to a survey on beneficial aspects of the online course that they were taking (Gannon-Cook, 2012). The top three beneficial elements identified included study aids or graphics, help from the instructor, and live chats. These three elements correlate with the three presences of the community of inquiry; study aids (cognitive presence), instructor help (teacher presence), and live chats (social presence). Research associated with the CoI model and the concept of social presence is detailed in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative case study to conduct my research. I drew participants from a convenience pool of EFL in-service teachers taking online courses in an international English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program delivered via institutions and countries around the world. The program is known throughout my study under its pseudonym, EFL Worldwide, to protect confidentiality. EFL Worldwide employs teachers who vary in first languages, experience, type of employment (full-timers v. part-timers), and all can benefit from enriching their skills as the program moves to more blended and online classes. Once interested in my study, potential participants completed a prescreening questionnaire. Those participants received the consent form for electronic signature. I

followed up with a request to complete an online questionnaire to establish the baseline

of each participant's current situation in their online training. Then, I asked them to write

a narrative of their personal, professional journey. Data collection included data gathered

from the online questions, the narratives, and a focus group interview. Data from these

three data collection strategies allowed me to complete triangulation in the analysis.

I proposed criterion sampling as the model to select eight to twelve participants

from four EFL teacher training courses using the prescreening questionnaire. However,

the range was reduced to six to eight participants with support from my Committee.

Although ten individuals volunteered, only nine were chosen for the study given the tenth

was a tutor in a course rather than a student. From the nine volunteers, only six teachers

followed through with next steps. The final sample presented variation regarding levels

of education, teaching load (full-time v. part-time), and years of teaching experience, as

well as prior difficulties in online learning. The six final participants were to be

interviewed in focus groups of three to allow the groups to be small enough to interact

appropriately, but only five confirmed attendance with four attending a single focus

group in the culmination of my study. Although this sample was small, it was important

to have a manageable sample size to gather thick and detailed data related to my research

question.

Definitions

Asynchronous online instruction: Instruction that affords participants

opportunities to interact with each other at different times (Wei, Chen, & Kinshuk, 2012).

Asynchronous instruction uses web 2.0 tools such as blogs, fora, wikis, and journals for instructor and participants to interact within the online course.

Attrition: The reduction of learners in a course or program including those who officially enrolled but who do not complete the course or program requirements (Lowe, 2005). In my study, these students are *Noncompleters*.

Cognitive presence: The manner in which members of a community of learning construct meaning out of the communication and engagement in that community (Garrison et al., 2000).

Community of inquiry: A space, comprised of teachers and students, where learning takes place through the interaction of three essential components: social presence, teacher presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000).

Completer: Although this term could simply indicate an individual is completing a course, Burns (2013) elaborated, noting a "quality dimension [that] refers to fulfilling all requirements and receiving certification or attainment of outcomes" (p. 146). In my study, participants who finished but failed the course were not considered completers.

Educational experience: The manner by which engagement and collaboration take place in an environment that leads to the construction of knowledge (Garrison et al., 2000).

EFL teachers: According to TESOL-direct, Ltd. (2014), these are teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), where EFL refers to individuals who teach English in countries where English is not widely used (for example, teaching English to students in Brazil, Honduras, or Spain).

In-service teachers: In general, in-service teachers are teachers employed in the field who are simultaneously attending training, workshops, courses, webinars or conferences to enhance their skills. The International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL, 2013) contrasts this with pre-service teachers who are in training before starting teaching.

Noncompleter: In contrast to completers, noncompleters are individuals who do not complete a course. This category includes "dropouts" who drop the course officially, or "withdrawals" who are removed from the course for lack of participation, and students who fail the course.

Perseverance: Motivation to continue with learning and complete a course or program (Bandura, 1989).

Persistence: Continuing with a course of study until the end (Burns, 2013). However, persistence does not automatically mean participants continue until the end of a given program. For my study, persistence is based on results at the end of a term (quarter) and not on the entire program. In my study, these participants are *Completers*.

Social presence: Social presence refers to the ways in which online course participants (teachers and students) make their presence felt in the online environment; throughout a course, how participants show their desire and availability to communicate and engage with others (Kehrwald, 2008).

Synchronous online instruction: Instruction requiring that all participants be present at the same time for simultaneous interaction; synchronous instruction is combined with asynchronous to form a blended online program (Wei et al., 2012).

Synchronous instruction uses live discussions or guest speakers through web conferencing software, peer review, oral assessments, and other activities.

Teacher presence: Functions related to content delivery and facilitation in a learning community; the way content is selected or organized in a community and the facilitation that takes place to engage learners around that content (Garrison et al., 2000).

<center>**Assumptions**</center>

There were three main assumptions in this study. First, EFL Worldwide in-service teachers taking online training experience some difficulties in completing online courses. Past data showing up to 44% average attrition in a program cohort would demonstrate this, but each cohort is different, and attrition varies from cohort to cohort. The pre-screening questionnaire further supported this assumption as eight out of the nine initial participants (this was five out of six in my final sample) indicated they had some difficulties with past online learning experiences, and one participant noted having plenty of difficulties. The second assumption was that e-moderators teaching the online courses are effective moderators of the courses. The third and final assumption was that participants would be open and honest in their responses.

The first assumption was integral to the study so that participants would be able to speak to the reasons for their individual attrition or persistence. The second assumption ruled out the possibility that the facilitator was the problem so that other factors could emerge as contributors to attrition or persistence. This assumption emerged on the basis that facilitators complete e-moderation training with highly experienced EFL online trainers in the field. The training includes co-moderating with the trainers through an

actual course. Only those participants who master the training and do well co-moderating are recommended to become moderators. Also, individuals who participate in the e-moderation training are individuals who have completed the five courses offered in the teacher training program. They have done extremely well by attaining a grade of "pass with distinction" and obtaining nomination by tutors or English Directors to become instructors.

<div align="center">**Scope and Delimitations**</div>

In this study, I aimed to understand attrition among English as Foreign Language teachers in an online training program. These in-service teachers were part of a convenience sample from EFL Worldwide, a program that is part of Worldwide University (pseudonym). EFL Worldwide's training program offers an entry-level, online, self-paced course for three months followed by four quarterly courses. For my study, my sample was drawn from the four scheduled quarterly (12-week) courses that have assigned e-moderators. The self-paced induction course was excluded from this study. The induction course has no set cohort or tutor contacting and motivating participants. Thus, attrition and persistence would be difficult to monitor. Furthermore, my study's conceptual framework is grounded on theoretical principles of social presence and community of inquiry, which aim to study the interaction between participants and any resultant influence on attrition/persistence. In the self-paced course, participants start the course and do not interact as they do in the courses that follow through collaborative tools such as blogs, fora, wikis, and polls. Also, there may be cultural differences among course participants as these in-service teachers come from different countries and

cultures. My study did not address culture as a way of reasonably limiting the scope of the study. Finally, transferability to other types of programs is not likely unless the programs have a similar audience given the specificity of the participants in this study; EFL in-service teachers. The participant pool and study participants are described in detail (within confidentiality guidelines) in Chapter 4 for other researchers to be able to compare my research setting to their settings.

Limitations

This study involved online learning. Therefore, certain accommodations needed to be made to the research design. The focus group interview was conducted online with e-conferencing software rather than face-to-face. Participants' body language and facial expressions may or may not have been visible dependent on participants' use of web cameras. Due to internet bandwidth concerns in various countries, participants may have been asked to keep cameras off to improve the quality of the audio and recording. Finally, given the voluntary nature of attendance to focus group meetings, I hoped that a significant number of participants would join the focus group. If participants dropped out of the course, participation might have been affected. The details of the limitations experienced while completing my study are in Chapter 4.

I am a proponent of online education. I have completed one degree partially online, and I am currently in an online doctoral program. Therefore, I have a bias for the efficacy of online instruction. Measures to address this limitation included scripting the questions for the focus group for other colleagues and my research Committee to review. I kept, from the start, a research journal to note findings and thoughts, including any

biases that emerged along the way. Also, participants were given the opportunity at the end of the focus group session, and in the online questionnaire, to make any open remarks they desired. Finally, member checking provided an opportunity for participants to review and clarify their responses for all the data collected.

Significance of the Study

Online education is vibrant, and enrollments are increasing, but attrition remains a significant problem (McMahon, 2013). Burns (2013) studied how to increase persistence in blended teacher training courses leaving room to study attrition in fully online programs. However, the opportunity to study attrition for in-service teachers is particularly significant given the teachers are under training in the very online delivery where student attrition can be high. The program of interest in this study already faces an average 44% attrition rate among in-service teachers (see Table 1). Reducing this attrition is crucial to preparing teachers to become effective online teachers, themselves. More importantly, the results of the study can have an impact beyond the program to support the mission of Worldwide University to provide affordable access to education. With this mission and the distributive nature of EFL Worldwide with over 100,000 students, the potential social impact is powerful.

Table 1

Completion Rates for EFL Worldwide's In-Service Teachers Taking Online Courses

Year	Noncompleters	Completers
2011	49%	51%
2012	40%	60%
2013	43%	57%
2014	40%	60%
2015	47%	53%
Average	44%	56%

Note. Unpublished data from EFL Worldwide.

This study was an investigation of factors that contribute to persistence and attrition of in-service teachers in an online environment, and thus, can serve as a basis for EFL Worldwide and other programs to develop interventions to increase successful completion of the online program. The study addressed the gap in the literature regarding the attrition problem among in-service teachers, and in turn, the influence of in-service teachers at EFL Worldwide and beyond. Furthermore, findings indirectly benefit other students who learn online by sharing factors that influenced in-service teachers to persist and complete their course. Identifying factors that influence persistence and attrition among in-service teachers can also better prepare those teachers to support persistence with their current and future online students. Identifying factors that support or inhibit in-service teachers from completing online training contributes to the literature and aids institutions in designing online programs that decrease attrition and support persistence.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I provided a brief background on attrition research and defined the problem addressed in this study. I described the conceptual framework for my research encompassing the CoI model and social presence. The purpose and nature of the study were described. I shared the research question, relevant definitions, and the significance of my study. In the next chapter, I dive deeply into the existing research base and the conceptual framework to clarify where this study is positioned in the body of research and how it contributes to the current gap in the research literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

High attrition rates in online education continue to be a problem challenging the efficacy of online teaching and learning. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore factors that influence attrition and persistence of in-service EFL instructors taking online teacher training courses. I begin this chapter by describing the search strategies and keywords that I used to review the research on attrition and persistence among online learners in higher education and professional development. This chapter also includes a discussion of the conceptual framework of CoI and social presence that ground the study. My study addressed attrition and persistence from various aspects including teacher, cognitive, and social presence (Tinto, 1975). The combination of several models provided the big picture in which to study the phenomenon of attrition. In this chapter I also present current research on attrition and influencing factors, as well as persistence and influencing factors. Finally, I end with a summary and conclusions.

Literature Search Strategy

In conducting my literature review, I used Google Scholar Alerts and Walden University Library databases such as Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, Thoreau, and ProQuest Central. I used the following keywords in several combinations: *online, teacher training*, *attrition*, *perseverance*, *persistence*, *causes*, *strategies*, *synchronous communication,* and *asynchronous communication.* I further narrowed the searches to peer-reviewed journal articles. I later restricted my search results to articles published after 2011 to comply with the requirement that the literature

review be comprised of recent research within five years of the dissertation oral defense. I found relevant articles that contained other sources noted as references that were equally relevant to my research. When I realized that results were not abundant for the specific population in my study (teachers), I turned to a different audience. I, then, researched studies addressing online attrition or persistence among students or corporate trainees.

After I decided on my conceptual framework composed of social presence and CoI, I conducted additional searches using the following keywords: *social presence*, *teacher presence*, *cognitive presence*, and *community of inquiry* which led me to various articles that placed CoI and social presence as key constructs for understanding online engagement. Most researchers (e.g., Akyol et al., 2009; Boston et al., 2009; Kovanović, Gašević, Joksimović, Hatala, & Adesope, 2015) studying attrition and persistence in online settings supported these constructs as strong bases to help shed light on the online attrition phenomenon. I found one opposing view. Preisman (2014) studied social presence among her online students and determined that increased social presence did not have an impact on students' course completion or grades. However, Preisman used questionable methodology and analysis of the data. Preisman was not only the researcher but also the professor. She tried engaging participants in one online class but not in another to understand if social presence was related to attrition.

Researching attrition among teachers in online training proved difficult. I was not able to locate any peer-reviewed research on online training of in-service teachers in EFL. Therefore, I concentrated on online students and professionals. After a certain point,

I felt a sense of déjà vu with every article that I read; authors pointed to the same sources and the same content. For me, this was a strong indication of the exhaustive nature of my review of relevant research. Therefore, I concluded the writing of the literature review, but continued to monitor search alerts for new articles.

Conceptual Framework

The CoI framework (Tinto, 1975) and social presence construct (Short et al., 1976) were my lenses for studying attrition and persistence in online learning. Researchers have used these two models in research to understand attrition and persistence among students (Akyol et al., 2009; Boston et al., 2009; Garrison et al., 2000; Kovanović et al., 2015). I used the constructs in this study to shed light on attrition among in-service teachers who are pursuing additional training in an online program. Although not originally developed for online education by Tinto (1975), researchers have used the CoI framework to understand online teaching and learning (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan & Ice, 2010). It continues to be as relevant at the time of this paper due to its widespread use and abundance of research findings. Given the encompassing nature of this framework containing three distinct and important areas, studying the environment through the CoI lens provided insights into all aspects of the attrition problem among the EFL in-service teachers who participated in my study.

Community of Inquiry

Understanding attrition in online environments requires studying the engagement among participants, the teacher, and the content. Tinto (1975) posited that there are three essential components (or presences) in any successful educational experience: social,

cognitive, and teacher presence. Furthermore, he noted the importance of differentiating these aspects to study dropout rates to distinguish learning behaviors (academic v. social). At the time of my study, the CoI framework is still being used to understand and enhance persistence in online courses (e.g., Bowers & Kumar, 2015; deNoyelles, Zydney, & Chen, 2014). The CoI model has been cited and linked to student and adult attrition in many studies (e.g., Gazza & Hunker, 2014; Subramaniam, 2014; Wicks, Ellis, & Lumpe, 2013). I used the model to inform development of my qualitative questionnaire and the focus group questions. Through the sample questions, I was able to form questions to gain further insights into attrition in online teacher training.

Understanding how learners interact in an online environment is important to decipher why they drop out or remain engaged in a given online course. Garrison et al. (2000) described the individual constructs that can help in that understanding (i.e., social, cognitive, and teacher presences) as interrelated elements necessary to develop a community of inquiry (see Figure 1). In addition, Swan, Garrison, and Richardson (2009) highlighted the importance of CoI by tying the framework to Dewey's (1938/1997) notion of learning and the requirement for collaboration to take place among individuals for any construction of knowledge to take place. Shea and Bidjerano (2009) used the CoI constructs to collaborate with other researchers to create a single instrument that measured CoI presences. Shea and Bidjerano used that instrument as the tool to measure perceptions among a random sample of online students from various institutions ($N =$ 2159). Sea and Bidjerano analyzed via principal axis factoring with Oblimin and validated a 34-question instrument. Their survey contained three sets of questions aimed

at measuring individuals' social presence, cognitive presence, and teacher presence. However, their quantitative study lacked further open discussion with participants. Quantitative results provide certain answers as to what happened with these online students, but do not explore the phenomenon more fully to understand why.

Community of Inquiry
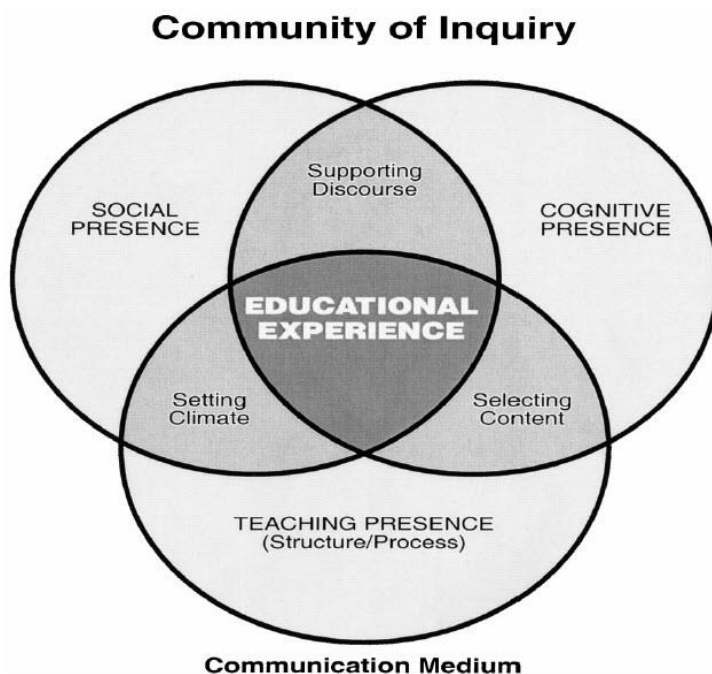
Figure 1. CoI framework from "Critical Inquiry in a Text-based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education," by D. R. Garrison, T. Anderson, and W. Archer, 2000, *Internet and Higher Education, 2*, p. 88. Copyright 2000 by Elsevier Science. Reprinted with permission.

Lowenthal (2010) argued that despite the popularity of the CoI model, measuring community indicators in self-reports fell short. Gunawardena (1995) collected CoI data via self-report. Lowenthal highlighted Rourke's methodology (2010) as a better approach of diving into online discussion fora to analyze social and teacher presences. Thus, utilizing the validated instrument in the present study to create a qualitative protocol helped further understand engagement among online teachers in training. The focus

group provided the opportunity to dive deeper into the framework to obtain a more robust picture of attrition and persistence.

Boston et al. (2009) studied CoI indicators among 28,000 fully online students and determined that social presence and affective expression were significant elements contributing to persistence in online courses. More importantly, they argued that social presence is the basis for collaborative and constructivist learning. They based their study on Tinto's (1975) model of student persistence. Tinto theorized that with greater social interaction comes a greater likelihood of persistence.

In my case study approach, participants provided a narrative, thus offering a picture of their personal professional journey. They responded to online interview questions, which informed me about their current context and online experience. A significant strength of my study emerged in hearing directly from the course participants about their successes and challenges throughout the course. By gathering responses about prior and current training experiences, I was able to create a thick description of the group. As a matter of practice, course evaluations (done at the end of the course) provide insights from those who complete courses. However, an initial benchmark is not usually gathered at the course start to understand where learners come from and what their current context is. That was the purpose of the personal narrative data collection in my study.

Social Presence

In 1976, Short and colleagues further developed the notion of social presence in the field of telecommunications as the medium used by two communicators and the

degrees of effectiveness achieved based on the quality of the interactions. This work was later streamlined for the educational context (Garrison et al., 2000). To date, the Short et al. social presence model is still being used to understand how learners interact in online courses, and how such interaction can aid in reducing attrition, thus promoting persistence (Gazza & Hunker, 2014; Oztok, Zingaro, Brett, & Hewitt, 2013). However, social presence remains one of the greatest challenges for online education where affective communication, interaction, and cohesion must be present for the human component of the CoI equation to be fully enabled (Mathieson & Leafman, 2014). Therefore, further extending the social presence model to understand how teachers interact during online training is crucial to better understand attrition among this population. For example, Irani, Wilson, Slough, and Rieger (2014) studied social presence among online graduate students on and off campus and their perceptions of isolation. They aimed to measure through causal-comparative research the impact of perceived isolation on persistence (Irani et al., 2014). However, the sample was very small ($N = 35$) including Ph.D. students, M.S. thesis students, and M.S. non-thesis students. Despite their focus on isolation, the researchers chose to take the approach of diffusion of innovation rather than social presence to measure perceptions of isolation.

The area of social presence is a crucial element of the community of inquiry, and other theories available to understand attrition. Wei et al. (2012) found that learners do not value all instructional activities and strategies the same. Learners felt that features that concentrated on social presence were the most useful (Wei et al., 2012). Similarly,

Ley and Cook (2014) noted, in their literature review, that social presence was highly valued in online education.

Teacher Presence

Bolldén (2014) concentrated on the area of teacher presence in the online environment. Bolldén conducted an ethnographic study of two online courses in higher education. There, he focused on looking at teacher presence around the "planning, structuring, and conducting of interventions" (Bolldén, 2014, p. 37). Bolldén relied on the literature that highlights the existence of a form of embodiment of teachers when participating in online teaching. Within Garrison's (2000) framework of the community of inquiry, Bolldén described, through the theoretical lens of the embodiment, teacher presence as a central element of how teachers interact and make themselves known to students (in this case, master's degree students).

Data collected consisted of interviews, surveys, and course documents (such as syllabi, course web pages, and including discussion fora with identities masked) (Bolldén, 2014). The findings confirmed that embodiment happened at various levels of the course, which started with the physical embodiment of whom the teacher is as personified by a photo uploaded and an avatar chosen. Embodiment increased with asynchronous fora where teachers used personal pronouns to address students, therefore, making the atmosphere more personal (teacher 2) as opposed to other comments of a more generic and impersonal nature (teacher 3). Analyzing the data in NVivo™ yielded knowledge of three essential components: name, photo, and text. Using these three elements in positive ways can increase teacher-student interaction and support greater

persistence. According to Bolldén (2014), something as simple as choosing a human versus an object avatar can make a difference, with that of the human having a greater impact on teacher presence.

However, findings also showed that a body could consist of several expressions depending on the situation. For example, there may be an asynchronous body known through picture or avatar in the discussions, while there may be an opposite presence through the voice in some synchronous interventions or text in feedback or emails. Bolldén (2014) explained there could be an overlap of the various embodiments of the teacher. Bolldén found that such combinations can help online learners forge a complete picture of their instructor or moderator.

Song, Kim, and Luo (2016) went further in studying the impact of teacher-student interactions. They examined the role of teacher disclosure in students' perceptions of engagement. Song et al. discovered that more teacher disclosure in online courses led to a higher perception of engagement among learners. However, they also noted that less disclosure occurred in online environments than in face-to-face environments. However, when it did take place online students took more notice.

Information gathered from all three articles (Bolldén, 2014; Croxton, 2014; Guan et al., 2015) is useful in understanding the dynamics of online teaching and learning among students. However, given the literature concentrated on online students broadly defined, attrition can be further investigated as it relates to in-service teacher training. Furthermore, implications for curriculum and program design are enormous regarding

figuring out how teachers can best support online learners whether they are

undergraduate, graduate, or taking part in professional development.

Cognitive Presence

As noted in the definitions, cognitive presence refers to the engagement learners

have with the given content, and the processes used to construct meaning out of the

content (Garrison et al., 2000). Sitzmann and Weinhardt (2015) highlighted the

importance of training given the premise that the most effective way to enhance

performance is through training. They posited that goal setting, goal prioritizing, and goal

persistence were key components of engagement. Thus, it becomes essential for

persistence to engage with the content (in my study, the training curricula and materials).

Interestingly, Stevenson (2013) looked outside of the instructional content to

understand factors affecting persistence. Other content factors content include, but are not

limited to, academic advising, technical support, and financial aid. Thus, Stevenson

explored the potential benefits of implementing plans in the areas of advising, academics,

technical support, and financial aid to help students persist in their courses or program.

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Attrition in Online Courses

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McMahon (2013) aimed to identify attrition factors among online learners

recruited virtually in an institute of technology in Ireland for a course on dyslexia. The

course was set up for self-access (without start or end dates) and completely online with

little to no interaction with an instructor. Participants reviewed material and took online

quizzes to meet course objectives. None of the participants completed the course ($N =$

12). When interviewed, participants reported being satisfied with the content and

presentation of the course. However, they felt there was a lack of social interaction and when asked how to improve the course, suggestions included peer-to-peer interaction (social presence), an initial meeting with the instructor, and more tutor guidance and encouragement throughout the course (teacher presence). In addition, Thompson, Miller, and Franz (2013) posited that life events conflicted with online courses and thus increased attrition, whereas face-to-face courses presented fewer challenges. However, the authors noted that online classrooms tend to be populated by individuals who have greater competing demands. Understanding those competing demands that may be causing attrition among in-service teachers was one element of my study.

On the other hand, Burns (2013) studied attrition among 60 elementary school teachers in Indonesia. Although this is closer to the audience in my study (in-service teachers), Burns' work focused on the design and implementation of the online courses rather than the teachers' experience within the online environment. The courses were offered in three modalities (fully online, hybrid, and web facilitated) with 20 teachers in each group. All teachers had similar technical skills and coaches to assist them throughout the program. The highest attrition (69%) happened in the fully online model where six teachers dropped out of 20, but in comparison, 100% of teachers persisted until the end of the course in the hybrid and Web-facilitated models. Burns' case study allowed for a brief interview with all participants at course end, where those who dropped out expressed they felt isolated from instructors and learners, lacked support, and commented that learning online was too much to bear. The evaluation of the program results concluded that those feelings were consistent with the lack of social, teacher, and

cognitive presences. Thus, the study emphasized the importance of a high degree of presence by online instructors. Although a larger sample than McMahon's (2013), Burns also focused on a mono-cultural and mono-linguistic sample. By contrast, my study includes EFL teachers from all over the world, providing greater insight into diverse audiences. Nordin and Anthony (2014) had 380 survey responses out of 2,422 invitations sent. They studied needs of faculty by attempting to answer the research question of what faculty perceptions are of needs to persevere in online teaching. The overwhelming majority (366) cited access to the internet. Therefore, robust access to the internet is a very specific reality that can affect attrition.

Sitzmann (2012) had by far the largest sample, with 779 adults recruited to participate in his research in exchange for training. Participants were mostly fully employed individuals ranging from non-high school graduates to post-graduate professionals. Sitzmann attempted to predict the probability of participants dropping out across 12 trials. Although the probability of dropping out decreased as the training continued, in the end, only 18% completed the training (136 participants). Contrary to predictions, the number of hours participants worked per week did not have an effect on attrition. However, consciousness of effort or self-efficacy did have an effect. Sitzmann concluded that lack of self-efficacy predicted who was susceptible to attrition although there is a glimmer of hope in that the teacher presence had a positive impact on the self-efficacy of the online learners, and thus a positive effect on persistence. The quantitative nature of Sitzmann's (2012) study did not provide opportunities to understand fully and monitor factors affecting the participants' experience.

Gaytan (2015) clearly stated that there is a problem of attrition in online environments. He cited data from various studies describing the reasons for such attrition. In addition, he cited grant programs in amounts of as high as billions of U.S. dollars to combat attrition and strengthen online education. Gaytan emphasized the study conducted by Park and Choi (2009) as a seminal article written about online attrition. Park and Choi narrowed down factors causing attrition into internal, external, and demographics categories.

Gaytan's (2015) literature review included citations for different research approaches and explanations for online attrition. Furthermore, the literature presented also verified the gap in the literature for my study. Gaytan (2015) explained that several studies have investigated perceptions of online teachers on attrition, and several more had focused on students' perceptions. However, little research had compared the perceptions of both groups. Filling this gap is crucial to understanding attrition. If there is a discrepancy between the groups, it is necessary to address the differences.

Reasons for Attrition

According to Boateng and Boadu (2013) there are various reasons for attrition, including but not limited to poor learning environment, location, and time conflicts with family and work. Although most studies point to learner circumstances to identify reasons for attrition, Aslanian and Clinefelter (2012) highlighted that despite online education having been around for years, technology took a long time to catch up with the needs of learners, especially when it came to making learners feel less anonymous in an

online environment. Lee, Choi, and Kim (2013) chose to look inward at learners for causes and found a significant relationship between attrition and good management skills and learner self-efficacy.

Reasons for attrition can be viewed from different perspectives. Abou El-Naga and Abdulla (2015) posited that challenges to online education emerge in various populations they refer to as clusters. These clusters include students, teachers, and managers. Mohamed and Zulkipli (2014) concentrated on learners and noted that three ways to prevent attrition among learners included communication, mentoring, and awareness. However, in my study, I focused on the reasons as described by the learners, who are in-service teachers in online training. Thus, they are a special population not often studied with a unique set of circumstances bordering perhaps on the reasons identified for both teachers and students.

Few studies have concentrated on in-service teachers in online professional development. However, Bissonnette and Caprino (2014) noted that ineffective professional development occurs because of fragmentation, lack of implementation, and lack of teacher-centeredness. They cited studies justifying these three areas and concluded that action research may be a better source of effective professional development by having teachers identify problems of interest, gather data, analyze it, develop an intervention, and implement the intervention. Bissonnette and Caprino presented little analysis or explanation for their conclusions, or even a trial to test their assumptions. They failed to address how action research could help teachers who needed training for basic teaching skills, and who were not prepared to perform action research.

Izmirli and Izmirli (2015) studied pre-service teachers using Keller's ARCS Model (attention, relevance, confidence, satisfaction) and noted that confidence, attention, and relevance were the top three areas regarding frequency counts throughout responses in the open online questionnaire taken by 155 college juniors and seniors. Despite the use of a different model (ARCS) than the one in my study (CoI), one commonality in the models is communication. Participants noted that communication was crucial to feeling satisfied, feeling confident to pay attention to the content, and to finding it relevant.

Persistence in Online Courses

If attrition could be considered the plague of online learning and teaching, persistence would be the healthiest state possible. Understanding how to promote and support persistence in education, particularly in an online setting has long been the goal of many educators and researchers. Croxton (2014) described the great appeal of online learning given its flexibility, ease of access, and convenience; but noted that lower persistence plagues the online environment. When concluding her review of the literature, Croxton suggested that student-teacher interaction could play a crucial role in student satisfaction, and in turn, persistence.

Similarly, Bigatel, Ragan, Kennan, May, and Redmond (2012) conducted research on the premise that the instructor has an important role in online learning. Thus, the instructor is a great contributor to persistence. Bigatel et al. argued that research studies have focused mainly on effective teaching strategies for face-to-face environments rather than online ones. Therefore, they concentrated on the online environment. To do so, they compiled a survey built from extensive literature reviews

and interviews that they refined to a list of 100 items identified as key tasks to be

performed by effective online teachers. A pool of 197 participants from various positions

and disciplines in academia rated the tasks on a 7-point Likert scale. The top rated tasks

yielded seven main competencies with the top three being: (a) active learning, (b)

administration/leadership, and (c) active teaching/responsiveness. These top three

categories include tasks that can be easily aligned with the CoI framework and its

components (Garrison et al., 2000) as I have organized them in Table 2. Thus, Bigatel et

al. (2012), although not focused on the CoI framework, provided additional insights to

establish the CoI model as a strong tool to examine constructs that define interactive and

engaging online environments.

Table 2

Correspondence Between Teacher Competencies and Tasks and Community of Inquiry

Constructs

Teacher competencies (Bigatel et al., 2012)	Teacher tasks (Bigatel et al., 2012)	CoI constructs (Garrison et al., 2000)
Active learning	• The instructor encourages students to interact with each other by assigning team tasks and projects, where appropriate. (r = .819) • The instructor encourages students to share their knowledge and expertise with the learning community. (r = .721) • The instructor encourages student-generated content as appropriate. (r = .531) • The instructor makes grading visible for student tracking purposes. (r = .683)	Social presence
Administration/ Leadership	• The instructor is proficient in the chosen course management system (CMS). (r = .591) • The instructor integrates the use of technology that is meaningful and relevant to students. (r = .454) • The instructor provides prompt, helpful feedback on assignments and exams that enhances learning. (r = .741)	Cognitive presence
Active teaching/ Responsiveness	• The instructor provides clear, detailed feedback on assignments and exams that enhances the learning experience. (r = .714) • The instructor shows caring and concern that students are learning the course content. (r = .514)	Teacher presence

Note. Adapted from Bigatel et al. (2012). The identification of competencies for online teaching success. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 16*(1), 59–77; and Garrison et al. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education, 2*(2), 87–105.

The importance of the CoI constructs became further emphasized by Kranzow (2013) who studied faculty involvement in course development and design to promote motivation, sense of community, and persistence in online environments. Kranzow found that teacher presence, cognitive presence, and social presence were integral components of a successful learning environment. Most importantly, she remarked that faculty members must be cognizant of these theories and use instructional strategies to promote an engaged environment where community members construct and share knowledge.

Reasons for Persistence

According to Boateng and Boadu (2013), successful completion of online courses requires learners who are self-starters, self-disciplined, and technologically savvy. More specifically, Whittington (2015) researched the relationship between motivation and academic success among 375 online nursing students. Whittington (2015) found that although motivation, in general, could play a role in academic persistence, there was "no significant link" between motivation and achievement (p. 15). Whittington speculated that the lack of correlation could have been due to invalidity of the self-reporting tool or that participants in the study may have taken the nursing test a second or third time and therefore already would have been in a state of defeat. The implications of the Whittington study highlighted the need for further research to understand persistence.

Motivation alone is not enough to promote persistence. According to Youger and Ahern (2015), student engagement increased when course material was related to prior knowledge. However, they emphasized the need for such knowledge to have value to sustain motivation and in turn, persistence. Furthermore, Youger and Ahern highlighted

the need for learners to feel that an online course was worthy of their investment. Although, the researchers concentrated on students in their study, and my study addresses in-service teachers, it is clear that fulfilling the expectations of "learners" (no matter who they are) is important to persistence. To understand the participants in my study, narratives were used to understand the picture and circumstances of each participant's personal, professional journey. Online interview questions were asked early in the course to establish a baseline for what my participants experienced from the very beginning of the teacher training course.

Hartnett's (2015) sample was closer to the audience of my study, by studying pre-service teachers in New Zealand conducting a study on data from a prior large scale study. Hartnett (2015) studied influences that undermined learners' perceptions of autonomy, competence and relatedness in an online context. From the qualitative data collected from the 12 participants in the study, Hartnett identified several themes by reviewing frequency counts in NVivo™. Among the top five reasons for undermining autonomy, there were 81 mentions of high workload, 63 of salience of assessment, 61 of lack of relevance, 58 course expectations, and 37 time constraints (Hartnett, 2015, p. 90). Competence was undermined by unclear/complicated guidance (63 mentions), insufficient guidance/feedback (57), judgements of low self-efficacy (54), teacher input gradually reduced (36), and resource perceived not as useful (28) (Hartnett, 2015, p. 90). These themes are highly correlated to my conceptual framework.

Summary and Conclusions

In Chapter 2, I provided a detailed account of the research strategies used in this study, including keywords, databases, best practices, correspondence with Walden library personnel, and discussions with my Committee. I included a more in-depth description of the theory, model, and constructs underlying my research study. The CoI framework and the social presence model were explained through relevant literature. Finally, attrition and persistence studies were presented to demonstrate how researchers have viewed and used the same constructs with similar methodologies and with similar (although not identical) audiences. The body of research revealed that CoI, with its presences (social, cognitive, and teaching), provides an ideal framework to study online environments and to examine attrition and persistence. Chapter 2 further demonstrated the gap in research for the population of my study (EFL in-service teachers). The qualitative nature of my study allowed for an in-depth analysis of participants' unique situations providing further insights given a larger sample than previous case studies cited in this chapter.

In Chapter 3 I provide an overview of the rationale and research design for my study. I also present a detailed account of the methodology I employed. I also include details on the instrumentation, data collection procedures, and a plan for data analysis.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore factors accounting for teachers' attrition and persistence in online teacher training courses. I was particularly interested in understanding the perspectives of in-service EFL teachers. In this chapter, I describe my research design, rationale for choosing a case-study approach, my role in the research process, and the research methodology. I conclude the chapter by addressing issues of trustworthiness and noting strategies to enhance the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of study findings.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question for this study was, What factors influence attrition and persistence among in-service EFL teachers in an online teacher training environment? To answer this question, I used the CoI framework. Tinto (1975) first developed the CoI model to study the dynamics between teachers and learners gaining knowledge as a community through the interaction of three essential components: cognitive, social, and teacher presences. However, it was not until much later that the CoI model was applied to online environments (Garrison et al., 2000). Researchers further developed the component of social presence to explain the interactions among learners in an environment. According to Kehrwald (2008), social presence encompasses how learners show their presence and engagement in virtual spaces. Therefore, my conceptual framework includes social presence to understand how in-service teachers engage in learning online.

I employed case study as my primary method and I followed the parameters that Yin (2014) laid out for case studies. Yin posited that a case study investigates a phenomenom (attrition in this case) where the phenomenon and the context blend in intricate ways. My goal for this study was to identify factors that impact attrition or persistence. This methodology afforded me the opportunity to deep dive into participants' experiences with the phenomenon.

Research participants in my study come from different countries and cultures. Therefore, there may be cultural implications impacting the attrition problem. According to Lichtman (2013), the purpose of ethnography is to study culture in order to understand how interactions among specific groups evolve and affect a phenomenon that is influenced by culture. Although cultural backgrounds are diverse with the population in my study located in different countries around the world, I intended to examine the universality of online attrition regardless of culture and mother tongue of my participants. I was interested in answering the research question about factors influencing participants' attrition or persistence regardless of their cultural background or their primary language.

By contrast, researchers using grounded theory aim to study a phenomenon by observing it without hypothesizing how the phenomenon fits any particular model (Lichtman, 2013). In grounded theory research, researchers elicit themes from data gathered in field observations or interviews and numerous data must be gathered (Lichtman, 2013). This approach would result in a study of attrition without the use of a specific framework to understand it. However, extensive research showed that the CoI model is ideal to understand attrition (e.g., Akyol et al., 2009; Boston et al., 2009;

Kovanović et al., 2015). Thus, the CoI is part of the framework for my research and I did not choose a grounded theory approach.

Lichtman (2013) described phenomenology as an approach rooted in lived experiences. The approach would call for studying the individual to understand the phenomenon. In phenomenology, data are reduced to their essence (Lichtman, 2013). However, attrition is a phenomenon that appears in the midst of a group of online learners, and online learning happens in a shared environment. Therefore, studying how the group experiences the phenomenon rather than the individual is a more encompassing way to answer my research question. In contrast to phenomenology, Merriam (2009) defined a case study as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bonded system" (p. 39). That system is embedded in the group rather than the individual. Thus, case study was the most appropriate approach for my study. Merriam (2009) noted that the focus of a case study is on the unit of study or case and the problem, not on the individuals. Therefore, my focus is not on the essence and lived experience as in phenomenology, but rather the case or group (EFL teachers) and the problem (attrition). Thus, phenomenology was not applicable to this study, but case study was. With the case-study approach, I aimed to investigate the problem as embedded in the group.

Role of the Researcher

After designing my study, my main role as researcher was eliciting from participants their experience as a teacher in online training and their perceptions related to attrition or persistence before proceeding to analysis. First, I obtained permission from the institution – EFL Worldwide (see Appendix A) to write the research proposal. Then, I

shared the research proposal through various committee reviews including a committee chair, a methodologist, and a university research reviewer. The proposal process culminated with Internal Review Board approval. Once I obtained IRB approval, I began recruitment of participants. I advertised my study in the course announcement page for EFL Worldwide where participants were involved in the online teacher training.

I gathered demographic data through an online prescreening questionnaire to select participants with variations in different areas. Although only nine participants volunteered for the study (and six followed through), they represented variations in levels of education (three had bachelors and five had masters degrees while one had a high school diploma), teaching load (three were full-time while six were part-time instructors), and years of teaching experience (ranging from 6 to 30 years with an average of 14 years), as well as prior difficulties in online learning (eight noting some and one plenty). Once the participants volunteered and completed the consent form, I asked them to write a narrative to describe their personal professional journey and to answer online interview questions about their current online teacher training experience. Finally, I held the focus group interview after the four courses ended to gather insights into factors influencing attrition and persistence. In my researcher role, I searched for themes and patterns that emerged in the online interview questions, the narratives, and the focus group in order to gather rich, thick data about the group's experiences and circumstances within the program. Details of my study implementation and the data collected are presented in Chapter 4.

Although I had a professional relationship with the program in the study, I was not in a supervisory role that would present any influence over participants. The consent form informed participants that my professional and researcher roles were completely separate from each other. I conveyed this information to participants in the text on recruitment announcements, in the consent form, and during the focus group.

According to Lichtman (2013), bias impairs judgment. However, bias is a reality. From the introduction of my study, I conveyed my preference for online learning to participants. My dissertation Committee helped me in addressing my bias by providing feedback at every step of this study. I also performed a test run with my peers to review my questions. The test run was helpful to ensure the questions were neutral. Also, I put great effort into developing open and objective questions for the focus group to avoid imposing my own beliefs about online education. Having others review interview questions and point out any issues was quite helpful. I also used member checking so that participants could provide further input or provide clarifications to their responses (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). I compared data gathered to field notes taken during the study. Such comparison allowed me to corroborate findings.

Given the busy nature of teachers, and their willingness to participate in the study, I offered them a small token of gratitude for their time. Participants spent approximately 10 minutes on the prescreening questionnaire, 60 minutes on writing the narrative, 30 minutes on answering online interview questions, and 90 minutes in the focus group interview. I viewed offering a small token as merely a thank you gesture rather than compensation for their time. Upon completing all parts of the study, I sent participants a

thank you email with directions to download a copy of a book about teaching English

online.

Methodology

Maxwell (2013) highlighted the importance of research questions matching data

collection methods when he said, "If your methods won't provide you with the data you

need to answer your questions, you need to change either your questions or your

methods" (p. 116). Therefore, I chose case study methodology as the best approach to

answer my research question. My case study method includes data triangulation

(qualitative online interview questions, narrative, and focus group interview).

Triangulation is important to address the research question fully. Data collection methods

are vital to maintain reliability. Qualitative researchers must present methodology in a

way that the study could be replicated by other researchers (Yin, 2014). These are all

reasons to use and present a clear and effective research methodology.

Lichtman (2013) highlighted the importance of a research method that

appropriately matches the research questions. Lichtman described five main research

approaches, of which, four were considered for this study. I described ethnography,

grounded theory, and phenomenology as potential approaches considered and discarded.

The method I chose was a case study.

Participant Selection Logic

The research question in the study was: What factors influence attrition and

persistence among in-service EFL teachers in an online teacher training environment?

Thus, the specific population is EFL teachers in online teacher training courses.

However, only a small sample of the thousands of teachers around the world could be studied for my case. Therefore, I needed to purposefully select a sample to study.

Sampling in qualitative studies requires careful choices. Miles et al. (2014) emphasized that qualitative samples be purposive in nature, unlike quantitative random sampling. Such purposive sampling is done to choose the right sample to answer the research questions at hand. According to Stake (1995), to understand a phenomenon, qualitative researchers designing case studies must choose cases that will lead to greater understanding. The participants in the study did not include administrators, directors, or tutors teaching at EFL Worldwide's (pseudonym) teacher training program. Rather, I concentrated on the in-service teachers in the online training program and factors influencing their online attrition or persistence. The participants had to be taking part in a moderated teacher training course (which takes place with participants as part of a cohort). Teachers in the introductory self-access course (induction) were not part of the study given the absence of a moderator and cohort that could tie directly to the teacher presence and social presence components of the CoI model. Addressing the chosen sample provided the greatest insight as to why teachers are dropping out of the training courses for four years at an average rate of 44% per year (see Table 1).

Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) indicated that comparable case selection allows for selecting individuals to increase confidence in findings. I used purposeful sampling and, more specifically, criterion sampling to identify participants for my study. The participants were in-service EFL teachers participating in an online teacher training course. I attempted to identify eight to 12 participants that represented variation across

certain demographic categories. Although only nine participants volunteered for the study, those volunteers represented the variation desired, as did the final six participants who followed through with the study.

Having multiple-case sampling for the study provided external validity as generalizations across cases provide further integrity to the study (Yin, 2014). I did not study various programs, but within the teacher training program in my study, I used personal narratives, online interview questions, and focus group to gather a thick, rich description of participants to allow for in-case and cross-case analysis to answer the research question. Analyzing the multiple individuals is what Stake (1995) referred to as developing grand generalizations that represent the participants in the study. Thus, the nine volunteers in the study were representative of the population in the variation by level of education (five masters, three bacherlors, one high school), teaching load (three full-time v. six part-time), and years of experience (six to 30 years with an average of 14 years of experience), as well as difficulties in online learning. This approach allowed me to arrive at a deeper understanding of factors impacting attrition and persistence in an online teacher training program. The final six participants also documented demographic variation (four part-time, two full-time, one high school/two bachelor/three masters, years of experience ranged from eight to 30 and averaged 13).

When it comes to sample size, I attempted from the beginning to strike the right balance. A big enough sample could provide further generalizability, but it was important not to achieve that at the expense of obtaining enough in-depth data to understand the phenomena of attrition and persistence. Also, qualitative sampling is theory driven and

given group theories from the conceptual framework (CoI and social presence); I planned

for participants to interact in the focus group interview. The group had to be kept small

enough to allow participants ample time to participate, answer questions, ask questions,

and hear each other out. According to Stake (1995), six to eight participants in a case

study represent a maximum number to obtain in-depth data. Furthermore, my

participants' diverse geographical settings necessitated an online focus group, and

according to Krueger and Casey (2015) such groups should be even smaller with four to

five individuals and questions being limited to at most eight (my protocol had five) to

allow all participants to provide information and engage. I planned for the six participants

to be interviewed in groups of three, but given only five could attend the focus group,

only one focus group took place. Having the small group provided further opportunities

to gather data and implement the methodology. Groups even smaller than that would,

according to my methodologist, work more like an interview rather than a focus group.

Therefore, all five participants were asked to join a single focus group.

Before recruitment, I obtained approval of the research. The recruitment process

consisted of announcements in the teacher training courses' announcement board in

Blackboard. EFL Worldwide (pseudonym) granted permission (see Appendix A). I

explain the recruitment process further in the next section, and the messaging used can be

found in Appendix B. The recruitment announcement guided participants to the pre-

screening questionnaire (see Appendix C) which served as a tool to select final

participants, although the selection was not necessary given only nine participants

volunteered. A consent form (see Appendix D) was provided as was a set of online

interview questions (see Appendix E). Then, the prompt for a narrative of their personal, professional journey was sent (see Appendix F). Finally, the focus group interview took place (see Appendix G).

Instrumentation

Although I was not using a published instrument per se to collect data, the questions for the focus group noted in the Consent Form (see Appendix D) and the focus group interview protocol (see Appendix G) were inspired by an established instrument. Arbaugh et al. (2008) developed the CoI Survey with questions using a Likert scale. Arbaugh and colleagues used the instrument among graduate students in four institutions across the United States and Canada with 287 students completing the survey. Later, Boston et al. (2009) revised the CoI Survey to 29 questions from 34. The revised instrument developed by Boston et al. was used in a quantitative study among undergraduate students in the American Public University System (APUS), a for-profit online institution with students from 109 countries, documenting 28,000 student records/survey data gathered.

Although the original survey was not appropriate for my qualitative case study, the instrument was useful in developing questions to ensure the focus group provided an opportunity to touch on all areas of the CoI model. The questions in the focus group protocol were very general as not to lead participants. Like the APUS sample, in my study, participants came from very diverse cultural populations.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Participants were contacted via an announcement in their online teacher training courses' electronic bulletin board in Blackboard. EFL Worldwide authorized the posting of the announcement (see Appendix A). The announcement (see Appendix B) was posted on the announcement board for each teacher training course (four). Each announcement generated an email/notification to all course participants. The announcement provided a link to the online prescreening questionnaire (see Appendix C). In the prescreening questionnaire, volunteers included their email address, which I then used to request that volunteers complete the online consent form (see Appendix D). Once participants granted consent, I sent an email providing the next steps for their participation: narrative and an online questionnaire. Finally, the focus group took place in Zoom (web conferencing technology with audio, video, and recording capabilities).

The data collection instruments in the study included the online interview questions (see Appendix E), the personal professional narrative (see Appendix F), and the focus group interview (see Appendix G). I used the CoI questionnaire refined by Shea and Bidjerano (2009) to inform the areas of interest addressed in this qualitative study.

The responses to the prescreening questionnaire were to be used in the selection process to identify participants for the study that would provide variation and thus representation of the population at hand. Although only nine volunteers came forward, they provided the desired variation. The online questions in Appendix E served as a base to understand the participants' motivation and experience at the beginning of the course. The narrative (see Appendix F) provided a rich description of the group's personal,

professional journey. Finally, the online focus group provided insights into perseverance and attrition as each participant discussed their experience as they reached the end of the course. These data are shared in detail in Chapter 4.

Personal narratives arrived via email. Online questionnaire data were gathered through Survey Monkey. Finally, the focus group was recorded in Zoom (web conferencing) to allow for easier transcription and to revisit the input. I imported all data into NVivo™ for safe keeping, organization, and analysis. After data analysis, member checking was used to allow each participant to confirm or clarify the data regarding his or her individual case. Once member checking was complete, I sent a thank you email to participants with a small token of appreciation.

Data Analysis Plan

All data collected served to answer the study's research question. All questions about the online teachers' training, challenges, and situations revolved around the research question. Open coding was used to find emerging themes, selective coding for cross-case analysis, and finally axial coding to confirm themes. Themes to emerge throughout the questions derived from the coding suggested by Krueger and Casey's (2015) for focus groups: frequency, extensiveness, intensity, specificity, internal consistency, and perception of importance. Emergent themes deemed frequent were further analyzed based on the extensiveness of the discussion, the intensity participants' put on the topic, including the specific examples cited, and the consistency across participants. I used NVivo™ as the software for analysis as further described in this

section. I revisited the data to confirm or discard emerging themes. Any discrepant details of the data or my analyses are shared in Chapter 4.

Using NVivo™ to analyze data provided the necessary structure to organize, access, and analyze the study's data. At the prescreening level, data were imported from Survey Monkey to keep all data organized and to review the diverse sample for the focus group. At the narrative and online interview levels (first two sources for triangulation), responses gathered were imported into NVivo™ for coding, as was the transcript and video for coding of the focus group interview (third source for triangulation). In addition to using NVivo™ to create nodes to sort data into categories, NVivo™ was used to create a frequency chart to search for other important areas that evolved as themes, trends, and factors related to my research question.

Issues of Trustworthiness

According to Lichtman (2013), four important areas upon which to judge qualitative research include credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. I address how I handled these issues during the study in this section. For credibility and dependability, Stake (1995) highlighted the importance of triangulation protocols to ensure a qualitative researcher is arriving at the right conclusions as objectively as possible. Such protocols include data source, investigator, theory, and methodological triangulation (Stake, 1995). In this qualitative study, I used data source triangulation by analyzing personal narratives, online interview questions, and the focus group transcript.

Transferability or external validity deals with the extent to which results would apply to other contexts, although it is debatable that this is the aim of qualitative research

(Miles et al., 2014). Stake (1995) went further when he stated that case studies aim to understand a case or phenomenon and not to compare various ones. Thus, the best way to address this in my study was to gather thick, rich descriptions of all participants, their characteristics, and the program/environment so other researchers can identify if those similarities are transferable to their realities. Finally, confirmability was addressed by maintaining a research journal with reflections and thoughts about the data gathered and the process. Member checking took place at the conclusion of my analyses to give participants' the opportunity to clarify or correct their responses.

Ethical Procedures

Participants agreed to participate in the study through an informed consent (see Appendix D). Institutional permissions, including IRB approval were completed before data collection. The consent form clearly stated the purpose, actions needed by participants, and the freedom to withdraw from the study. If, at any point, participants would choose to leave the study, they could do so by informing me, and with no penalty.

All information and data gathered have been kept confidential, and I use pseudonyms for the institution and participants. I have not and will not use the individual information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, I will not include a name or anything else that could identify a participant in the study reports. Data have been and will continue to be kept secured by password, protecting all files such as recordings and any raw data or documentation with identifiers. Any print outs will be kept locked and secured. Data will be kept for at least five years, as required by the

university. Finally, I have noted the separation between my roles as a researcher and as an employee in the field of this study.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I described the qualitative case study approach undertaken to address my research question. As laid out in the various sections of the chapter, as the researcher, I paid close attention to design and implementation processes that meet ethical standards and IRB guidelines to produce a sound and worthwhile study. Chapter 4 follows with data analysis. I conclude in Chapter 5 with implications of my study and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore reasons for students' attrition and persistence in online teacher training courses. The research question was, What factors influence attrition and persistence among in-service EFL teachers in an online teacher training? To answer this question, I sought the perspectives of in-service EFL teachers toward their online course experiences. To do so, I used qualitative case study methodology to gather in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon of attrition as it pertains to the population being studied. In this chapter, I describe the research setting, demographics, data collection procedures, data analysis techniques, and the results of my study. I answer the research question by highlighting themes that emerged from analysis of the three qualitative data sets. I use triangulation to confirm overarching themes emerging from all three data sets. Finally, I conclude with a section describing how I maintained trustworthiness throughout the study.

Setting

Instead of conducting the study in a specific physical setting, I used multiple online channels to recruit and communicate with participants and to collect data because my participants live in various countries around the world. Participants teach in different institutions and campuses throughout EFL Worldwide (pseudonym). I collected data via an online questionnaire (Survey Monkey), professional narrative (email), and online focus group (Zoom web conferencing). I did not visit the institutions for this research study nor did I speak with other school or program personnel. At the time of my study,

the six final participants were part-time and full-time teachers of English in EFL Worldwide and they were enrolled as students in an online program for in-service EFL teachers. All six participants noted in responses to open questions the challenges of their busy schedules. At the time of my study, only one participant was teaching in a single school; the other participants were teaching at two or three institutions. In their responses to the online questionnaire, participants repeatedly mentioned time consuming tasks, courses being time-demanding, and challenges associated with keeping up with all their responsibilities. Fortunately, all participants were willing to participate in the study, and they responded to my requests for information, although two were not able to be present during the focus group. In the next section, I describe the participating teachers in more detail.

<div align="center">**Participant Demographics**</div>

Participants in my study came from several institutions in Latin America. Spanish or Portuguese were their native languages. My study was conducted in English and none of the participants specifically mentioned speaking or writing in English as being a challenge. Some participants noted that they did not fully understand a specific online question ("Please provide some examples that illustrate your comfort level related to the technologies used in this course (e.g., SCORM online activities, fora, wikis, blogs)"). The focus group, however, provided an opportunity for participants to address any misunderstandings, as did the member checking.

As displayed in Table 3, the six teachers (one male and five females) had numerous years of teaching experience ranging from 8 to 30 years. Most were employed

part-time with only two working full-time. The majority worked in two or three institutions, while only one teacher worked exclusively for one school. They had educational credentials ranging from a high school diploma to a master's degree. Finally, five were participating in the online training program as optional with one taking the course as mandatory. All had experienced difficulties in prior online training, with one noting she had plenty of difficulties.

Table 3

EFL Worldwide Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Yrs. Teaching	Employment	Level of Education	No. of institutions where teaching	Training: Mandatory or optional	Experience with online training (difficulties)
P1: Patricia	F	14	Part-time	Bachelor	2	Mandatory	Some
P2: Hilma	F	13	Part-time	Master	2	Optional	Plenty
P3: Bella	F	13	Full-time	High S.	2	Optional	Some
P4: Marcy	F	18	Part-time	Bachelor	1	Optional	Some
P5: Ian	M	8	Full-time	Master	3	Optional	Some
P6: Calista	F	30	Part-time	Master	3	Optional	Some

Data Collection

Through the online course announcement board, ten volunteers completed the online prescreening questionnaire (on Survey Monkey – an online survey platform) that I used to select participants for the study. Upon reviewing the results, I selected nine participants for the study. I did not select the tenth because she was a tutor teaching one of the four courses rather than a course participant. I thanked her for her willingness to participate but noted that I could not include her as a participant in my study. Of the nine volunteers selected, I was not sure about including one in particular, but eventually I selected her for the study as well. She was a teacher who emailed me to ask if she could

participate in the study despite her level of education. Bella (pseudonym) noted that the prescreening tool did not provide high school as an option for level of education. My original assumption was that all EFL teachers would have a college degree. Upon discussion with my committee chair, I decided to include Bella in the study because of her extensive experience with EFL instruction. She had 13 years of teaching experience.

Six of the nine prospective participants completed consent forms. Three volunteers were not able to participate: One stated that she was too busy during the semester. The other two never replied to requests to complete the consent form (see Table 3).

I also gathered the consent forms through Survey Monkey. Participants shared their names and email addresses and provided the dates on which they consented to participating in the study. Some participants erroneously entered their date of birth in the date field. However, Survey Monkey provided a time stamp which I used as the date and time of consent. One challenge throughout the data collection process was reaching participants via email. I received several bounce backs and was told by some participants that my emails were routed to their junk mail folders. Fortunately, in the prescreening questionnaire, I also collected phone numbers that allowed me to maintain participant contact and continue with the study.

The six volunteers who consented became the official participants in the study. I approached both my research Committee and Walden's IRB about reducing the number of participants from the original range desired (eight to 12) to a lower one (six to eight). The IRB noted that such change would not need the board's approval, but rather could

simply be approved by the research Committee. This change to reduce the number of

participants aligned more closely with the literature for case study methodology. Stake

(1995) noted that the maximum number of participants in a case study should be six to

eight to allow for many opportunities to gather in-depth, rich data. My Committee

approved the sample size of six.

      The first set of data I collected came from the online questionnaire (see Appendix

E). Participants responded to five questions in Survey Monkey. I compiled the responses

and downloaded them into an Excel™ file. Then, I imported them into NVivo™ for

coding. The second set of data came from the professional journey narrative (see

Appendix F) that participants emailed to me directly. I proceeded to import the narratives

as individual Word™ documents for each participant into NVivo™ for analysis. The

final set of data consisted of the video recording and transcript of the focus group

interview (see Appendix G). I imported the video and transcript into NVivo™ for

analysis.

Data Analysis

      Yin (2014) suggested that to analyze data, a researcher must focus on the protocol

questions rather than the data. By using the questions, and looking for evidence in the

data that answered the questions, a path could be traced back to the research question.

Therefore, as I reviewed individual responses to the online questionnaire, I looked at the

responses to organize how participants answered each question. This approach is similar

to that of Krueger and Casey (2015) who posited that purpose ought to drive analysis at

all types guiding the intensity, direction, and depth of the analysis. Thus, I asked myself

what were the reasons participants had for taking the courses? Moreover, why had they persisted in courses or dropped out? Reasons for taking the courses included access to online training, desire for professional development, or a requirement/mandate of their employment. These and other answers emerged from the analysis at the individual level. Then, I reviewed the data as a collection of the responses from all six participants to look for emerging themes when it came to reasons for taking the course, strengths for course completion, and potential challenges. Color coding the themes in NVivo™ for the individual responses served well for identifying overarching themes once I reviewed individual responses. I used a similar color coding process for the analysis across all participants.

First, it was important to understand the study participants who comprised the case to answer the research question, What factors influence attrition and persistence among in-service EFL teachers in an online teacher training environment? Following is a brief description of each participant to help the reader understand each one.

- Patricia holds a Bachelor degree and teaches part-time at two institutions. She has 14 years of experience. She learned English and started teaching at a young age. Her biggest challenge in the profession, "I think the biggest challenge is to keep the students motivated in a world full of technologies, visual appeals, information, and short patience."

- Hilma holds a Master's degree and teaches part-time at two institutions. She has 13 years of experience. She has done extensive training face-to-face and online in EFL, pedagogy, technology, and psychology, among other areas. She believes

face-to-face training is more engaging and interactive. Her challenge in online

training is feedback as there is a need to wait for responses from the instructor.

- Bella holds a high school degree and teaches full-time at two institutions. She has

  13 years of experience. She started studying engineering but discovered her

  passion for teaching the minute she walked into the classroom. Her challenge is

  improving herself as workshops tend to concentrate too much on textbooks and

  materials rather than pedagogy.

- Marcy holds a Bachelor degree and teaches English part-time at one institution.

  She has 18 years of experience. Originally, she worked in radio and upon moving

  to a different town with her husband, she just happened to find an opportunity in

  teaching and fell in love with it. Therefore, she concentrated at night on

  schoolwork to obtain her degree in education while her baby slept.

- Ian holds a Master's degree and teaches English part-time at three institutions. He

  has eight years of experience. He became a bilingual teacher and enjoyed teaching

  math in the USA to under privileged children. Unfortunately, after September 11,

  2001, all the programs were cancelled. He found himself going back to his

  country to teach English and believes in learning and improving himself with

  courses, workshops, and training. However, his greatest challenge is time to

  manage all those activities, especially "fill-in-the-blanks" types of exercises.

- Calista holds a Master's degree and teaches English full-time at three institutions.

  She has 30 years of experience and described teaching as her true calling. She

  started studying chemistry but soon realized it was not for her so she switched to a

small college where she learned English. She has been taking many courses and training to better herself, and has even presented at conferences and workshops at regional TESOL events.

Online Questionnaire

During the analysis of the first set of data, I identified several categories representing emergent themes from the data. The categories included: reasons for taking the course, potential challenges in the training program, and potential strengths. Most teachers (five out of six) were participating in the training program by choice due to the optional nature of the program. Patricia was the only teacher who was in the program due to a mandatory local requirement. Thus, understanding the reasons for being in the program was important. I discuss summative findings in the results section of this chapter. The findings related to the online questionnaire emerged from the following established questions:

1. Describe what interested you about this online EFL teacher training program.

2. What differences, if any, do you see between this EFL online training and face-to-face trainings you may have done in the past?

3. Please provide some examples that illustrate your comfort level related to the technologies used in this course (e.g., SCORM online activities, fora, wikis, blogs).

4. What professional development goals do you have? Please describe them and explain how this EFL teacher training fits your goals.

5. What do you foresee will be your strengths and challenges in completing this course/program?

In the following sub-sections, I provide the results for the various categories that emerged from the participants' responses to the online questionnaire. I summarize the overarching themes, and at times illustrate the themes with quotes. I have provided the quotes as submitted online by the participants even if the statements contain grammatical or syntax errors. As stated earlier, the English as a Foreign Language teachers are speakers of other primary languages (Spanish or Portuguese for my six participants) who learned English as a foreign language. However, maintaining their responses as provided was important as not to change the meaning or nuances of their statements and opinions.

Category 1: Reasons for taking the online training program. Reasons included professional development, convenient access to coursework, relevance, and required training. Twelve instances of professional development appeared in the first data set. Professional development represented the most popular response. Despite 14 years of teaching experience, Patricia said: "I like to be updated and have some of my practice refreshed and re-thought." Hilma, with 13 years of experience, responded that the courses would have "enormous influence …on professional performance" and she spoke of her desire to be the "best English teacher" she could be. Even Calista with 30 years of experience expressed the need "to keep updated in ELT methodology" and Ian expressed his need "to look for different ways to improve [his] skills" although he had been teaching for eight years at the time of the study. Ian expressed his belief in an "educational revolution" where "We are teaching a new generation with specific

technological demands that make us look for different ways to improve our skills." Although Marcy did not refer to improving her teaching skills, she did mention her desire to become a manager when she said, "I have been a teacher for 18 years, and now I would like to apply for a management position, so this online training has been very useful to get a better scope of what is expected of a manager."

Easy access was cited by three participants (a total of five instances) as a reason for taking the course. Marcy identified with the "comfort of being able to have access to training without physical presence required." Ian spoke about the "advantage of some free time between classes or very late at night, something that makes it impossible to attend face-to-face lessons." Hilma mentioned access in two instances: one noting as important the ability to "get organized better in terms of time," and a second time saying, "I always search for the best moment to work on my course." Furthermore, Ian went on to say when answering a separate question that after teaching 40 hours a week, he can still take online training "normally at night."

Finally, these teachers referred to relevance (four times) as a reason for the training. Bella praised the fact that the available online training was one of the "few specifically for language teachers." She went on to state that "[they] don't have the same needs, approaches, or methodologies as other teachers." Patricia recognized the importance of the courses given they provide "more useful examples of teaching practice" and Calista was interested in the specifics of ELT methodology. Hilma stated, "I am interested in every Module in this training program. I find it very useful. I have

gone through some other modules and I know about their quality." Only one participant, Patricia, noted that the training was mandatory, but she still found the courses relevant.

Category 2: Strengths supporting completion. Participants identified several strengths that could support their completion of the course. Activities such as fora and other collaborative instruments emerged as a positive aspect (noted by three participants). Calista said, "I feel extremely comfortable with online activities on Blackboard really comfortable with the wikis and the forum." Patricia pointed to work in fora as a strength given the participation by her and others that promotes engagement. She also noted her desire for "learning and sharing more and more." Hilma also liked fora and felt at ease with them noting:

> *I feel comfortable with the use of fora and blogs, because they really work, we are really having interaction with other teachers, which is very fruitful for me, since they contribute with excellent ideas and opinions, from which I always learn.*

Technology also emerged (from five participants) as another important strength, including "being tech savvy" with Bella even identifying herself as being born with an "internal chip" as she spoke of her ease for using technology. Patricia noted, "I feel fine with the tools we use in the course." Hilma went on further to say, "I know how to use the required technologies, and I feel very happy to be able to learn more about new platforms, sites, etc." Marcy praised the use of technology saying "[O]verall, I believe technology has increased its utility in education, especially in online education." Ian also noted this is the right time to be learning with technology. A positive reaction to technology was evident among most participants' comments.

Finally, persistence was considered an important strength in completing the coursework. Hilma described what could be labeled persistence when she said, "This is the fourth course I take, I am so eager to finish this year!! I started in 2010, and now I'm very close to my goal." She went on to affirm "[M]y strength is that I always finish what I start. =)." Similarly, Marcy expressed both organization and persistence when she said, "I trust in my capacity of being well-organized and in my concentration when performing a task." Patricia's desire to learn more was what motivated her, and Calista said about English Language Teaching (ELT), "I am quite responsible as to doing things on time and complete. I love ELT methodology, theory and practice." Therefore, desire to complete their EFL training program and personal perseverance seemed evident for these teachers who saw themselves as committed to learning and to becoming better teachers.

The determination of these teachers resonated with Kauffman's (2015) research on predictive factors of success in online learning. Kauffman found that perceptions of differences between online and face-to-face classes reflected differences in course satisfaction. Furthermore, Kauffman highlighted the profile of a successful online learner as one who is self-regulated, responsible, and in control.

Category 3: Challenges for completion. Challenges for the online teacher training program included demands for their time, lack of immediate feedback, and the observation requirement. Patricia, for example, spoke about the short time for the course (12 weeks with one being an introductory week, and one midterm break). She noted she even had to drop out of another course in the series but was currently taking the third course. Although Hilma expressed concern over how time-demanding the courses were,

she noted she was taking the fourth and final course. Marcy noted the "challenge would be definitely setting the time for working on the course every week." Calista had a similar comment about time noting that she is contributing to this research study and was signed up for another course she had not anticipated taking. Expanding a bit on time constraints, Ian mentioned that in addition to the time demand of the courses, at times the courses coincide with evaluations, accreditations, and other time-demanding tasks at his institution thus making it harder to complete the courses.

Lack of immediate feedback/communication emerged as a challenge for several teachers. Marcy said, "In face-to-face training, you are able to get almost immediate feedback from peers and trainer." Hilma also mentioned feedback and said "the feedback depends on the tutor, but in the module I am going through right now, the tutor has been very close to us. =)." Although Calista did not use the word feedback, she noted "[C]ommunication is still an issue. If ever I have a question as for the contents of the course, I have to wait for some time for the reply/answer, which may take even longer than a day."

Another challenge teachers mentioned was the observation. Students in the teacher training courses must complete an observation by an English director, coordinator, or designee as a requirement to pass the course. Ian expressed concern because teachers like him "are evaluated by somebody that is not fully qualified for this task and has no idea about the course objectives." Bella also identified observations as a problem saying "my students this semester are quite sensitive and everything bothers and discomforts them."

As I moved through other data collection instruments (the personal narratives and the focus group), it was important to concentrate on them as separate data sets to determine emerging themes for each data set (Yin, 2014). However, in preparation to contrast the emerging themes of all data sets, Table 4 summarizes the overall themes for the first data set.

Table 4

Themes Appearing in Data Set 1: Online Questionnaires

Pseudony m	1. Reasons for course			2. Strengths for course			3. Challenges for course		
	Dev.	Acces s	Relevanc e	Act .	Tech .	Perseveranc e	Tim e	Feedbac k	Observatio n
P1: Patricia	2	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0
P2: Hilma	2	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	0
P3: Bella	2	0	1	0	1	0	2	0	1
P4: Marcy	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
P5: Ian	2	2	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
P6: Calista	3	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	0
Total	**12(6)**	5	4	3	**5(5)**	3	**7(6)**	3	3

Note. **Bold** denotes emphasis on the highest frequency per category both in terms of frequency, but also in that the highest number of participants alluded to the themes (e.g. all six participants mentioned professional development as a reason for taking the course, five noted technology being a strength, and finally all six identified time as a potential challenge to completing the course.)

Personal Narratives

After compiling the second set of data from the personal professional narratives, I read each narrative several times to look for emergent themes. The narrative prompt read as follows to guide participants and provide a common ground for their essays.

Please provide a narrative (between two and five pages in length) describing your personal professional journey. You may wish to include why you chose to be a teacher, how you prepared yourself to become one, your past learning

experiences (face-to-face and online), and any other information which may help

me understand you as a learner in the current EFL course.

Despite this guidance, the narrative prompt was general enough to provide a blank slate and less structured environment than the online questionnaire so that the participant teachers could express themselves more freely and share their opinions, experiences, and circumstances. All the narratives were on the short side (one to two pages). However, they provided a clear picture of the journey that led each teacher to English as a Foreign Language teaching assignment. They also described their preparation to become teachers. Most of them commented on their past and current challenges in their professional journeys. The less structured environment made it more difficult to identify emerging themes in the data gathered during this phase of the study. Nevertheless, some themes emerged: love of education/teaching, desire to improve themselves/learn, and self-reliance.

Category 1: Love of education/teaching. To illustrate the love for education theme, one has to go no further than the introductory paragraph of the narratives. Bella expressed it by saying, "The minute I stepped into the classroom as teacher and not student, I knew it. That's where my heart and I belonged." Marcy noted that although she loved her days working in radio, she felt something was missing, and was quite open when a principal offered her a teaching position. She described it as a knock on the door she could not refuse, and said, "I decided to take the offer and it was when I discovered my passion in life." Ian described the beginning of his teaching career as a "fantastic opportunity to learn about the relevance of teaching and the chance to help the

community." Hilma described teaching as a "wonderful activity." Finally, Calista went all the way back to childhood to describe how she played teacher with two or three "little neighbors", ages four to eight, where she taught them in her home with a tiny blackboard and chalk that would leave her in a cloud of dust.

Category 2: Desire to improve themselves and learn. All six participants alluded to a desire to learn, to take training, and to be better teachers. Hilma expressed it as a continuum by saying, "I like learning and I am aware one never stops learning." She noted that is the reason she continues training. Patricia emphasized that from the very beginning of her teaching career, she took "many professional courses to learn how to teach and to develop the students' skills." Marcy also noted that early in her career she "realized … it was necessary to get formal training and preparation." She concluded her narrative saying, "I realized that training and preparation were essential if you wanted to be a good teacher so I took every opportunity I could and attended to a number of seminars, workshops, courses, etc." Hilma summarized it well when she said, "This is my true calling. This is who I am. This is what I love to be, a teacher."

Category 3: Self-reliance. Self-reliance or perseverance was highly visible in all six narratives. Bella explained how she had persevered despite many challenges. Through a particularly difficult time, she still hung on as she expressed it saying, "Here I am now dividing my time between [School 1], [School 2] and my personal life. Pursuing a degree in English Literature, getting back in shape after an accident and back into learning." Marcy spoke highly of a training course she took and said, "It took me about ten months to complete the course but it was totally worth it." Ian expressed he gladly devotes time

to the courses despite challenges. He enjoyed the voluntary nature of the courses and said, "I believe that when the school forces you to complete online work without a proper motivation or reward, it is very difficult to get the best results possible." Calista noted that from the beginning of her career she had a thirst for knowledge. She quenched it taking courses, reading books, and is currently taking online teacher training, and working on a Ph.D. in history. Finally, Patricia sternly noted:

> *I've been teaching English since then and my journey is still long and full of challenges. It does not scare me because I feel confident enough to face all of them. I'm sure I'm not going to succeed in some of them, but my effort is going to be big and my hope to become today better than yesterday will never end.*

Table 5 summarizes the themes that emerged from the personal professional narratives.

Table 5

Themes Appearing in Data Set 2: Personal Professional Narratives

Pseudonym	Love of Teaching	Desire to improve	Self-Reliance
P1: Patricia	0	2	1
P2: Hilma	1	1	0
P3: Bella	1	1	1
P4: Marcy	3	2	1
P5: Ian	0	1	1
P6: Calista	1	2	1
Total	6	**9(6)**	5

Note. **Bold** denotes emphasis on the highest frequency both regardg times the theme emerged, but also in that all six participants alluded to the theme. All teachers wrote about their desire to improve/better themselves.

Focus Group Interview

Originally, I scheduled two focus group interviews with three participants each. However, there had to be several re-scheduling attempts due to conflicts in participant schedules and low attendance (only one individual attending or several cancelling ahead of time). Also, one participant (Marcy) stated that she was not going to be able to attend at all. She had an illness in her immediate family and had to be in the hospital with her son. She, therefore, had dropped the course weeks before it ended. A great challenge in scheduling the focus groups, was working around everyone's schedule given most teachers were working for multiple universities and teaching morning, afternoon, and even evenings. An additional challenge was dealing with the different geographical locations and time zones. I was finding that two individuals could come at one time but the other three could not. A focus group of two seemed to be awkward so I consulted with my Committee.

Upon recommendation of the Committee, the five participants were scheduled into one single group to have enough participants to hold an actual focus group discussion rather than individual interviews. Having only two participants in a focus group would not have made for a proper focus group. In the end, out of the five participants scheduled for the focus group, four attended. One of the participants, Calista, was stuck in traffic after leaving the university where she was teaching at the time, and did not make it home in time to join the focus group. She apologized and offered to help in any other way she could.

The focus group began with me thanking them for their time and revisiting the purpose and structure of the focus group, including the fact that the discussion was being recorded for transcription purposes. The four teachers in attendance; Patricia, Bella, Hilma, and Ian agreed; and the focus group proceeded with the questions previously sent to participants. The first was an open question about their experiences in the online teacher training in the quarter just ending. Despite the question, participants spoke about the current quarter and prior quarters or semesters as well. Their comments provided a wider picture of their training experience, and provided a contrast to different courses and tutors. Then, we moved on to the more specific questions and concluded with an open opportunity for any other comments. In this section, I list the questions asked. Although I had additional sub-questions for each question in case they were needed for probing, but I rarely needed such questions because participants were very open and thorough in their comments. They often fed of each other and kept the discussion going without my intervention.

1. Please describe what your experience has been in this online teacher training course.

2. Describe your experience regarding teacher presence and interaction throughout the course. Additional probing questions if needed:

3. Describe your experience regarding student presence and interaction throughout the course?

4. Cognitive presence in research refers to the learner's engagement with the course content. Describe your experience regarding content interaction throughout the course?

5. Is there anything else you would like to add to this focus group interview?

In moving through the questions during the focus group, several themes emerged. These themes included: challenges in completing the course, reasons for taking the course, interaction with other course participants, interaction with the tutor, and course content. In each category, I explain how these themes emerged in the coding. They did not all emerge out of frequency.

Category 1: Reasons for taking the course. An area that emerged in the online questionnaire was the reasons participants expressed that led them to take the course. Although that question was not explicit in the protocol for the focus group, the topic re-emerged in the introductory question about the participants' experience in the online teacher training. According to Krueger and Casey (2015) themes emerge from frequency (how often research participants mentioned topics) but also from intensity (how emphatically participants voiced an opinion). Within the intensity parameter, relevance emerged as an important reason for undertaking the course. Hilma noted that relevance was her motivation to take the training when she said, "I did apply all those things in my classes, and I even posted some videos of the things we have to do." She was emphatic in her comment. She brought it up several times and stated that despite the challenges she committed to completing the training because she saw it as useful. When the conversation was too engaging to cut in, Hilma kept raising her hand and made a point to be able to

comment and bring this perspective to the group's attention. Bella and Ian had been fully

engaged discussing how the content was too general and basic to be relevant for them.

Patricia seemed to agree with their perspective. However, after Hilma's comments,

Patricia expressed more concern with the ways in which content was shared and

discussed in the course rather than the content itself when she said:

> *I don't know, when we have a criticism, I think we should have a suggestion, but I*
>
> *guess, if the material could be shorter in a, in some, I don't know, in some, in*
>
> *PDF or whatever kind of material, mmm, that we could just take a brief look and*
>
> *then have a discussion, again, like this one, which I really think is nice, it could be*
>
> *more rich for everybody, we could grow more as teachers, and probably, we*
>
> *would have much better classes than we do today, with more information.*

Category 2: Challenges for completion. The category of challenges emerged

again in this data set. Participants described the various issues that made it difficult to

complete the course. There were 22 references in the focus group coded as challenges.

These references to challenges included: personal problems, mandatory nature of course,

observation requirement, forum guidelines, lack of teacher feedback or contact (teacher

interaction), and the content deemed by participants as too basic. I elaborate on each area

in this section.

Personal problems. Three participants described personal problems. Bella shared

the personal difficulties she encountered this quarter in completing the course. She said,

"Between doctors, hospitals, being severely depressed… I was like, what was more

important for me at some point was like finding a reason to go on." Ian alluded to

unexpected personal travel as a factor affecting completion coupled with the mandatory nature of the courses as described in the next sub-section. Finally, Marcy dropped out of the course mid-way due to personal matters. Marcy was not able to join the focus group as she had to tend to her son in the hospital.

Mandatory nature of courses. Ian explained that he dropped the course in part due to the mandatory nature of the course (although in the first data set, online questionnaire, he identified the training as being optional). It turned out that Ian had signed up for a hybrid learning course of his interest/choice, and his supervisor indicated that it was mandatory to do one of the Worldwide EFL teacher training modules. Having to do both courses and keep up with his teaching responsibilities turned out to be too much. He felt it was better to stay with the hybrid learning course where tutor involvement was better, and the observation requirement Ian deemed arbitrary was not an issue. Patricia on the other hand had identified the training as mandatory, but did not express that the requirement made it challenging to complete the course.

Observation requirement. Although only two teachers brought the required observation up as a challenge, they did so emphatically. Ian remarked, "The part that I really don't like too much is that the course goes one way, and they require a class observation and then, it's someone who has no idea about these courses [doing the observation]." Ian exclaimed, "They tell you that if you are not observed by your boss or somebody in your office, you fail the course. So, that kind of thing is something that I didn't really like." Bella corroborated that in her case a supervisor (or coordinator) had

not filled out the observation form correctly, but her tutor had worked with her to get the observation counted for course completion.

Forum guidelines. Fora emerged as a challenge several times (12 instances noted) and all four teachers in the focus group talked about this course requirement. Participants had issues with two aspects of the forum requirement. The first was the repetitive and required steps of posting and then replying to two participants. The second area was the word limit/guidance. I illustrate this theme with participants' own words reflecting these frustrations.

Ian said, "Forums don't help to complete any interaction. You are not getting any important information. You are just commenting. It's just comments. That's a great trouble." Bella felt the same way and emphatically noted, "The forum is not interaction, it's me doing my homework and finding a way to comply with the two mandatory posts. That's not interaction!" Patricia liked the focus group synchronous session and said about it, "This is much more interesting than five blocks of fora." She wished for some synchronous discussion of the same type as the focus group interview in the courses, noting that there is a curiosity about how teaching is in other parts of the world and how different approaches may exist to handle the same problems. She saw the synchronous discussion as an opportunity to learn from others about real life situations. Hilma added that the greatest challenge with the fora was replying to two other teachers. She found herself posting her original post and waiting around for others to post so that she could provide comments. She remembered that at one point she emailed the tutor due to a grade lowered by two points because of her lack of responses. She informed the tutor that she

kept coming back and not found any posts to comment on, and the tutor adjusted her grade.

The second problematic area of the fora for all participants was the word limit. Although there were instructions for the fora stating a world limit such as 50 to 70 or 100 to 120, participants felt that some individuals posted very long posts and ignored the directions. Ian expressed frustration saying when a mid-term report noted that his posts were too brief and said, "You asked me for a hundred, I made a 100, I made more. I don't know. That kind of thing doesn't help to motivate you." Bella noted there were some participants' posts she avoided "like the plague." She expressed it was not ideal to have to comment on the other teachers' posts that appeared like whole essays. Finally, Hilma, who had noted she benefitted from fora expressed, "I think sometimes it's not that bad, but it's demotivating, that sometimes it's not so easy for you to write as much as others can."

Lack of teacher feedback or contact. Three participants expressed that lack of teacher communication and feedback in the past had caused them to drop out or fail a course. These participants were Ian, Patricia, and Hilma. Ian decided to drop two courses in the past because of lack of feedback from his tutors. He was especially disturbed when a tutor contacted his supervisor directly noting his lack of participation rather than reaching out to him directly. Patricia dropped a prior course as well. She commented that she expected much more involvement and sharing in the technology module but felt the tutor was absent. She noted she would have benefited greatly from the exploration of tools like the online conferencing where the focus group took place for this study. Hilma

explained she failed a prior course because of lack of feedback. She noted that the tutor did not provide comments in the fora, did not send emails, or provide any other support. Hilma went on to say, "He didn't give any midterm report, so I never realized something was missing." When the course ended, Hilma was surprised she had failed. She did not know that was the case until she reached out to the support team inquiring about her certificate. When she received the response that she had failed because several tasks were missing, she was puzzled because she thought those tasks were optional. I provide an additional discussion on this topic in Category 4: Interaction with tutor.

Content deemed by participants as too basic. Bella expressed concern that the content of the courses was too basic. She felt that kept her from developing. She emphasized her point saying, "Teachers' development is very important as long as it's DEVELOPMENT!" She proceeded, "I didn't read all of it or watch all of the videos because some of these things were pretty common sense to me." Finally, she exclaimed, "I have 17 years of teaching experience… [T]o be honest, it's very boring, it's very very boring." Ian agreed saying, "I agree with that, that it's pretty common sense. Some things are nice but not really a lot of activities that you can use directly in the classroom more than the thing that you already do." The other two participants had differing opinions about the content. Patricia felt the lack of downloadable materials (which used to be present in the past and are no longer available) made it more difficult to digest/use the content. Hilma agreed on the need for the portable document format files (PDFs), but also noted the usefulness and relevancy of the material. She has used what she has learned in the classroom, and said about the PDFs, "I keep the other ones as a treasure because

they're really good, and this module, I wasn't given one. I asked her [the tutor] and she said they were not available anymore."

Category 3: Interaction with other course participants. In the first general question of the focus group interview, teachers highlighted the usefulness of meeting participants from all over the world and learning from their experiences. Patricia noted, "For me, it was the most important part when we could trade experiences, exchange experiences with other cultures and other Worldwide EFL teachers." Similarly, Hilma said, "I love knowing people from other experiences and I have really learned much from both the course itself and from the rest of the participants." However, as the interview went on, participants seemed to share more deeply than their initial responses and commented on the lack of interaction among participants as explained in the comments about fora in Category 2: Challenges for completion. All four teachers in the focus group agreed that a synchronous online discussion like the one held in the focus group would promote real and meaningful interaction in the courses.

Category 4: Interaction with tutor. Participants presented both positive and negative experiences around the topic of tutor interaction. Bella noted how her current course tutor, Mel (pseudonym), was the motivating factor that helped her complete the course. Mel encouraged Bella to continue despite all the personal problems she was having. Bella recalled, "She actually told me, go on, and do it, and finish, please don't despair, you still have time, complete what you can. You need 70%, just give me 70%,

pass the course." Bella attributed being able to pass the course in part due to Mel's support and encouragement.

Hilma spoke about a past course where she unknowingly failed the class. The tutor, Edwin (pseudonym), did not provide any feedback or encouragement. He did not send out the usual mid-term report or even a final report. Hilma found out she failed when she inquired about her certificate and was informed she had failed. When Hilma asked why, she got the report that listed all the activities she had not done when all along she thought those activities were optional. The lack of communication throughout the course made it impossible to catch up at that point. Hilma contrasted that experience to her current tutor, Mel, who was present at every step of the way.

Patricia noted that a prior tutor, Ella (pseudonym), had the class working in pairs, trios, and groups, and truly achieved engagement. Patricia felt she learned a lot from that and to this day has a friend in Mexico from that course. However, when Patricia had Nadine (pseudonym) as a tutor, she was disappointed that the tutor did not provide the same experience. Finally, Ian expressed similar sentiments. He said he was about to drop the course and officially decided to drop it because of his tutor Edwin. Ian complained:

> [I]nstead of writing me, he writes directly to my boss what was my situation and why I was not entering to the module. So, I prefer to receive a notice or something following before because it was like in the Week 7 or 8, it was almost impossible to complete the module.

Category 5: Interaction with course content. As noted in Category 2 of this section, there were mixed feelings about the interaction with the content. Bella and Ian

felt they could not engage with the material because it was too basic, general, or "common sense" information. Patricia and Hilma felt the content was relevant and useful, but discussed the need for more mechanisms for engagement. Both Patricia and Hilma felt that providing PDF downloadable resources was necessary. Patricia noted, "I don't know about you but sometimes, when I don't see with my hands literally, I don't feel good, you know. I try to be into technology but sometimes, I'm old school." She also suggested downloadable discussions because there are very specific suggestions about activities created for the books all the teachers use. She saw it as a lost opportunity noting, "We could have a database in our institutions or something like this. Otherwise, I think it's kind of pointless, because we prepare, we do everything, and it's just there. I have mine, but I don't have the other ones, you know."

Table 6 summarizes the themes that emerged from the focus group interview. With this final set of data, I compare the different themes that emerged from all three data sets in order to identify overarching themes that, through triangulation, support the answer to my research question about factors influencing attrition and persistence in online teacher training.

Table 6

Themes Appearing in Data Set 3: Focus Group Interview

Participant	Reason: Relevance	Challenges						Peer Interaction	Teacher Interaction	Content Interaction
		P	M	O	F	C	T			
P1: Patricia	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	4	2	2
P2: Hilma	2	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	2	1
P3: Bella	0	1	0	1	6	2	0	5	3	2
*P4: Marcy**	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*
P5: Ian	0	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2	1
*P6: Calista**	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*
Total	2	2	1	2	**12(4)**	3	3	**13(4)**	**9(4)**	6

Note. **Bold** denotes most frequent issues raised by the all four teachers attending the focus group. Within challenges, themes that emerged are abbreviated in Table: P = personal, M = mandatory course, O = observation requirement, F = fora, C = content, T = tutor. *Calista and Mayra were not able to attend the focus group.

Across Cases Analysis

After evaluating all three data sets separately, I turned to cross-analysis to confirm or reject themes. Doing so provided the opportunity for triangulation. I followed up on themes identified in the first data set to confirm if such themes re-emerged in the second and third data set. Table 7 depicts three thematic categories that emerged throughout all three data sets. Following the table, I describe how the themes in each category relate to each other.

Table 7

Cross-Case Analysis of Themes

	1. Reasons for course			2. Strengths for course			3. Challenges for course		
Pseudonym	DS1: Dev.	DS2: Desire to improve	DS3: Content	DS1: Perseverance	DS2: Self-reliance	DS3: Relevance	DS1: Time	DS2:	DS3: Fora
P1: Patricia	2	2	2	0	1	0	1	No challenges emerged in the narratives as related to the course.	3
P2: Hilma	2	1	1	2	0	2	1		1
P3: Bella	2	1	2	0	1	0	2		6
P4:Marcy*	1	2	*0*	0	1	*0*	1		*0*
P5: Ian	2	1	1	0	1	0	1		2
P6:Calista*	3	2	*0*	1	1	*0*	1		*0*
Total	**12(6)**	9(6)	6(4)	3	5	2	**7 (5)**		**12(4)**

Note. DS= Data Set to refer to DS1: Online Questionnaires, DS2: Narratives, and DS3: Focus group.*Marcy and Calista were not able to attend focus group and therefore have no data showing in data set 3.

Category 1: Reasons for taking the course. The first category dealt with reasons for taking the course regardless of the labels. In the online questionnaires (Data Set 1) teachers mentioned professional development. In the narratives (Data Set 2), they wrote about their desire to improve themselves and learn. Finally, in the focus group (Data Set 3) they talked about content and relevance. All three areas overlapped in that those reasons to take the course motivated the teachers.

In the online questionnaires, all six participants mentioned their desire for professional development even if in varied terms expressed as: update myself, be a better teacher, improve my professional performance, be the best teacher of English, tools to improve as a teacher, learn something new, improve skills, and refresh methodology. In the narratives, the teachers not only talked about their desire to improve themselves, but back-tracked to how they became teachers and how early in their careers they believed in continuing education, learning, and preparing themselves. They connected that to the present as they discussed the various learning experiences they engage in including but

not limited to: EFL Worldwide online teacher training, other Worldwide University's training, one teacher working on an undergraduate degree, one working on a Master's degree, and one on a Ph.D. degree, in addition to attending workshops, and webinars.

Finally, in the focus group, participants turned to the point of relevance of the content and how it benefitted them in improving themselves. Hilma and Patricia both noted how much they learned from the courses and the other course participants. They noted they missed the downloadable PDFs they used to access in the course. They used such PDFs as a point of reference for their teaching. However, the PDF summaries were not available in the last set of courses. Bella and Ian felt that although the content was relevant, it was too basic for their experience and that although it served as a refresher, it did not provide a true development opportunity.

Category 2: Strengths for course completion. Teachers discussed their potential strengths in the course throughout the entire study. In the online questionnaires, two teachers talked about perseverance and their will to finish what they start. In the narratives, five out of the six teachers wrote about their own self-reliance. They noted their sense of commitment and responsibility to the courses as tied to their desire to learn and improve themselves. In the focus group, only Hilma hinted on this area while discussing relevance. After noting that she had learned from the content and used what she learned in her classes, she said, "I love this and I think it's just a matter of getting organized."

Category 3: Challenges for course completion. The category of challenges was present throughout all three data sources. However, the challenges from the narratives

dealt with the process of becoming a teacher, studying at night while taking care of children during the day, changing from job to job, and even changing careers for some. On the other hand the challenges mentioned in the online questionnaire and in the focus group dealt directly with the courses. Those challenges related to CoI framework; discussed later in the results section. There, I explain how the challenges reflect the three components even though I classified into various themes in the individual data set analyses such as: time, personal, mandatory nature of course, observation requirement, fora, course content, tutor engagement, among others.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

As noted in Chapter 3, four important areas to address in qualitative research included credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Lichtman, 2013). In this section, I describe how these four areas were addressed throughout my study to arrive at valid results.

Credibility

In order to have credible results that depict the reality of the teachers in my study and their online teacher training environment, triangulation was used as planned. Stake (1995) posited that triangulation helps ensure researcher arrives at correct conclusions by analyzing the data as objectively as possible. I used data triangulation by collecting and analyzing three sources of data: online questionnaire, narrative, and focus group. The analyses were done in stages as the data was gathered to see the themes of each data set as unique before conducting cross-analysis. According to Krueger and Casey (2015) that

is the ideal approach for qualitative studies in contrast to quantitative studies where researchers wait to gather all the data before analyzing it.

A limitation posited in Chapter 3 was the voluntary nature of attendance for the focus group meeting. I noted then that studying attrition could involve working with participants who drop out of the course and therefore may or may not participate in the focus group in the end. This was the case as one of the two participants who dropped out of the course was unable to participate in the focus group due to a family illness. Marcy was not able to attend the focus group and give her third and final data input. Neither was Calista who did pass the course.

Another tool I used was member checking. According to Stake (2015), member checking involves giving participants the opportunity to review the analysis/result material for "accuracy and palatability" (p. 115). In addition to that type of general review, member checking provided my participants the opportunity to clarify responses such as the number of years in teaching differing from one set of data to the next (as in Bella's case) or who was meant when Ian said "they" had told him the course was required (his supervisor). After all, according to Lichtman (2013), research participants ought to be the ones capable of deeming the results credible or not.

Transferability

A limitation I noted in Chapter 3 was the unique nature of the program in the study. Although Stake (2015) argued that transferability is a sort of external validity, he noted that others would be the judges of such transferability. I addressed transferability by writing clear and detailed procedures should other researchers aim to replicate the

study. However, I stated that transferability to other types of programs is not likely unless

the programs have a similar audience given the specificity of the participants in this

study: EFL in-service teachers located in other countries.

Dependability

Lichtman (2013) described dependability as the researcher's responsibility to

account for changes in the context. Indeed, as a researcher investigating attrition and

persistence in real live classes with real live teachers participating in online teacher

training, changes happened. I documented any changes and stayed in close contact with

my Committee as the study proceeded. The original sample range for the study (8 to 12)

changed to 6 to 8. Before changing, I addressed the IRB with the question, where I was

referred to my Committee. Other changes such as scheduling one focus group for five

participants instead of smaller groups were also discussed with the Committee, approved

by my Committee, and noted in this chapter.

Confirmability

Lichtman (2013) described confirmability as the extent to which others can

confirm the results of a study. Although peer coding was not implemented in the study,

my dissertation Committee, and especially the methodologist, serve to strengthen this

potential limitation. To support the confirmability of my study, detailed analysis and

results are included in this chapter. I have included summary tables documenting

frequency, narrative explanations, and direct quotes to support my findings. I followed

Krueger and Casey's (2015) recommendations to pay attention to extensiveness,

intensity, specificity, internal consistency, and perception of importance in using my analyses to support the results of my study.

Results

In this section, I present the results to answer my study's research question: What factors influence attrition and persistence among in-service EFL teachers in an online teacher training environment? The results are organized around the three elements of the study's framework: social presence, teacher presence, and cognitive presence. In this section, I also discuss themes that emerged that did not fit the framework.

Social Presence

Short et al. (1976) used the concept of social presence to understand better the interaction among peers. Equally important in my study is Tinto's (1975) CoI model, which contained social presence as one of its three constructs. Given how both models have been used to understand social presence and interaction among online students, the models were important in studying peer interaction among my study's participants (in-service teachers in an online EFL teacher training course).

According to Mathieson and Leafman (2014), social presence and effective peer communication in online courses remain great challenges. More importantly, research shows that social presence has an impact on persistence. Irani et al. (2014) studied social presence among online graduate students and found that the higher their perception of social presence, the stronger their persistence. Furthermore, Wei et al. (2012) found that online learners value activities that promote social presence more highly than pure instructional activities.

My study corroborated the results of those studies on students, but with online in-service teachers as the audience. Within the first data set (online questionnaire), the theme of professional development emerged strongly due to frequency, but also one mentioned by all six teachers. Within that theme, various participants noted the importance of learning from others in the class. Patricia noted, "I really like to exchange experiences with teachers from other countries." Hilma also wrote about peer interaction when she said,

> *I feel comfortable with the use of fora and blogs, because they really work, we are really having interaction with other teachers, which is very fruitful for me, since they contribute with excellent ideas and opinions, from which I always learn.*

In the narratives, the topic re-emerged when Hilma said, "The human interaction is interesting and important, since you can learn a lot from that interaction." Patricia also pleaded, "I wish we had more fora or meeting on these topics." Marcy wrote about her desire to take some courses, seminars, and workshops to learn from others.

The topic of peer interaction or social presence was highly debated during the focus group. Bella and Ian did not feel that peer interaction was taking place in the courses. As noted in the analysis sections through various quotes, they felt strongly that course participants go through the motions of the forum requirements (doing an initial post and responding to two). Bella emphatically noted that such practice was not "true interaction." She often felt she wanted to read "no more." Ian expressed frustration over the word limits and the lack of enforcements of such limits. He also noted that the fora always lead to the same practice. He suggested having different activities. All four

participants in the focus group felt that an online synchronous session like the one taking

place from the focus group of my study would be more beneficial to learn from each

other. They felt they could learn more from that than the fora or the SCORM activities

(system-graded exercises). This sentiment echoed the Wei et al. (2012) findings that

online learners value more the activities that promote social presence than purely

instructional activities. McMahon (2013) also found that in a self-access course,

participants felt the lack of interaction was problematic despite effective online content.

In concluding this section it is worth noting that Table 8 shows the significance of

this theme given its high frequency as well as the fact that all participants spoke about

this topic. They did so with emphasis and emotion. Even those who felt there was no

social presence throughout the course, spoke of the need for it and proposed suggestions

such as online synchronous meetings to promote it. This suggestion also emerged from

participants in McMahon's study (2013) of online self-paced courses who felt isolated

and saw a synchronous online environment as a potential improvement.

Table 8

Emergent Themes Paired with Social Presence

Pseudonym	Data Set 3: Focus Group
	Social Presence
P1: Patricia	4
P2: Hilma	2
P3: Bella	5
*P4: Marcy**	*0*
P5: Ian	2
*P6:Calista**	*0*
Total	**13(4)**

Note. *Marcy and Calista were not able to attend the focus group and therefore there are no
responses for them.

Teacher Presence

      All study participants addressed teacher presence, sometimes using other terminology (e.g., tutor intervention, interaction with tutor/teacher, or the names of the tutors replaced in this study with pseudonyms). Table 9 depicts the frequency of the theme during the focus group. It is worth noting that in addition to frequency and all participants bringing up the topic, there was intensity in this part of the interview.

      For teachers who spoke highly of teacher presence, they praised the tutors. Bella noted that it was due to Mel (pseudonym for tutor) that she was able to pass the current course even in the face of adversity due to personal problems. Hilma also spoke highly of Mel. Patricia was intrigued by the discussion and asked what course Mel tutored. When Bella and Hilma mentioned it was Module 4, Patricia was excited because that was the next module she signed up for in the following term. Patricia also spoke highly of Ella, a prior tutor that truly engaged her and had the participants working in groups, creating community, and learning from each other.

      There were also negative experiences with teacher presence. As noted in the analysis section Hilma failed a course as she did not even know she was missing activities given the tutor did not communicate with her. Ian dropped a current course due to the demands of at work while taking two courses. However, Ian noted the lack of tutor presence was the deciding factor in officially dropping the course. He was particularly frustrated by the tutor's contact with Ian's supervisor about him not entering the course rather than addressing the situation directly with him first. Ian also expressed frustration with Nadine, a prior course tutor, who provided little feedback. Although she provided

scores for the fora, there were hardly any comments and the comments to the supervisor seemed irrelevant.

For the negative experiences, it became clear during the discussion that participants lacked a true engagement with the tutors and became demotivated. Such comments resonated with Bolldén (2014) who found that teacher embodiment in the form of a picture in the course and personal comments rather than generic feedback led to a more personalized experience.

In my study, participants expressed the desire to be in a synchronous environment with the other participants and the tutor. In McMahon's study (2013) the participants experienced isolation and suggested that initial orientation meetings with the teachers would improve persistence. Such desire seemed to go beyond teacher presence to a deeper teacher presence McMahon called instructor presence.

Although the two terms have been used interchangeably in the past, Richardson (2015) argued that instructor presence is more likely to occur in live classes. Such presence presents the teacher as a human and caring person. Ian's comment about needing to know the teacher is a human being who treats him as a person rather than a number resonated with Richardson's findings although his study was in K-12 education. Teacher presence was important to participants in the study as illustrated in Table 9 depicting frequency of the topic during the focus group, but also the fact that all participants spoke on the topic. In studying online and hybrid courses, Burns (2013) found that persistence was higher in hybrid courses where teacher presence was higher.

Table 9

Emergent Themes Paired with Teacher Presence

Pseudonym	Data Set 3: Focus Group
	Teacher Presence
P1: Patricia	2
P2: Hilma	2
P3: Bella	3
*P4: Marcy**	*0*
P5: Ian	2
*P6:Calista**	*0*
Total	**9(4)**

Note. *Marcy and Calista were not able to attend the focus group and therefore there are no responses for them.

Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence refers to the engagement of learners and the content; it is how meaning is constructed out of that engagement (Garrison et al., 2000). All participants brought up the topic as indicated by the frequency data in Table 10. However, experiences varied from participant to participant. Two of them felt there was no engagement with the content given the basic nature of the material. The other two participants felt there was engagement leading to the opportunity to learn and implement the content. Surprisingly, Bella noted she preferred the induction course due to its self-access nature so she could engage without the pressure of doing the fora and following timelines. Although Patricia agreed with Bella, Hilma felt that model lacked engagement with others and a tutor, and would likely take too long to finish.

Sitzmann and Weinhardt (2015) studied cognitive presence in training, and highlighted the importance of training for performance. Given the online teacher training program aims at enhancing teacher performance, the engagement with content is crucial.

They posited that goal setting, goal prioritizing, and goal persistence were key

components of engagement. Therefore, teachers must be able to see the training course

content as relevant to engage with it and implement it in their teaching. Hilma and

Patricia were representative of this because they implemented material in their classroom

and benefitted from downloadable PDF summaries to refer to in the future. Bella and Ian,

on the contrary, did not report the same level of engagement. They deemed the content

too basic and nothing new from what they were already doing in the classroom.

Table 10

Emergent Themes Paired with Cognitive Presence

Pseudonym	Data Set 3: Focus Group
	Cognitive Presence
P1: Patricia	2
P2: Hilma	1
P3: Bella	2
P4: Marcy*	*0*
P5: Ian	1
P6:Calista*	*0*
Total	**6(4)**

Note. *Marcy and Calista were not able to attend focus group and therefore there are no responses
for them.

Discrepant Data

Sitzmann et al. (2010) noted technical difficulties as a reason for attrition among

online students. However, in my study technical abilities were deemed a potential

strength to completing the course. Although this could be seen as support for Sitzmann's

research, it is worth noting that despite the technical difficulties Bella experienced, she

completed the course. She noted that she was sure she had completed certain activities

but was told by the professor that she had not. Although this was problematic, Bella

managed to re-do the activities so that her progress would show in the gradebook and she was able to complete the course successfully.

Upon reviewing the data gathered and preparing to present results, I revisited cognitive presence as a potential discrepancy given two focus group participants noted it was not present and two noted it was. However, I eliminated the possibility of the discrepancy given those who noted it was not present also spoke to the need to have such presence. Both Ian and Bella suggested that if the content were more engaging and interactive, it would be beneficial to course participants and would result in better teacher training courses.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I presented the results of my qualitative case study. I began by providing background with participant demographics to understand the case and its members. I provided a detailed explanation of the analysis by for each of the three data sources: online questionnaire, narrative, and focus group. Within each data set, I discussed the categories and themes that emerged concluding each section with a table that summarized the emergent themes. Then, I discussed how credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were addressed in the study. I described the cross-case analysis along with triangulation to emerge with overarching themes in the results section.

The results confirmed the need for social presence, teacher presence, and cognitive presence to support persistence in the online teacher training environment studied. In the participants' experience, weaknesses in any of these areas caused

difficulties in the online teacher training and challenges to completion of the course. Social presence was the most emphasized area, followed by teacher presence, and then cognitive presence. Positive experiences in any of the three areas were deemed important to improve persistence, while negative experiences, especially when it came to teacher presence, could even cause attrition.

In Chapter 5, I share my interpretations of the findings, revisit the limitations of the study, and make recommendations within the boundaries of this study. I conclude this dissertation study with a discussion of the implications for positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore factors that influence attrition and persistence in online teacher training courses for the unique population of in-service EFL teachers in an international network of institutions. The participants came from a convenience sample of EFL in-service teachers who were taking online courses. The courses were offered by an international English language program (EFL Worldwide, pseudonym) that has dozens of institutions located in countries around the world.

I posted a recruitment announcement in fall online courses taught by EFL Worldwide. Those interested in participating in the study completed a prescreening questionnaire. Once selected for the study, they received a consent form electronically, followed by a request to complete an online questionnaire. I used questionnaire data to establish the baseline of each participant's current status in their online course. Then, I asked the participants to write a narrative of their personal professional journey. Data collection sources included data gathered from the online questionnaires, the personal narrative, and the focus group interview. Data from these three data collection strategies allowed for triangulation in the analysis and the identification of the themes for the results.

Upon analyzing each data set, I identified themes within the data sets. Once all three datasets were compiled for triangulation, I identified overarching themes in the data and related those back to the CoI framework and its three components: social, teaching,

and cognitive presence. In my study, a link was evident between all three CoI elements

and persistence and attrition; confirming the findings of, several studies cited in the

literature (e.g., Shea & Bidjerano, 2009; Subramaniam, 2014; Wicks et al., 2013). My

participants identified all three elements as key factors influencing their persistence or

attrition in the online teacher training course and program.

<div align="center">**Interpretation of the Findings**</div>

The CoI model originally proposed by Tinto (1975) and further applied to

teaching by Garrison et al. (2000) has been used by researchers worldwide to understand

online teaching and learning (Swan & Ice, 2010). Educators still find the model to be

relevant for examining online courses today (e.g., Bowers & Kumar, 2015; deNoyelles, et

al., 2014). Two components of the CoI model, teacher presence and cognitive presence,

were repeatedly described during my study (all three data sources). The final component,

social presence, was prevalent in the focus group. Williams et al. (1976) originally

studied social presence as a way of analyzing interactions in face-to-face and telephone

conversations. Boston et al. (2009) described social presence as one of the most used

frameworks for understanding interactions as they relate to teaching and learning. In my

research study, I used a qualitative approach to understand the various presences. The

qualitative nature of my study allowed me to develop questions to address those

presences while giving participants the freedom to provide in-depth details that would

foster understanding of how the three components impacted attrition and persistence.

Garrison et al. (2000) found the components of CoI to be integral to learning in a

community. Through my study, I confirmed that those components are as relevant among

teachers in online teacher training as they were found to be in research among other online students (Gazza & Hunker, 2014; Oztok et al., 2013). Consequently, my study contributes to the literature by addressing a population not studied before: online in-service teachers in training.

Social Presence

In my study, social presence was a key component allowing participants to have interaction with their peers and to learn from each other. Even those participants who did not experience the interaction they desired spoke of its importance for their learning, staying engaged, and for persisting to completion of the course or program. Those who did experience social presence noted it as the most important contributor to their learning in the course. This finding confirmed the research of Irani et al. (2014) who studied social presence among online graduate students and found that the higher their perception of social presence, the stronger their persistence in their graduate online courses. In my study, social presence was embedded deeply into the participants' learning as each one mentioned at one time or another that they learned from one another's experiences. During the focus group interview, for example, Patricia noted that she was naturally curious about different teaching challenges and how teachers around the globe faced those challenges. Therefore, it became clear that the interaction among participants was key to engagement.

Throughout the focus group interview, Bella and Ian insisted that the fora were not ideal for interaction. They felt that going through the motions in posting did not constitute true engagement. Bella persisted in the course but attributed it to her tutor's

presence and motivation. Ian, on the other hand, dropped out of the course. Patricia and Hilma saw interaction and learning from others as the most significant part of the training. Patricia fondly recalled a past course in which the tutor had participants work in groups. She noted that she learned more from her peers than from the content and mentioned that up to the time of my study she still maintained a friendship with a fellow course participant from the course she mentioned.

As in my study, Boston et al. (2009) also studied social presence. Their sample constituted 28,000 fully online students. They found that social presence and affective expression were significant elements contributing to students' persistence in online courses. Furthermore, they argued that social presence was the basis for collaborative and constructivist learning. This finding concurs with comments made by my participants (Patricia and Hilma), that they learned more from the interaction than just the content. Furthermore, Wei et al. (2012) posited that online learners do not value all instructional activities the same. Wei et al. (2012) found that online learners put more value in activities that promote social presence. Such prioritization for social presence emerged in my study as well. However, as discussed during the focus group, creating social presence proves to be a difficult task. Mathieson and Leafman (2014) reported that it is challenging to promote social presence in online settings although it remains a crucial component of academic success and persistence. Therefore, understanding what promotes or inhibits social presence is crucial in order to enhance interaction among course participants.

Teacher Presence

Based on my findings, tutor presence is crucial for these in-service teachers to feel engaged and motivated throughout their online courses. Weaknesses in teacher presence can contribute to attrition. It did in the case of two participants in my study. Ian dropped the course he was enrolled in at the time of my study. He attributed his dropping out, in part, to his tutor not being present. His tutor did not engage in the forum discussions. Also, his tutor failed to communicate via messages or announcements. Ian had been wondering about dropping the course and made the decision to do so when the tutor approached his supervisor. He felt it was not fair for his tutor to do so without first reaching out to him to engage him in the course. Patricia dropped a prior course with the same tutor because of the lack of tutor presence. Patricia had expected a similar experience to another course where the tutor was involved in providing guidance and creating working groups. Thus, she was disappointed and ended up dropping the course. Hilma had a similar experience, and although she did not drop the course, she found out at course end that she had failed. The failure took her completely by surprise. She had not received any feedback from the tutor informing her that she was missing activities or that she was in danger of failing.

Lack of teacher presence is often cited as the top reason for online students' attrition (Boston et al., 2009; Burns, 2013; Garrison et al., 2000). My study confirms that teacher presence is just as important among in-service teachers in online training. Richardson (2015) went further to describe instructor presence as a deeper presence that both engages the student and shows the teacher as a human being who connects to the

student mainly in face-to-face classes. In my study, all four participants who attended the focus group expressed a desire for a synchronous online meeting where they could have a real-time discussion during their online courses. This desire emerged during the conversation among the focus group participants without any prompting question. Ian explicitly said he needed to know that the teacher on the other side was a human being treating him as a person and not just a number. This need for human connection supports Bolldén's (2014) research on teachers' embodiment in online courses that makes the teacher's presence felt and impacts persistence.

Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence was also a key component for participants to engage with the content and make it relevant enough to put what they learned from the course into their face-to-face and blended classes. Gannon-Cook (2012) found that the top three beneficial elements identified in online courses included study aids/graphics, help from the instructor, and live chats. The first resource (aids/graphics) was identified during the focus group discussion as an important element for success. All four focus group participants talked of how useful PDF downloadable resources were to support the content and their desire to use those materials as references in their teaching. However, two participants insisted that the topics covered in the course were too general and basic to be relevant.

Some research cited in Chapter 2, however, was not found to be relevant for the participants in my study. For instance, Stevenson (2013) found that factors related to content impacting attrition included academic advising, technical support, and financial

aid. In my case study, those areas were not identified as relevant by participants. Only one teacher (Bella) mentioned in the focus group that she may have had some technical issues. Bella mentioned her tutor said she had not completed certain activities and she thought she had done them already but the system lost them forcing her to re-do the activities.

Limitations of the Study

An anticipated limitation in the study was the inability to see facial expressions during the focus group interview. However, all participants who attended the focus group had good enough internet bandwidth that they were able to keep their online cameras on during the entire interview. I should note that the video connection seemed to encourage the lively and active engagement of all four participants.

A significant limitation of the study was the voluntary nature of participation while studying online attrition. If participants were to drop out of the course, there was no guarantee that they would continue in the study. Of the six in-service teachers in my study, two dropped out of the course, and of those two, one completed all three data collection points. It became important for me to document what participants were present for each data collection as I could not fully compare all three data sets as having the same participants. Unfortunately, it is difficult to obtain information from those who leave an online course. In general, course evaluations and teacher evaluations are performed at the end of courses. By then, those who have dropped out are no longer around to provide their insights. Despite the lower number of participants in my focus group, as noted by

Stake (1995), gathering rich, thick data in case studies is essential to understand the phenomenon at hand and my focus group participation allowed me to do so.

A final limitation of the study was my own belief in, and bias for, online education. As a proponent of this delivery mode, it became even more important to remain neutral throughout the study. As each data set was gathered and analyzed, I wrote results and shared drafts with my committee chair to ensure I was not reading too much into the data. During the focus group interview, I read the protocol, including the questions that I posed as a way to remain neutral. I was careful to pose the questions in the objective manner they were written and approved by my dissertation Committee and the IRB.

Recommendations

After tying the emergent themes to the literature review and the limitations/strengths of my study, certain recommendations for future research became apparent. I present these for future researchers to consider. Given this case study focused on attrition and persistence in an online teacher training program, some recommendations naturally evolved that apply to the program itself. I identify those as well in this section.

The first recommendations revolve around data sources and population. Gathering other data such as course documentation and forum submissions would provide additional sources to compare related to the three presences of the CoI framework. An approach recommended is that of Bolldén (2014) who used documentation like the course syllabus and study guides for indication of any of the presences. Including such documentation in further studies would provide input to compare the expectations of the

course as stated by the program versus participants' understanding of the expectations as evidence of teacher presence. In my study, Hilma expressed concern that she had failed a course due to incomplete tasks when she thought those tasks were optional. Thus, it is important that all expectations and requirements be clearly stated in the documentation. A review of forum submissions would provide further insights into social presence to understand how participants interact throughout the course with each other and the tutor.

The population participating in my study was a single one: in-service EFL teachers enrolled in an online training course. At the time of recruitment, there was a course tutor who volunteered for the study. Although she would have had plenty of insights related to attrition/perseverance in her course, she did not fit the audience intended for the study, and could perhaps be another audience to explore in future studies. Administrators could also be another audience, and triangulation across the three audiences would then be possible. Expanding the sample to include three different audiences would provide views from multiple perspectives to be analyzed. For example, including in-service teachers participating in the courses in combination with the tutors could provide further insights into teacher presence. Also, including school administrators would potentially provide a more robust picture of the expectations for the in-service teachers at the conclusion of the online training program.

A limitation of the study was the voluntary nature of participation among a group experiencing an average of 44% attrition in the past five years. Therefore, I knew it would be challenging to have all the study participants by course end still participating in my study so they could join the focus group. Therefore, a recommendation would be to

use online interviews as a final point of data collection so participants could be interviewed individually at any point. This practice would afford the opportunity to interview any participant dropping the course at the time he or she drops the course. Waiting until the end of the course as I did does not assure all participants join given the gap of time between dropping the course and the focus group interview. Furthermore, the majority of participants who volunteered for the study (four out of six) were taking the training by choice. Only two participants were required to take the training (Patricia from the start and Ian, who found out later that the training was mandatory). Having greater representation of participants in the pool from both required and optional course participants might help us to understand how the optional or required constraint might impact attrition and persistence.

Finally, it is common that online courses have no synchronous component. Several researchers found that learners view the lack of a synchronous component as a positive aspect given anytime and anywhere access to online education (Croxton, 2014; McMahon, 2013; Nordin & Anthony, 2014). In my study, three participants (out of six respondents) noted in the online questionnaire (see Table 4) that access was one of the reasons for taking the course. They mentioned access five times. However, during the focus group, all four participants suggested that an online synchronous meeting such as the one taking place for the focus group interview would be beneficial for them. They emphasized that such a meeting would promote interaction, learning, and persistence more than the numerous fora in the courses that did not truly promote interaction.

Therefore, a recommendation for future research would be to study attrition and persistence between courses with and without a synchronous component.

As noted in the literature review, although attrition has been the subject of studies for decades (Chakraborty & Nafukho, 2015; Hartnett, 2015), research in online attrition has focused mainly on undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate students (Cook et al., 2009; Guan et al., 2015). My study contributes to this literature base, but further research is needed regarding factors that impact attrition and persistence in online teacher training.

Implications

Positive Social Change

This study contributes to positive social change by providing a deeper understanding of attrition and persistence in online teacher training. At the individual level, it helps us understand how the CoI model and its components (social presence, teacher presence, and cognitive presence) influence attrition and persistence in online teacher training. Such enhanced understanding informs online teacher training curriculum, design, instructor and tutor preparation, and future research.

Implementing changes to create teacher training curricula and activities that are more engaging, interactive, and relevant will serve to not only benefit the institutions and teachers, but also their future students as well. Finally, given the almost universal goal of institutions involved in online teaching to provide greater access to education, enhancements to online teacher training programs can lead to benefits for society at large.

Recommendations for Practice

To deliver engaging online teacher training courses, it is clear that all three presences must be evident. Therefore, reviewing curriculum and the design of teacher training courses is important to provide a rich and engaging experience that promotes persistence and leads future teachers to implement what they learn in their online courses. It is worth noting that despite the universality of the topic of attrition in online learning, some suggestions for improvements emerged specifically related to the teacher training program under study. These include three main recommendations. First, a revisit of tutor quality and presence in the courses is imperative. It was an assumption of this study that tutors were trained and effective tutors. However, the lack of engagement of some tutors as reported by several participants deserves continuous monitoring and training of those teaching the courses. Second, the audience for these courses should be evaluated. Several participants with many years of experience felt the content was too basic for them and therefore not engaging enough. Consequently, I recommend a review of the intended audience of the courses. Teachers who truly need the beginner level course can benefit from the training, and perhaps more advanced training should be available for more experienced teachers. Professional development webinars where teachers can discuss and learn from each other might offer a different solution. An approach for more experienced teachers may be that of Bissonnette and Caprino (2014) who suggested action research as a way for teachers to identify a problem of interest, gather data, develop an intervention, and implement the intervention. Finally, it is worth revisiting the structure and guidelines

for the requited fora in these courses to ensure they provide engaging topics and activities where in-service teachers can truly engage and learn from each other.

This study may foster change in the development of online teacher training curriculum, design, and future research in relation to technology integration in online training. Further research is needed not only on how social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence influence attrition and persistence, but also on how those areas can be enhanced in online teacher training through the integration of contemporary and emergent technologies. Identifying the problems without research into best practices can leave the field at a dead-end where the problem is identified, but potential solutions are not researched.

Methodological, Theoretical, and Empirical Implications

The CoI model has been around for decades. Since Tinto's (1976) research, the model has been heavily utilized to investigate and understand the interaction among a group of learners. However, learning and teaching environments have drastically changed. Bolldén (2014), for example, noted the need to redefine the teaching presence component as instructor presence and explained the differences between the concepts.

Another area of concern that remains is the type(s) of media used to deliver online courses. All focus group attendees voiced concerns over fora not being interactive and engaging enough. Although this could be characterized as an element of social presence, there is a second plane of concern related to the delivery media, itself. It cannot be characterized as cognitive presence because rather than the content itself, participants were addressing the manner of presenting and demonstrating knowledge of the content.

Further exploration of the media used as it relates to the CoI theory is also important to supplement the current literature related to persistence and attrition in online settings.

Conclusion

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.

This study may foster change in the development of online teacher training curricula and design. Furthermore, additional research about technology and media use in online training is essential to identify best practices to enhance online engagement and support persistence among online learners.

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Appendix A: Letter of Cooperation

Letter of Cooperation from EFL Worldwide (pseudonym)

August 20, 2015

Dear Joseline Castaños,

Based on my review of your research abstract, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled Understanding Attrition among English as a Foreign Language Teachers in Online Training. As part of this study, I authorize you to contact teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to recruit participants in online teacher training courses and collect online demographic data to select participants. You are authorized to contact the participants selected to request narratives, conduct online interview questions, and focus group interviews. You are authorized to share broad results of your findings with permission from the participants.

Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion. We understand that our organization's responsibilities include: allowing access to participants and ensuring your rights to protect the confidentiality of your participants. We also extend the use of our online conferencing (Zoom) to conduct virtual focus groups. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting. I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission from EFL Worldwide (pseudonym).

Sincerely,

Name [Redacted]

Title [Redacted]

Appendix B: Recruiting Announcement

Greetings EFL Worldwide Teachers,

My name is **Joseline Castaños**. I am a Ph.D. student at Walden University with a concentration in **Educational Technology**. I am carrying out **an interview/focus group study** under the supervision of Dr. Kay Persichitte. My proposed research will:

- Study **factors influencing attrition/persistence** among in-service EFL teachers in online training.
- Gather **your insights to provide a greater understanding** of attrition/persistence factors in online learning.
- Provide understanding that in turn **benefits online teachers and students**, and is vital to find **solutions** to attrition.

You may already know me as a staff member, but this research study is separate from that role, and your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be compensated for your participation, but as a **token of appreciation, you will receive an online book on teaching English** online once you complete participation. If you are interested in possibly volunteering for this interview/focus group study, **please complete the pre-screening questions link below**.

☞ **Pre-Screening Recruitment Questions** ☜

By providing some basic information about you, the prescreening tool will be used to identify a diverse group of participants according to the level of education, teaching, experience, and online learning experiences. If selected, you will receive an online consent form to confirm your voluntary participation in the study. The three steps in the study include:

- writing a **narrative** about your personal, professional journey (approximately one hour),
- answering **online interview questions** (approximately 30 minutes), and
- participating in an **online focus group interview** (approximately an hour and a half)

Please note all responses during the study will be kept **confidential** and protected with pseudonyms. The research interview questions have been approved by **Walden University Institutional Review Board**. Once you complete the prescreening questionnaire, I will be in touch with you directly. Thanks in advance!

If you have questions concerning this research, please feel contact me at
☞ [redacted]☜

Appendix C: Prescreening Online Questionnaire

Online form at https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/BBVTXCD

1. Name:

2. Country:

3. Email address:

4. Telephone:

5. Gender: ☐ Female ☐ Male

6. Level of education: ☐ Undergraduate ☐ Master ☐ Doctorate

7. Teaching load: ☐ Full Time ☐ Part-time

8. How many institutions are you currently teaching at while taking training? _____

9. Years teaching *(including this year)*: _____

10. Is this training mandatory or optional for you? ☐ Mandatory ☐ Optional

11. Course you are currently taking in the series: ☐ DM1 ☐ DM2 ☐ DM3 ☐ DM4

12. Have you encountered challenges in other online courses?

     ☐ None ☐ Some ☐ Plenty

Appendix D: Focus Group Consent Form

Consent Online Form available at https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/BPYWGZT

Dear _____,

My name is Joseline Castaños, and as a doctoral student at Walden University, I am conducting an important study on online attrition to understand factors related to dropping out of courses. You may already know me as a staff member, but this research study is separate from that role, and your participation in this study is voluntary.

You are invited to take part in a research study of attrition and persistence in online teacher training courses. My goal is to understand attrition and persistence factors in online training on how course participants interact with each other, moderators, and the course content. This study will help us better understand why participants persist or drop out of online courses, which will also be of interest to you as a blended or online teacher.

I am inviting teachers currently participating in the EFL Worldwide (pseudonym) teacher training moderated courses around the network. Participants must be enrolled in a current course and may or may not have taken prior courses in the series (teachers currently enrolled in the introduction course that is not moderated are excluded from the study). This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to participate.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to explore factors of attrition and persistence in online teacher training courses among in-service EFL teachers enrolled in an international network of universities training program.

Procedures:
Materials related to your participation including online interview questions, focus group interview transcripts, and anecdotal records will be used in the study. However, all personal identifiers will be removed, and pseudonyms will be used.

You have been selected through the prescreening questionnaire, and if you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Write a narrative of your personal, professional journey (approximately 60 minutes).
- Complete a brief online interview (six questions) at the beginning of your training course to describe your current learning and professional situation (approximately 30 minutes).
- Participate in a recorded focus group interview via audio web conferencing (Zoom) with up to four participants (approximately 90 minutes).

Here are some sample questions from the focus group:

1. Please describe what your experience has been in this online teacher training course.
2. Describe your experience regarding teacher presence and interaction throughout the course.
3. Describe your experience regarding student presence and interaction throughout the course?
4. Cognitive presence in research refers to the learner's engagement with the course content. Describe your experiences regarding content interaction throughout the course?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add to this focus group interview?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
This study is completely voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to participate in the study. No one at Walden University or EFL Worldwide will treat you differently if you choose not to participate. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as balancing things to do, time demands online, and spending time with others you may disagree with in a focus group online meeting.

Dropout numbers in online education continue to be a problem both for students and teachers. Participating in this study can help me and others better understand factors influencing attrition and persistence in online learning.

Payment:
There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, a thank you gift will be provided at the end of the study: *Make Money by Teaching English Online: A FAQ Guide.* After the transcript review meeting, you will receive a thank you email and delivery of the e-book which can be read from any Kindle device, Kindle App on any mobile devices, or on Kindle Cloud from any computer.

Privacy:
Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. In addition, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secured by password protecting files such recording or any raw data or documentation with identifiers. Any print outs will be kept locked. Data will be kept for at least five years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email at [redacted]. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is [redacted] (for US based participants) OR [redacted] (for participants outside the US). Walden University's approval number for this study is 09-22-15-0366257 and it expires on September 21, 2016.

Please print or save this consent form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the information in this Consent Form, and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By completing the information below and clicking **Submit**, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described in this Consent Form.

Researcher: Joseline Castaños

Printed Name of Participant	
Date of consent	

Appendix E: Online Interview Questions

Online Interview Questions available at https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/BZTRDRL

Thanks for providing your consent form. I look forward to our focus group interview in Week 12 when courses end. In preparation for the focus group interview, I would like to gather your insights as the courses start. Please answer the questions below about the current course/teacher training program by (date).

1. Describe what interested you about this online EFL teacher training program.

2. What differences, if any, do you see between this EFL online training and face-to-face trainings you may have done in the past?

3. Please provide some examples that illustrate your comfort level related to the technologies used in this course (e.g., SCORM online activities, fora, wikis, blogs).

4. What do you have professional development goals? Please describe them and explain how this EFL teacher training fits your goals.

5. What do you foresee will be your strengths and challenges in completing this course/program?

Appendix F: Personal Narrative

Narrative of Personal Professional Journey

Please provide a narrative (between two and five pages in length) describing your personal, professional journey. You may wish to include why you chose to be a teacher, how you prepared yourself to become one, your past learning experiences (face-to-face and online), and any other information which may help me understand you as a learner in the current EFL course.

Appendix G: Focus Group Interview Protocol

Thanks for joining me in this focus group to discuss attrition and persistence in online teacher training. As noted in the consent form you signed online, this focus group will last about 90 minutes and will be recorded for transcription purposes. If at any time you do not want to continue to be a part of the study, you are free to stop. However, I expect your input will help me and others understand reasons for attrition and persistence among in-service teachers who are involved in online training.

1. **Please describe what your experience has been in this online teacher training course.** Additional probing questions if needed:

    a. How has it been challenging? If you overcame the challenges, how did you do so?

    b. How would you characterize your assignments and pacing of course? Helpful? Not helpful?

    c. How would you describe the time commitment required to complete the work?

2. **Describe your experience regarding teacher presence and interaction throughout the course.** Additional probing questions if needed:

    a. How would you describe the communication or lack thereof between the tutor and course participants?

    b. How would you describe the facilitation and encouragement by the tutor throughout the course?

    c. What role have informal and formal feedback played for you? Has the

       feedback been timely?

    d. How would you describe your tutor's responsiveness?

3. **Describe your experience regarding student presence and interaction**

    throughout the course? Additional probing questions if needed:

    a. How well did you get to know the other participants in the course? Do you

       feel that the peer relationships you established influenced your desire to

       complete the course? Why? Why not?

    b. If any disagreements occurred during discussions, wikis, or blog

       comments, how were they handled?

    c. How would you describe your own student interaction in terms of

       supporting your learning in this course?

4. **Cognitive presence in research refers to the learner's engagement with the**

    course content. Describe your experience regarding content interaction

    throughout the course? Additional probing questions if needed:

    a. How would you describe your level of curiosity throughout the course?

    b. How would you describe your level of interest in the topics addressed

       throughout the course?

    c. How applicable would you consider the course content to your current

       teaching role(s)? To teaching roles you anticipate in the future?

5. **Is there anything else you would like to add to this focus group interview?**

Thank you again for participating in this study. Your identity will be kept confidential. After data analysis, developing themes, and writing summaries, I will conduct member checking to afford you the opportunity to confirm or clarify your thoughts.