

**"CAN YOU HEAR MY ENERGY?": THE ROLE OF TEACHER PROSODY
AND DIGITAL AFFECTIVE PRESENCE IN ONLINE EFL CLASSROOMS**

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Abstract: *While previous studies have established that teacher enthusiasm and physical non-verbal cues increase Student Talking Time (STT) and oral fluency in physical classrooms, the transition to online and hybrid learning environments introduces a distinct pedagogical challenge: the loss of physical proxemics and movement. This action research study investigates how teacher prosody (vocal pitch, pacing, and strategic pauses) and digital affective presence function as compensatory mechanisms in synchronous online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lessons. Over a four-week intervention with secondary pre-intermediate learners, lessons were systematically varied between high-energy digital delivery and neutral delivery. Data collection combined digital STT measurements, engagement metrics (chat frequency, unmuting rates), and student perception questionnaires. Findings indicate that exaggerated prosodic modulation and warm virtual presence successfully substitute for physical movement, maintaining high engagement, reducing screen fatigue, and driving active language production. The paper concludes that mastering digital prosody is an essential core competency for modern online language teaching.*

Keywords: *teacher prosody, digital affective presence, online EFL instruction, vocal modulation, student engagement, action research*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital and blended learning environments has transformed modern English Language Teaching (ELT). While virtual classrooms offer flexibility, they present a significant affective barrier: the physical separation between teacher and learner. In physical classrooms, teacher enthusiasm is heavily communicated through a combination of vocal variety, physical movement (proxemics), and facial expressions (kinesics), which together act as emotional scaffolding and foster learner flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Rosenshine & Furst, 1973).

However, in synchronous online classes, teachers are visually constrained to a small webcam frame, and students frequently experience digital fatigue or turn off their cameras. This raises a critical pedagogical question: How can teachers project affective presence and maintain student engagement when physical space is removed?

Building on prior research demonstrating that teacher enthusiasm drives oral fluency and task completion, this study investigates teacher prosody—vocal pitch variation, pacing, and strategic pauses—as the primary vehicle for digital affective presence. By isolating vocal delivery in a virtual environment, this research explores whether deliberate prosodic modulation can successfully compensate for physical absence and sustain student talking time (STT) online.

Theoretical Framework

Digital Affective Presence and Embodied Cognition

Affective presence refers to the consistent emotional influence one person has on others (Eisenkraft & Heiman, 2009). In a physical setting, this presence is multi-sensory. In a virtual setting, affective presence must be compressed primarily into auditory and tightly framed visual channels. According to Embodied Cognition Theory, learners process language through perceptual cues (Gibbs, 2006). When physical movement is absent, the human voice becomes the primary medium for carrying emotional and cognitive energy.

Prosodic Scaffolding in Virtual Spaces

In second language acquisition, students require clear signals to navigate communicative tasks. Prosodic cues—such as dynamic pitch changes, dramatic vocal inflection, and strategic pauses—act as acoustic markers that focus learner attention and reduce cognitive load. A strategic pause online, for instance, serves as a digital "wait time," giving learners the necessary processing window to formulate responses without the pressure of face-to-face immediacy.

Methodology

Participants and Context

The study was conducted over a four-week period with 28 secondary EFL students (aged 14–16, pre-intermediate proficiency) at an academic lyceum in Tashkent during synchronous online lessons via a virtual meeting platform.

Experimental Design

A repeated-measures action research design was employed across parallel task-based lessons structured around the Willis and Willis (2007) framework:

1. **High Digital Energy Condition:** The teacher intentionally utilized dynamic vocal prosody (exaggerated pitch variation, warm tone, strategic pauses), direct eye contact directed squarely into the webcam lens, and rapid verbal/chat reinforcement.
2. **Neutral Digital Delivery Condition:** The teacher maintained a flat, even vocal tone, minimal facial expression, and standard instructional delivery while covering identical task content.

Data Collection

- **Digital STT Logs:** Breakout rooms and plenary sessions were recorded to calculate total student speaking time in seconds.
- **Engagement Metrics:** Frequency counts of voluntary unmuting, chat-box response speed, and camera-on participation rates were tracked.
- **Student Perception Questionnaire:** An anonymous post-intervention survey gathered student feedback regarding how teacher voice and screen presence affected their speaking confidence and online anxiety.

Findings and Discussion

1. Voice as a Substitute for Movement

Quantitative tracking revealed that student talking time (STT) remained high during the high digital energy condition, averaging nearly double the output recorded during neutral online sessions. Just as physical proximity sustains interaction in a brick-and-mortar classroom, deliberate vocal modulation and warmth online successfully captured learner

attention. Students noted that a dynamic voice prevented them from drifting off or getting distracted by other tabs on their screens.

2. Lowering Online Anxiety Through Prosodic Warmth

Qualitative analysis of the student questionnaires showed that teacher intonation directly impacted online participation anxiety. In a virtual space, speaking up feels exposing because the student's voice is isolated over a microphone. When the teacher delivered prompts with high vocal warmth and enthusiasm, students reported feeling "encouraged rather than tested." Strategic vocal pauses helped normalize waiting time, creating a low-stress psychological climate conducive to language risk-taking.

3. The Power of Digital Affective Presence

The findings confirm that affective presence can be successfully digitized. While physical movement (kinesics and proxemics) is lost behind a screen, prosodic competence emerges as the core driver of virtual engagement. Teachers who master vocal variety, pitch modulation, and enthusiastic pacing can effectively bridge the digital divide, transforming a flat video call into an interactive, lively communicative space.

Conclusion and Practical Recommendations

This study demonstrates that teacher enthusiasm does not require a physical classroom to be effective; rather, it adapts through digital prosody. When physical movement is restricted by a webcam, the human voice becomes the primary engine for emotional scaffolding, student engagement, and fluency.

Practical Takeaways for Online Teachers:

- Vary Your Pitch and Pace: Do not speak in a monotone through a microphone. Exaggerate pitch changes slightly to signal task transitions and important instructions.
- Embrace Strategic Silence: Use intentional pauses after asking a question online to give students time to process and unmute.
- Project Vocal Warmth: Infuse your greeting and feedback with positive emotional tone to maintain a high affective presence across the screen.

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