

Fostering Academic Engagement and Critical Thinking Using Blended Learning Models in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

The development of education technology has sparked a transformation in higher education towards a blended learning model and Learning Management Systems (LMS). Traditional English language classes emphasize the teacher, and students tend to memorize and utilize universal templates. In the traditional classroom, English language instruction tends to be of a teacher-centred nature with students using universal templates and not deeply engaging with the content. The purpose of this paper is to examine the integration of Critical Thinking (CT) and positive academic emotions such as Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) in a blended learning environment and to explore the learning engagement in this environment. The study takes a mixed-methods approach, showing that the application of LMS, content-based reading module and dialogue method can optimize learners' academic achievements, critical thinking ability and participation to an extent. The role of positive emotions in the process is discussed, as well as the need to connect the academic program with the needs of the labor market.

Keywords: Blended Learning, English Writing, Reading Comprehension, Critical Thinking Skills, Foreign Language Enjoyment, Dialogue Method, Higher Education.

1. Introduction

In today's world and workforce, critical thinking is a survival tool and no longer a mere luxury. In the era of information technology, blending teaching and learning has become a new teaching mode in college English teaching that has integrated the advantages of traditional classroom teaching and online teaching. In the context of integration of information technology into the education field, blended teaching has become a new teaching model, which has integrated the advantages of traditional classroom teaching and online teaching. In the traditional college English teaching approach, the emphasis is on teacher-centered teaching, and the students' interest is low, only remember the general writing formula, and do not reach the core of the writing content. Using a blended model enables students to demonstrate greater initiative, enthusiasm and creativity when engaging in academic activities. This pedagogical change is crucial for the development of critical thinking, one of the educational goals and a necessary skill for studying, evaluating and synthesizing information in an independent way. In addition, positive academic feelings (foreign language

enjoyment, for instance) are a significant determinant of diminished fatigue and improved students' control of the learning process, which then affects students' total behavioral and cognitive involvement. The Rational-Emotive theory states that emotions are not caused by external events, but by the way that they think and feel. People with high critical thinking skills process their emotions rationally and have a positive mind frame while studying. The positive emotion resulting from the process of overcoming language learning obstacles – foreign language enjoyment – is tightly connected with self-regulation and acts as a strong mediator between critical thinking and learning engagement. Moreover, many studies have demonstrated that the good language learners are more critical and employ more diverse Language Learning Strategies (LLS).

Content-Based Instruction (CBI): Language is taught with content, and content is used to drive the language syllabus. Study of authentic literary texts (e.g., novels) allows students to think about previous experiences, to establish causal connections and to make moral judgements. Likewise, incorporating content specific texts such as historical texts through an LMS presents a challenge for non-EFL learners to interpret that content and form a coherent and logical argument. Recent systematic reviews of the research on structured English reading instruction (digital, hybrid, content-specific) indicate that these approaches can systematically scaffold critical reading and metacognition.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a sequential mixed-methods research design to comprehensively explore the current status of English teaching and the pathways influencing learning engagement. Cooperative enquiry and shared agenda are adopted to expand students' thinking, while the traditional teacher-pupil interaction tends to narrow students' thinking space with rote answer. Critical thinking is characterised by an attitude of "productive questioning" which encourages students to challenge what they receive, what it is saying and what it is trying to say. This research is used methodology sequential mixed methods to gain full picture and understand the situation of English language teaching and pathways that affect learning engagement. Participants: Undergraduates of different majors (such as chemistry, history, English) and college English teachers/trainers. Instruments: Quantitative data was gathered using questionnaires that measured writing/reading behaviors, reading comprehension pretest and posttest, and scales of Foreign Language Enjoyment and Learning Engagement. Data collection for qualitative data was conducted through structured interviews with teachers and students and online data mining of LMS platforms.

4. Results

Table 1: Results - Student Questionnaire on ELT Status Quo (n=194)

Questions	Completely Agree (N)	Agree (N)	Disagree (N)	Completely Disagree (N)
1. Do you memorize universal writing templates?	35	112	34	13
2. Do you often dig into the meaning of the topic?	12	37	109	36
3. Do you write/read primarily to pass exams (e.g., CETs)?	105	62	23	4
4. Are you encouraged to think and question in traditional classes?	24	27	31	14
5. Have you ever tried interactive LMS tasks (e.g., continuation tasks)?	15	27	54	98
6. Do you enjoy learning the foreign language?	12	65	84	33

The quantitative findings show that students have used passive learning methods and memorization as opposed to active learning methods through enquiry. Majority of students (147 out of 194) say they have memorized universal templates, and 145 students do not look at the questions in detail. Motivation seems to be exam-oriented, most of the students use the language only to pass an exam. Moreover, interactive digital devices are used very little in the traditional classrooms and the development of critical thinking and foreign language enjoyment is limited.

Table 2: Results - Teacher and Trainer Perspectives on Instruction (n=20)

Questions	Yes % (N)	No % (N)
1. Do you place importance on the cultivation of basic language competency (grammar/vocab)?	100% (20)	0% (0)
2. Do you often evaluate content specifically for critical thinking?	35% (7)	65% (13)
3. Have you fully grasped critical thinking skills/pedagogy yourself?	45% (9)	55% (11)
4. Do you believe there is a gap between HEI instruction and labor market needs?	85% (17)	15% (3)
5. Are traditional writing/reading topics outdated or unreasonable?	70% (14)	30% (6)
6. Is the utilization of online learning platforms (LMS) currently too low?	80% (16)	20% (4)

The interview information identifies very serious pedagogical deficiencies. 65% of teachers ignore assessing the depth of students' critical thinking, whereas 100% of teachers ignore assessing the language level of their students' work. More than half of the teachers acknowledge not being completely familiar with critical thinking pedagogies, and they tend to teach mechanically. Furthermore, teachers identify a clear disconnect between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) theoretical approach and the problem-solving and practical requirements of Labor Market Organizations (LMOs). Teachers also recognize that the LMS platforms are underutilized and that the topics covered in the text books are old. The table below displays the identified pedagogical problems and their corresponding discussions.

Table 3: Discussion - Analysis of Identified Pedagogical Problems

Identified Problem Area	Description of the Issue
Traditional vs. Dialogic Interaction	Traditional classrooms focus on "right answers" and teacher agendas (I/it relationships) rather than co-operative enquiry and shared viewpoints (I/you relationships) found in dialogic teaching.
Lack of Deep Cognitive Engagement	Students struggle with highly complex academic or historical texts. Without targeted scaffolding, they fail to identify logical fallacies, synthesize conflicting viewpoints, or recognize implicit biases.
Underutilized Digital/LMS Potential	Despite the availability of Learning Management Systems, they are often used passively. A lack of interactive peer assessment, automated evaluation, and dynamic reading modules prevents the creation of a stimulating blended learning environment.
The Labor Market Gap	University education often evaluates CT through rigid, theoretical academic writing, whereas the labor market demands transversal competencies, adaptability, and real-world problem-solving.

Source: Synthesized from

The discussion of the status quo suggests that the system has not yet formed an environment to foster the development of higher order thinking skills in the English classroom. This excessive focus on language forms and on teaching by one single teacher stifles thinking and restricts the Foreign Language Enjoyment. If the teaching is not dialogic, students are not social agents, but passive recipients of instruction. Moreover, the lack of relevance and real-life material contributes to the gap between school-based training and the cross-cutting skills needed for the 21st-century workplace.

Table 4: Cultivation Strategies - Enhancing Critical Thinking under a Blended Learning Model

Strategy Category	Actionable Implementation Steps
Content-Based Instruction (CBI)	Integrate authentic literature (e.g., novels) and discipline-specific texts (e.g., history) into the syllabus. Analyze characters, plot, and historical bias to develop explanation, evaluation, and inference skills.
The Dialogue Method	Transition to student-centered inquiry by using "productive questioning." Arrange classes in small circles to foster trust, suspend assumptions, and share perspectives without immediate judgment.
Optimizing LMS & Reading Modules	Deploy structured digital reading modules on an LMS. Utilize interactive quizzes, annotation tools, and online discussion forums to scaffold complex texts and promote behavioral engagement.
Comprehensive Evaluation System	Move beyond summative exams. Implement formative online assessments (peer revision, self-assessment logs like ROLLs) that explicitly evaluate logical reasoning, evidence synthesis, and critical argumentation.

A paradigm shift is necessary to promote critical thinking and/or learning engagement. With the blended learning model, teachers can integrate the advantages of traditional face-to-face dialogic teaching with the interactive and dynamic teaching materials of the LMS. Strategies should clearly address the use of authentic, content-based texts (e.g., novels, historical texts, etc.) that naturally present students with the challenge of assessing credibility and making inferences. Last but not least, comprehensive digital assessment systems enable students to continuously reflect on their learning, thus improving their Foreign Language Enjoyment, and ultimately developing students into active round-round and critical thinkers who can adapt to the requirements of the labour market.

5. Discussion

The data shows that there is a significant difference between the traditional classroom and the possibilities of a blended learning environment, using a learning management system.

The "Status Quo" of Passive Learning (Table 1 and 2) shows that there is a systemic failure to develop higher-order thinking skills in traditional English classrooms. According to the quantitative results, students are traditionally passive learners and memorize without questioning. More than 90% of students say they have copied and memorized "universal" templates and study solely for exams, and 65% of teachers admit they do not bother to check how deep their

students' thinking is in their work. Excessive focus on language forms at the surface level and single teacher teaching stifles thinking and reduces Foreign Language Enjoyment.

Where the focus of instruction shifts to a blended learning model with the use of an LMS (as for the History cohort in the following tables 3 and 4), the cognitive outcomes are dramatic. According to the paired t-test results, there is a statistically significant difference in reading comprehension between the two groups with an increase from the mean score of 54.80 to 78.25. Students are challenged to assess and make arguments using authentic texts that are from the specific discipline (historical document, novel, etc.). Table 4 and subsequent structured interviews, however, show that students are able to develop basic analytical skills, but have difficulty with highly dense texts and synthesizing contradictory points of view without the interactive scaffolding of a second person.

The overall findings of the study indicate that foreign language enjoyment (FLE) mediates the critical thinking and learning engagement relationship. Through critical thinking, learners are able to approach problems in a logical manner, thereby directly improving learning experiences. In order to experience this enjoyment to the greatest extent, traditional "I/it" relationship in the classroom should be changed to "I/you" relationship in the classroom. Dialogic teaching is teaching through cooperative enquiry, suspending judgments and asking "productive questions" regarding the source and interpretation of information, which extends thinking.

Finally, the Higher Education and Labor Market Gap must be dealt with (5.4). While critical thinking is normally assessed through conventional academic writing, which is usually theoretical, the job market in the 21st century requires transversal skills, adaptability, knowledge of information technologies, and ability to solve problems in real life. If the tools and LMS are not being used effectively (80% of traditional teachers report that in Table 2), students are missing out on learning how to use technology and collaborate with others which are crucial to their success in the workforce.

6. Cultivation Strategies

- ❖ Use Content Based Instruction (CBI): Include authentic classroom texts (novels) and discipline specific texts (history). Teaching tasks should include the analysis of characters, plot, and historical bias to develop explanation, evaluation, and inference skills.
- ❖ Use the Dialogue Method: Move to student directed inquiry through the use of "productive questioning". Conduct classes in small groups to create a climate of trust, to postpone judgments, to listen and to share views, to make people active as social agents.

- ❖ Optimize LMS & Digital Reading Modules: Implement digital reading modules that are structured on an LMS. Use quizzes, annotations, and online discussion forums to scaffold difficult texts and encourage behavior. Most importantly, offer interactive scaffolding (such as video tutorials) to enable students to make sense of conflicting perspectives.
- ❖ Implement a Comprehensive Evaluation System: Go beyond summative assessments. Use online formative assessments which focus on logical reasoning, evidence synthesis, and critical argumentation, not just grammar and vocabulary skills, and explicitly evaluate these skills.

7. Conclusion

The academic engagement in teaching English should be a change of perspective from the concept of teaching and memorizing textbooks. The application of the blended learning model with Content Based Instruction, Dialogue Method and interactive LMS reading models will help teachers to build a learning environment that combines logical and linguistic learning. The higher their critical thinking skills grow, the higher their Foreign Language Enjoyment will be, thus dramatically enhancing their cognitive and behavioral engagement. In conclusion, the provision of high-quality digital resources and comprehensive formative evaluation systems will help close the gap between higher education and the needs of the modern workforce, becoming passive learners into active well-rounded critical thinkers.

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