

A Research on College Students' Engagement in English Writing Course

Suli Liu

School of English Language, Culture and Literature, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, 100024, China
liusuli@bisu.edu.cn

Abstract: *This paper provides a comprehensive study on college students' engagement in a blended mode English writing course. Paper questionnaires and SPSS 26.0 were used to analyze the results. 61 sophomores of non-English majors participated this research. It has been found that students actively took part in the blended mode learning and the students were more motivated and confident in future English learning and less anxious after the course. We also found that the majority of student's engagement, namely, behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and agentic engagement correlate with their learning results. While the relationship between cognitive engagement and mid-term and final testing was not significant enough. The research findings indicate the importance of raising the awareness of students' engagement in English writing course. With the results of this investigation, the current study provides some suggestions for English writing course design, as well.*

Keywords: *engagement; English writing course; blended mode learning*

1. Introduction

Learning engagement is a prominent concept in the field of educational psychology. This notion has evolved over time, with various perspectives on its definition. The exploration of learning engagement traces back to the 1930s when Tyler [11] introduced the concept of "time on task", underscoring the quantitative aspect of engagement—how much time is invested. Pace [7] stressed the importance of quality with "quality of effort". Astin [1] first proposed "student involvement", highlighting the synergy of physical and psychological energy in academic pursuits. Highly involved students allocate more time and effort to various aspects of education, resulting in improved academic outcomes. Newman, Wehlage and Lamborn [6] described engagement as "the student's psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote". Reeve [8] characterised learning engagement by the extent of students' active participation in learning activities. In an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, engagement is seen as a cognitive, affective, and social process in which the learner takes an active role with the language as the object [10]. These diverse perspectives reflect the multifaceted nature of learning engagement, emphasizing that it should not be studied from a single dimension. Today, it is widely accepted that learning engagement consists of a variety of dimensions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Three Core Dimensions of Learning Engagement

Given the multifaceted nature of learning engagement, many scholars conducted and summarize the features and classifications of learning engagement. In 1989, Finn [3] introduced a model of learning engagement with two key components: how students behave in class (participation) and how much they feel connected to school (identification). Fredricks and his colleagues [4] proposed a more comprehensive model, which included three distinct dimensions: how students behave (behavioral), how they feel (emotional), and how they think (cognitive) when they are learning. Fredricks' [5] framework has gained widespread recognition and acceptance in the field. Behavioral engagement draws on the idea of participation, including involvement in both academic and social or extracurricular activities. Emotional engagement, on the other hand, is about learners' feelings and reactions, positive and negative, towards teachers, classmates, and academics. As for cognitive engagement, it involves the mental effort

and intellectual activity of learners as they engage in the learning process. It is characterised by purposeful, discerning, and sustained concentration aimed at achieving specific learning objectives.

2.2 The Fourth Dimension – Agentic Engagement

While behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement has explained learners' efforts, enjoyment and strategic thinking in learning activities, it has become evident that students play more active roles. They, more or less, actively take part in the instruction they receive, making efforts to enhance their learning experience and create a more motivating and supportive environment for themselves [2]. This recognition gave rise to the concept of agentic engagement. As the name implies, agentic engagement emphasises active and intentional change. Reeve [9] introduced the concepts of agent, agency and agentic engagement in the context of learning.

It is acknowledged that agentic engagement is about action and behavior, what students say and do to create learning experiences that satisfy their needs, align with their interests, and hold personal value. Through agentic engagement, students take a more proactive and reciprocal role in learning. Being proactive means that students take actions, express preferences, and make suggestions; being reciprocal, a two-way interaction between students and teachers is possible, and both parties mutually influence each other's actions and work collaboratively to foster a more motivationally supportive learning environment.

This paper is to investigate the college students' engagement and the learning results in English writing course, from the behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agentic perspectives respectively.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Questions

This paper is based on the following research questions:

- 1) What's the current situation of students' engagement in college English writing learning?
- 2) Is there a significant influence of behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement and agentic engagement on students' English writing learning results respectively?

3.2 Participants

The participants, research methods, data collection and analysis are introduced specifically in the following part. The study involved 2nd-year undergraduate students from a foreign language university in China, who were enrolled in an English writing course (N = 61). The group consists of 41 girls and 20 boys. They are sophomores and have learned English for about 10 years. They are able to understand moderately difficult articles and materials published in the English-speaking countries and express their ideas in general written English. In other words, they are intermediate English learners without specialized writing training. After learning, the students were expected to be able to write compositions of about 200 words according to the given topic, outline or chart, data, etc. Their writing should be relevant, complete, and well-organized. The students met in the classroom once a week (90 minutes) with the instructor. During this period, they were to learn English writing from the initial diction, sentence writing to paragraph writing and the essay writing.

The English writing course was conveyed in a blended mode, and it went on briefly as follows: the instructor organized the students to learn the concrete English writing rules, strategies and skills in class. Then the students' writing assignments were released by the instructor on iWrite3.0. The scoring system would evaluate the students' compositions from language, content, organization and mechanics. It could also make a process diagnosis for students' writing learning. Meanwhile, the instructor would grade one third of the students' compositions and wrote a writing diagnosis for the class based on her own grading and that of iWrite3.0. Then in the following week, the instructor guided all the students to make target revisions based on the feedback from the class writing diagnosis and iWrite3.0. Quite often in this stage, individual adaptive writing exercises were assigned to the students. For instance, exercises to revise run-on sentences or misplaced modifiers, transitional exercises, cohesive exercises, etc. Peer-evaluation was chiefly applied in this stage with some conclusive evaluation from the instructor. The students' general performance after class (score of the composition, completion time, revising times, etc.) would be recorded by iWrite3.0.

3.3 Research Methods

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Questionnaire is a common quantitative method that is usually adopted in student engagement researches. Thus, this study chose questionnaire to do the quantitative research. In regard to qualitative research method, interview was adopted to investigate supplementary information of students' engagement.

To obtain the data we used both quantitative and qualitative data. We measured behavioral engagement through students' course attendance records, records of online logins to iWrite3.0 platform, revising times recorded by iWrite3.0 platform, and records of peer-evaluation in class. Emotional involvement and cognitive engagement were measured both quantitatively during the survey. To determine the students' learning results, we used the mid-term and final testing records on the English writing course. Agentic engagement was measured via the College Student Agentic Engagement in English Scale for Chinese college students.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Behavioral Engagement

The whole course of English writing lasted 17 weeks in a semester. We decided to consider the behavioral engagement of students during the whole participation of the course, including the students' course attendance records, records of online logins to iWrite3.0 platform, revising times recorded by iWrite3.0 platform, and recorded times of peer-evaluation in class. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of students' behavioral engagement.

Data	Mean (N = 61)	SD
Attendance in weekly lectures	16.1	2.03
Online login times to iWrite3.0	67.88	21.13
Revising times recorded by iWrite3.0	34.97	8.65
Recorded times of peer-evaluation in class	18.64	5.29

According to statistics, the students visited more frequently online learning website and contributed to online project than attended face-to-face lecture. However, as an encouraging finding, all indicators are quite high, even though there are much deviations on online login times and revising times recorded by iWrite3.0.

4.2 Emotional Engagement

To get a comprehensive assessment of students' emotional engagement, everybody from considering groups were offered to complete an online motivation questionnaire anonymously before and after the course. We received 61 responses from students before the course and 59 responses after the course (N = 61). Special statements were created to identify the students' perceptions about teaching and learning offered, defining five standard indicators: desire of learning English after university, anxiety, positive attitude to English, self-esteem, and self-demand. For each of the questions, the participants marked one of the five Likert-scale responses. The questionnaire included two questions for each motivation factor. The maximum score in each factor group was 10. For the sake of clarity, we reversed the figures of anxiety before and after the course. Results are presented in Figure 1.

As we can see from Figure 1, students become more motivated after the blended course based on integrated approach. The greatest difference was in the following indicators— anxiety and desire of learning English after university. Students felt themselves much more relaxed and more confident about their future English study at the end of the semester.

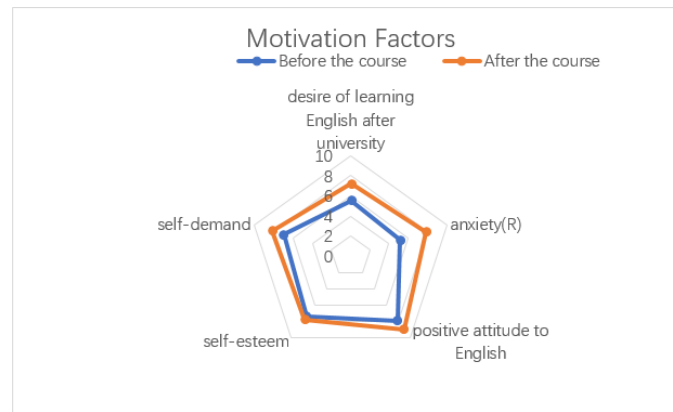


Figure 1. Motivation testing results.

4.3. Cognitive Engagement

To investigate students' cognitive engagement, we conducted a survey consisted of three items. In the Effort Questionnaire applied, each of the items was scored on 5-points Likert scale. Results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of effort questionnaire results.

Survey Items	Mean (N = 61)	SD
I put a lot of effort preparing to classes on iWrite3.0 platform.	4.23	1.95
I was engaged with the topics at hand on lectures.	4.09	1.21
I invested much time in implementing in-class discussion tasks.	3.84	1.79

The results showed that students were more willing to prepare to classes via online platform than work with project tasks in class. The engagement with the topics on lectures was high, as well. We could also witness a rather big standard deviation in the item of preparation on iWrite3.0.

4.4. Agentic engagement

In this study, agentic engagement was measured via the College Student Agentic Engagement in English Scale for Chinese college students. There are 14 items in this scale. Most of them are classroom-based. This scale has four dimensions that are "self-study", "helping teachers with teaching", "cooperation with teachers" and "helping classmates with learning English". The reliability of the whole scale reaches over 0.910, all dimensions have good internal consistency, and the homogeneity of all the items is relatively high. Thus, this study chose this scale as a basic model of the questionnaire. The author also set two reverse questions to check whether students fill in the questionnaire carefully or not. In order to be users-friendly, questionnaire used in this study was written in Chinese. This questionnaire mainly includes 5 parts. The first part is the basic information of respondents (gender, major, English score in CET 4). The other four parts are the four dimensions that are "self-study", "providing teachers with suggestions", "cooperation with teachers" and "helping classmates learn English". There are 16 questions in total. The questionnaire asked the participants to rate on a 5-point scale (1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree).

A total of 61 paper questionnaires were sent. Finally, after rejecting invalid questionnaire, the author got 59 valid questionnaires. Then the author used SPSS 26.0 to analyze the data. Table 3 below shows the mean of each dimension in detail.

Table 3 Descriptive statistics of agentic engagement questionnaire results.

Survey Items	Self-study	Providing teachers with suggestions	Cooperation with teachers	Helping classmates	Total
Mean (N= 61)	3.88	2.97	3.93	3.69	3.65

The total agentic engagement value of these participants was in a moderate level (MD=3.65). In terms of each dimension, it can be seen that the mean of the dimension "Providing teachers with suggestions" was the lowest (MD=2.97) and 'Cooperation with teachers' was the highest (MD=3.93) among the four, which suggests that these students always cooperated with their English teachers, but they seldom

provided teachers with suggestions. The mean of “self-study” (MD=3.88) was higher than “helping classmates learn English” (MD=3.69). Thus, compared with “helping classmates learn English”, these students did more in “self-study”.

4.5. Results of Students' Learning Outcome

As one of our research goals was to determine the impact of students' engagement on their learning results, we conducted the Pearson correlation analysis and calculated the significance of indicators' influence. Pearson correlation coefficient is a linear correlation coefficient, used to reflect the degree of the linear correlation of two variables. The significance level (p) is usually to indicate the responding correlations. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Correlation analysis of students' engagement and their learning results.

	Behavioral Engagement	Emotional engagement	Cognitive engagement	Agentic engagement	Mid-term testing	Final testing
Behavioral Engagement	1					
Emotional engagement	0.13*	1				
Cognitive engagement	0.16*	0.23*	1			
Agentic engagement	0.06*	0.08*	0.17*	1		
Mid-term testing	0.22*	0.18*	0.79 ***	0.33 **	1	
Final testing	0.35 **	0.39 **	0.77 ***	0.24*	0.41 **	1

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

The correlation analysis revealed a strong relationship between the four types of engagements and learning results ($p < 0.01$; $p < 0.05$), which indicates the four engagements are integral and mutual supportive. However, while the behavioral, emotional, and agentic engagements all significantly predicted Mid-term testing ($p < 0.01$; $p < 0.05$) and final testing ($p < 0.01$; $p < 0.05$), while the relationship between cognitive engagement and mid-term and final testing was not significant enough ($p > 0.05$; $p > 0.05$).

4.6. Results of Interview

The author interviewed four of these participants as a focal interview. The four students all actively expressed their views towards their engagement in the English writing course. After synthesized the interview data, the author found the following results.

First, the four interviewees' behavioral engagement were quite varied. Even though all of the four interviewees finished their online assignments and following tasks on time, their login times and revising times were quite different. If they didn't get a satisfying grade for certain assignments, their reactions to it were much different. Two of them would refer to the instructor, one would do more online revisions, and one would not care much and do no polishing work. Besides, the first two interviewees also got more involved in the in-class peer evaluation.

Secondly, the four interviewees' emotional engagement was different, too. An interesting finding was that the two students thought highly of the materials provided by this blended mode English teaching course, while the other two thought that these writing materials and blended arrangements were a kind of burden for them. One interviewee said that, “I think these writing materials weren't designed for our college students. They were too general for us to express some perceptions on unfamiliar field, such as cross-cultural communication. Doing online writing tasks was kind of boring.”

Thirdly, as for their self-confidence in English writing proficiency, three out of the four interviewees were not so confident at first, however, they all admitted that they got great progress after learning this course. One student mentioned that after the comprehensive training in the course, he would like to read more documents and write some analytic articles on his major in English.

Fourthly, the four interviewees' cognitive engagement was nearly the same. It seems that the four students hardly used metacognitive strategies. The four participants admitted that they didn't set goals or

plan for their online tasks. Actually, they strived to meet the deadlines of submitting and revising. Besides, they didn't do self-evaluation or change their learning habits when facing unfamiliar materials.

Lastly, in term of their usage of agentic strategy, the four interviewees all mentioned that they would like to cooperate with the teaches and help the classmates if possible. However, two of them doubted that they were qualified enough to provide teachers with suggestions. As for self-study, the four interviewees all deemed that the online schedule and arrangement kept them busy enough and which really left little room for self-study.

After analyzing the results, the author got the following findings: an analysis of behavioral engagement proved that students actively take part in online learning, and the more flexible time and place of online learning worked as a necessary supplement of in class lectures. A survey of emotional engagement showed that students were more motivated and confident in future English learning and less anxious after the course. A survey cognitive engagement showed many students were more willing to prepare for classes via online platform than work with project tasks in class, but not all students were ready to study in this blended mode. We also found that the total agentic engagement value of these participants was in a moderate level, which is kind of encouraging and at the same time, much to be improved, especially in the aspect of self-study.

The results suggested that the majority of student's engagement, namely, behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and agentic engagement correlate with their mid-term and final test scores. While the relationship between cognitive engagement and mid-term and final testing was not significant enough. The interviewees' feedback verified this finding, too. They could hardly conduct metacognitive strategies. On the one hand, the students were not given enough guidance or opportunities to practice self-plan, self-monitoring, need analysis of the course, etc. On the other hand, the blended mode of online and in-class arrangements left little room for the students to do so.

5. Conclusion

With correlation analysis of all considered indicators, it was identified that students' engagement played an influential role and greatly impacted their learning results in English writing course. We can conclude that, due to the introduced blended model, students were actively involved in the learning process and had achieved comparatively satisfying results. Thus, it is worthwhile for the instructor to further direct and encourage the students' engagement in the course. Also, it will be of great help for the instructor to analyze the students' need and bafflements in the blended learning mode, especially on the ways and psychological preparations to meet the platform deadline. At the same time, students' cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies need to be emphasized. Some possible attempts might be the good learners' sharing of their reflections, more encouragement on students' peer evaluation in class and establishing after-class study group, etc. More frequent communication between the instructor and the students are encouraged, as well. Finally, due to the limitation of time and resources, the author did this study in a small sample size. However, it is hoped that this study could provide some reference for future engagement research in English writing course.

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