

CoI-based Teaching Practices to Promote EFL Learners' Online Discussion in China's Blended Learning Context

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<https://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v18i2.18000>

Received: 30 October 2021

Accepted: 17 March 2022

Date Published Online: 30 April 2022

Published: 30 April 2022

Abstract: The Community of Inquiry model (CoI) is a guiding framework for blended learning and online learning and it has been implemented in diverse disciplines. However, the research on how EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers can promote students' engagement in online discussions through the CoI framework is very limited. This mixed-method study aims to investigate effective teaching practices that can promote students' active participation in online discussions based on the CoI in the blended EFL course. Responses to the survey of CoI and Engagement from 97 undergraduates in a Chinese university and interview transcripts of a focus group were collected as the data. The data were quantitatively analyzed by descriptive statistics and simple/multiple linear regression, and qualitatively by thematic analysis. Results indicated that students' perceptions of the teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence in the CoI had a statistically significant impact on students' engagement in online discussions. Students' perceptions of teaching presence had both direct and indirect impacts on their engagement; grading in online discussion forums, the teacher's timely responses and feedback, and the teacher's guide in the meaningful discussion were highly-rated teaching practices in promoting students' online discussion. The findings shed light on how teachers in the blended EFL courses should do in the online discussion to promote students' language use..

Keywords: CoI, Engagement, Online discussion, Teaching practice

1. Introduction

With the deep integration of information and communication technology (ICT) in the field of education, blended learning has been widely adopted by Chinese universities. EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers have been quite active in exploring EFL teaching in blended learning environments to change the teacher-fronted teaching throughout the years (Wang et al. 2019; Wu et al., 2017) so as to improve EFL learners' English proficiency and meet its increasing demand in the workplace (Yaniafari et al., 2021).

However, the majority of the literature has focused on blended EFL teaching modes or strategies (Feng et al., 2018), the Flipped classroom (Wu et al., 2017), or SPOC teaching design (Wang et al. 2019), only a few articles were found studying the online learning, online discussion in particular. Actually, online discussion forums (ODF) are effective tools for interactive learning and interpersonal communication (Onyema et al., 2019). According to Vygotsky (1986), students acquire language

through using it with others in social contexts, and social interaction is fundamental in the development of cognition. The inadequate opportunities for English use because of large classes (usually about 50 or more students in Chinese universities) in the face-to-face class time, and the rare occasions of language use outside the classroom have made the language interaction in the ODF an indispensable part of successful language learning. The truth is that the exam-oriented and high teacher-dependency culture in China has impaired students' self-directed learning in the online component, and the little attention paid by teachers to online discussions has rendered the blended EFL teaching short of expectation. Since productive interaction is rare and students just discuss at a superficial level in either synchronous or asynchronous discussion forums (Vuopala, 2015), the teacher's teaching presence is particularly important in enhancing learners' participation in it.

In numerous blended and online learning studies, the Community of Inquiry (CoI) has been proved to be a prominent techno-pedagogical framework to realize meaningful learning experiences (Garrison, 2017). It functions through the development of three interdependent elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Social presence refers to "the ability of participants to identify with the community, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop interpersonal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities" (Garrison, 2017, p. 25). Cognitive presence is defined as "the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse in a critical community of inquiry" (Garrison, 2017, p. 26). And teaching presence is "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" (Garrison, 2017, p. 27). The CoI framework is based on "collaborative constructivist" perspective of teaching and learning, and the meaningful learning experiences are mainly created as a result of online discussion enabled by the interaction of the three presences (González Miy & Herrera Díaz, 2015). As research has indicated that student interaction during discussion helped the development of language skills (Wu et al., 2017; Ariffin, 2021), this study aims to explore what CoI-based teaching practices are effective in promoting students' active online discussion in blended learning settings. It proposed the following research questions to guide this study:

- (1) What are the students' perceptions of teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence in online learning?
- (2) How do the students' perceptions of teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence predict their engagement in the ODF?
- (3) What teaching practices are considered to be effective in enhancing students' active participation in online discussions?

2. Literature Review

Since the last decade, Chinese EFL teachers have been working at facilitating student-centered learning and enhancing teaching effectiveness with blended teaching, but there is still much room left to facilitate students' online learning and online discussion (Hu, 2021). As existing studies indicated that the CoI framework is a credible theory in guiding blended learning research (Kineshanko, 2016), and the ODF is important communication means for learners and instructors to discuss course-related problems in online learning environments, it is worthwhile referring to them to investigate feasible teaching practices.

2.1 CoI Framework in ESL/EFL Teaching and Learning

As an influential structure for transactional educational experiences, the CoI framework has been supported by a large body of literature (Akyol et al., 2010; Kineshanko, 2016). To make the CoI framework practical, sub-categories of the three presences and their indicators have been constructed. To be specific, social presence consists of three subcategories: affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion. It aims to set a purposeful learning environment of mutual trust and inquiry, creating conditions for in-depth exchanges. Cognitive presence is closely related to critical thinking, and the learning experience relies on four inquiry processes of cognitive presence: triggering events, exploration, integration, and resolution. Teaching presence plays a dominant role in establishing

a learning community and making possible the cognitive and social activities required for effective online learning (Garrison et al., 2000). With the three sub-categories---the teacher's design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction, students can interact with peers or the instructor to reach the goal of higher-order learning. For EFL learners' dialogue in the CoI, there is an inherent need for the teacher to design, direct and inform the transaction (Garrison, 2017).

The previous research showed that cognitive presence has always been regarded as the center of the CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison, 2017); teaching presence played a central role in establishing and maintaining social presence and cognitive presence, and in creating an online learning environment (Garrison et al., 2010); students' perception of social presence also significantly predicted that of cognitive presence, signifying that it was a mediating variable between teaching presence and cognitive presence (Garrison, 2017; Zhang, 2020). Therefore, the relationship among the three presences can be shown in Figure 1.

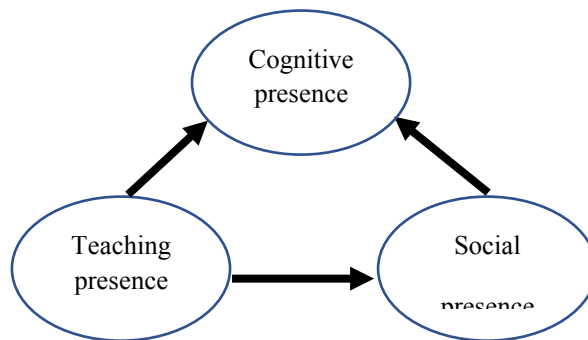


Fig. 1 The relationship among the three presences in the CoI framework

Though CoI has been used in diverse disciplines, its application in ESL/EFL teaching and learning is relatively limited. Among them, most studies have concentrated on the positive impacts of the CoI application in online language teaching courses on learners' learning experiences or language proficiency (Asoodar et al., 2014; Chen, 2012; Herrera Díaz & González Miy, 2017), or the adoption of different online communication tools on learners' higher perceptions of three presences (Goda et al., 2013; Mehri & Izadpanah, 2017; Zhang, 2020). Accompanying the good results of CoI studies, we cannot ignore the fact that language learners especially EFL learners seldom or poorly attended the online discussion (Chen, 2012; Herrera Díaz & González Miy, 2017). However, very few studies can be found regarding EFL learners' participation in online discussions (Cui, 2021) even though insufficient student participation is a major challenge faced by teachers (Satar & Akcan, 2018). As online learning is an indispensable part of blended EFL learning in China, it is necessary to investigate ways of facilitating student participation in ODF (Cui, 2021).

2.2 Importance of ODF in online learning

Discussion forums are the frequently used communication tool in online learning environments to facilitate interaction among learners and instructors. There are two types of online discussion forums (ODF): asynchronous and synchronous. The asynchronous ODF is the widely adopted means by most online teachers due to its advantages of communicating at any time, having enough time to think about ideas before the reply, being able to view others' discussion, et cetera. Besides, it may help students handle challenges of both cognitive and metacognitive skills in online learning (Ariffin et al., 2021). Therefore, the ODF is often used to enhance the effectiveness of blended courses (Ononiwu, 2021). It is suggested that learners should interact with each other at deeper levels so as to internalize knowledge instead of just learning it by rote memory (Dennen & Wieland, 2007). According to Vygotsky (1986), interaction and dialogue are central to learning, during which meaning is constructed and critical thinking is developed. However, students' participation in the ODF was not autonomous and active (Nandi et al., 2009), and most students talked superficially just for grading or fulfilling assignments (Vuopala, 2015). This is far from the expectation of blended learning effectiveness, so teachers' facilitation is of great significance especially when language use is limited in and outside of

the classroom. Yet, there is a scarcity of research regarding how teachers promote EFL learners' engagement in dialogue in the ODF, and this is the gap this study is going to address.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and Setting

The participants in the current study were 97 freshmen in a Chinese university. They come from two classes, one class of 49 students majoring in Financing and the other class of 48 students studying Culture Industry Management. About four-fifths of each class are female students and one-fifth male students, aging from 19 to 20. Their English proficiency level is considered to be lower-intermediate as most of them have not passed College English Test---Band 4 (CET-4, a national English test for non-English majors). The course they took is College English which is a basic compulsory course for all non-English majors. It was taught by the researcher's colleague with the blended learning approach in the spring term of 2021.

3.2 Instructional Procedure

The blended EFL course was organized in three phases: pre-class learning, in-class learning, and after-class learning:

In the first phase, relevant video resources and other learning materials were uploaded to the Learning Management System (LMS) according to the teaching goals of each unit, and some output-driven tasks such as retelling the text, drawing mind maps, or quizzes were assigned to promote students' pre-class learning. Students were required to conduct self-directed learning on the LMS, completing the output tasks set by the teacher and communicating difficult problems with their peers in the ODF.

While in the face-to-face class, the teacher strengthened and checked students' pre-class knowledge, explained key and difficult points, and conducted classroom activities that matched pre-class input and online discussion. Enough time was given to EFL learners to participate in activities through discussing and exchanging views with group members, and got immediate feedback from the teacher.

In the after-class phase, EFL learners had threaded discussions or problem-solving discussions in the ODF based on what they have learned in the class, preparing themselves for the completion of comprehensive tasks.

As this study focused on EFL teaching practices through the CoI framework to promote students' engagement in online discussions, the practices employed by the teacher to establish her teaching presence were listed in Table 1.

Table 1. CoI-based teaching practices to inform EFL learners' online learning

Sub-categories of teaching presence	Teaching practices
Design and organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing students clear instructions and requirements on how to participate in online learning activities. • Informing due dates/time frames. • Using both asynchronous ODF and synchronous ODF. • Modeling and expressing expectations. • Setting authentic, real-life, and knowledge-related ODF activities. • Having students discuss in small groups. • Grading students' online performance by assessment rubrics. • Using welcoming remarks and an approachable tone to encourage students' participation.
Facilitating discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking heuristic questions instead of giving answers directly. • Assigning different roles in group discussion activities. • Providing timely responses and frequent feedback.

- Acknowledging student participation positively.
 - Drawing in every student to contribute and leading them to productive dialogue.
 - Supporting students to make discussion smooth and meaningful.
 - Correcting the wrong use of the language.
 - Summarizing the student discussion or guiding students to summarize the discussion to form a holistic understanding.
- Direct instruction
- Providing useful information from a variety of sources.
 - Offering helps on how to access and operate tools or resources.

3.3 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-method approach to examine EFL learners' perception of three presences in online learning and their experiences with effective teaching practices. The quantitative data were collected via the CoI survey and the Engagement Scale, whereas the qualitative data were obtained through the focus group interview. Figure 2 illustrates the overall design of the study.

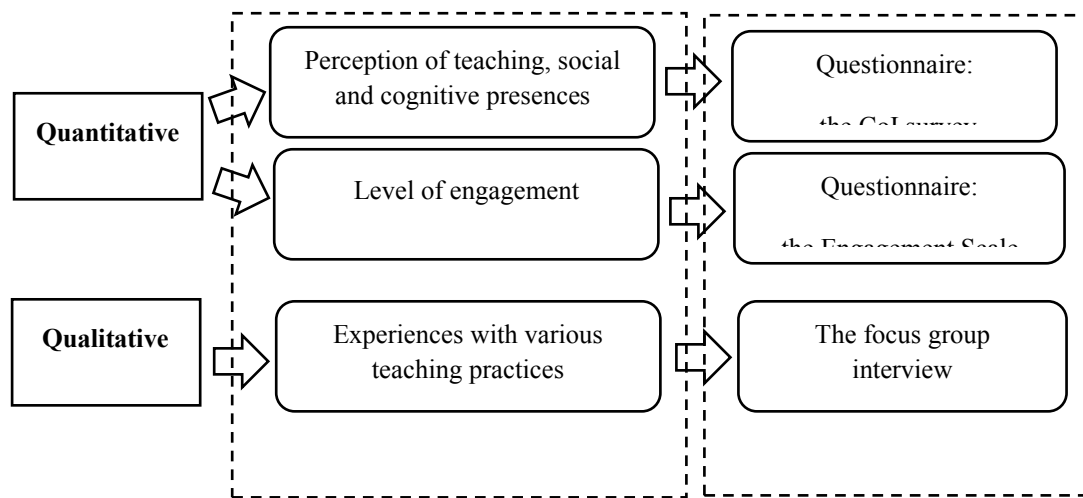


Fig. 2 The overall design of the study

3.4 Instruments and Data Analysis

To examine student perceptions of teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence in online learning, as well as their level of engagement, the EFL learners completed the CoI survey and the Engagement Scale. They were put together to make a big questionnaire in two sections. Section one was comprised of 34 items adopted from the CoI survey instrument (Arbaugh et al., 2008), with minor modifications of a few items. As for section two, the Engagement Scale, the 6 items were selected from the participation dimension of the Online Student Engagement Scale (OSE) (Dixon, 2015), and they have been modified to be more appropriate for the discussion in the ODF. To be specific, there were 13 items for teaching presence, 9 items for social presence, 12 items for cognitive presence, and 6 items for engagement in the ODF. All of these items were measured by a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). The questionnaire was piloted among 15 students and all of the 40 items were accepted.

The questionnaire was delivered in SO JUMP, a professional questionnaire website in China, and 92 students responded to it with a response rate of 94.8%. The overall reliability of the CoI instrument was .952, and the Cronbach's alpha values for teaching, social and cognitive presences were .887, .896, and .898 respectively, indicating high internal consistency of the CoI instrument. The Cronbach's alpha value for engagement in the ODF was .853, showing high reliability of this dimension as well. The items in the questionnaire were checked by one expert in the field of statistics, and were considered to have strong content validity. The KMO of the CoI Instrument was 0.857, and that of the Engagement Scale was 0.741, both of which were above 0.6. Besides, the results of Bartlett's sphericity

test for both CoI and Engagement reached a significant value (sig. <0.001), indicating the data is suitable for proceeding with the factor analysis (Pallant, 2000). The quantitative data in this study were analyzed by descriptive statistics and simple/multiple linear regression, and the results were shown in the following section.

The interview of the focus group was conducted face to face and lasted about two hours. 8 voluntary participants who had attended the survey took part in the interview at the end of the term. The interview followed the semi-structured protocol that concentrated on EFL students' experiences of the teaching practices, their online learning and discussion as well as their suggestions for dialogue participation in the ODF in the blended EFL course. The data gathered from the interview were analyzed qualitatively with thematic analysis. After a series of coding-recoding processes of the transcriptions by two researchers, a general agreement was made and the results generated from it were shown below.

4. Results and Discussion

The overall analysis of the questionnaire and the focus group interview suggested that the teacher's teaching practices guided by the CoI framework promoted EFL learners' engagement in the ODF. The ODF was a favorable learning environment for students to use the target language outside the classroom and collaborate with each other. The EFL teacher's teaching presence enhanced students' online learning and participation in the dialogue with peers and the teacher, yielding higher course satisfaction. The findings of the study are presented according to the three research questions.

RQ 1: What are the students' perceptions of teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence in online learning?

The descriptive statistics (Table 2) showed that EFL learners' perceptions of the teaching, social and cognitive presences were 3.7571, 3.6554, and 3.6417 respectively, representing the establishment of a community of inquiry with a relatively high rating to teaching presence.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of EFL learners' teaching, social and cognitive presences

Variables	Items	N	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Teaching presence	13	92	3.7571	.31870	2.77	4.46
Social presence	9	92	3.6554	.38346	2.56	4.22
Cognitive presence	12	92	3.6417	.38147	2.08	4.25

RQ 2: How do the students' perceptions of teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence predict their engagement in the ODF?

In answering RQ 2, the multiple linear regression was applied to show the correlation among the four variables: teaching presence, social presence, cognitive presence, and engagement in the ODF. Meanwhile, the multicollinearity of the predictive variables, and their standardized coefficients Beta weights were calculated in the analysis. First of all, the correlation among teaching, social and cognitive presences, and engagement were analyzed (Table 3).

Table 3. The correlation among teaching, social and cognitive presences and engagement

		Engagement	Teaching presence	Social presence	Cognitive presence
Pearson correlation	Engagement	1.000	.761***	.746***	.799***
	Teaching presence		1.000	.690***	.721***
	Social presence			1.000	.766***
	Cognitive presence				1.000

Note: p<0.001 (***)

Table 3 presented that all the three predictive variables (teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence) were significantly correlated with the dependent variable (engagement) (the Pearson correlation coefficients are .761, .746, .799 respectively, all the Sig. values were below .001), which meant that students' perceptions of the three presences were highly related with their engagement. Thus, the multiple regression analysis could be implemented.

Table 4. The coefficients among teaching, social and cognitive presences and engagement

Model	R ²	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Collinearity Statistics		
		B	SE	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)		-.699	.294		-2.377	.020		
Teaching presence		.447	.117	.323	3.825	.000	.434	2.304
Social presence	.728	.249	.105	.217	2.385	.019	.374	2.674
Cognitive presence		.462	.110	.400	4.210	.000	.343	2.919

Note: Independent variables: teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence
Dependent variable: engagement

The results in Table 4 described the value of R square, the standardized coefficients, and the multicollinearity of the three independent variables. Based on the value of R square ($R^2 = .728$), we could conclude that 72.8% of the variance in students' level of engagement can be explained by the three presences. According to Plots (2011), if the tolerance levels are no less than .1 and the VIF scores are below 10, it is accepted that the predictive variables did not influence each other excessively. The statistics in Table 4 showed there was no excessive multicollinearity among teaching, social and cognitive presences. Moreover, the beta weight of teaching presence ($\beta = .323$, $t = 3.825$, $p = .000 < .001$), that of social presence ($\beta = .217$, $t = 2.385$, $p = .019 < .05$), and that of cognitive presence ($\beta = .400$, $t = 4.210$, $p = .000 < .001$) suggested that they were all significant predictive variables, and the combination of the three independent variables contributed to 72.8% of the variance in the dependent variable (engagement). Among the three predictive variables, EFL learners' perception of cognitive presence had the strongest prediction ($\beta = .400$), followed by their perception of teaching presence ($\beta = .323$). Their perception of social presence was the least contributor.

As shown in Figure 1, teaching presence is a binding element, influencing social presence and cognitive presence; social presence is a mediating element between teaching presence and cognitive presence. Therefore, to draw a clear path analysis model, the multiple regression for testing the correlation among teaching, social presences, and cognitive presence, as well as the simple regression for teaching presence and social presence were analyzed like the above process. The coefficients of the multiple regression among teaching, social presences, and cognitive presence were shown in Table 5.

Table 5. The coefficients among teaching and social presences and cognitive presence

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	SE	Beta	t		Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	.125	.284		.442	.660		
Teaching presence	.440	.103	.368	4.293	.000	.524	1.909
Social presence	.509	.085	.512	5.973	.000	.524	1.909

Note: Independent variables: teaching presence, social presence
Dependent variable: cognitive presence

The values of Tolerance and VIF described in Table 5 showed there is no excessive multicollinearity of teaching presence and social presence. Moreover, both teaching presence ($\beta = .368$, $t = 4.293$, $p = .000 < .001$) and social presence ($\beta = .512$, $t = 5.973$, $p = .000 < .001$) can significantly predict cognitive presence.

Likewise, the coefficient of the simple regression between teaching presence and cognitive presence was presented in Table 6.

Table 6. The coefficient between teaching presence and social presence

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	SE	Beta	t		Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	.536	.284		1.549	.125		
Teaching presence	.830	.092	.690	9.044	.000	1.000	1.000

Note: Independent variables: teaching presence
Dependent variable: social presence

As can be seen from Table 6, the independent variable can significantly explain the correlation with the dependent variable (VIF = 1.000, tolerance =1.000) (Zhang, 2020), and it was demonstrated that teaching presence can significantly predict social presence ($\beta = .690$, $t = 9.044$, $p = .000 < .001$). Based on the above standardized coefficients in the three regressions in Table 4, Table 5, and Table 6, a path analysis model was drawn and shown in Figure 3.

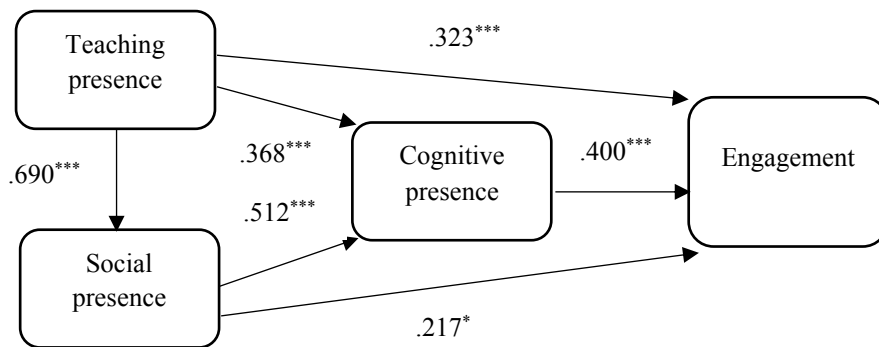


Fig. 3 The path analysis model among the four variables
Note: $p < 0.05$ (*), $p < 0.001$ (***)

As can be seen from Figure 3, not only did EFL learners' teaching presence affect their engagement in the ODF directly, but it also impacted their engagement indirectly through social presence and cognitive presence.

RQ 3: What teaching practices are considered to be effective in enhancing students' active participation in online discussion?

In answering RQ 3, thematic analysis was used to analyze the focus group interview transcriptions. The top three highly-rated themes were grading in the ODF, the teacher's timely responses and frequent feedback, and the teacher's guide in the meaningful discussion. The important generalized themes were shown in Table 7.

Table 7. The important themes of interview transcriptions

Excerpts	Themes	Frequency
I attended the online discussion (..) regularly because I wanted to get higher grades. ... (Student 1) [...] I found the more positive I took part in the dialogue with my group members, the higher grades I got from the course. (Student 3) ...I often participate in online discussions because I don't want to fail in this course. [...] (Student 4)	grading	8
When I posted my opinions in the ODF, I felt I was (...) cared about if I got my teacher's timely responses or (.) feedback. (Student 3) [...] I benefit a lot from my teacher's feedback and I think this is a good (..) platform for me to practice English and get support. (Student 7)	timely responses and frequent feedback	7
I don't think it is meaningful to just discuss with classmates in the ODF (..) unless my teacher helps us correct our mistakes or (.) solve our puzzles. [...] (Student 8) At first, I just lurked, and later I found the discussion guided by my teacher was meaningful. ... So I chose to talk when my teacher was there. [...] (Student 4)	teacher's guide in the meaningful discussion	6
We valued the interaction with my teacher, since she could guide us in many ways. the discussions guided by my teacher were more meaningful and (...) trustworthy. (Student 7)		
I tend to be more active when the topics or activities are interesting and practical. I don't want to talk anything (.) bored or (...) cliché [...] (Student 2)	authentic and interesting activities	3
I think discussing with my group members is more comfortable. ... small group discussions with different roles would contribute more to the final results. [...] (Student 6)	small group discussions with assigned roles	3

As was shown in Table 7, all 8 participants reached a consensus on the importance of grading. Chinese learners tend to be exam-oriented and grade-oriented, so it is understandable that the grading of EFL learners' performance (including both quality and quantity of the posts in the dialogue with peers and the teacher) had tremendous impacts on their engagement in the ODF.

The second highly-rated theme was the teacher's timely responses and frequent feedback. Although the EFL teacher could give immediate feedback to students in the face-to-face session in blended learning settings, he/she may not have enough time to deal with all problems and the ones occurring in the online discussion. Therefore, the teacher's timely responses and frequent feedback would aid students greatly in unsolved difficulties or confusing language problems in the ODF.

In addition, the teacher's guide in the meaningful discussion was also considered to be good discussion-facilitating teaching practice. Research demonstrated that students' interaction with the teacher is crucial for enhancing their social interaction with peers in online learning communities (Cho & Tobias, 2016). For Chinese EFL learners, the teacher's guide and interaction with students were critical for the quality of the discussion. With the teacher's guide, learners felt their participation could endow them with a better sense of achievement.

5. Discussion

As shown in the above section, results from the descriptive statistical analysis (Table 2) revealed that EFL learners' perception of teaching presence was a little higher than that of the other two presences, signifying Chinese students paid more attention to teaching presence and they may be more affected by it than the other two presences in online learning. This is consistent with findings of González Miy and Herrera Díaz (2015) and Zhang (2020).

The results in Table 3 & 4 indicated that learners' perceptions of the three presences were significant predictive variables for their engagement in the ODF, with their perception of cognitive presence being the strongest one, that of social presence being the weakest. It is a little different from the work of Richardson et al. (2017) that claimed "a moderately large positive average correlation between social presence and satisfaction and social presence and perceived learning" (p. 402). EFL learners' low rating of social presence might be caused by several complicated factors such as their familiarity, their exam-oriented characteristics, their poor English proficiency, or their low motivation in participating in online discussions in blended learning settings.

Meanwhile, the path analysis model indicated teaching presence as a central element in the CoI framework has exerted great influence on learners' engagement in online learning and discussion. In addition to its direct effects on student engagement, student perception of teaching presence could exert indirect effects on it through the other two presences. The direct effects and indirect effects made teaching presence more influential upon EFL learners' engagement in the ODF.

The thematic analysis of the qualitative data suggested that grading in the ODF, the teacher's timely response and feedback, as well as the teacher's participation in the meaningful discussion, are the most effective teaching practices, which are consistent with the findings by Nandi et al. (2009), Woo and Reeves (2008) and Cho and Tobias (2016). In addition to the above three highly-rated teaching practices, setting authentic and interesting ODF activities, having students discuss in small groups with assigned roles were also considered to be good strategies to activate EFL learners' active participation in online discussions, and these teaching practices have been supported by the research of Woo and Reeves (2008) and Vlachopoulos and Makri (2019).

5. Conclusion

This mixed-method study employed a series of online teaching practices by following teaching presence in the CoI to promote learner' engagement in online discussions, and found that EFL learners had higher perceptions of three presences, and all of them significantly impacted learners' engagement in the ODF. The newly-constructed path model revealed that EFL learners' perception of teaching presence could remarkably predict their engagement in the ODF directly and indirectly. Specifically, grading in the ODF, the teacher's timely responses, and the teacher's guide in the meaningful discussion are the most influential teaching practices for EFL learners' engagement in the ODF. In this sense, this study will enlighten EFL teachers on what they should do with students' participation in the ODF in the Chinese background.

Meanwhile, the findings may be culture-specific. As in East Asian contexts like China, teachers' dominant role is necessary for the learner-instructor interactions for learning purposes, and EFL teachers in blended learning settings are expected to participate in the online discussion. Yet, it may be different in less teacher-dependency culture.

There is no denying that a couple of limitations existed in this study. One of them was the use of the focus group interview instead of the in-depth interview, and their English proficiency was not considered, which may have caused incomplete and biased opinions on effective teaching strategies. The other one was this study only focused on promoting the EFL learners' active participation in the ODF while paying no attention to facilitating productive dialogue among learners. Thus, this is what future studies should put effort into.

6. Acknowledgements

I'd like to express my sincere gratitude to my Ph.D. supervisor Dr. Farhana Diana Deris, for her insightful guidance and revision. My heartfelt thanks are also given to my colleague Zhang Xu, for her great support and feedback for this study.

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