

Effective Instructional Strategies to Enhance Chinese EFL Learners' Engagement in a Blended Learning Environment

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Abstract—This study aimed to investigate the effective instructional strategies perceived by EFL students to enhance their engagement in a blended learning environment. Data from an English Reading and Writing blended course at a Chinese university were collected and analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. A total of 162 non-English majors responded to a survey and 10 were interviewed to express their views. The results identified 16 instructional strategies either online or face-to-face, which could enhance students' behavioral, emotional, cognitive or social engagement. These strategies were further categorized into four groups, namely instructor presence, process monitoring and feedback, learning assessment and group cooperation. Student interviews were analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of the strategies. Pedagogical implications have been provided, with an emphasis on the fundamentals of developing effective instructional strategies for teachers in blended learning environments.

Index Terms—teaching strategies, Chinese EFL learners, engagement, blended learning environments

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Student Engagement

Student engagement has received significant attention in education from administrators, researchers, and practitioners as a crucial factor in determining learners' academic success. An increasing amount of research indicates that students' engagement correlates with their learning perseverance, in-depth learning, satisfaction with courses, and academic achievement (Christenson et al., 2012; Halverson & Graham, 2019; Manwaring et al., 2017). Moreover, the literature has shown that various factors within a bio-ecological model's macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem, including cultural and historical influences, institutional policies, social and economic backgrounds, and curricula, can impact students' engagement (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019). Teachers are part of the microsystem, along with institutions, families, peers, technologies, and curricula, making it crucial to evaluate the effectiveness of their instructional strategies.

B. Blended Learning

Blended learning, which integrates traditional face-to-face and online learning paradigms, has aroused the interest of researchers, particularly since the outbreak of COVID-19, during which the classroom teaching time had been dramatically reduced, if not completely eliminated (Bonk & Graham, 2012). Meanwhile, the swift advancement of information and communication technologies (ICT) in recent years has radically transformed the teaching and learning methods. Due to the complementary advantages of both online and face-to-face teaching, blended learning has progressed to become the new normal in higher education, and is likely to develop as one of the educational trends in the twenty-first century (Boelens et al., 2017; Halverson et al., 2014; Norberg et al., 2011; Poon, 2014). According to some studies, the online learning portion of blended learning can range from 30% to 79% (Allen et al., 2007). One important principle underscored by blended learning is the shift from a teaching-centered to a learning-centered approach, which allows students to become more involved and enthusiastic in the learning process (Ismail et al., 2018).

C. Research Gap

Despite the importance of improving students' engagement in blended learning (Vaughan et al., 2013), researchers in this field have paid less attention to addressing how the blended learning mode acts as a fertile ground to optimize student engagement. Therefore, further research has been recommended by some scholars (Graham, 2019; Halverson et al., 2014; Heilporn & Lakhal, 2021; Manwaring et al., 2017). Meanwhile, the academic literature shows a lack of research exploring the strategies used by instructors to enhance students' engagement in blended learning environments (Halverson et al., 2014; Halverson & Graham, 2019; Manwaring et al., 2017). Existing studies rely solely on teacher interviews as their primary data source for content analysis, neglecting the valuable input of students. To ensure that

blended learning remains learning-centered, it is crucial to consider students' perspectives during teaching. Therefore, this study aims to fill the research gap by exploring effective instructional strategies that learners find as enhancing their engagement in the blended learning environment. The findings will provide valuable insights for instructors in blended learning environments to improve their instructional practices.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Student engagement is a multifaceted concept that refers to the effort and energy that students devote to their learning (Borup et al., 2020; Fredricks et al., 2016). It has been defined in various ways based on psychological, social and cultural perspectives. Most studies in the literature follow the typology of Fredricks et al. (2004), which defines "engagement" as a three-facet consisting of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. There are also other definitions of the construct of students' engagement. For instance, Awang and Murad (2008) proposed that student engagement is a complex construct that includes behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement and psychological engagement. Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2012) classified students' engagement into cognitive engagement, motivation, behavioral engagement and social behavioral engagement. Kahu (2013) identified four perspectives of students' engagement: the behavioral perspective, psychological perspective, socio-cultural perspective, and the holistic perspective. In this study, it is argued that student engagement is a psycho-social construct that includes not only learners' psychological situations but also their interactions with peers and teachers. This is because interaction is a critical process for learners to construct knowledge and practice linguistic skills in EFL contexts (Atkinson, 2014; Hulstijn et al., 2014). Therefore, we define student engagement as having behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social components. Behavioral engagement refers to the learning behaviors required for academic achievement in blended learning, such as participating in tasks and completing assignments in online or face-to-face mode. Emotional engagement refers to students' affective responses to blended learning, such as their attitudes, interests, motivation to learn, or a sense of belonging to a learning community. Cognitive engagement emphasizes the mental effort students devote to understanding the learning topic, such as deep processing of information, reflective thinking, self-regulated learning, or active knowledge production. Social engagement refers to interactions between students and the teacher as well as peers, such as discussing ideas, working together to complete tasks, providing feedback, helping each other, and so on. It is believed that these four components interact to increase the overall level of EFL student engagement.

Although there is a paucity of literature revealing teachers' strategies to support student engagement in blended learning environments, previous studies provide a solid foundation for our research. In the following section, we will review these studies. Jeffrey et al. (2014) conducted interviews with nine tertiary business lecturers from two state universities to identify teaching strategies for engaging, sustaining and re-engaging students. They identified two effective strategies: primers and social presence. Primers are strategies used for stimulating students' curiosity and interest in the learning subject being taught. Social presence, on the other hand, refers to the teachers' enthusiasm and the extent to which students feel they are part of a class or group. To keep students engaged, teachers can design challenging and authentic learning tasks and provide personal, timely, and high-quality feedback. Meanwhile, well-organized and structured online content, such as appropriately separated parts, easy navigation, and logical structure, can help keep students engaged. To re-engage students, teachers can use monitoring, personal interaction, and negotiated study practices. It is important to note that this study has limitations due to its small sample size and the restricted subject area.

Morton et al. (2016) developed two blended courses on neurotransmitters and neurodegenerative disorders that combined both self-directed online learning with collaborative face-to-face learning. To examine undergraduates' engagement, data from three focus groups were thematically analyzed. Five main themes emerged to improve student engagement: purpose and acceptability, organization, focus and consolidation, preparation and workload, engagement with the e-learning component, and future medical education. Students specifically mentioned the importance of effective structure and clear signposting of online courses to connect learning points and improve consolidation. The students reported that the tutorials were well-prepared and facilitated efficient learning and effective questioning. However, they expressed concern that the blended course would increase their workload due to the incorporation of additional e-learning. As a result, they recommended sticking to traditional courses. Some students suggested preparing for online learning before going into the classroom by tracking individual use of the e-learning and setting an expiry date to access to content. Additionally, students felt that including relatively short and self-contained modules would enhance the value of the blended course. The study was limited in scope and did not provide information on the scalability of blended learning. The participants were pharmacology students who may have had a higher level of interest in the subject matter than the general population.

Fan et al. (2021) conducted a study on the teaching and learning data of 5500 students and 406 teachers from 23 online or blended courses in Australia over a five-year span. The study found that teacher participation in discussions and homework feedback had a positive impact on student engagement in learning. However, the study limitations are clear. Specifically, the outcomes were not only relevant to the blended learning mode as the blended courses were not distinguished from the online courses. The investigation focused solely on behavioral engagement. Additionally, no comprehensive or specific teaching strategies were collected through learning analytic.

Heilporn and Lakhali (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews with eight instructors from the departments of accounting, management, operations, and decision systems. The data analysis has identified three categories of strategies: socio-affective strategies, strategies of teaching design, and organizational strategies. Socio-affective strategies, which include establishing a comfortable and trusting learning atmosphere and personalizing interactions with students, were primarily aimed at increasing emotional engagement among students. However, the use of socio-affective strategies may pose some challenges for teachers. The first challenge is generating genuine enthusiasm among students. The second challenge is instilling a sense of belonging among students in the course, which some teachers believe is unrealistic to cultivate because the students do not know each other. To promote students' cognitive engagement, strategies of teaching design, such as proposing relevant learning experiences (either professionally or personally), developing critical skills, promoting active and collaborative learning, and encouraging student interaction with the content through ICT, were implemented. Organizational strategies can result in clearly presented course structure. It was suggested that studies should be conducted from other disciplines and institutions to uncover further perspectives. Additionally, studies based on the perceptions of the students themselves should be conducted.

Heilporn et al. (2021) extended the previous study by conducting twenty semi-structured interviews with teachers from four universities in the province of Quebec (Canada). The findings provide a more comprehensive understanding of the strategies employed by teachers. These strategies were classified into three meta-categories: course structure and pace, choice of teaching and learning activities, and teacher role and course relationships. The course structure and pace strategies aimed to present a clear, continuous, and unified course structure while maintaining a consistent pace throughout the course, both synchronously and asynchronously. For the selection of relevant teaching and learning activities, giving choices in discussion topics and providing choices in assignment format were excellent examples. The teacher's roles in establishing a trusting relationship with students from the beginning of the semester and guiding them throughout the semester are crucial. Additionally, clear communication of course organization, objectives, and teachers' expectations are also important. It is worth noting that this study did not present teachers' specific disciplinary strategies and did not explore students' perceptions.

Yang and Ogata (2022) conducted a six-week quasi-experiment to investigate the impact of teacher feedback on personalized remedial actions for students utilizing learning analytic. The study enrolled 87 students from an undergraduate course in Accounting Information System. The BookRoll system was used to collect the data, including students' backtracking rate, reading time, and annotation activity. Based on the findings, teacher feedback that utilizes learning analytic has the potential to improve students' learning outcomes and increase their behavioral engagement in blended learning. This is consistent with the findings of Gong et al. (2018), where 31 undergraduates' engagement was measured in a blended learning environment using both self-report measures (student engagement questionnaire) and quantitative observation measures (number of viewing records and posts to a discussion board). The study's limitation is that it solely focuses on behavioral engagement and offers restricted types of learning data and remediation recommendations.

Synthesizing the literature on teachers' strategies for effectively engaging learners in blended learning environments is crucial. Previous studies have identified various instructional strategies employed by teachers, providing a strong foundation for future research. However, these studies have limitations as they solely reflect the teachers' perspective without acknowledging the students' perception. Disregarding students' opinions could lead to ineffective teacher instruction. Additionally, the existing literature has not explored the context of EFL blended learning. Therefore, our aim is to investigate students' perceptions of teacher instructional strategies in the EFL blended learning environment.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. *Research Design*

The present study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods, including surveys and interviews, to collect data and investigate the effective instructional teaching strategies perceived by students in a blended learning environment. Specifically, a survey focusing on instructional strategies in a blended course will be created and distributed to students at the end of the semester, requesting them to rank the effectiveness. Then, researchers will convene to discuss and reach a consensus on the classification of these strategies. Additionally, interviews will be conducted with students to further investigate their understanding of the strategies used in the blended course.

B. *Participant and Setting*

The study was conducted at a comprehensive key university in China with 162 sophomore students majoring in a variety of disciplines, including chemistry, physics, music and civil management. The participants had an intermediate level of English proficiency and no prior experience in a blended learning environment. The blended course in which the participants enrolled was called College English Reading and Writing. It was a mandatory course worth 2.5 credits, and half of the learning hours were completed either online or face-to-face. This course was taught by one of the researchers and lasted sixteen weeks with two periods in each week. It began in early March of year 2023 and ended in late June of 2023. The course consisted of both online and face-to-face activities. The online activities included watching teaching videos, participating in topic discussions and essay writing. The face-to-face activities included group work and text reading. The course aimed to develop students' writing skills, including essay structure and

paragraph development, exemplification, cause-effect, comparison, unity, cohesion, sentence variety and precise word choice. The reading topics covered a range of subjects including college life, food, technology, well-being, economy, gender differences, culture, language, and sports. At the start of the course, the students were divided into groups of 6 people in each. Each member was assigned a role such as leader, recorder, photographer or organizer to ensure equal participation among all members as expected by the researchers. At the beginning of the course, the teacher explained how to use the Chaoxing Learning Platform, a widely used online learning platform in China. The study proposal was approved by the university's ethics committee, and the researchers were granted permission to access the data.

C. Research Instrument

A survey was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional strategies, both online and face-to-face. The survey included 35 possible instructional strategies, and students were asked to rate each one on a 5-point scale ranging from completely ineffective to completely effective (1= completely ineffective; 2 = a little bit ineffective; 3 = just so so; 4 = a little bit effective; 5 = completely effective). The reliability of the survey was tested with Cronbach's α of 0.95.

D. Procedure

The study was conducted in a blended English course at a prominent university in Southwest of China during the first semester of 2023. In the final week of class time, students were given a survey on the effectiveness of instructional strategies by Wenjuanxing, a professional questionnaire platform in China. The survey's purpose was clearly explained to the students, with the assurance that their responses would not affect their course grades or necessarily flatter the teacher. A time limit of 10 minutes was set for them to complete the survey, so they were expected to take it seriously. Data from 162 students were considered as valid and analyzed by SPSS version 24. Mean scores were calculated to determine the central tendency of students' perceptions. The effectiveness of instructional strategies was assessed using scores as an index. Strategies with a mean score above 4 were considered effective, while those with a mean score below 4 were deemed ineffective. The standard deviation was used to describe the variability of data about the sample mean. Finally, the researchers classified the perceived effective strategies into categories. Ten students were interviewed in person to determine why they considered certain strategies were effective while others were not. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin, and participants were informed of the study's purpose beforehand. All participants volunteered to attend the interview, shared their thoughts with researchers, and consented to be audio-recorded during the process. Afterward, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and content analysis was subsequently conducted.

IV. RESULTS

The statistical analysis revealed 16 effective strategies with a mean score above 4, while the mean score of the remaining strategies was below 4, indicating that not all strategies were considered effective by the students. These 16 strategies were grouped into 4 categories, which will be explained in the following section.

A. Instructor Presence

Table 1 shows the first category, instructor presence, which consists of eight effective instructional strategies that students perceived as enhancing their engagement. Five of these strategies are online instructional strategies and three are face-to-face instructional strategies. Instructor presence refers to the actions and behaviors of instructors that project themselves as real people, as well as how they position themselves socially and pedagogically within a learning community (Richardson et al., 2015). The findings of this study focus on instructors' communication styles and their adaptation of specific communication mediums, as well as their direct instruction. Specifically, learning can be made interactive and friendly by instructors using a polite tone, expressing personal values, displaying non-verbal emotions, sharing personal experiences, providing task lists, or organizing discussions.

TABLE 1
CATEGORY OF INSTRUCTOR PRESENCE STRATEGIES (N=162)

Strategies	M	SD	Enga.	Mode
To motivate students' learning, the instructor will frequently speak in a kind and encouraging manner.	4.31	0.71	EE	face-to-face
When assigning online learning tasks, the instructor will provide a clear list of tasks and a deadline for completion.	4.20	0.65	BE/EE	Online
When assigning online learning tasks, the instructor will give a concise and understandable clarification of the learning goals.	4.14	0.57	BE/CE	Online
When there is a learning problem, the instructor can be easily reached online by the students.	4.09	0.71	CE/EE/SE	Online
The instructor will delve deeper and cover more pertinent material in the face-to-face class time.	4.05	0.68	CE	face-to-face
The instructor will explain the use of learning platform or other educational resources at the beginning of the course.	4.03	0.71	BE	face-to-face
The instructor will allow students to turn in essays by either typing online or writing on paper and uploading it as a picture.	4.03	0.66	BE/EE	Online
The instructor will organize students to respond to others' views in online discussion.	4.02	0.75	CE	Online

Note. BE = Behavioral Engagement; EE = Emotional Engagement; CE = Cognitive Engagement; SE = Social Engagement

According to the survey and interviews conducted in this study, students value teachers who interact with them in a courteous and supportive manner. In this way, students will feel confident in their learning abilities and avoid self-doubt. Meanwhile, the students felt obligated to engage learning because the teacher was considered excellent due to their hard work. In Chinese culture, teachers are highly respected and education is greatly valued. Students genuinely appreciate the efforts of their teachers, which are often compared to candles burning themselves to illuminate the lives of others. Teachers' personal attributes and professional practice can encourage students to engage emotionally, leading to a chain reaction of other types of engagement. This aligns with Heilporn and Lakhal's (2021) classification of social-affective relationships based on trust and friendliness.

Students value teachers' ability to provide clarification. In a blended learning environment, students will switch between online and face-to-face learning, which can present difficulties. To address these challenges, instructors should provide students with a clear list of learning tasks and instructions on when, where, and what activities are required to be completed. This strategy, also identified by Heilporn and Lakhal (2021), can reduce students' anxiety and negative emotions while increasing their behavioral and emotional engagement. The following outlines the reasons provided by students:

I believe that the list of tasks acted as a tool for organizing and the set deadline acted as a reminder and motivator for us to finish the task on time. (S3)

The description of learning objectives would help me become more goal-oriented. (S5)

I will feel more freedom to arrange my time for efficient learning after I understand what I should do and when I should finish it. (S7)

Students appreciate teachers who are easily accessible. Previous research has shown that instructors can reduce students' perceptions of distance by providing timely presence when students have learning problems, followed by fostering a sense of community (Hodges & Cowan, 2012). Such a strategy can enhance students' cognitive and emotional engagement as well as facilitate teacher-student interaction. As one student highlighted in the interview:

When we are learning a foreign language, we must have many questions. And if the teacher could help us solve the problems on time, we will feel the progress and know that we are not alone in our study. (S5)

Students value direct instruction and assistance from their teachers in expanding and elaborating on the learning content. This strategy has been shown to enhance students' cognitive engagement in blended learning. A student provided the following justification:

Even if I have learned the basics of English reading and writing through online teaching videos, I still need my tutor to broaden and deepen the learning materials. In this way, I can connect the pieces of information and gain a thorough understanding of the subject matter, which will make a lasting impression in my memory. (S6)

Previous studies have shown that e-learning platforms with technological advancements can make teachers adopt a learner-centered approach and provide effective practices by presenting alternatives to real-world scenarios. If used appropriately, such platforms can offer students a reliable learning experience (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Wong et al., 2014). The acceptance of learning management systems by students has a significant and positive impact on their sense of community and engagement in blended learning (Ustun et al., 2021). Therefore, it is essential for teachers to ensure that students understand the practicality and simplicity of learning management systems, which will facilitate their behavioral engagement. As one student remarked:

The introduction of the online learning system would help me familiarize myself with the learning materials and make me start learning promptly and know where I can do my assignment. (S6)

The students state that the flexible approach to submitting assignments, whether through text, audio or video, was considerate of their learning preferences and enhanced their educational motivation. This aligns with the results of Manwaring et al. (2017), which found that providing learning options to students increased their emotional and behavioral engagement.

According to students, if the teacher could organize them to discuss online, they would tend to review and comment others' opinions. This strategy shows potential to increase students' cognitive engagement. As Fan et al. (2021) found, instructors' ongoing involvement is crucial to maintain students' interest and engagement, particularly in discussion participation.

Directing instructors' attention to the importance of their presence can eliminate negative aspects of blended learning, such as reduced face-to-face teaching and students feeling isolated, while also promoting student engagement.

B. Process Monitoring and Feedback

Table 2 shows effective monitoring strategies for students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, particularly for online learning. Previous research has shown that providing prompt and distinctive feedback enhances learning engagement in the majority of educational contexts (Jeffrey et al., 2014).

TABLE 2
CATEGORY OF PROCESS MONITORING AND FEEDBACK STRATEGIES (N=162)

Strategies	M	SD	Enga.	Mode
The instructor will provide regular feedback on online learning via social media or learning platforms.	4.02	0.83	BE/EE/CE	Online
To encourage students to finish their learning assignments on time, the instructor will ask the class assistant to distribute the online learning feedback periodically.	4.01	0.73	BE/EE/CE	Online

Note. BE = Behavioral Engagement; EE = Emotional Engagement; CE = Cognitive Engagement; SE = Social Engagement.

In this study, students valued the teacher's or class assistant's monitoring and feedback and they expressed their reasons as follows:

The teacher's monitoring and feedback served as a reminder and incentive, as well as a tool to establish an active and competitive learning environment, because nobody wanted to be the last person in learning, which would be humiliating and face-losing. (S5)

The teacher's feedback would help me understand my learning situations, particularly the existing difficulties. (S3)

It is consistent with the findings of Heilporn and Lakhali (2021), which argues that providing general and individual feedback for a specific activity or assignment on a regular basis would increase students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. And the feedback, whether in text, audio, or video, plays an important role. Fan et al. (2021) also supported this strategy, and in their study, they found a positive correlation between teacher feedback and the students' completion rate for assignments and learning content.

C. Learning Evaluation

Students rated three effective strategies on learning evaluation in enhancing their behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, as indicated in Table 3. These findings are consistent with Heilporn and Lakhali's (2021) study, in which the teachers recommended problem-solving assessments to improve students' behavioral and cognitive engagement in both online and face-to-face activities.

TABLE 3
CATEGORY OF LEARNING EVALUATION STRATEGIES (N=162)

Strategies	M	SD	Enga.	Mode
The presentation of learning groups in the classroom is considered a part of procedural evaluation.	4.17	0.74	BE/EE	face-to-face
The instructor will award bonus points to students who answer questions correctly in class.	4.12	0.84	EE	face-to-face
Every online instructional video is followed by a related quiz.	4.09	0.71	CE	Online

Note. BE = Behavioral Engagement; EE = Emotional Engagement; CE = Cognitive Engagement; SE = Social Engagement.

In the interview, students expressed their understanding:

Because the presentation of learning group will be evaluated and considered as part of the final marks, all group members approach the task with seriousness as nobody wants a low grade. To ensure the success of the presentation, we have held three meetings to determine the content and method of delivery. (S8)

I believed that awarding bonus points for group presentations and individuals who correctly answered questions would elicit learning motivation because it was not only the teacher's evaluation of our performance and achievement, but also provided us with a sense of struggle and competition. (S6)

The quiz following the teaching video will push me to watch it attentively and purposefully. Otherwise I will not be able to answer it and will lose points for online learning. (S4)

D. Group Cooperation

According to the collaborative construction framework, learning knowledge is a process of continuous and collaborative process of reconstructing experience in which students are recognized and supported (Garrison & Archer, 2000). It is generally acknowledged that online learners may feel disconnection from peers and instructors, which can lead to feelings of isolation in blended learning. In this study, the students appreciated the strategies for encouraging group cooperation, such as working together to write an essay or evaluate others' assignments. Table 4 shows the group cooperation strategies that students found effective in promoting their behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social engagement.

TABLE 4
CATEGORY OF GROUP COOPERATION STRATEGIES (N=162)

Strategies	M	SD	Enga.	Mode
The instructor will make learning groups collaborate to finish assignments, like writing essays.	4.06	0.81	BE/CE/EE/SE	face-to-face
The instructor will make the learning groups assess each other's assignments.	4.03	0.77	BE/CE/EE/SE	face-to-face
The instructor will make the group members collaborate to provide feedback on each member's assignment.	4.01	0.72	BE/CE/EE/SE	face-to-face

Note. BE = Behavioral Engagement; EE = Emotional Engagement; CE = Cognitive Engagement; SE = Social Engagement.

Students prefer to collaborate on writing, evaluating and providing feedback for English essays. Students reported their reasons:

Writing an essay together was a great challenge for a team, so every member of the team would be actively involved in it and think about the structure, vocabulary, and ideas, allowing everyone to learn from each other, and the friendly discussion climate would make us feel relaxed. (S4)

Evaluating the assignments of other groups would help to break down thinking stereotypes, broaden our vision, and gain enlightenment from others. Furthermore, it was difficult to identify our own writing problems, but it is easy to find in others' mistakes. (S5)

We would write more carefully after learning that our essays would be graded by others because we do not want to lose face. (S7)

Heilporn and Lakhal (2021) suggested that proposing active or interactive teaching and learning activities can increase students' sense of belonging to a group, psychological investment, and emotional and cognitive engagement. Additionally, Öncü and Bichelmeyer (2021) found that when teachers used collaborative and learner-centered practices, students were more engaged in schoolwork behaviorally.

The strategies mentioned above align with the seven principles of increasing student engagement in learning recognized by Chickering and Gamson (1987). These principles include promoting interactions between students and teachers, encouraging collaboration and cooperation among students, facilitating active learning, providing prompt feedback, emphasizing the importance of spending time on tasks, instilling high expectations through teacher guidance, and acknowledging and accommodating diverse learning styles.

Some teaching strategies were deemed ineffective by the students. For instance, the teacher required students to upload photos of their faces when accessing the learning management system to ensure that they were participating in online learning. However, some students found it inconvenient because they had to retake their face images to access the learning system if the network connection was disrupted during the learning process. At the start of the course, the teacher asked the students to share a personal introduction document and video in the QQ group, a popular social media in China, to help them become acquainted with one another. However, some students expressed that this strategy appeared to be a mere formality, without any actual significance. A few even showed their reluctance to become acquainted with their peers. According to the teacher, if the students periodically documented their progress on shared documents, it would encourage their engagement in learning. Nevertheless, the students stated that this strategy failed to account for their unique learning pace. The teacher believed that having the students write a learning report after the group cooperation would enhance group cohesion and student engagement. However, the students felt that it placed an additional burden on their learning and was slightly time-consuming. Thus, teachers should aim to respect students' learning styles when implementing teaching strategies without increasing their learning burden. Furthermore, teachers should provide additional attention, relevant supervision, or offer rewards during activities. For instance, if instructors do not organize the exchange of ideas among students, the online discussion may devolve into a mere expression of viewpoints with little interaction. Without quizzes to assess comprehension of teaching videos, students may be absent-minded while watching them. Teachers must meticulously design activities to promote student engagement.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effective teaching strategies that students find effective in enhancing their engagement in a blended learning environment. The results reveal 16 effective strategies that can be used either online or face-to-face, which are further categorized into four groups, instructor presence, process monitoring and feedback, learning evaluation and group cooperation. Students believe that these strategies can stimulate their behavioral, emotional, cognitive, or emotional engagement in blended learning. However, some students found other strategies to be ineffective, possibly due to a lack of teacher attention or supervision or the absence of additional rewards. In the Chinese educational field, teachers hold an esteemed position and their instruction is highly regarded by students. If the teachers fail to invest enough in teaching activities, students may view those activities as unimportant and be inclined to avoid them. And granting rewards to students who complete tasks successfully can also motivate them and lead to increased engagement in their learning. Instructors must pay attention to the following four principles when creating and implementing strategies in blended learning environments to increase student engagement.

A. Learnability

We define learnability as the use of teaching strategies by instructors to promote learners' knowledge construction, critical thinking and deep learning in blended learning. This includes establishing clear learning objectives, logically structured content, post-video quizzes, well-organized discussions, and learning technology support. Implementing these strategies in teaching enhances cognitive engagement among students and ultimately leads to their academic success. In order to address the belief among Chinese EFL learners that teachers are better than them at generalizing and deepening knowledge, instructors should focus on strategies for synthesizing, analyzing and evaluating knowledge.

B. Flexibility

The power distribution between teachers and students in blended learning allows for flexibility. Teachers have the ability to select what and how to blend, while students have the freedom to schedule their learning time, space, and pace according to their unique learning patterns and plans. It is important for teachers to regularly negotiate with students throughout the course to establish learning content, methods, and even appraisal to cater to various learning styles. In this study, students had the option to submit their essays either by typing online or by writing and uploading them as photos. This illustrates that students value their instructors' guidance but also desire to retain their autonomy. It serves as a strategy that encourages students' behavioral and cognitive engagement (Heilporn & Lakhali, 2021).

C. Interactivity

Blended learning is widely regarded as the most effective way to combine online and face-to-face instruction. This approach enables greater interaction between students and teachers when used appropriately. Additionally, it enables teachers to create and offer a variety of interactive assignments using social media and learning management systems that include communication tools. During the face-to-face portion, group work will enable verbal and nonverbal communication among students (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003). Interactive assignments may include discussions on specific topics, collaborative projects, corrective feedback, synchronously or asynchronously questions, and other activities that require formal or casual communication among students and teachers.

D. Emotionality

To enhance students' engagement in blended learning, teachers must consider the role of emotions. Strategies to spark students' interest and build rapport between teaching and learning agents can promote positive emotional experiences. Strategies can help create an inquiry community and enable students to feel a sense of security and belonging within their community. This is crucial for students' independent and interactive learning in a blended learning environment.

VI. RECOMMENDATION

This study has identified 16 practical strategies that EFL teachers can use to foster student engagement in blended learning environments through a combination of survey data and interviews. The reasons why students believe these strategies are effective have also been analyzed. However, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. Firstly, in the future research, a wider range of blended learning environments should be considered due to the varying characteristics of different courses. Secondly, it is important to collect data from multiple sources, including the learning management system and students' academic achievement scores, to determine the impact of instructors' strategies on students' academic success.

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