

Designing SPOC-based Blended Oral English Teaching in Vocational Colleges under the Framework of Community of Inquiry

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Abstract

The Community of Inquiry framework is an efficient theoretical and methodological framework for analyzing and developing both online and blended learning. SPOC-based blended teaching was one of the predominant modes in the pandemic period in China, and previous studies indicated its positive effect on the learning outcomes of English language learners. In order to provide a deep and meaningful learning experience to English language learners, the research first analyzes the connotations and dimensions of cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence in the CoI model and summarizes the pedagogical strategies for creating the three elements in the SPOC-based blended teaching environment. Then, taking the English course “*Oral English for Cabin Service*” as an example, the teaching practice of the whole blended learning process, including before, during, and after the face-to-face class, is designed with a view to providing a reference and an example for oral English teaching and learning in other higher vocational colleges.

Keywords: Community of Inquiry Model, Oral English, Vocational Colleges, SPOC, Blended Learning

Introduction

Small private online courses (SPOCs) which are put forward by Fox (2013) can organically combine the advantages of high-quality MOOC resources with face-to-face classroom teaching. It is believed that SPOCs are the inheritance, improvement, and transcendence of MOOCs (Kang, 2014). In 2019, when the COVID-19 epidemic broke out, SPOC platforms such as Smart Vocational Cloud Education, Rain Classroom, and Chaoxing, as well as live streaming platforms and software such as Tencent Classroom and Tencent Meeting have emerged one after another to ensure the teaching progress and quality during the epidemic prevention and control period. Online blended learning (BL) based on SPOC has become one of the main learning modes in universities during the epidemic period in China (Xu et al., 2020). With its popularization, the benefits and potential of SPOC-based teaching and learning have been gradually recognized by Chinese instructors and students.

The preliminary research results have elucidated the positive effects of the SPOC-based BL e.g. Zhang et al (2019); Jia & Zhang (2021) and the feasibility of applying this BL in English

language education (e.g. Rianto, 2020; Karima, 2021). This learning mode combines the benefits of F2F instruction and online learning and course instructors can provide more feedback and guidance while tracking students' learning process (Bran & Grosseck, 2019). Moreover, learners' engagement and learning attitude can be enhanced Lu (2018), thus they can have a more complete and in-depth learning experience (Filius et al., 2018). After students returned to school, some vocational colleges in China began to explore blended online and offline teaching and learning practices based on the SPOC platform. However, the research on BL of oral English in Chinese vocational colleges is in the exploratory stage. In addition, in most of the spoken English courses traditional classroom face-to-face teaching is still predominant under which Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' oral English proficiency is far from satisfactory (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). Therefore, this motivates the researcher to design a blended teaching practice based on SPOC to enhance Chinese college EFL learners' oral English proficiency.

In addition to having SPOCs for BL, systematic and careful pedagogical design is also critical. Designing a BL is a complicated and challenging task, which is highly dependent on the specific context and involves "a fundamental reconceptualization and reorganization of the teaching and learning dynamic" (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Therefore, it is crucial to integrate both face-to-face and online learning appropriately and creatively and match each to specific learning tasks Vaughan & Garrison (2005) by taking exact context into consideration. According to Garrison and Kanuka, "what makes blended learning particularly effective is its ability to facilitate a community of inquiry" 2004. Thus, the process of carrying out BL can be regarded as the one in which a community of inquiry is created, preserved and advanced. Therefore, there is a need for researchers and teachers to make the best use of the blend to support a community of inquiry for effective and deep learning experiences.

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model (Garrison et al (1999) is an effective theoretical framework and methodological guiding tool to develop both online learning and BL (Cleveland-Innes, 2019). It is often used to create instructional techniques e.g. Fiock, (2020) or mentor teachers to make instructional designs in online learning (e.g. Martinez & Barnhill, 2017) and BL environment (e.g. Theodosiadou et al., 2017). Previous research results indicate that the CoI model has certain applicability to Chinese higher education (e.g. R. Zhang, 2020; Yang & Mohd, 2020). However, designing blended teaching from the perspective of the CoI framework is still in its early stages in Chinese contexts with only a small number of studies on the CoI framework available, particularly for vocational education. Furthermore, to the best knowledge of the researcher, there has been no research on constructing a blended oral English teaching practice under the guidance of the CoI framework. In view of this, this study intends to construct a SPOC-based blended oral English teaching practice for Chinese EFL learners in vocational colleges from the perspective of the CoI model, in order to provide a reference for teachers and practitioners in the field of oral English language education.

Community of Inquiry Model

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model was originally proposed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (1999) based on Dewey's practical inquiry theory to guide the research and practice of online learning and blended learning. Explore the three core factors of the CoI model that is cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Integrating these three elements provides guiding methods for designing deep and meaningful educational experiences (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). The following figure of the CoI framework illustrates

the cognitive presence, social presence, and instructional presence as well as their overlaps (Garrison et al., 1999).

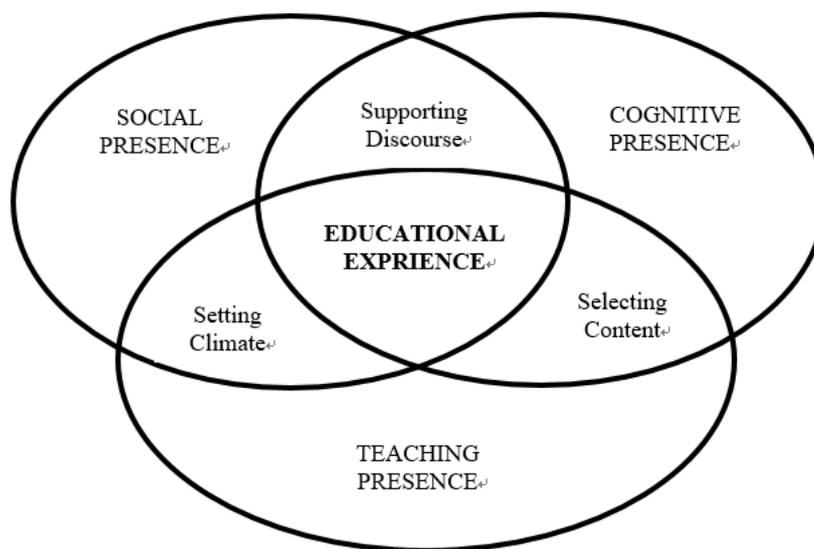


Figure 1. Community of Inquiry (adopted from Garrison et al., 1999, p.88)

Cognitive presence: In exploring the community of inquiry, cognitive presence is the core element for achieving successful learning experiences (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Cognitive presence refers to the degree to which learners can construct meaning through reflection and continuous communication (Garrison et al., 2001). In addition, cognitive presence is a key element of critical thinking and a necessary factor for higher-order thinking and deep learning (Garrison et al., 2001). Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001) put forward a practical inquiry model (PIM) for cognitive presence, which includes four stages: triggering, exploration, integration, and resolution. Previous research demonstrated that students' inquiry process often stays at the triggering and exploration stages, with little involvement in integrating and resolution these two higher-order thinking levels (Kilis & Yildirim, 2019). However, by setting appropriate questions, arranging appropriate learning tasks, and providing clear teacher guidance, students can enter a higher-level stage of inquiry (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

Social presence: Social presence refers to the ability to engage in open, polite, and trustworthy conversations as a member of the learning community (Kaczko & Ostendorf, 2023). Social existence mainly includes three elements: affective responses, cohesive responses, and interactive responses (Rourke, 2001). It is found that social presence can help students establish a sense of belonging (Archard, 2014) and facilitate their engagement (Swan & Shih, 2019) which helps to create a good learning environment, enabling students to communicate candidly with each other, negotiate different perspectives, and confirm mutual understanding (Garrison et al., 1999). It is also reported that social presence can directly affect the establishment of cognitive presence (Mutezo & Maré, 2023), helping students achieve cognitive goals (Annand, 2011), and thus have a beneficial impact on their learning outcomes (Kreijns et al., 2022).

Teaching presence: Teaching presence refers to the process through which teachers design, promote, and guide cognitive and social processes to achieve meaningful and educational learning outcomes (Anderson et al., 2001). Establishing a teaching presence

mainly includes three aspects according to Anderson, Liam, Garrison and Archer (2001), that are instructional design and organization, facilitating discourse and direct instruction. Teaching presence can help increase social interaction in the learning community, promote collaboration and construction of knowledge among students, and therefore play a crucial role in creating and maintaining a community of inquiry (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Thus, teaching presence has a direct impact on creating and developing social presence and cognitive presence, thus also influencing learners' academic performance (Law et al., 2019). Therefore, teachers need to create, maintain, and develop cognitive and social presence by providing scaffolding, guidance and support.

Pedagogical Design Based on the Community of Inquiry Framework

Teaching strategies in SPOC-based BL learning: With an aim to optimize the learning environment and enhance students' oral English learning outcomes, several teaching strategies are utilized to leverage the expected effects of cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence. The specific instructional strategies under the sub-categories of teaching presence are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Col-based Instructional Strategies in BL

Teaching Presence	Instructional strategies
Instructional Design and Organization	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Choosing teaching and learning topics and content, oral assignments and rating rubrics and arrange them appropriately. 2. Designing online and offline oral English activities and tasks that require students to complete individually, in pairs or in groups. 3. Creating learning groups and encouraging students to interact within the group, and work together to complete tasks and projects 4. Informing students of deadlines and time boundaries for each oral task and activity. 5. Providing students with precise guidelines and directions on how to take part in both F2F and SPOC-based learning activities. 6. Setting rules and regulations for F2F classroom and online discussion and interaction
Facilitating Discourse	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Facilitating student-student and student-teacher interaction and collaboration in both online and F2F learning environments. 2. Providing immediate feedback and evaluation, and developing F2F and online communication. 3. Seeking consensus and identifying disagreement among student interaction. 3. Promoting, praising, or highlighting the achievements and progress made by students. 4. Encouraging and engaging students to participate in oral activities and lead them to explore and inquire into higher

	<p>levels of learning by providing necessary support and guidance.</p> <p>5. Creating open and trusting environments that are conducive to F2F classroom and online learning.</p>
Direct Discussion	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Providing rich and diverse self-learning resources and encouraging students to engage in online self-learning. 2. Concentrating the interaction on particular problems and summarizing the discussion. 3. Verifying understanding with an evaluation and clarifying comments. 4. Recognizing misunderstanding and directing students to have a smooth and meaningful discussion 5. Assisting with accessing and utilizing ICT tools or learning resources.

Designing SPOC-based Blended Oral English Teaching

Spoken English for Cabin Service is a compulsory course for students majoring in Cabin Service, with a total of 30 class hours and 2 class hours per week. The researchers and the teaching team of this course, relying on the construction of high-quality courses at the selected vocational college, have created teaching resources including teaching videos, teaching slides, student demonstration videos, extracurricular extension materials, and teacher explanation texts. Then, the researchers established the course on the Smart Vocational Cloud Platform. Based on the theory of the CoI framework and the teaching strategies mentioned previously, the researcher has constructed online and offline blended teaching procedures for the course of *Spoken English for Cabin Service*. The specific teaching design is as follows:

Before class (online): Teachers use the Smart Vocational Education Cloud SPOC platform to upload course-related resources. The course “Spoken English for Aviation Services” is themed around different English scenarios and is divided into five units: greetings and introductions, gratitude and apologies, directions and directions, shopping and dining services. The learning resources uploaded before class include the key sentences of this unit, vocabulary explanation videos, teaching slides, student oral demonstration videos, extracurricular extension videos, and explanatory texts. One week before the implementation of face-to-face class, students receive learning resources through terminals such as mobile phones, computers, or tablets and engage in self-paced learning on the platform. The SPOC platform tracks and records students’ learning progress in real-time. Teachers can view students’ learning progress at any time, grasp their learning situation, and remind students who have not yet started self-learning. When students encounter problems in their studies, they can send messages through the platform to inquire and interact with teachers.

Before class, teachers provide direct guidance and scaffolding to students which establishes a preliminary sense of teaching presence. Through teaching presence, students engage in self-learning and independently construct basic knowledge, identify problems during the learning process, initiate exploration, and create cognitive presence. During the learning process, students can communicate and interact with teachers or discuss with classmates through the platform, thus creating a sense of social presence.

In F2F class: After a week of online learning, face-to-face class is conducted in traditional classrooms. Each F2F class consists of 2 class hours, totaling 90 minutes. Firstly, teachers

check and consolidate the knowledge that students have learned online through the quick question section. On the basis of mastering basic knowledge, rich and diverse classroom communication activities are carried out to enable students to apply the content learned online. Classroom activities mainly focus on project-based and problem-based tasks, including students working in pairs to complete simulated dialogue exercises, role-playing in relevant scenarios based on the content of the expanded materials, discussion on situational problems in groups of three to five people, solving problems, and providing solutions. After completing the task, teachers and students give their evaluations and provide real-time feedback to students.

In the process of F2F teaching, teachers mainly use teaching methods such as promoting discourse, guiding students to think about problems, and timely evaluating the effectiveness of the learning process to further develop a sense of teaching presence, and promote student discourse communication and interaction. Through offline interaction and verbal communication, students establish a sense of collective belonging, enhance group cohesion, and thus develop a sense of social presence. In the process of F2F learning, students explore, integrate, and apply the knowledge learned online while completing different tasks, and engage in meaningful and deep learning. Then they discover new problems during the learning process and then start a new round of practical inquiry. The development and maintenance of cognitive presence in the process of cyclic and iterative practical exploration. Finally, students' higher-order thinking abilities are improved.

After the F2F class (online): After the offline class, teachers assign post-class tasks on the SPOC platform, set task times, and provide clear instructions. After completing the oral tasks including individual assignments and group tasks, students could deepen their understanding and reinforcement of the knowledge they have learned and constructed. Among the oral assignments, group tasks require students to engage in after-school group interactions, and students can jointly construct meaning and knowledge through social interaction. After submitting the oral task assignment, the teacher groups the students to conduct teacher evaluation and student peer evaluation based on their performance in the oral task and conduct in-depth discussions in the SPOC platform discussion forum. Teachers regularly check and reply to student posts, maintain student online interaction and participation, and encourage students to share their learning experiences. Students and teachers mainly engage in discussions in the discussion area through asynchronous text-based interaction, which helps to reduce students' speaking anxiety (Satar & Özdener, 2008) and engage in deep thinking and learning.

After the F2F class, teachers promote and provide direct guidance in the discussion forum, while encouraging communication and cooperation among students. Teachers establish etiquette standards for online discussion to ensure a good learning and inquiry environment. Teaching presence on the SPOC platform has been maintained and further developed. The social presence established in F2F class is continued and consolidated in the discussion forum after online classes through forms such as emotional expression and interactive communication among students. Students continue to explore in the online discussion forum, collaborate and engage in in-depth discussions with classmates, thus surpassing the initial stage of practical inquiry and improving their higher-order thinking abilities.

Conclusion

Starting from exploring the cognitive, social, and teaching presences of the CoI model, this article proposes several teaching strategies and constructs a SPOC-based blended oral English teaching for developing a deep and meaningful learning experience. The authors utilize teaching methods and strategies to establish a teaching presence and reconstruct the teaching process based on SPOC, thereby establishing, developing, and maintaining cognitive presence and social presence in the learning community. The SPOC-based blended teaching for vocational college English established in this article can optimize the oral English learning environment, enhance the learning experience, and enhance oral English proficiency. Thus, it can provide an example for EFL teachers and practitioners of other countries whose contexts are similar to Chinese ones to refer to. Future studies can be conducted to validate the effects of the blended teaching designed in this study in different geographical locations.

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