

Student Engagement and their Voices: Exploring Think-Pair-Share in Blended Learning in Chinese Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Blended learning has been widely implemented in higher education worldwide, and student engagement has become a key concern within this context. The Think-Pair-Share method has been extensively adopted for its potential to foster participation and interaction. However, student engagement is a multidimensional construct, encompassing cognitive, behavioural, and emotional dimensions, and research examining how TPS influences these distinct aspects remains limited. Most existing studies rely on quantitative data to validate the effects of Think-Pair-Share on student engagement and are predominantly situated in Western educational contexts. Thus, this study adopted a qualitative case study approach to investigate how Think-Pair-Share shapes cognitive, behavioural, and emotional engagement in a blended English class at a Chinese university. Data were collected from classroom observations, interviews, and students' learning journals, and were analysed thematically through iterative coding. The participants were enrolled in a blended English course where the instructor systematically integrated TPS activities into both online and face-to-face instruction. The findings revealed that, in terms of behavioural engagement, the Think-Pair-Share was an external regulator that shifts learners from passive recipients to active participants. Cognitively, TPS was a cognitive scaffold that deepens knowledge construction through dialogic interaction. Emotionally, TPS was a social tool that connects learners by transforming isolated individuals into collaborative peers. Nevertheless, Chinese undergraduates considered TPS more engaging than traditional lectures, yet they perceived it as time-consuming. Although students acknowledged the value of TPS in stimulating critical thinking and expanding perspectives, they expressed scepticism regarding its direct contribution to examinations. These findings highlight a persistent tension between collaborative learning and exam-oriented assessment in Chinese higher education. The study, therefore, calls for a systemic reform of evaluation frameworks in Chinese higher education to better align assessment practices with the goals of student-centred pedagogies such as Think-Pair-Share.

Keywords: Think-Pair-Share, undergraduates, cognitive engagement, behavioural engagement, emotional engagement, blended learning

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning has gained significant attraction in higher education globally. This trend is particularly pronounced in China, where national policies issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2019 required higher education institutions to integrate 20%-50% online self-directed learning into their curricula. More recently, the administrators further emphasized accelerating innovative blended teaching models to enhance learning quality (Xiang, 2025). In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 acted as a catalyst, compelling a rapid shift towards a blended learning approach in Chinese higher education (Tsegay et al., 2022).

Student engagement remains one of the most pressing issues in blended learning contexts (Graham & Halverson, 2023; Mujallid, 2024; Sareen & Mandal, 2024). Research shows that the inherent complexity of navigating between online and face-to-face learning environments in blended learning can easily lead to disengagement (Heilporn et al., 2022, 2023; Rasheed et al., 2020). Such a challenge is salient in Chinese higher education (Chang et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2023). A well-documented explanation for this lies in the transition from a deeply entrenched, teacher-centred learning culture to one that demands greater student autonomy and self-regulation (Wang et al., 2022).

One of the ways to engage learners in blended learning is to employ collaborative efforts. Grounded in social constructivist, collaborative learning emphasizes knowledge construction through social interaction. Such strategies have been identified as effective means to enhance interaction and motivation in blended learning settings (Bosch & Laubscher, 2022). Think-Pair-Share (TPS) (Lyman, 1987) stands out as a widely recognized and easily implementable collaborative learning strategy (Schul, 2011). It has been adapted to diverse learning contexts, including traditional classrooms, asynchronous online discussions (Raba, 2017), and distance learning environments (Sembert et al., 2021). Moreover, this interactive approach is highly esteemed in language acquisition for its effectiveness in facilitating discussion and verbal interaction (Barkley et al., 2014).

A substantial body of research has demonstrated that Think-Pair-Share (TPS) can effectively foster student participation and interaction. However, most of the research has been conducted within Western educational contexts and shows the results in a quantitative way to validate the effect of TPS. Consequently, limited attention has been paid to how TPS shapes different dimensions of engagement, including cognitive, emotional, and behavioural. Student engagement is a multidimensional construct (Fredricks et al., 2004), and cultural and institutional factors may influence how learners participate and experience engagement in collaborative activities such as TPS (Kahu, 2013). Empirical research on exploring the effects of Think-Pair-Share (TPS) on student engagement in language learning of blended learning classrooms in China is still limited. Therefore, investigating how TPS plays its role in student engagement in terms of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural within the Chinese-specific cultural context not only fills a gap in the current literature but also provides contextually grounded insights that may inform blended learning practices in similar educational traditions. Hence, the purpose of this study is to find out:

- (1) How does the Think-Pair-Share strategy shape cognitive, emotional, behavioural engagement of Chinese undergraduates in the English blended learning classes using Think-Pair-Share?
- (2) How do Chinese undergraduates make sense of the value of Think-Pair-Share in their English blended learning classes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Blended learning has shown its potential to enhance students' engagement and learning outcomes (Zhu et al., 2025). However, evidence consistently shows that its effectiveness depends on the quality of instructional design, particularly the integration between online and face-to-face components, teaching presence, task structure and so on (Fionasari, 2024; Xiang, 2025). A growing number of systematic reviews and meta-analyses demonstrate that when students are supported by sustained facilitation and feedback from their teachers and peers, students experience significantly higher levels of engagement (Mulenga & Shilongo, 2025; Nanda et al., 2024).

Student engagement is widely recognized as a critical indicator in predicting academic success and has been termed the "holy grail of learning." (Sinatra et al., 2015). Student engagement is understood as the investment of time and energy students devote to purposeful learning activities, coupled with their perception of institutional support. A three-dimensional meta-construct of engagement, including cognitive, behavioural, and emotional, has been widely adopted in the literature. Cognitive engagement involves the intellectual effort students exert to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills, exemplified by critical thinking, problem-solving, and making conceptual connections. Behavioral engagement refers to class attendance, active participation in discussions, and timely completion of assignments. Emotional engagement encompasses students' affective responses to learning and their community, including their level of interest, enjoyment, and sense of belonging within the learning environment. These dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how students interact with and invest in their learning environments.

Collaborative learning, emerging in the United States in the early 1970s and gaining substantial momentum in the mid-1980s, is a pedagogical theory and instructional strategy. It organizes learning through small groups or teams, emphasizing dialogue, discussion, and debate to promote knowledge construction. It has become a prominent educational model widely applied across disciplines. However, research has highlighted persistent challenges in implementing collaborative learning in the Chinese context. Due to the enduring influence of exam-oriented education that prioritizes individual achievement and the Confucian tradition that values teacher

authority, many Chinese students are less accustomed to peer-centred approaches and may perceive collaborative learning as inefficient or less effective than direct instruction.

Nowadays, Chinese students' responses to collaborative learning are shaped by the dynamic interplay of multiple cultural forces, such as traditional and modern values, Chinese and Western educational philosophies, and generational differences. This cultural complexity is further intensified by the contradictions within China's socialist market economy, which simultaneously promotes collective ideals and individual competition, as well as by the pressures of higher education, including diploma and GPA inflation (Xu, 2024).

Among various collaborative techniques, Think-Pair-Share (TPS), pioneered by Frank Lyman, stands out for its simplicity and effectiveness. TPS is rooted in social constructivist theory, which posits that knowledge is actively constructed through social interaction. This strategy unfolds in three simple but powerful stages. In the "Think" stage, students are given individual wait-time to process a question. In the "Pair", students discuss their ideas in pairs, which provides a low-risk space for articulation and peer scaffolding. In the "Share", students work in a group to share their views, or they present their group work to the whole class. Extensive research highlights the benefits of TPS. The strategy requires students to analyse and synthesize information, thereby enhancing their critical thinking abilities (Muzekki et al., 2025). Engaging in discussions helps students tackle complex concepts collaboratively, leading to deeper understanding. The collaborative nature of TPS fosters a sense of community, encouraging students to support one another (Bastian & Rahayu, 2023).

Existing research on collaborative learning has often focused on academic performance, critical thinking, and communication skills. In terms of engagement, research relied on a survey to validate the effectiveness of TPS generally, with relatively limited in-depth qualitative inquiry into students' engagement experiences. In the Chinese higher education context, blended learning is still at an early stage of development, and much of the research on Think-Pair-Share (TPS) has primarily taken the form of practical teaching reports or instructional design frameworks aimed at pedagogical improvement. There is a lack of evidence reporting the impact of TPS on student engagement. Moreover, little attention has been given to how they perceive and experience TPS practices within such contexts, which calls for more nuanced, qualitative investigations.

Theoretical Framework of This Study

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985) posits that human motivation, well-being, and engagement are driven by the satisfaction of three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. According to SDT, when these needs are fulfilled, individuals are more likely to exhibit intrinsic motivation, leading to higher levels of engagement in activities. Autonomy refers to the sense of being able to direct one's own actions and make choices that align with personal values and interests, rather than acting under external pressure. Competence involves feeling capable and effective in one's pursuit; it is about meeting challenges, developing skills, and gaining a sense of mastery through progress and achievement. Relatedness captures the need to connect with others, to build and maintain meaningful relationships, to give and receive care, and to feel a genuine sense of belonging within a community.

In the context of this study, SDT serves as a theoretical framework to examine how the Think-Pair-Share (TPS) strategy influences student engagement in blended learning environments. TPS aligns closely with SDT by structuring learning activities that systematically address psychological needs. Specifically, the "Think" phase promotes autonomy by encouraging students to independently generate ideas, reflect on content, and formulate personal interpretations without immediate external direction. This individual reflection grants learners a sense of self-direction and volition, enabling them to engage with material on their own and build intrinsic motivation.

The subsequent "Pair" and "Share" phases further integrate competence and relatedness. Students collaborate in small groups to discuss and refine their ideas, receiving peer feedback that validates or challenges their understanding. This process enhances competence by providing opportunities for mastery through iterative problem-solving and skill application, as students experience efficacy in contributing to and learning from shared dialogues. Simultaneously, these interactions cultivate relatedness by fostering a supportive community where students feel connected to peers, reducing isolation in blended learning settings, and promoting a sense of

belonging through mutual respect and knowledge exchange. The “Share” phase extends this to the whole class, amplifying collective insights and reinforcing social bonds under teacher facilitation.

However, in blended learning contexts, these needs may be undermined by cultural and systemic factors, such as an exam-oriented educational culture that prioritizes individual achievement over collaboration, hierarchical teacher-student dynamics that limit student agency, and limited prior exposure to interactive pedagogies. By employing SDT as the theoretical lens, this study aims to offer a nuanced exploration of TPS’s effectiveness.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study design, which is appropriate for gaining an in-depth understanding of complex educational phenomena within their real-life context. A volunteer teacher was invited to implement the Think-Pair-Share (TPS) strategy in her blended English classroom. The researcher provided support in lesson planning and activity design but did not intervene in the teacher’s instructional practice. This approach allowed the teaching process to unfold naturally while ensuring that the TPS activities were pedagogically coherent and aligned with the course objectives.

Each Think-Pair-Share (TPS) session followed a structured format integrated into the blended English course across one semester. Students individually considered an open-ended question or problem related to the lesson content. Prompts were displayed via the learning management system. In the face-to-face class, students worked in pairs to exchange and refine their responses. Students worked in a group, and then selected groups presented their responses to the whole class.

Participants selected for this study consisted of a class of approximately 50 undergraduate students (28 females and 22 males), all of whom were enrolled in a college English course in a university in the middle of China. The students were mainly second-year undergraduates majoring in Engineering. In this blended learning environment, the TPS strategy was systematically implemented as a central instructional method throughout one semester. Participation in the study was voluntary, and ethical approval was secured before data collection.

Data collection employed a multi-method approach to ensure a comprehensive understanding of students’ experiences via students’ learning journals, interviews, and observations. As for the journals, students documented their engagement experiences within the TPS activities. The researcher provided clear prompts to guide them to reflect on and record their engagement. They were required to record how they processed information, developed ideas, and dealt with the cognitive challenges, what they did to complete the task, and what their feelings, attitudes, and affective responses were throughout the activity.

To support the data, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students’ perceptions of the TPS strategy in the blended learning context. Following a purposive sampling strategy to capture a range of perspectives, 8 participants were selected from the class for individual interviews. Each interview, lasting approximately 45 minutes, was conducted in Mandarin using a pre-designed interview protocol. The process continued until data saturation was achieved. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

Both classroom and online observations were to capture students’ engagement in blended TPS activities. For the face-to-face sessions, a video recorder was used to document students’ participation. Specific indicators included: (1) the number of students or groups who voluntarily spoke during the “Share” stage; (2) the number of students displaying off-task or disengaged behaviours; and (3) the overall classroom atmosphere, reflected in students’ participation enthusiasm in “Pair” and “Share” and the frequency of teacher-student interactions.

For the online learning component, observational data were collected through Chaoxing, a learning management system. The system generated records of (1) the duration of students’ online learning, (2) the frequency of online access, and (3) the number of students completing the posted question. Together, classroom and online observations provided a comprehensive picture of students’ engagement across both face-to-face and online learning contexts.

This research used data-driven thematic analysis. An inductive approach allowed themes to emerge directly from the textual data. Data collection and analysis continued until no substantially new codes or themes emerged based on the principle the data saturation. Two researchers independently reviewed the data to identify emerging themes related to cognitive, behavioural, and emotional engagement. Preliminary codes were then compared and discussed to establish a shared understanding of code meanings. Through several rounds of discussion, the coding framework was refined and organized.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Drawing on data from the learning journals, interviews, and observations, this study reveals that the Think-Pair-Share (TPS) strategy exerted a positive and meaningful influence on student engagement in blended learning. The themes and subthemes are reported in Table 1. The analysis identified main themes in terms of how TPS makes an influence on student engagement: (1) TPS as an external regulator that shifts learners from passive recipients to active participants, (2) TPS as a social tool that connects learners by transforming isolated individuals into collaborative peers, (3) TPS as a cognitive scaffold that deepens knowledge construction through dialogic interaction.

Table 1: Main themes and sub-themes of TPS for student engagement

Dimension	Main themes	Sub-themes
Behavioural Engagement	TPS as an external regulator that shifts learners from passive recipients to active participants	Self-searching Re-learning Task management
Emotional Engagement	TPS as a social tool that connects learners by transforming isolated individuals into collaborative peers	Interpersonal trust Peer accountability Sense of belongings
Cognitive Engagement	TPS as a cognitive scaffold that deepens knowledge construction through dialogic interaction	Ideas expand Knowledge co-construction Critical thinking

TPS as an external regulator that shifts learners from passive recipients to active participants

TPS transformed students from passive recipients of knowledge into active learners. By structuring opportunities for individual thinking, peer exchange, and public sharing, TPS provides an external scaffold that guides students' cognitive and behavioural engagement. This process helps learners move beyond passive reception of knowledge toward more active and self-directed participation in learning tasks.

The learning management system records revealed a gradual increase in the number of students who reviewed the materials, suggesting that learners became more engaged with the online resources over time. The three figures below show students' reviewing frequency from the first TPS activity to the third activity.

In the first TPS activity (Figure 1), the records from the learning management system show that the materials were reviewed only three times between March 26 and 29. In contrast, the reviewing frequency increased dramatically in the second TPS activity (Figure 2), reaching a peak of 85 times. During the third TPS activity (Figure 3), the number of reviews peaked at 50, and some students continued to access the materials even after the activity ended. This indicates that the TPS activities effectively stimulated students' learning behaviours and encouraged active learning.

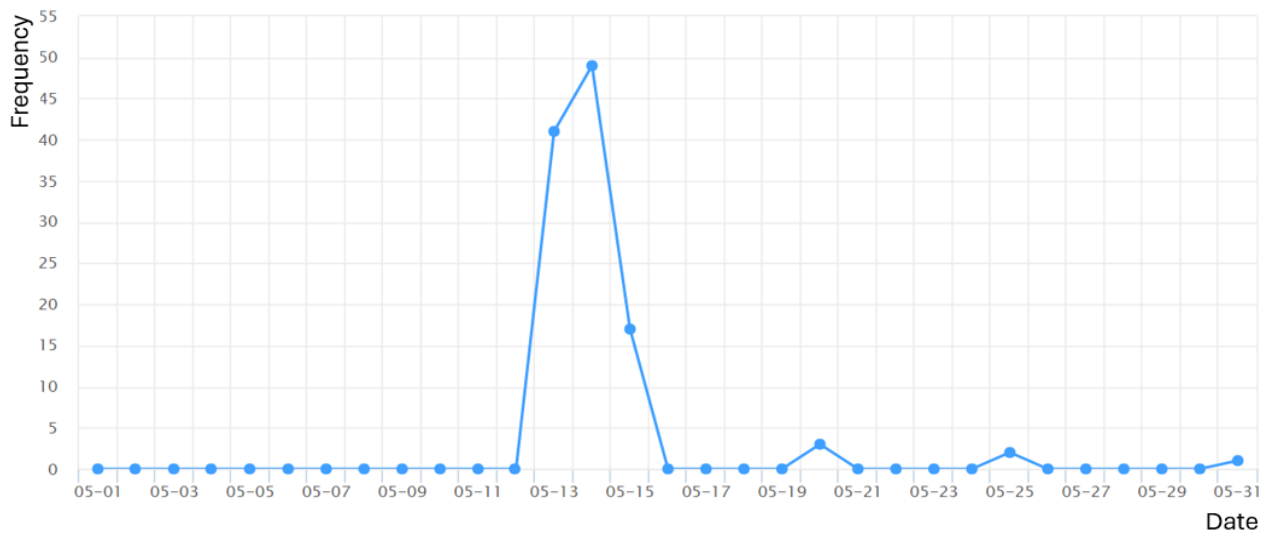


Figure 1. The frequency of material review in the first TPS activity

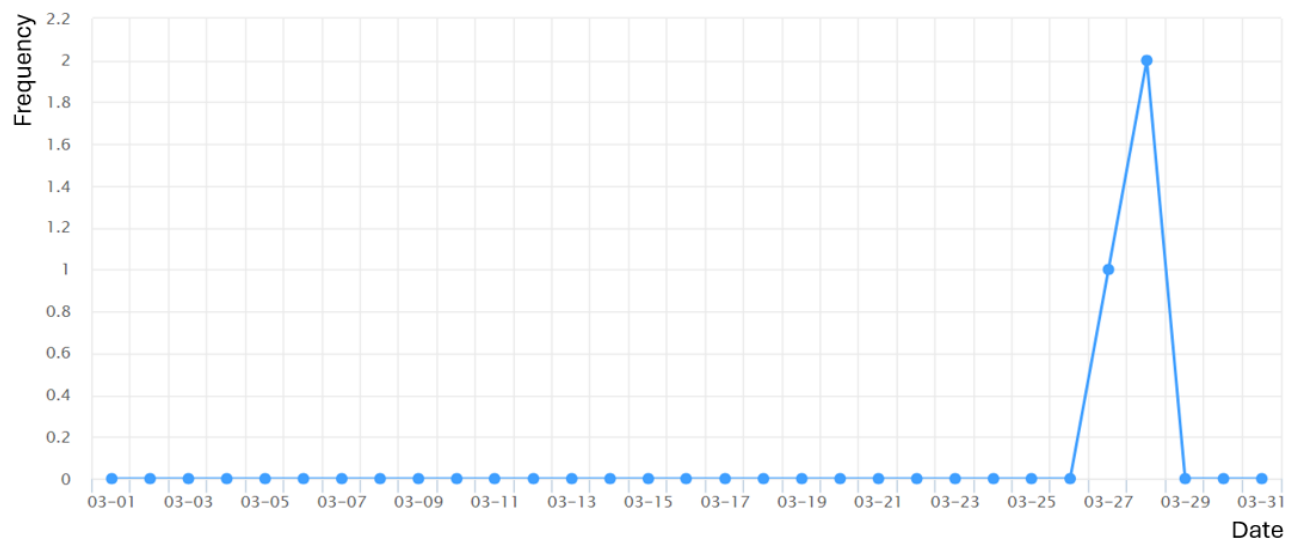


Figure 2. The frequency of material review in the second TPS activity

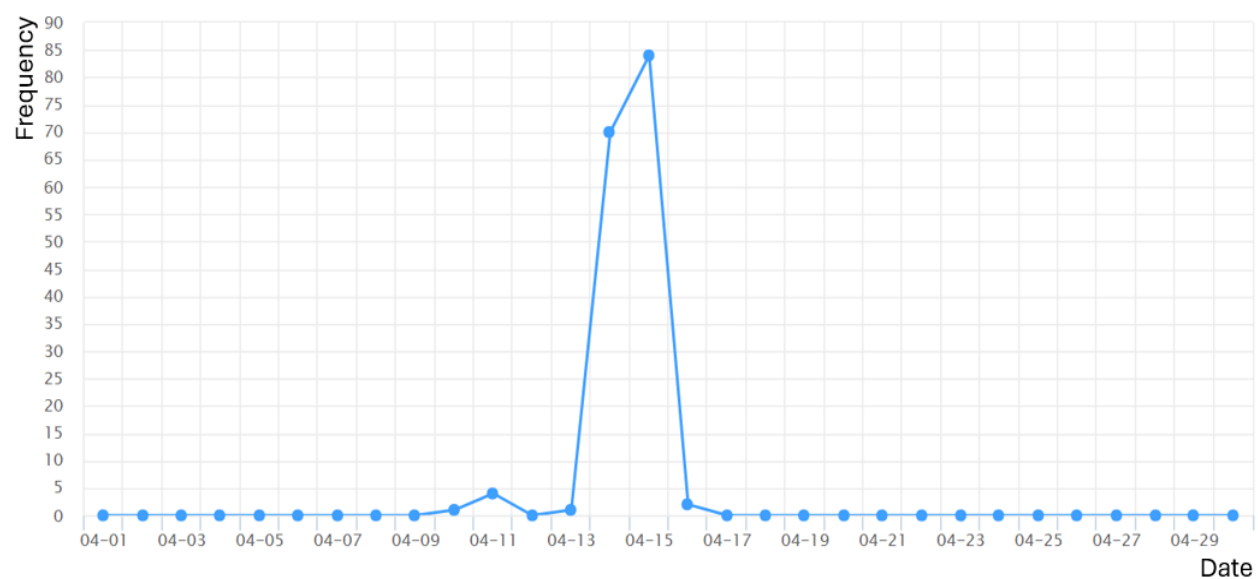


Figure 3. The frequency of material review in the third TPS activity

In particular, the “Think” phase provided valuable individual processing time, compelling even those who were typically passive to independent learning. One student reflected: “I used to give a perfunctory style to the online learning, waiting for the teacher to deliver the lecture in class. But now, I have to think by myself so I can discuss with my classmates. Otherwise, I’d be embarrassed in class (Interview-S2).”

This quote illustrates how TPS counteracted a common pattern in blended learning, where students often rely on the teacher’s explanation rather than engaging in independent thinking. The structured responsibility embedded in the subsequent “Pair” and “Share” stages further reinforced the sense of accountability. Meanwhile, students were aware that they might be called upon to represent their group, which encouraged them to approach the discussion with greater seriousness. As another participant explained, “Since I might be asked to share, we take the discussion more seriously. We try to think through the problem more carefully instead of chatting (Interview-S7).”

The expectation of public accountability produced what has been described in previous studies as “productive pressure” (Kaddoura, 2013). This pressure was not experienced as negative or inhibiting, but rather as a driving force that compelled students to engage. As one student emphasized: “When I encounter a challenge in learning, I’d always wait for the teacher to give the answer. But now, I discuss and communicate with my classmates, when a problem comes up, I’m much more willing to work with them to solve it instead of just waiting (Journal-S5).” This reflects a broader transition that students shift from being dependent on the teacher toward peer-supported problem solving. Classroom observation data also confirmed students’ proactive exploratory behaviours, including searching with tools and asking peers. Such a shift resonates with research suggesting that collaborative structures can foster learner agency and self-regulation (Gillies, 2023).

Culturally, this transformation carries particular significance in the Chinese context. Prior studies note that students in Confucian-heritage classrooms often display deference to teacher authority, preferring to “wait for the answer” rather than risk error in front of peers. TPS, by structuring responsibility across all stages, disrupted this passivity. It encouraged students to take ownership of their own learning processes. In doing so, it provided opportunities for students to experience a greater sense of autonomy, as they were required to generate ideas, make decisions collaboratively, and express their viewpoints.

TPS as a social tool that connects learners by transforming isolated individuals into collaborative peers

The results reveal that TPS also serves as a social connector that transforms classroom dynamics from individual isolation to collaborative interaction. Through pair and group discussions, learners build interpersonal trust, peer accountability, and a sense of belonging, which collectively enhance their willingness to communicate and cooperate. In this way, TPS bridges social distance and fosters a more connected and supportive learning community.

Another significant finding is that TPS cultivates positive socio-emotional experiences, bringing students closer together. One student commented, “Through sharing with different classmates, I got to know peers I hadn’t talked to much before. Working together on group answers made us understand each other better, and I felt a stronger sense of connection (Interview-S9).”

Students also emphasized that TPS extended collaboration into both online and offline spaces. As one participant explained, “When we had group discussions on the platform, members actively shared their learning resources in the chat group. And, during in-person discussions, I was encouraged by other members (Interview-S6).” These accounts suggest that TPS not only facilitated academic collaboration but also fostered emotional support among peers. The support students received from peers contributed to their confidence and reinforced their identification with the learning community. Importantly, this sense of peer validation represents a key psychological resource, especially in blended learning environments where feelings of isolation are frequently reported (Parmar et al., 2025).

TPS appears to mitigate the “transactional distance” that is often associated with blended learning. Whereas online learning can leave students feeling disconnected, TPS activities provided structured opportunities for synchronous interaction and face-to-face bonding. By integrating online resource-sharing with in-class

discussion, students experienced continuity across learning modes, which reinforced their sense of community. During the “Pair” and “Share” phases, students displayed high levels of enthusiasm and engagement. This was further confirmed via the classroom observations, where they smiled, maintained eye contact, and interacted in a relaxed and supportive manner, all of which reflected positive collaborative dynamics and a warm, inclusive classroom atmosphere fostered by the TPS design.

These findings suggest that students’ need for relatedness is satisfied in collaborative learning. By structuring opportunities for mutual interaction and emotional connection, TPS helped reduce the sense of transactional distance often experienced in blended learning. The positive classroom atmosphere reflected a strong sense of belonging and interpersonal warmth. Through such meaningful peer engagement, students felt connected not only to their classmates but also to the collective learning process, fulfilling their relational needs in the blended classroom.

TPS as a cognitive scaffold that deepens knowledge construction through dialogic interaction

The analysis further indicates that TPS acts as a cognitive scaffold that facilitates deeper knowledge construction through dialogic and reflective exchange. The cyclical process of articulating, negotiating, and refining ideas enables learners to move from surface-level understanding to conceptual integration and shared meaning-making. Verbal interaction thus becomes both the medium and mechanism through which cognitive depth is achieved in TPS-based learning.

TPS was found to exert a strong cognitive impact by scaffolding deeper thinking. The staged structure of Think-Pair-Share encouraged students to progressively refine and expand their ideas. As one participant admitted, “Sometimes, I think in a limited way without even realizing it. During the Pair and Share, it hits me that there are different ways to view the situation (Interview-S8).”

The subsequent “Pair” and “Share” stage provided a crucial interactive space for testing and revising ideas. “I thought my original idea was great, but as I debated it with my peers, the concept was constantly refined, and finally my idea had become much better. (Journal-S1)” Students described how peer argumentation not only challenges their assumptions but also prompts more rigorous reasoning and elaboration on their initial thoughts. The “Pair” and “Share” phase functioned as a social negotiation, prompting students to articulate, defend, and revise their ideas in response to peer challenge.

These findings resonate with prior research showing that structured peer interaction is a powerful catalyst for conceptual change and critical thinking (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). In line with previous studies that highlight the role of collaborative dialogue in promoting deep learning, the present findings suggest that the structured, staged approach of TPS effectively transforms preliminary, limited individual thought into a collectively refined and multifaceted understanding (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). The TPS structure, therefore, acts as a powerful scaffolding tool for intellectual growth.

Within the collaborative exchanges of the “Pair” and “Share” stages, students received immediate feedback from peers, which reinforced their sense of progress and accomplishment. The process of articulating, defending, and revising ideas not only strengthened their academic confidence but also fostered a deeper engagement with the learning task. Social interaction in collaborative learning functioned as a mediated mechanism through which students’ competence needs were actively supported and fulfilled.

TPS class is more engaging but less efficient

The findings revealed that tensions in the Think-Pair-Share (TPS) activities. Firstly, it is the interest and the efficiency of the TPS. Secondly, it is the perceived learning gains and exam-oriented performance.

The majority of students perceived TPS as more engaging than traditional teacher-centred lectures. They reported that TPS activities broke the monotony of conventional instruction and sustained their attention. As one student explained, “TPS activities are much more interesting than when the teacher keeps lecturing. At least I don’t get sleepy, and time doesn’t feel so slow (Journal-S4).” Students attributed this increased engagement to peer interaction, which exposed them to different perspectives: “When I discuss with peers, I hear different ideas, and their viewpoints are interesting, which makes the class less boring (Interview-S1).”

Despite this enthusiasm, students frequently expressed concern that TPS was less time-efficient than teacher-led delivery. A participant noted that extensive discussions consumed class time without covering much content: “This way is fun, but too time-consuming. We need to start online learning and then spend a lot of time discussing in class. By the end, not much gets covered (Interview-S8).” They thought that the teacher could cover the same material more efficiently, “I think, the teacher just explained, and then one class would be enough to cover what we discussed (Interview-S7).”

While TPS effectively enriched the classroom experience, it challenged students’ expectations of rapid knowledge transmission. This tension echoes prior findings that Chinese students often equate effective instruction with efficient content delivery, since the large amount of content make them feel they learned something (Chan, 2019). Traditionally, students in Confucian-heritage classrooms often emphasize rote memorization and expect authoritative solutions from teachers (Wang & Lee, 2025). By contrast, TPS redistributed cognitive responsibility, positioning students as active constructors of meaning.

Feeling the gains but doubting the exam value of TPS

On the one hand, many acknowledged that TPS stimulated more active thinking and exposed them to diverse viewpoints, “I admit this way makes me think more and hear other people’s ideas, but when the teacher lectures, I can remember knowledge points (Interview-S1).” On the other hand, participants questioned the value of such gains for academic success, particularly in relation to exams. As one student stated: “This activity is fun, and I feel I gain something, but it doesn’t help with exams. Exams test specific knowledge, not discussion skills (Interview-S10).”

This perception reflects a deep-rooted exam-oriented learning culture, where learning outcomes are judged primarily by their contribution to test performance. Students openly articulated this priority: “Honestly, I care more about scores. It does make the English class more interesting, but for me it’s useless (Interview-S1).” These students worry more about the scores. “Grades are very important in university, you know, grades affect scholarships and postgraduate admission. This method can’t help with exams, now I am tired of it (Interview-S6).”

These statements reveal not merely preference, but a pragmatism driven by high-stakes consequences. Students’ explicit mention of scholarships and postgraduate admission demonstrates that grading outcomes carry significant material implications for students’ futures. The phrase “now I am tired of it” suggests that initial openness to TPS had been replaced by frustration as the misalignment of TPS with assessment became apparent over time.

The ambivalence toward TPS must be understood within the broader context of exam-oriented learning culture prevalent in Chinese higher education (Ashraf et al., 2017). This culture, often characterized by high-stakes testing, competition for limited opportunities, and emphasis on measurable outcomes, profoundly shapes student learning orientations. As Lin (2017) reported that many Chinese students perceive collaborative learning as ineffective for exams, prioritizing grammar-based English learning to achieve higher scores. They express a preference for individual study, believing that collaborative efforts do not align with the exam’s focus on linguistic competence.

The perception that TPS “can’t help with exams” may stem from several sources. When examinations primarily assess discrete language knowledge through formats such as multiple-choice questions, gap-filling, or translation exercises, the skills developed through collaborative discussion may indeed seem irrelevant. While studies indicate that collaborative learning can enhance communication skills, it does not necessarily translate to improved results in standardized language competency tests.

IMPLICATIONS

While TPS indeed plays a facilitative role in developing students’ engagement, its benefits are often undervalued within exam-oriented educational contexts. The perceived disconnect between TPS activities and examination indicates a fundamental misalignment between pedagogy and assessment. When examinations fail to assess or

reward the competencies fostered through TPS, such as collaboration, communication, and critical thinking, students are likely to devote their efforts to learning tasks that more directly support exam performance.

Although collaborative competence cannot be directly measured through traditional testing, educational institutions should emphasize its long-term importance to students rather than focusing solely on test scores. Reform in China's higher education evaluation system is therefore necessary. Currently, English examinations in China mainly consist of reading comprehension, translation, and writing tasks, which leads students to concentrate on exam-specific skills training while neglecting the cultivation of underlying cognitive abilities. Educators should help students recognize that exam success cannot be achieved merely through rote memorization, but through genuine improvement in thinking and communicative competence.

To make TPS feasible in Chinese higher education contexts, instructional adaptation is necessary. First, instructors should integrate exam-relevant content into TPS prompts to ensure alignment between collaborative learning and assessment goals. Additionally, national educational reform should aim to broaden the definition of academic success beyond test performance. Curriculum and policy frameworks could integrate formative and authentic assessment practices that value students' participation, reasoning, and communication skills alongside traditional written tests.

The findings suggest a need to address culturally shaped beliefs about effective learning. Many Chinese students have been socialized into viewing learning as knowledge transmission and reception. To foster broader acceptance of active learning approaches, it may be necessary to help students appreciate alternative models, such as those emphasizing knowledge construction and collaborative meaning-making.

LIMITATION

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the data were collected from a single institution, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The study aimed to provide depth rather than breadth, focusing on the nuanced processes of student engagement within a specific Think-Pair-Share (TPS) classroom. While this approach generated rich contextual insights, the findings may not represent the full diversity of students' engagement experiences across different institutional settings or disciplines.

Second, the research relied on qualitative data sources, including classroom observations, student reflective journals, and interviews, to explore how engagement was enacted and experienced in context. Future studies could build on this work by employing mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to examine how engagement patterns develop across diverse educational environments and to validate the qualitative findings with larger datasets.

CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that TPS exerted a multifaceted influence on students' engagement. It significantly enhanced student engagement in relation to behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. TPS functions as an external regulator that shifts learners from passive recipients to active participants. TPS serves as a social tool that connects learners by transforming individuals into collaborative peers. TPS functions as a cognitive scaffold that deepens knowledge construction through dialogic interaction. At the same time, while TPS was widely regarded as more engaging than traditional lectures, students questioned its efficiency, perceiving it as time-consuming compared with direct teacher explanations. Despite acknowledging learning gains such as critical thinking and collaboration, students expressed scepticism about the value of TPS for exam preparation. This reflects the pervasive exam-oriented culture in China, where teaching methods are often evaluated based on their contribution to test performance rather than broader learning outcomes. Therefore, the researcher calls for more in-depth and systematic reforms in China's higher education. It must be acknowledged that the study focused on a single blended learning course in one institution, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Further research may explore how TPS can be adapted across different disciplines and grades using a larger sample.

Ethical Considerations

This study involved human participants and was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of research involving human subjects. Ethical approval was obtained from the research ethics committee of the university.

All participants were fully informed of the purpose and procedures of the study, and their participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and confidentiality agreements with the participants. The data include classroom observations, interview transcripts, and learning analytics from the institutional learning management system, which may contain identifiable information.

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