

Ecological Analysis of EFL Learners' Online Communication

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Abstract

The present study explores an ecological analysis of the online communication of 24 university students in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes in China. Over the course of two semesters, the students posted blog entries on a shared website accessible to their classmates. Ecological analysis of the students' online communication was conducted within the Community of Inquiry (CoI) conceptual framework, which allowed the careful consideration of the social contexts of learners' blog communications. The analysis revealed favored communicative functions (CFs) employed by the participants, elucidating the ways in which they realized their social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence in the blog community. The findings reveal that the Chinese EFL students tended to employ a variety of recognizing and context-setting CF patterns in their online communication. The results further indicate that among the three major participatory roles outlined within the CoI framework, the learners realized the social presence aspect of community most clearly. It is suggested that ESL or EFL instructors can implement a variety of interventions in order to facilitate each learner's online presence and successfully address environmental factors, such as the ready availability of technology. Specific communicative functions (CFs) that instructors can teach to English language learners in order to help them develop successful online presences are also outlined. It is argued that some important by-products of this effort are the fostering of a more engaged and supportive classroom community and the overall improvement of participating students' online and face-to-face communicative competence.

Keywords: Community of Inquiry (CoI), online communicative competence, EFL

1. Introduction

In the foreign language classroom, consideration of context is unquestionably primary in any effort to understand the process by which students learn and develop. Over the past decade or more, a conceptual framework that recognizes both the importance of context and that of the individual learners and instructors involved in classroom online communication has emerged and been increasingly applied to educational settings. This approach, the

Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, has been applied to the analysis of online and hybrid classes, as well as to online communication.

With regard to the efficacy of online communication and its ability to enhance EFL students' language development, Lin, Lin, and Hsu (2011) point out that some claims of the effectiveness of classroom blogging in enhancing ESL students' writing performance may be unrealistic. Migliorino (2011) also cautions that digital technologies, although they can serve to unite learners into tight-knit communities, can also isolate or divide individuals who may not have acquired the level of digital literacy needed to communicate effectively online. The optimal solution to this possible problem, it would seem—and Migliorino (2011) appears to agree—is to work to bridge the digital gap and provide experiences and resources that aid learners in developing fuller digital literacy. As we have seen, this new literacy must include online communicative competence.

In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom under analysis in the present study, the instructor engages the students in online activities, such as regular blogs in response to readings, which are designed to foster a community of learning. In order to carry out these activities successfully, individual community members need to develop not only linguistic skills, but also proficiency in paralinguistic and pragmatic aspects of communication.

2. Review of the Literature

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, originated from the philosophical work of C.S. Pierce, has been adopted and applied in educational discourse as it allows for the analysis of classroom interaction in its actual context (Pardales and Girod, 2006). Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000, 2010) provided the foundation for the CoI approach applied in educational contexts in their study of computer conferencing in the context of university graduate-level programs. In reviewing the ways the participants in these programs communicated in text-based discussions, they generated the model of the CoI framework – the three major elements that describe a community of inquiry: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence, which combine to form the overall educational experience of the learning community. This model assumes that “learning occurs within the Community through the interaction of three core elements” (Garrison et al, 2000, p.88).

Since Garrison et al's (2000) pioneering work, the CoI framework has been widely applied to different educational contexts, including both face-to-face and online interactions. McDaniel and Caverly (2010) investigated the application of the CoI framework to the mathematics classroom, with particular attention given to supporting online learning and developing mathematical literacy (or numeracy) in the “flipped classroom,” in which students are responsible for reviewing lecture-type material outside of the classroom, leaving the majority of class time for working out mathematical problems and discussion. The implications for instructor-student interaction are applicable to the language classroom to some extent.

More studies have looked at the application of the CoI framework in online discourse, such as asynchronous discussions, online courses, and educational blogs. Fusco, Haavind, Remo, and Schank (2011) provided an in-depth discussion of on-line professional development seminars conducted among professional participants. They analyzed the participants' involvement in the seminars within the CoI framework, including a careful look

at the activities that made up the learning experiences of the participants. Importantly, their analysis revealed the importance of the facilitator in promoting a successful interactive experience among the voluntary participants. For the language classroom, the analog of the facilitator to the classroom instructor is fairly obvious, but there are important differences. In implementing some of the concepts suggested by Fusco, et al.'s results, it is important that EFL educators consider the differences in context.

Taking the application of the CoI framework beyond the identification of observable elements, Haavind (2007) offered a critical contribution to our understanding of how the CoI framework can make explicit the relationship among the key elements of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence in the context of online courses. There are implications for those instructors who intend to teach students how to collaborate in the online language community of inquiry. Haavind's focus on social presence and teaching presence has much to offer EFL instructors wishing to implement interactive online communicative activities in their classrooms. Furthermore, Shea and Bidjerano (2008, 2012) extended our understanding of the CoI model and its ability to be applied to real online and hybrid university-level classes. In their (2012) study, over 2000 US college students' online interactions were observed in order to determine the efficacy of a CoI-based instrument in capturing differences in learning outcomes in hybrid and fully online learning environments. Further, Shea, Gozza-Cohen, Uzuner, Mehta, Valtcheva, Hayes, and Vickers (2011) added the SOLO taxonomy, a process-product model of online learning.

Angelaina and Jimoyiannis (2009, 2012), in a key study for the present research effort, presented evidence that learning is enhanced when students are actively involved in task-oriented blogging. In the case of their study, the students were 15 year old students in computer science classes in Greece who were blogging in English in response to specific project assignments. The results of transcription analysis revealed the students were generally well engaged in the blog activities, and that the learners' *cognitive presence* in the blog activities was the most frequently documented aspect of their participation among *social*, *cognitive*, and *teaching* presence, although all three aspects were well represented in the learners' blog posts and comments. They described their participants' engagement in terms of number of publications (i.e., blog posts and commentaries) that included certain indicators within the three main elements (presences). This approach to description has influenced our own analysis in the present study. Angelaina and Jimoyiannis conclude that blogs afford learners a developmental environment that fosters their active communication and co-construction of knowledge and understanding. Importantly, they posit that their own research is in response to the lack of "sufficient research evidence on the efficacy and the applicability of the CoI model in educational blogs" (Angelaina & Jimoyiannis, 2012, p. 170). They also indicate their hope that their research would lead to further development of instructors' scaffolding techniques to support students' engagement with educational blogs (p. 180). The present study likewise supports the notion that meaningful instructional interventions can be valuable in fostering the growth of learners' online communicative competence in the context of interactive blogging and similar online communicative activities.

2.1 Research Questions

Based on our review of the primary literature and context, our work expands the initial CoI analysis from the asynchronous discussion to reading blogs in EFL context, a unique online

discourse that has been rarely explored. The present study was undertaken to address the following research questions: (1) What elements of social, cognitive, and teaching presence in the CoI framework are dominant in EFL students' reading blog? (2) How do students perceive the use of blogging in the EFL reading class?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants include both the instructor and students in a reading class of second-year English majors (N=25) in a university in central China. The first author was the instructor, who is a female Chinese with 15 years of ESL teaching experience. She had spent eight years in US, studying and teaching ESL.

As seen in Table 1, the students were a homogeneous group aging from 17 to 22, with 20 females and 4 males (one male student only posted one blog through the whole semester and was thus excluded from the data). The imbalanced gender ratio is representative of all classes in the English department in the university. All students were native speakers of Mandarin Chinese and had learned English for approximately eight years. According to the questionnaire distributed to the students at the beginning of the semester, 50% of students had never or rarely blogged and a majority of them (71%) reported that they were not confident in reading in English. For most students, their favorite books in English were classics, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Gone with the Wind*,

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

N	Min. age	Max. age	Ave. age	SD
24	17	22	20.08	1.00

3.2 Context

The participants were enrolled in an extensive reading class and the class met once a week for 90 minutes. At the time of the study, the participants had already taken extensive reading for three semesters and they were preparing for the reading section of national English Test for English Majors (TEM) Band 4, which was held in the middle of the semester. The class instruction focused on enhancing reading skills and fluency, recognizing patterns of organization in academic texts, and building academic vocabulary. In order to build reading fluency, students are assigned to read a novel outside the class over the semester in addition to readings in the course textbook. *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho was chosen for outside reading because of its compatibility with students' language proficiency. As hard copies of the book were not available for students to purchase or loan from the library, an electronic copy of the book was posted on the course website for students to download and read.

3.3 Procedure

At the beginning of the semester, students were required to create their own blog on Sina Blog (<http://blog.sina.com.cn>). This platform was chosen because of its popularity among Chinese speakers globally and its easy access to students. The instructor also created her own blog on the same platform. Students were then assigned into blog groups of four, with one

group of five. The Sina Blog features allow students to post individual blogs and to add their group mates (and the instructor) as their friends and to follow their blogs so that they are notified whenever those blogs are updated. Importantly, the blogs are public on the internet, meaning that anyone in the world can view the blogs. To protect their privacy, all students used pseudo names shown on their blog pages and they posted their blog addresses in the course website, which was only accessible to students enrolled in the class. One advantage of this system is that students are able to see a broad range of blogs, produced by other bloggers in different areas, which include some well-known professional blog writers. This context made student aware that they were writing to a broader audience, not just their instructor and classmates.

Each week before class, the instructor posted a blog giving instructions for students' blogs and the students completed an individual blog entry following the instructions before the follow class meeting. The students were required to post ten blogs over the semester and comment on their blog group members' blogs. The requirements for the blogs moved from more specific at the beginning of the semester to more general near the end of the semester. The first three blog entries were intended to familiarize students with the blog features and to elicit students' response to readings. For the first blog, students were directed to read a news story from *USA Today* online, summarize the story in one paragraph, and write their reaction to the story in another paragraph. The second and third blogs asked students to express their own opinions on the in-class readings. In Blogs Four to Ten, students reflected on the segment of the novel *The Alchemist* they had read for the week. At this point, students were given much freedom on the content of the blogs. The instructor only posted the page range of the novel to be read in each week in her blog so that all students were on the same pace in reading. In students' blogs, they could write about their own reaction to the part of the book they had read, analyze one of more major characters, discuss one or more selected paragraphs, draw connections to their own experience, relate the book to current events, and so forth. Students were encouraged not to simply summarize the chapters read, but to write more on what they thought about the story. Moreover, as students had the freedom to personalize their blog pages, they were encouraged to insert pictures, video, or music as long as they show some connection to the novel. Students were informed in the syllabus that their active participation in the blog would be graded for the course.

In addition to posting their views on the outside reading in blogs, students were expected to reply to their group members' blog postings. The instructor also posted her comments on some of student blogs. This comment feature of the blogs provided opportunities for authentic out-of-class interaction between the instructor and students and among the students within their group. During each class meeting, approximately ten minutes were spared on discussion of the novel within the blog group.

A survey was distributed to the students to determine the participants' characteristics and their views on reading blogs at the beginning and end of the semester. The initial items in the survey included basic demographic information: Gender and Age. Next, several questions targeting the students' views on reading and blogs were asked:

How would you describe your confidence as a reader in English?

When you read in English, which one of these describes your reading rate (reading speed)?

How would you describe your experience this semester with blogging?

Several more open-ended completion statements were given next for the participants to complete:

I think reading in English is _____.

Reading in English for me is _____.

Being able to read well in English is _____.

When someone asks me a question about something I have read in English, _____.

Please indicate your favorite book in English:

Places for open comments on reading and blogging were also provided:

Please use this space to give other comments about your view of reading in English.

Please give other comments about your view of Blogging in the Reading class.

3.4 Analysis

Based on Garrison et al's Community of Inquiry Coding Template (2000, p.89), Angelaina & Jimoyiannis' (2012, p.178) coding scheme was adapted and applied to the blog posts and commentaries in the current study. As Angelaina & Jimoyiannis' (2012) data were educational blogs posted by students in a science class in a secondary school, some categories were not applicable to our data and thus eliminated. In addition, some new categories were added to the scheme as they emerged in the data. Table 2 presents the coding scheme adopted in the current study with characteristic transcript examples from the data.

Table 2. CoI Coding Scheme for Blogs and Commentaries

Elements	Indicators	Examples from blog postings	Examples from commentaries
Social presence	Emotional Expression (EME)	As far as I am concerned, the part of the novel which I have read gives me a sense of freshness. It likes the soft spring breeze from the grass roots with mud, a smell comes fresh and intoxicated.(S13)	Nice work. I enjoy reading it. (T)
	Group Cohesion (GCO)	As I have mentioned in the Blog 6, it's just your own choice in your life. (S14)	I have the same feeling, when we are addicted to the "beauty" of the surroundings, We should also remember the goal of our life (S10).
	Social Cues (SOC)	As long as you have a dream, you have faith that you can achieve it. (S12)	Thanks for your encouragement. (S16)
Cognitive presence	Introducing Ideas (IDE)	In fact,just the auther says,every blessing ignored becomes a curse. (S6)	Considering our own capacity, we'd better let things as they are, but how can you be so sure that you won't make a miracle if you change the certain situation?

			(S23)
Personal View (PER)	As you know ,the life is limited ,so we should make good use of our time. And don't let your time spend in hesitating ,just do the things you want to do. You aslo should learn how to forget the past, you can't let it influence you. (S14)	We Chinese donnt wanna make troble and hope to be peaceful. (S15)	
Synthesizing Information (SYN)	So in our daily life we would better try our best to get what we want and then make a promise. (S8)	In fact,the mysterious force is diffculties. (S9)	
Providing Examples (EXM)	I can't help thinking of my grandparents with slight hearing loss. (S3)	N/A (no examples in the data)	
Teaching presence	Critical Evaluation (CRE) The story becomes more and more interesting with new people showing up. And what people say in the article is also enlightening. (S15)	As for this part, I badly approve of your idea. is more philosophical and discuss many abstract questions. (S16)	
Direct Instruction (INS)	I hope you enjoy reading the book "The Alchemist". For Blog 5, read pp.11-22 and write about what you think of this section. (T)	Please post your blogs earlier so that your group members can read it before class. (T)	
Discussion Managem ent (MGT)	So we should find the new thing fou our life,do you agree with me? (S14)	I quite agree with you that we had better let things as they are. But what do you mean that if we do so, we can be stronger and influential? (S1)	

The coding scheme was applied to both blog postings and commentaries that are associated to the blogs, but these two components of data were coded separately. Different from Angelaina & Jimoyiannis (2012, p.176) who grouped all blog postings by the indicators of CoI, we identified multiple indicators in one single blog posting. For example, one blog posting may include personal view (PER), synthesizing information (SYN), and emotional expression (EME). As the length of the blogs varies, the tokens of each indicator were not counted. Instead, the percentage of blogs that include a particular indicator was calculated so that the dominant pattern was more visible.

As for commentaries which are much shorter than blog postings in length, one code was applied to each comment so that the major functions of comments could be identified. The data was coded by two raters. Both of them coded 10% of the data first and compared their coding. There was a 90% level of inter-rater agreement. They then coded the rest of the data, consulting each other whenever there was confusion in the coding process.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Overview

The data include 232 blog postings by 24 students (20 females and 4 males) and 19 blog postings by the instructor, 401 comments associated with these blogs posted, as well as students' responses to the pre and post surveys. Table 3 shows individual students' contribution to the blog. Complete texts of posts were extracted from the blog and were analyzed using the coding scheme described in the next section. Students and the instructor's contribution to the blog were divided into:

- (a) Content posts, which include text, photo, audio, and video.
- (b) Commentaries, which were posted below each content post in text format, including questions, replies, or comments.

Table 3. Posts and Comments for Each Member in the Community of Blogs

CoI member	S 1	S 2	S 3	S 4	S 5	S 6	S 7	S 8	S 9	S 10	S 11	S 12
Published Posts	10	10	10	8	8	10	10	10	10	8	10	10
Published Comments	5	5	13	0	0	5	16	5	28	13	16	6
Word count of total posts and associated comments	25 98	171 5	264 5	197 3	122 0	138 8	205 9	248 9	229 3	193 1	235 2	252 9

CoI member	S1 3	S1 4	S1 5	S1 6	S1 7	S1 8	S1 9	S2 0	S2 1	S2 2	S2 3	S2 4	T
Published Posts	10	9	10	8	8	10	10	10	10	10	8	10	19
Published Comments	38	6	20	37	5	10	2	0	18	13	15	9	79
Word count of total posts and associated comments	39 52	16 97	38 26	29 49	30 85	28 65	15 71	18 46	26 27	20 12	30 50	24 91	74 88

To answer the first research question, the results of the analysis of the sample of 232 student blogs as well as 410 associated comments with respect to the occurrence of the indicators of CoI are presented in Table 4 and Table 5.

Table 4. Occurrence of Community of Inquiry Elements in Reading Blogs

Elements	Indicators	Number of Blogs (N=232)	Percentage
Social Presence	EME	75	32.3%
	GCO	8	3.4%
	SOC	31	13.4%
Cognitive Presence	IDE	146	62.9%
	PER	176	75.9%
	SYN	181	78.0%
	EXM	60	25.9%
Teaching Presence	CRE	15	6.5%
	INS	0	0
	MGT	7	3.0%

Table 5. Occurrence of community of inquiry in comments

Elements	Indicators	Number of Comments (N=410)	Percentage	Number of Comments (N=410)	Percentage
Social Presence	EME	264	64.4%	77	18.8%
	GCO			115	28.0%
	SOC			72	17.6%
Cognitive Presence	IDE	29	7.1%	3	0.7%
	PER			24	5.9%
	SYN			2	0.5%
	EXM			0	0
Teaching Presence	CRE	117	28.5%	57	13.9%
	INS			11	2.7%
	MGT			49	12%

4.2 Cognitive Presence

As stated earlier, multiple indicators were identified in each individual blog, and the length of the blogs varied greatly. Therefore, the frequency of indicators in each blog was not calculated and the percentages of blogs do not add up to 100%. As seen in Table 4, cognitive presence is most dominant in students' blogs with 62.9% of blogs include IDE (introducing ideas), 75.9% of blogs include PER (personal view), 78% of blogs include SYN (synthesizing information), and 25.9% of blogs include EXM (providing examples). This is related to the

requirements of the reading blogs, which ask students to share what they think about the readings. In most of the blogs, students synthesized information from the readings by summarizing the readings and interpreting some quotes or stories in the readings. They also expressed their personal views on the materials read, and some students provided examples to support their views, most of which were from their personal experience. In addition, most of the students introduced new ideas that were related to the readings in their blogs by bringing up new topics or exploring the current topic from a different perspective.

This finding is consistent with Angelaina and Jimoyiannis' (2012) evidence that cognitive presence is the most dominant aspect in 9th-grade students' participation in educational blogs. Despite limited previous blogging experience for most students in our study, they were fully engaged in the blog activity. The integration of ideas and construction of meaning is clearly evidenced from the indicators of cognitive presence. In conventional reading classrooms, the discussion topics are usually initiated by the teacher in the form of comprehension questions on the readings. In this blog community, in contrast, students took the initiative and explored the reading from their own perspectives, which can enhance their critical thinking skills.

4.3 Social Presence

As seen in Table 5, and as one might predict based on the nature of the communicative function (CF) categories within it, the *social presence* element is more visible in comments than in blog posts. Since the comments are much shorter than blogs, and most of the comments are about the same length, a single indicator was applied to each comment. As a result, the percentages of comments add up to 100% across all the students. Social presence takes up 64.4% of the 410 comments posted by both the students and teacher. Among the three categories of social presence, GCO (group cohesion) is the most dominant. Students connect with the blog writer by showing their agreement or disagreement in the comments. For example, "Totally agree that our destiny grasps in our own", and "I have the same feeling with you. I always hesitate when I make a decision, if I could get something better if I could get something better if I give up what I possess now." Both comments indicate agreement and mutual understanding, which improves group cohesion. The emotional expression in comments is mostly positive, as in "Nice work. I really enjoy reading it." and "Both are brilliant ideas. I would like to be your advocate!!! And hang on for your dream." Social cues (SOC) are mostly in the form of the author's replies showing appreciation to readers' comments or reader's comments giving encouragement and wishes to the author, such as "I am also willing to go there with you and best wishes to you."

It should also be noted that social presence is also visible in students' blogs. 32.2% of blogs include EME (emotional expression), in which students expressed their likes or dislikes for the characters in the readings, how the story develops, and sometimes emotions in describing their personal experience.

The interactivity between the blog writer and the readers can be best illustrated by the thread of comments below S15's Blog 2, which is on an article "Fast Food and Personal Responsibility". S15 disagrees with the author in that consumers of fast food, rather than the restaurants, should be responsible for their own health. "As far as I am concerned, it is improper to impose all faults on customers themselves", he states in the blog. He also compared eating fast food with smoking and drinking to support his view that the responsibility lies in both consumers and restaurants.

Teacher:

Good point!

S18:

Your point of view is quite novel and the summary covers all information! By the way, the passage would be better without some spelling mistakes~

Student A from another class:

hi, S15. your thinking seems to try covering "all" the aspects that need to be considered. I think it's a good way to think better. But it seems to me that blaming everyone is as the same with blaming no one, don't you think. I think neutral is boring and useless.--- please comment back.

S15' reply:

When we come to know we cannot change something on our own, we will understand why more and more people choose to be neutral. That does not mean they escape but avoid more trouble. After all, nobody will like suffering from pains. Besides, for this problem, self-control is a good solution to solve it but we should know not all can be able to be that strong to deal with all kinds of issues.

Student B from another class:

I agree with you in some way that we all, who have directed relationships with fast food, are to blame, even only a little. But we're also supposed to make the chef culprit take the most of the responsibility.

As illustrated by the example, the discussion involved the teacher, blog group members, as well as readers outside the class. The comments show collaboration and social support, consistent with affective, interactive and cohesive responses in social presence in CoI framework defined by Garrison et al.(2000). This high level of interactivity among learners, which may not be always obvious in face-to-face EFL classrooms, reflects students' strong motivation as autonomous learners.

4.4 Teaching Presence

The teaching presence element is mostly identified in the teacher's comments, but some students' comments also demonstrate teaching presence. It should be noted that a total of 117 comments are coded as teaching presence while the teacher only posted a total 79 comments as indicated in Table 2. Most of the teacher's comments offer positive evaluation on students' blogs. For example, "Very interesting ideas!" Some students also offer evaluation on their peer's blogs in the comments, such as "Your opinions on this passage are reasonable."

Almost all the comments with INS (direct instructions) come from the teacher and they were usually posted on blogs by students who had trouble posting blogs on time or those who did not follow the teacher's instruction. Both the teacher and students contributed to the comments with MGT (discussion management) by asking for clarification as in "What do you mean? I don't know actually.", or eliciting the author's opinion, as in "I just want to say that different people hold different ideas toward the meaning of love or happiness. What is your opinion, S13?" In these comments, students helped managed the discussion and kept the discussion active.

The teaching presence illustrates the importance of teacher's role as the facilitator in the online discussion, as revealed in the study of Fusco et al (2011). Teaching presence, in Fusco et al's terms, is "what sustains the learning experience and encourages inquiry" (2011, p.140). In our data, not only did the teacher serve as the facilitator of the discussion, but the students

volunteered to mediate the conversation online. Thus, the teaching presence results reveal that learners share the responsibility of teaching one another, along with their classroom instructor.

4.5 Students' Perceptions

The second research question is answered with the results of questionnaires distributed at the beginning and end of the semester. The results of the learner survey confirmed that a majority of the EFL students recognized the value of cognitive presence in the blogs and the benefits of blogging in the reading class. In the survey distributed at the end of the semester, 66.7% of students indicated that blogging motivated them to read more; 79.2% agreed that blogging about what they read improved their reading comprehension"; and 79.2% agreed that blogging increased their vocabulary." In responses to a related question, 58.3% reported that blogging helped them have a better sense of writing for an audience; 75% felt that blogging helped them think more critically about what they were reading"; and 62.5% agreed that blogging helped them understand their classmates' viewpoints on the readings". Overall, 58.3% of students thought that blogging was more interesting and effective than writing book reports and 54.2% indicated they were either somewhat likely or actively planning to blog on their own. In fact, after the semester ended, a few students kept on posting blogs on their own, either recording events that they have experienced recently, or expressing their viewpoints on current events.

In addition to the definite survey responses, the more open-ended answers reinforced benefits of blogging, such as motivating reading, improving reading comprehension, enhancing critical thinking, increasing vocabulary, improving writing skills. S20 commented "It's really helpful that makes me read more as well as think more deeply. Sometimes it seems do help my reading speed . And I will write more blog on my own." S2 commented, "I do believe it's a good way for motivate me to read more and think more and write more." Students S3 commented, "When I wrote the blog, I will try to use the new vocabulary I learned in the novel. Writing the blog motivates me to read the novel carefully." Such positive perception is evident is most of students' comments.

The open-ended answers also revealed the ways in which the social presence in the blogs created a strong sense of community and rapport among the students. For example, S16, who posted the most comments on her classmates' blogs, commented in her survey at the end of the semester "Blogging in the reading class motivates me to express what I am thinking in mind. And I can communicate with my classmates on the Internet, at the same time, we learn from each other by reading blogs and discussing in the class. Furthermore, it is of great significance to my writing skill. All in all, blogging in the reading class is a good way to arouse my interest in English learning no matter whether it is true for others or not." Similar comments can be found in many other students' responses.

5. Conclusion

The study presented in this paper reported on the investigation of students' engagement in reading blogs within the CoI framework. For instructors working with university-level EFL learners, the Community of Inquiry framework sheds light on the actual experiences through which students develop not only the linguistic competence needed for academic success, but also the social and cultural aspects of language learning afforded by interactive online activities such as blogging. The cognitive presence in the blogs demonstrates students'

active engagement in the reading (interpreting texts, sharing personal views, initiating new topics, etc.). The analysis of the social presence element indicates that students provided social support and emotional feedback to each other, which fosters a positive learning environment and encourages students' autonomy in self-learning. The teaching presence results highlight the teacher's role as a true facilitator of discussion, rather than merely as a blog manager. The results also are indicative of the way the students were empowered to take an active role in the discussions, beyond that of passive participants.

The overall results of the study suggest three primary implications for EFL instructors wishing to enhance their students' online communicative competence. Firstly, the unique feature of blogs encourages students' self-reflection and integration of different aspects of language learning (readings, vocabulary, writing, etc.), which may not be fully addressed in the limited class meeting time. Secondly, through the online interaction, students can practice the most common communicative functions (CFs), which can be applied in face-to-face interactions as well as in online environments. Thirdly, the comment function of blogs enables peer interaction among students, constructing an interactive online community. Future research into the online communication of EFL and other learners may not only reveal students' preferred communicative functions and patterns of participation, but also foster genuine growth in their online and face-to-face communicative competence. Our own future work in this direction is likely to focus on the careful engineering of activities--from blogs to social media--with an eye toward their contribution to the community of inquiry within the classroom.

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