

# Research on the Influencing Factors and Optimization of Students' Learning Engagement in College English Classrooms

Xiaohu Zhao

Xi'an FanYi University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710105, China

**Abstract:** With the improvement of the requirements for cultivating college students' English application ability and cross-cultural communication ability in the 2020 edition of the "Guidelines for College English Teaching", the problem of insufficient student learning engagement in college English classrooms has become increasingly prominent, directly restricting the improvement of teaching quality. This article adopts literature research and logical analysis methods to first define the core concepts and dimensions of learning engagement, and then systematically analyze the key factors that affect students' learning engagement from four levels: students themselves, teachers, curriculum design, and classroom environment. Finally, targeted optimization strategies are proposed. Research has found that students' learning motivation, English foundation, teachers' teaching methods and professional competence, practicality of course content and assessment methods, as well as classroom physics and psychological environment, all have a significant impact on learning engagement. By stimulating students' intrinsic motivation, innovating teaching models, optimizing the curriculum system, and creating a positive classroom atmosphere, measures can effectively enhance students' learning engagement. Research provides theoretical references and practical paths for the reform of college English teaching, helping to achieve the goal of high-quality foreign language teaching.

**Keywords:** college english classroom, learning engagement, influencing factors, optimization strategy, teaching reform

## 1. Introduction

In the context of globalization and internationalization of higher education, college English, as a public basic course in universities, undertakes the important mission of cultivating students' cross-cultural communication skills, supporting professional learning and future career development. The "Guidelines for College English Teaching (2020 Edition)" released by the Ministry of Education in 2020 clearly states that college English teaching should "focus on stimulating students' learning interests and cultivating their learning abilities, and enhance their awareness and ability to actively learn". However, there is a common phenomenon of insufficient student engagement in current university English classrooms: some students lack concentration during class, have low enthusiasm for participating in classroom interactions, complete homework perfunctorily after class, and even have problems such as "hidden truancy" (such as looking down at their phones and daydreaming). This low investment state not only leads to slow improvement of students' English abilities, but also dampens teachers' enthusiasm for teaching, becoming a core bottleneck that restricts

the improvement of the quality of college English teaching.

As a key indicator for measuring students' learning status and teaching effectiveness, the level of learning engagement is directly related to the degree of achievement of teaching objectives. At present, scholars at home and abroad have conducted research on learning engagement from the perspectives of psychology and education, but systematic analysis of the specific subject of college English classrooms still needs to be deepened. Therefore, exploring the influencing factors of students' learning engagement in college English classrooms and proposing feasible optimization strategies has important theoretical value and practical significance: theoretically, it can enrich the research results of learning engagement in the field of subject teaching and improve the theoretical system of foreign language teaching; In practice, it can provide specific guidance for college English teachers to improve teaching methods and optimize curriculum settings, helping to enhance students' English learning quality and comprehensive literacy.

## **2. Analysis of Factors Influencing Students' Learning Engagement in College English Classrooms**

The learning engagement of students in college English classrooms is influenced by multiple intertwined factors, including subjective factors of the students themselves, as well as objective factors such as teachers, curriculum, and environment. Through literature review and teaching practice observation, the core influencing factors can be summarized into four major levels:

### **2.1 At the level of students themselves: the intrinsic driving force of learning engagement**

Student self factors are the core variables that affect learning engagement, directly determining their willingness and ability to engage, mainly reflected in three aspects:

#### **2.1.1 Types and intensities of learning motivation**

Learning motivation is the core driving force that inspires students to engage in learning. According to Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (2008), learning motivation can be divided into intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation: intrinsic motivation stems from students' interest in English itself, such as liking to read English literature, watch English movies and TV shows, communicate with foreigners, etc. These students often actively engage in learning, demonstrate high vitality and dedication; External motivation comes from external pressure or rewards, such as passing the CET-4 and CET-6 exams, obtaining credits, and successfully graduating. These students often adopt a "coping style" learning approach, with low engagement and easy fatigue. The current motivation for most college students to learn English is mainly external motivation, lacking interest in the language itself, leading to negative classroom engagement.

#### **2.1.2 Differences in English foundation**

English foundation is the ability foundation for students to participate in classroom learning. Due to the differences in the quality of English teaching and students' learning attitudes in high school, the English proficiency of college students shows significant stratification: students with good foundations can quickly keep up with the pace of the classroom, actively participate in activities such as dialogues and speeches, and have high levels of engagement; Students with weak foundations, due to insufficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge, find it difficult to understand the teaching content and are afraid to participate in interactions. They remain in a state of "not understanding and not daring to speak" for a long time, gradually feeling frustrated and ultimately giving up on their involvement. This 'Matthew effect' further exacerbates the polarization of students' learning engagement<sup>[1]</sup>.

#### **2.1.3 The effectiveness of learning strategies**

Effective learning strategies can improve learning efficiency and enhance students' confidence in engagement. Some students lack scientific English learning strategies, such as relying solely on rote memorization of words and neglecting contextual applications; Translate word for word while reading, do not understand the logic of the text; Lack of methods for listening training, relying solely on repeated playback without analyzing incorrect questions. Inefficient learning

strategies lead to students investing a lot of time but gaining little, gradually losing their confidence in learning and reducing their willingness to invest.

## **2.2 Teacher level: Guidance and Support for Learning Engagement**

As organizers and guides of classroom teaching, teachers' teaching behavior and professional competence directly affect students' learning status, mainly reflected in three dimensions:

### **2.2.1 The traditional tendency of teaching methods**

Currently, some university English teachers still adopt a "lecture style" teaching model: in the classroom, the focus is on explaining words, grammar, and texts, while students passively receive knowledge and lack opportunities for participation and interaction. This "teacher led, student passive" model neglects the practicality of language learning, making it difficult for students to transform knowledge into practical abilities and gradually losing interest in learning. For example, in reading teaching, if teachers only analyze grammar sentence by sentence without organizing students to discuss the topic of the article and express personal opinions, students will be unable to think actively and have insufficient cognitive investment.

### **2.2.2 Limitations of professional competence**

The professional competence of teachers includes language proficiency, cross-cultural knowledge, and the ability to apply educational technology. On the one hand, some teachers lack cross-cultural teaching awareness and only focus on imparting language knowledge in their teaching, neglecting the introduction of the cultural background of English-speaking countries, which makes it difficult for students to understand the cultural connotations behind the language. Without understanding the cultural origins of "white elephant" (an expensive and useless thing), they cannot accurately apply it; On the other hand, some teachers have a preference for modern educational technologies such as smart education. The application ability of the intelligent teaching platform and multimedia resources is insufficient, and the classroom teaching form is single, which is difficult to attract students' attention and affects their behavior and emotional investment.

### **2.2.3 Lack of classroom interaction and feedback**

Interaction is the core element of language learning, and timely feedback can help students adjust their learning status. Some teachers lack effective interactive design in the classroom, such as only targeting a few students with good foundations when asking questions, ignoring students with weak foundations; The lack of clear task guidelines in group discussions has resulted in discussions becoming mere formalities. In addition, teachers' feedback on students' learning often lags behind or is vague, such as only checking "√" and "×" in homework grading without pointing out the reasons for errors; Without evaluation after classroom interaction, students are unable to understand their own learning outcomes and gradually lose their enthusiasm for participation.

## **2.3 Curriculum Setting Level: Content and Goal Orientation of Learning Engagement**

The curriculum design determines the practicality of learning content and the scientificity of assessment methods, directly affecting students' willingness to learn, mainly reflected in two aspects:

### **2.3.1 The disconnect between course content and needs**

Currently, most university English courses still focus on general English and lack integration with students' majors. For example, engineering students have not been exposed to professional English vocabulary and literature reading skills, while humanities students lack training in cross-cultural communication scenarios. This 'one size fits all' course content makes students feel that 'what they have learned is useless', unable to link English learning with professional development and career planning, thereby reducing their willingness to invest. In addition, the course content is updated slowly and lacks topics that are relevant to the times (such as artificial intelligence, cross-border e-commerce, etc.), which also makes it difficult to stimulate students' interest in learning.

### **2.3.2 Simplification of assessment methods**

The assessment method has a guiding effect on students' learning behavior. At present, the assessment of college English is still mainly based on "final exams+written exams", focusing on vocabulary, grammar, reading and other knowledge, neglecting the evaluation of listening and speaking abilities and comprehensive application abilities. This single assessment method traps students in "exam oriented learning": they do not immerse themselves in class and only review before exams; Neglecting listening and speaking training has led to the persistent phenomenon of "mute English" and "deaf English".

### **2.4 At the level of classroom environment: the external atmosphere of learning engagement**

The classroom environment includes both physical and psychological environments, providing external support for students' learning engagement. Its impact is mainly reflected in:

#### **2.4.1 Limitations of the physical environment**

The physical environment includes classroom facilities, teaching equipment, etc. Some university English classrooms lack necessary multimedia equipment (such as high-definition projectors and speakers), or the equipment is aging and frequently malfunctioning, which affects listening teaching and the display of video resources; Part of the classroom seats are arranged in traditional "row seating", which is not conducive to the development of interactive activities such as group discussions and role-playing, and restricts students' behavioral engagement. In addition, problems such as limited classroom space and noise interference can also distract students' attention and reduce their focus.

#### **2.4.2 The negativity of the psychological environment**

The psychological environment includes teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, etc. On the one hand, if teachers have a strict attitude and lack patience, and show neglect or criticism towards students with weak foundations, it will cause students to experience anxiety and fear, and they will not dare to speak up actively, resulting in insufficient emotional investment. On the other hand, if there is a lack of cooperation among classmates and an atmosphere of "competition over cooperation" exists, students are unwilling to share their views and help others in group activities, resulting in isolation in the learning process and difficulty in forming a positive learning community<sup>[2]</sup>.

### **3. Optimization strategies for students' learning engagement in college English classrooms**

Based on the above analysis of influencing factors, enhancing students' learning engagement in college English classrooms requires collaborative efforts from four levels: students, teachers, curriculum, and environment. Targeted optimization strategies are proposed:

#### **3.1 Student level: Inspire internal motivation and enhance investment ability**

##### **3.1.1 Guide intrinsic motivation and establish a sense of meaning in learning**

Teachers can stimulate students' intrinsic motivation through "interest introduction" and "goal association": introducing English movie clips, songs, and news hotspots related to the teaching content before class (such as playing the English clip "An Inconvenient Truth" when explaining the theme of "environmental protection") to stimulate students' interest; Combining students' majors and career plans in teaching, explain the practical value of English learning (such as explaining cross-border e-commerce English communication skills to business students, and introducing English medical literature reading methods to medical students), so that students realize that "English is useful and can be used", and thus actively engage.

##### **3.1.2 Implement hierarchical teaching and pay attention to individual differences**

In response to the differences in students' English foundations, a "layered teaching+personalized tutoring" model is adopted: students are divided into basic level, advanced level, and improvement level through pre-class tests, and different difficulty learning tasks are designed (such as the basic level focusing on word dictation and simple conversations, and the improvement level focusing on English speeches and literature translation); Establish a

"one-on-one" tutoring group after class, where students with good foundations assist students with weak foundations. Teachers regularly answer questions to help weak students overcome learning difficulties, enhance confidence, and avoid giving up due to "falling behind".

### **3.1.3 Teach learning strategies to improve investment efficiency**

Integrating learning strategy guidance into teaching: teaching "root and affix memory method" and "contextual memory method" in vocabulary teaching, guiding "predicting content" and "grasping keywords" skills in listening teaching, and training "skimming" and "intensive reading" methods in reading teaching; Through "strategy sharing sessions", students can exchange efficient learning experiences, help them master scientific strategies, improve learning efficiency, and enhance their confidence in engagement.

## **3.2 At the teacher level: innovating teaching models and strengthening guidance abilities**

### **3.2.1 Adopt interactive teaching to activate the classroom atmosphere**

Teachers should break through the traditional teaching mode and adopt interactive methods such as task-based teaching and flipped classroom. In task-based teaching, specific and actionable tasks should be designed (such as "group cooperation to write English travel guides" and "role-playing simulation business negotiations"), allowing students to actively use language in the process of completing tasks; In the flipped classroom, micro lesson videos and preview tasks are released through smart teaching platforms (such as Chaoxing Learning) before class, and discussions, Q&A, and practical activities are carried out during class to transform students from being "pleasing to the ear" to "actively doing" and enhance their behavioral and cognitive engagement.

### **3.2.2 Enhance professional competence and enrich teaching content**

Teachers need to transition from being "language transmitters" to "comprehensive guides": on the one hand, by participating in cross-cultural teaching training, reading English original books, and communicating with foreign teachers, they can enhance their cross-cultural knowledge reserves and integrate cultural elements into teaching (such as explaining Western festivals, etiquette, and comparing cultural differences between the East and the West); On the other hand, learning and applying modern educational technology, such as using "Rain Classroom" to conduct real-time answering and bullet screen interaction, using the "English Fun Dubbing" APP to train students' oral skills, and attracting students' attention through diversified teaching forms.

### **3.2.3 Strengthen interactive feedback and pay attention to students' needs**

Teachers should optimize classroom interaction design and feedback mechanisms: adopt a "layered questioning" strategy when asking questions, ask simple questions to students with weak foundations (such as "What's the main idea of the paragraph?"), and ask in-depth questions to students with good foundations (such as "Why do you think the author wrote this article?"), ensuring that every student has the opportunity to participate; Clear task division in group activities (such as recorder, spokesperson, summarizer) to avoid discussions becoming mere formalities; When providing feedback, adopt the "encouragement + specific suggestions" mode (such as "Your pronunciation is very standard, if you can increase body language, it will be more vivid"), so that students can clarify the direction of improvement and enhance their enthusiasm for participation.

## **3.3 Course level: Optimize content assessment and strengthen goal orientation**

### **3.3.1 Refactoring course content to achieve the integration of "general+professional"**

Universities should construct a modular curriculum system of "General English+Professional English" based on students' professional needs: the General English module focuses on language foundation and cross-cultural communication skills, while the Professional English module combines different subject design contents (such as "Engineering English" for engineering, "Literary English" for humanities, and "Medical English" for medicine). At the same time, timely update the course content, introduce contemporary topics such as "Artificial Intelligence and English

Learning" and "Cross border E-commerce English Communication", and enhance the practicality and fun of the content.

### **3.3.2 Improve the assessment system and achieve "process+ability" evaluation**

Establish a diversified and process oriented assessment system: reduce the weight of final exams (e.g. 50%), increase the weight of daily grades (e.g. 50%), including classroom participation (15%), homework completion (15%), group tasks (10%), and listening and speaking tests (10%); The assessment format takes into account both written and practical aspects, such as adding practical assessment items such as English speeches, oral conversations, and English reports, comprehensively evaluating students' language application abilities, guiding them from "exam oriented learning" to "ability improvement", and enhancing the sustainability of learning engagement<sup>[3]</sup>.

### **3.4 Environmental aspect: Improve hardware and software to create a positive atmosphere**

#### **3.4.1 Optimize the physical environment to support interactive teaching**

Schools should increase investment to improve the physical environment of college English classrooms: equip classrooms with high-definition multimedia equipment and professional listening devices to ensure smooth display of teaching resources; Adjust the classroom seating arrangement to "round table style" and "group style" to facilitate interactive activities; Build specialized English language labs and scenario simulation rooms to provide students with immersive learning spaces and enhance their learning experience.

#### **3.4.2 Create a psychological environment and build a learning community**

Teachers should strive to establish a classroom psychological environment of "equality, inclusiveness, and cooperation": maintain patience and respect towards students, encourage them to speak boldly, adopt a tolerant attitude towards mistakes (such as "Your idea is interesting, let's discuss it further"), and alleviate students' anxiety; Organize "English Learning Groups" and "Learning Partners" activities to guide students to cooperate and assist each other, such as completing English projects and grading homework together, creating an atmosphere of "learning together and making progress together", and enhancing students' sense of belonging and emotional investment.

### **Conclusion**

The learning engagement of students in college English classrooms is the result of multiple factors including students themselves, teachers, curriculum, and environment, and its improvement requires collaborative efforts from multiple parties. Student learning motivation and English foundation are the internal core, teacher teaching methods and professional competence are the guiding key, course content and assessment methods are goal oriented, and classroom environment is external support. By stimulating students' intrinsic motivation, innovating teacher teaching models, optimizing curriculum systems, and improving classroom environments, strategies can effectively enhance students' engagement in behavior, emotion, and cognition, thereby solving the current problem of "low engagement and low efficiency" in college English classrooms.

This study proposes influencing factors and optimization strategies through literature analysis and logical reasoning. In the future, further empirical research can be conducted, such as questionnaire surveys, classroom observations, interviews, etc., to verify the effectiveness of the strategies; At the same time, in-depth research can be conducted on a specific factor (such as learning motivation, teaching methods) to provide more accurate guidance for the reform of college English teaching. Enhancing students' learning engagement is a long-term task that requires continuous efforts from universities, teachers, and students to ultimately achieve a comprehensive improvement in the quality of college English teaching and cultivate high-quality talents that meet the demands of globalization.

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