



## Through the Lens of Community of Inquiry: Scaffolding Chinese ESL Oral Participation in a US Online Graduate Course

This reflective writing identified components that contribute to increased participation of international ESL in one online graduate course. All the factors identified in the analysis as conducive to greater engagement and elevated participation naturally fell into the three presences of Community of Inquiry (CoI). As such, a new theoretical framework titled CoI-Participation Model was created to reveal the underlying connection between CoI and participation. Findings drawn from the critical analysis indicate that online courses maintaining a good CoI can effectively promote ESL class participation, especially oral participation, by eliminating linguistic barriers, building a sense of group commitment, and creating a connected community of learners. Instructional implications and practical teaching tips for TESOL professionals incorporating the CoI-Participation Model in online teaching are discussed.

**Keywords:** online teaching, adult education, ESL, Community of Inquiry (CoI), participation, engagement, class management, synchronous communication

### Introduction

The recent pandemic has forced many schools to transition to online teaching, causing a shift in course content delivery and student participation in class. Online learning and teaching experiences during the pandemic disruptions in California made me reflect on my roles as a MA TESOL student, a Chinese ESL speaker, and a novice ESL instructor at an adult school in Los Angeles. I used to perceive online courses as unengaging and unfavorable for ESLs in the higher education context, based on my previous learning experience at an Asian university. However, my online learning experience at a university in California as a graduate student changed my perspective. The course I attended was quite engaging, and I noticed that my international ESL fellows and I seemed to participate more in class than we did in our previous face-to-face courses. The gap between my preconception and reality stimulated my curiosity. To verify my observation and figure out the contributors to the increased participation, if any, I kept observation logs and conducted critical analysis through the lens of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) theory. Findings drawn upon critical analysis and teaching practices indicate that maintaining a good CoI can effectively promote ESLs' participation, especially oral participation, in online graduate courses.

## Research Context

In two years during the pandemic, I accumulated many experiences with online learning in two different educational settings and have continuously reflected on my learning experience. I took four online graduate courses at an Asian university adopting English Medium Instruction (EMI). Much like many schools in the US, the school moved online due to some uncontrollable factors. Neither the students nor instructors prepared for the sudden and unexpected transition to the online format. As a result, the students were not engaged in class and seldom participated. The MA TESOL course I took at a university in California, on the contrary, was as interactive and engaging as in-person ones. As the constitution of the two classes was similar, with most students being graduate-level ESLs majoring in language education from mainland China, it is plausible and meaningful to explore the causes of the different learning experiences and outcomes.

The course duration of the MA TESOL course I took was 15 weeks. The school transitioned to online delivery due to COVID-19 in the second half of the semester (from week 9 to week 15). The school adopted Zoom as the teaching platform. The instructor had previously taught two online classes using a different platform, whereas students' familiarity with online learning varied. In addition, there were course recordings safely locked and available after class. Around week 10, I noticed that the class participation of my Chinese ESL fellows (including myself) seemed to increase compared to the previous in-person courses, and the instruction went much better than expected. This contradiction between my perception of online learning and reality resulted in my research interest in the factors at play.

## Research Questions

The overarching question is *how can international Chinese ESLs' participation in US online graduate courses be elevated?* Moreover, there are three sub-questions:

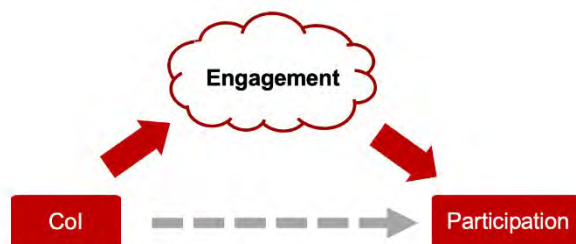
1. What evidence highlights the target students' active participation?
2. What components contribute to online participation?
3. What implications might support instructors' elevation of ESLs' participation in an online environment?

## Literature Review

After extensive reading about student engagement, participation, and online teaching and learning, I adopted Col as my theoretical lens. Finally, I created a new framework, the Col-Participation Model (see Figure 1), to examine the core components—social, teaching, and cognitive presence—essential to supporting a “good community of learners,” which leads to greater engagement and participation (Garrison et al., 2000).

**Figure 1**

*Col-Participation Model*



## **Col**

Garrison et al. (2000) proposed three elements of a Col for educational purposes: social, cognitive, and teaching presences. The authors defined social presence as participants' identification with the particular community, purposeful communication in a trusting environment, and the development of interpersonal relationships through projecting personal characteristics (Garrison, 2009). Thus, social presence could contribute to a successful educational experience and facilitate the construction of the critical thinking process by eliminating learners' isolation and loneliness (Garrison et al., 2000; Cho & Scott, 2016).

Cognitive presence is also essential for critical thinking and success in higher education. The core concept of cognitive presence lies in constructing and validating meanings through sustained communication, such as continuous reflection, conversation, and engagement in the learning process through peer participation (Cho & Scott, 2016). Thus, collaboration is critical for cognitive development since cognition is not separable from social context (Garrison et al., 2000).

Teaching presence plays a role in binding, supporting, and enhancing the first two presences to create Col for educational purposes (Garrison et al., 2000). There are three manifestations of teaching presence: (a) instructional management (intentional course organization and planning); (b) building understanding (validating knowledge acquisition); and (c) direct instruction (facilitating critical reflection and discourse).

### **Relations of the Three Presences of Col**

The three presences of Col are interrelated and co-construct the prerequisite for a successful higher education experience. Garrison and Archer (in the press, as cited in Garrison et al., 2000) stated that every successful educational experience, ideally, is a collaborative communication process for constructing meaningful and worthwhile knowledge.

This collaborative-constructivist perspective resonates with the premise that group consciousness can facilitate and optimize critical inquiry and the quality of the discourse (Garrison et al., 2000). Thus, on the one hand, social presence supports and is closely associated with the cognitive aspects of an educational experience through activities that build up and sustain a sense of group commitment (i.e., collaborative group work). On the other hand, teaching presence plays an essential role in balancing cognitive and social issues, so they are consistent with intended educational outcomes (Garrison et al., 2000). Moreover, as students' deep learning only occurs upon the interaction of the three presences (Akyol et al., 2011), all three elements are indispensable to a critical Col for educational purposes.

### **Col-Participation Model**

According to Dixson (2015), engagement consists of using time and energy to learn materials and skills, demonstrating the learning process, interacting meaningfully with others in the class, and becoming at least somewhat emotionally involved with learning. Dixson also claimed that the three presences of Col co-create an effective community of learners and a cohesive and interactive learning environment that contributes to students' engagement. So, Col directly connects with engagement.

Hrastinski (2009) defines online learner participation as a complex learning process comprised of doing, communicating, thinking, feeling, and belonging by taking part and maintaining relations with others. Moreover, participation is one of the four components of engagement (along with skills engagement, performance engagement, and emotional engagement) (Handelsman et al., 2005). Thus,

since participation is naturally embedded in and related to engagement, Col vicariously promotes students' participation, with engagement being a bridge or medium in the model (see Figure 1).

### Methodology

To verify my hypothesis about increased participation in online classes, I started to take observation logs around week 10. Entries in the class logs included meeting dates, course topics, class atmosphere, student participation, notes on exceptional cases (e.g., spring break), and my subjective comments on each lesson. Also, I rewound the class recordings to supplement details and operationalize students' participation.

#### Research Question 1: What Evidence Highlights the Target Students' Active Participation?

Based on my observations and analysis, there was a hierarchical system within students' participation in terms of initiative and passivity. For example, in descending order of initiative, students' in-class participation could be roughly categorized as *self-initiated oral participation (S-iOP)*, *course content-related questions/responses*, *breakout group report*, and *presentation group report*. The latter three types of participation (verbal and written) were driven mainly by participation scores or a sense of responsibility as a breakout/presentation group member, requiring slight initiative on the participant's part. Since those types of participation also had a lower affective filter for language learners, only S-iOP, such as sharing personal stories, adding comments/opinions, and supplementing information, was regarded as Chinese ESLs' proactive participation.

The more profound reason for regarding S-iOP as active participation is that oral participation is the more critical but challenging skill for international Chinese ESLs in a US graduate course. The US academic culture reflects the communicative values of the dominant society (Chu & Kim, 1999), such as "students' demonstration of critical thinking abilities, problem-solving skills, and assertive oral participation" (Lee, 2007). Specifically, students are typically expected to interact in a class by sharing opinions, debating, arguing, expressing disagreement, etc. (Lee, 2007; Murphy, 2005). Thus, East Asian Students (EAS) with more introverted characters, such as many Chinese ESLs, need to adapt to this new culture to fully participate in the classroom, unlock their potentials, and maximize their communicative and educational experiences (Yook & Albert, 1998).

Yet the proactive and demonstrative qualities that are highly valued and rewarded in the US educational context sharply contradict with what is valued and rewarded in Eastern society. Raised in Confucianism culture and affected by the rootedness of "traditional teacher-centered instruction and didactic learner role" (Lee, 2007), Chinese ESLs might find it challenging to assimilate to the different academic cultures and new communication norms. Moreover, the students may simultaneously struggle with language proficiency issues: self-perceived insufficient English competence, speaking anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation when making errors (Lee, 2007; Galanti, 1997) are all potential factors impeding ESLs' verbal participation.

This dual challenge results in a higher affective filter for language learners, affecting how often they speak up in classes. Thus, I identified increased S-iOP in class as the key evidence demonstrating Chinese ESLs' active participation.

#### Research Question 2: What Components Contribute to Online Participation?

According to my observational notes, I identified a set of factors conducive to greater engagement and elevated participation. As all the elements naturally fell into the three presences of Col, I further

established the Col-Participation Model to reveal the underlying connection between Col and participation.

### ***Social Presence***

Online social presence comprises three components: ***chatbox interactions*** (Zoom), ***group work***, and ***class rapport***. According to Garrison et al. (2000), text-based communication has three social presence indicators: emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion. The first two are manifested via the Zoom's chatbox function, whereas group cohesion is co-constructed by the chatbox and implementation of group works. As a focused collaborative communication activity, group work helps build a sense of belonging and commitment vital for eliciting students to share personal meaning and building empathy, eventually leading to participation. Furthermore, as the (initial) face-to-face meeting can establish a relationship and a higher comfort level, the first eight-week on-ground classes contributed to constructing student-instructor rapport. Finally, a positive rapport can create a benign and collaborative learning space and is essential in an interactive environment (Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

### ***Cognitive Presence***

As stated above, the fundamental goal of cognitive presence is to construct and validate meanings through peer participation and reflective activities. In the online course context, implementing ***collaborative group works*** such as Think-Pair-Share, Round Robin, and small group discussion through the breakout group function is the primary way to realize and maintain a cognitive presence. ***Course content features*** also impact students' cognitive development and engagement levels. The difficulty level of the course, the relevance the topic has to students' life, students' familiarity with the course content, and the criticality involved in the course materials are all variables that affect the construction and quality of online cognitive presence.

### ***Teaching Presence***

Though teaching presence may be provided by any of the participants in a Col (Garrison et al., 2000), the leadership of the instructor remains the most influential factor. The instructor fulfills the responsibilities of the course facilitator and resources provider through (a) ***participation-form orientation***, (b) ***group work design and facilitation***, and (c) ***multi-tasking ability***.

First, the instructor's degree of flexibility in terms of how students participate and requirements about using only verbal or written forms of participation could impact students' participation levels and patterns. For example, Chinese ESLs may feel more comfortable participating by making posts in the chatbox but be reluctant to unmute themselves and speak.

Second, the instructor's group work facilitation also influences students' class participation: well-designed and organized group work with appropriate instruction could foster students' critical thinking, promote peer collaboration, and establish positive class rapport, strengthening and supporting the social and cognitive presences.

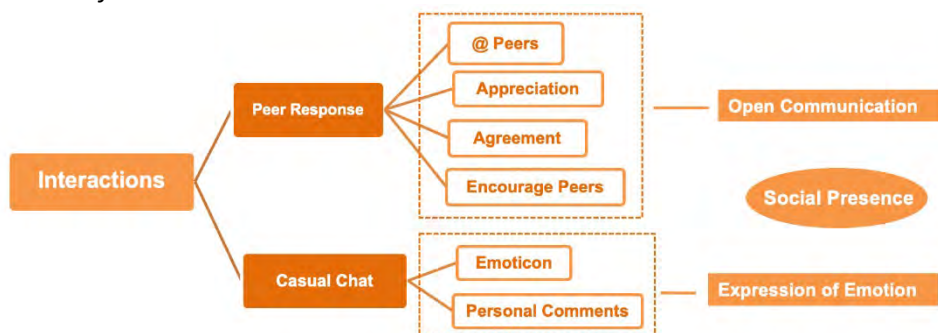
The last but most crucial element is the multi-tasking ability of the instructor. Chickering and Gamson (1987) claimed that students would be more engaged in class if the instructor could "address different learner needs in the learning process" and "provide timely feedback on students' academic progression," both of which make high demands of the instructor's multi-tasking ability. Indeed, the instructor's multi-tasking ability in an online course is vital for the feelings and experience of the students, affecting students' engagement levels and academic outcomes. However, since, in most cases, the

instructor has to push forward with the course even while handling technological issues and many other unexpected problems simultaneously on a 13- to 16-inch screen, even the most ordinary instructional activity could become exceptionally challenging in the online environment. Thus, online instructors must elevate their multi-tasking abilities intentionally.

### Operationalization

Most factors identified and analyzed above, such as group work and class rapport, apply to a Col in face-to-face and online education contexts. However, the chatbox function of Zoom is unique to the online setting. According to my operationalization, students' online participation could be classified into (a) course content-related participation (oral and written) and (b) chatbox interactions. Self-initiated and instructor-initiated course-related participation, including S-iOP, fall into the former category, while the latter could be further divided into two types and six subcategories (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
*Operationalization of Chatbox Interactions*



As shown in Figure 2, peer response consists of chatbox posts expressing appreciation, agreement, encouragement in response to a particular peer, corresponding to open communication; casual chat consists of emoticons and personal comments, corresponding to expression of emotion. As open communication and expression of emotion are two of the three indicators of social presence in text-based communication (Garrison et al., 2000), chatbox interaction is the unique and most significant contributor to online social presence.

### Critical Analysis and Findings

There are two main findings drawn from the analysis of my observational logs.

**Finding 1:** Social presence in Col (i.e., chat function) is crucial for language learners' active participation in an online platform, as long as cognitive and teaching presences are maintained and sustained.

According to my notes, three indicators are relevant to the increased S-iOP of Chinese ESLs. First, some taciturn fellows in face-to-face classes started to take the initiative to participate from week ten. After noticing this change, I focused on five students and took separate notes. The five students displayed increased oral participation, sharing their past experiences or supplementing answers to the instructor's question. Second, as a typical Chinese ESL, I felt more and more comfortable unmuting myself in online classes. I used to be the type who preferred written communication and would never speak out if not necessary. However, I could sense that I gradually assimilated into this community of learners, acknowledged group identity, and was willing to share with other members and contribute to the conversations. Third, students and instructors established a supportive and friendly class atmosphere as

the class progressed. Finally, the class environment became interactive and easygoing while maintaining academic formality.

The chatbox function is unique to the online setting and the main contributor to social presence. On the one hand, the chatbox provides opportunities for all students to make equal contributions to class discussion, which can be unrealistic in on-ground classes due to physical constraints, expanding space to continue virtualized group/pair work. Moreover, casual and personal emotional communications (i.e., chatbox interactions) built up a class rapport and group commitment, making up for the absence of in-person communication.

However, although social presence is the most significant and necessary factor of Col, social presence alone is insufficient for a successful educational experience. Therefore, ensuring equal contributions from all three presences is essential, as they are inseparable in entirety and come into play only collectively.

As Lee (2009) claimed, linguistic factors were more influential on EAS oral participation in US university classrooms. The three presences of Col in online courses break down language barriers in four ways: (a) co-creating a supportive environment that ameliorates ESLs' speaking anxieties and fear of participation; (b) helping the instructor and native speakers establish a welcoming and trusting classroom for ESLs; (c) minimize ESLs' perceptions of embarrassment when making linguistic errors; and (d) building up and consolidating a friendly rapport (Lee, 2007; Hrastinski, 2008). In sum, Col relieves ESLs' reluctance to participate due to self-perceived insufficient English oral skills and promotes their verbal participation.

Thus, maintaining a good Col could facilitate Chinese ESLs' oral participation.

**Finding 2:** Consistent and continuous interactions of Col presences is essential for maintaining ESLs' active participation.

My observation notes indicated an evident and steady increase in oral participation in the three consecutive weeks (week 10 to week 12), whereas there was a decrease when there was a break from class. For example, between weeks 9 (the first week of the online course) and 10 was a one-week spring break; between weeks 13 and 15 was the final presentation session where no whole-class meeting occurred. The reason may lie in a discontinuous and interrupted Col. Lack of social presence potentially leads to breakdowns in community commitment and comfort level in communication. Lack of cognitive and teaching presences results in a discontinuity in reflection, discourse, familiarity, and the general acquisition of content knowledge, which could compromise students' learning experience and cause a decrease in active participation among students.

### **Pedagogical Implications and Practical Teaching Tips**

This section answers the third research question, *what implications might support instructors to elevate ESLs' participation in an online environment*, by presenting 3 pedagogical implications and 15 practical teaching tips for online instructors.

#### **Implication 1**

Building rapport creates higher comfort levels and conducive learning spaces for language learners, positively developing social presence. In other words, the crux of an effective online course focuses on creating a shared social identity and a cohesive group identity (Rogers & Leav, 2005, as cited in Garrison, 2009).

## **Implication 2**

Synchronous discussions like Zoom chatbox interactions are open but purposeful communications (Garrison, 2009) essential for building up social support that encourages communication, fosters knowledge work, and facilitates collaborative learning (Hrastinski, 2008). Thus, online instructors should encourage students to take advantage of chatbox, establishing group identity and a collaborative environment.

## **Implication 3**

Intentionally facilitating the composition and continual interaction of the three elements of Col is the driving force for developing a dynamic and active online community (Garrison, 2009). Thus, instructors could consider creating a welcoming climate, incorporating collaborative and reflective activities, and giving appropriate facilitation and instruction (Garrison, 2009).

The 15 teaching tips are classified into 4 categories: group work, class rapport, multi-tasking ability, and class management.

### ***Tips for Designing and Facilitating Group Work***

1. *For mixed classes, grouping native speakers with language learners in breakout group activities is beneficial.* Students sharing the same L1 are inclined to communicate in their native language without the presence of students from different language backgrounds. Though L1 is acknowledged as helpful for critical thinking development, ESLs in US universities are expected to communicate in class using English. Therefore, the mixed grouping strategy can push the students to think and express their ideas in English, preparing them for later class sharing and promoting oral participation.
2. *In the case of a class sharing the same L1, the instructor should jump into each breakout group for one to two minutes to ensure that students communicate in English, check students' progress, and facilitate the conversation, if necessary.* As stated above, L1 can be conducive to high order thinking and understanding. However, communicating in English is essential to elevate class engagement and participation.
3. *Implement group work that enables all students to participate actively and equally in class.* Group work such as Round Robin activities can ensure that language learners have the same chance and accountability to participate as native speaking peers, and no one will dominate the interaction.
4. *Allow students to share as a group in the follow-up reporting section.* Sharing outcomes on behalf of the whole group can alleviate language learners' stress and speaking anxiety when asked to speak publicly.
5. *If the group keeps silent, call on one member first and invite others to add information.* As some students may feel too shy to initiate and share themselves, by doing so, the instructor creates a safe space and provides ESLs with a ladder to participation.

### ***Tips for Improving the Instructor's Multi-Tasking Ability***

6. *If conditions permit, using multiple screens is beneficial for teaching.* Multiple screens will significantly facilitate online instructors' multi-tasking capacity. The instructor can use one screen with the gallery view to monitor students' movements, such as raising hands, and another for presenting slides and class materials.



7. *Set aside a few minutes to read through and summarize the posts in the chatbox every 20 minutes. If necessary, give extra time for class discussion and Q&A.* It would be better for instructors to address the valuable points raised by students in real-time, as students will feel respected and motivated to participate. However, responding to students' posts timely in class is challenging for even the most experienced online instructor. A regular pause for review and summary can also work.

### ***Tips for Establishing and Maintaining Class Rapport***

8. *Warm up the class with a casual talk or brainstorm about a topic to start the conversation.*
9. *Create different group formations to ensure that students will have worked with all other peers after a couple of weeks.* Grouping is an effective strategy to build class rapport among students when there is no face-to-face meeting. It can help students familiarize themselves with other classmates and consequently feel connected.
10. *Rephrase questions and comments posted by ESL students in a non-offensive way when their wording is ungrammatical or makes little sense to others.* Recasting shows cognition of students' contributions without embarrassing the students. As a result, language learners will feel safe and motivated to participate as they know their participation and ideas are valued even if their language use is not perfect.
11. *Participate in chatbox interactions with students.* For example, instructors can join the casual talk in the chatbox by expressing agreement or appreciation, posting emoticons, adding comments, sharing personal stories, etc. Casual interactions will bridge the distance between students and teachers and establish a supportive class atmosphere.

### ***Tips for Class Management***

12. *Limit the number of students in one class session to 15 to 20.* Under 20 students is an appropriate number for conducting group work and for allowing instructors to take care of the whole class with even attention and energy in the online setting.
13. *Incorporate interactive technological tools.* Incorporating various interactive tools such as Padlet, Kahoot! and Poll Everywhere in online classes can vitalize the class and attract students' attention.
14. *Leave enough time for language learners to organize their answers and prepare for sharing.* For some language learners, it may be challenging to improvise answers immediately. So, if they are required to give answers orally quickly, they may focus only on organizing answers instead of comprehending the content and critical thinking.
15. *Give participation scores to stimulate student participation.* Participation scores accounting for an appropriate portion of their total scores can motivate students. This strategy works primarily for classes with a considerable number of language learners.

### **Limitations**

As this is preliminary research, several limitations can be identified. First, the data is sole-sourced, purely based on the author's observational notes which are highly subjective. Further quantitative and qualitative data is needed for verification. Second, the observation only focused on one course at one university. More data should be collected from classes of various disciplines from different institutes for longer periods to generalize the findings.

Third, the subjects of this study are MA TESOL students whose English proficiency is at an advanced level. Subjects at lower language proficiency levels may display different patterns of online

participation. Lastly, this study did not consider subjects' technological literacy levels. Further research can be done to investigate the correlation between technological literacy and online participation, as technological literacy is essential for students' online learning experiences and outcomes.

## Author

*Dian Jiang is a graduate student in language education. She earned her dual master's degree at University of Southern California and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, majoring in TESOL and teaching Chinese as a second language (TCSL) separately. Her research interests focus on second language acquisition.*

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