



Examining the Effects of Teacher Support and Collaborative Learning on Critical Thinking in College English Classrooms: The Mediating Role of Learning Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking has become an increasingly important learning outcome in higher education, particularly in College English classrooms, where students are expected not only to acquire linguistic knowledge but also to interpret information, evaluate evidence, compare perspectives, and construct reasoned arguments. However, the classroom processes through which critical thinking develops remain insufficiently explained. This conceptual article proposes an integrated framework in which teacher support and collaborative learning function as classroom antecedents of students' critical thinking, while learning engagement serves as a mediating mechanism. Seven theoretical propositions are developed to explain the direct and mediated relationships among the four constructs. The proposed framework contributes to College English research by shifting attention from isolated classroom variables to the learning processes through which supportive and collaborative classroom environments may promote critical thinking. The article concludes with implications for classroom practice and directions for future empirical research using structural equation modelling, longitudinal designs, classroom observation, and performance-based measures of critical thinking.

1. Introduction

Critical thinking is widely recognised as a central outcome of contemporary higher education because university students must interpret complex information, assess the credibility of evidence, identify assumptions, evaluate arguments, and justify decisions. Facione (1990) defined critical thinking as purposeful and self-regulatory judgement involving interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-monitoring. This definition emphasises that critical thinking is not equivalent to general intelligence or the simple accumulation of knowledge. Rather, it involves

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disciplined cognitive processes through which learners determine what to believe, how to interpret evidence, and whether a conclusion is adequately justified.

The importance of critical thinking has become particularly evident in information environments shaped by digital media and generative artificial intelligence. Students can now access extensive information and generate apparently coherent responses within seconds. However, rapid access to information does not necessarily result in careful evaluation, reflective judgement, or intellectual independence. Under these conditions, higher education must help students move beyond the reproduction of available answers and develop the ability to question sources, examine reasoning, distinguish evidence from assertion, and construct defensible positions.

College English classrooms represent an important context for cultivating these capabilities. In China, College English is generally offered to non-English-major undergraduates and constitutes a major component of university general education. Contemporary College English learning extends beyond grammar, vocabulary, and examination preparation. Students are increasingly required to read argumentative texts, compare perspectives, participate in discussions, evaluate information from multiple sources, and produce evidence-based oral and written responses. These activities are closely aligned with critical thinking because they require learners to interpret meanings, evaluate claims, justify opinions, and respond to alternative viewpoints.

Nevertheless, critical thinking is not automatically developed simply because students learn a foreign language or complete language-related tasks. When classroom teaching prioritises memorisation, correct answers, examination routines, and teacher-led explanation, students may participate at a surface level without analysing underlying ideas. Even collaborative activities may fail to promote critical thinking when students merely divide the work, repeat textbook content, or accept group members' contributions without evaluation. Consequently, the effectiveness of College English teaching depends not only on the availability of instructional activities but also on the extent to which students become behaviorally, emotionally, cognitively, and socially engaged in them.

Two classroom factors appear particularly relevant to this issue: teacher support and collaborative learning. Teacher support refers to students' perceptions that teachers provide clear instruction, useful feedback, emotional encouragement, interpersonal respect, learning assistance, and opportunities for autonomy. A systematic review of higher education research concluded that perceived teacher support is consistently associated with stronger student engagement, although the theoretical explanations and measurement approaches differ across educational contexts (Prananto et al., 2025). The review also identified psychological-need satisfaction, self-efficacy, motivation, classroom climate, and teacher–student relationships as important mechanisms through which teacher support may influence engagement.

Collaborative learning refers to structured learning arrangements in which students work with peers to develop understanding, solve problems, exchange explanations, and complete shared intellectual tasks. When appropriately designed, collaborative learning exposes students to alternative perspectives and requires them to articulate, defend, revise, or integrate ideas. A meta-analysis of 36 empirical studies found that collaborative problem-solving produced a substantial positive overall effect on critical thinking, although the strength of the effect varied according to instructional type, intervention duration, subject area, group size, and learning scaffolds (Xu et al., 2023).

Despite these findings, the relationships among teacher support, collaborative learning, and critical thinking remain theoretically incomplete. Teacher support and collaborative learning should not be assumed to produce critical thinking directly or automatically. Students must respond to classroom opportunities by investing attention, effort, emotion, strategic thinking, and social participation. Learning engagement may therefore be the process through which supportive teaching and collaborative activities are transformed into higher-order thinking.

This article develops a conceptual framework positioning learning engagement as a mediator between teacher support and critical thinking and between collaborative learning and critical thinking in College English classrooms. It addresses three principal questions. First, how does teacher support promote learning engagement? Second, how does collaborative learning promote learning engagement? Third, how does learning engagement contribute to critical thinking? By integrating these relationships into a single framework, the article offers a process-oriented explanation of how classroom conditions may support critical thinking development.

2. Critical Thinking in College English Classrooms

Critical thinking is a multidimensional construct that includes both cognitive skills and intellectual dispositions. Its cognitive dimension involves interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. Its dispositional dimension concerns tendencies such as open-mindedness, intellectual curiosity, truth-seeking, reflective scepticism, and willingness to reconsider one's position. A student may possess reasoning skills but fail to apply them consistently unless willing to question assumptions and engage seriously with evidence. Critical thinking therefore involves both the capacity and the inclination to reason carefully (Facione, 1990).

In College English classrooms, critical thinking is expressed through language-related academic practices. Students demonstrate critical thinking when they distinguish main claims from supporting details, determine whether evidence supports an argument, identify bias or unsupported generalisation, compare competing interpretations, explain why one conclusion is more convincing than another, and revise their positions in response to stronger evidence. Critical thinking can also be demonstrated when students evaluate online information, assess AI-generated content, identify logical inconsistencies, or construct arguments that acknowledge and respond to counterclaims.

Language learning and critical thinking are closely connected because language is not merely a tool for transmitting predetermined knowledge. It is also a means through which learners organise ideas, articulate reasoning, interact with alternative perspectives, and refine understanding. Argumentative reading and writing, classroom discussion, debate, peer feedback, problem-solving, and source evaluation can all provide opportunities for critical thinking. However, these tasks promote critical thinking only when students engage with their reasoning demands rather than treating them as mechanical language exercises.

For example, an argumentative writing activity may require students to present a position and provide supporting evidence. At a surface level, students may simply reproduce a memorised writing template. At a deeper level, they must evaluate the relevance and credibility of evidence, distinguish stronger arguments from weaker ones, anticipate objections, and revise their position when necessary. The same instructional activity may therefore produce different learning outcomes depending on the quality of students' engagement.

Research on collaborative problem-solving supports this distinction. Xu et al. (2023) found that collaborative problem-solving generally improved critical thinking, but its effectiveness depended on the structure and quality of instruction. Teaching type, intervention duration, subject area, group size, and learning scaffolds significantly moderated its effects. These findings suggest that collaboration is most productive when learners are provided with appropriate support and when tasks require substantive reasoning rather than simple information sharing.

A further issue concerns the difference between perceived critical thinking and demonstrated critical thinking. Students may describe themselves as analytical, reflective, or open-minded without consistently displaying these characteristics in actual learning tasks. Future empirical studies based on the proposed framework should therefore consider combining self-report measures with scenario-based assessments, argumentative writing, source-evaluation tasks, or classroom performance measures. Nevertheless, a conceptual explanation is first needed to clarify why particular classroom factors should influence critical thinking and through which learning processes these effects may occur.

3. Teacher Support in College English Classrooms

Teacher support refers to the instructional, emotional, interpersonal, and autonomy-related resources that students perceive teachers provide during learning. It is broader than general friendliness or teacher availability. Supportive teachers establish clear expectations, explain difficult content, provide timely feedback, recognise students' difficulties, encourage participation, respect students' viewpoints, and create opportunities for meaningful choice.

Teacher support may be understood through three interrelated dimensions. The first is instructional support, which includes clear explanations, task guidance, modelling, scaffolding, and constructive feedback. The second is emotional and relational support, which includes respect, encouragement, empathy, fairness, and willingness to assist students. The third is autonomy support, which involves acknowledging students' perspectives, explaining the relevance of learning activities, providing meaningful choices, and avoiding unnecessarily controlling language.

Autonomy support does not mean that teachers withdraw structure or allow students to work without clear expectations. Rather, autonomy-supportive teaching combines meaningful student agency with sufficient instructional guidance. Reeve and Cheon (2021) explained that autonomy-supportive teaching is malleable and can improve educational practice by helping students experience learning activities as personally meaningful rather than externally imposed. Similarly, Jang et al. (2010) demonstrated that autonomy support and classroom structure are complementary: students are more likely to engage when teachers provide both opportunities for agency and adequate guidance regarding how to participate successfully.

These dimensions are particularly important in College English classrooms. Foreign-language learning frequently requires students to speak publicly, produce imperfect language, respond without complete preparation, and expose their ideas to evaluation. Such conditions can create anxiety, embarrassment, and fear of making mistakes. When students perceive teachers as judgemental, dismissive, or excessively controlling, they may avoid participation and rely on safe, reproductive learning strategies. By contrast, supportive teachers can normalise error as part of learning, encourage intellectual risk-taking, and help students remain involved in demanding tasks.

Teacher support may promote engagement through several processes. Clear instructions reduce uncertainty and allow students to direct cognitive resources towards the substantive demands of a task. Constructive feedback helps learners identify strengths, weaknesses, and appropriate strategies for improvement. Emotional encouragement reduces fear of negative evaluation, while autonomy-supportive practices increase the perceived relevance and personal value of learning activities. Respectful responses to students' opinions create psychological safety and make students more willing to contribute to classroom discussion.

The relationship between teacher support and student engagement is supported by higher education research. Prananto et al. (2025) found that perceived teacher support was associated with engagement through internal factors such as psychological-need satisfaction and self-efficacy, as well as contextual factors such as classroom climate and teacher–student relationships. The findings suggest that support is not a single teacher behaviour but a classroom resource that shapes students' motivation, confidence, participation, and persistence.

Teacher support may also have a direct relationship with critical thinking. Teachers influence the intellectual expectations of a classroom by determining which questions are asked, what constitutes an acceptable explanation, whether alternative perspectives are considered, and how evidence is evaluated. A teacher who regularly asks students to justify claims, compare evidence, consider counterarguments, and explain their reasoning creates stronger conditions for critical thinking than a teacher who rewards only recall and linguistic accuracy.

Instructional feedback can directly encourage critical thinking when it moves beyond identifying grammatical mistakes. For example, rather than merely correcting vocabulary or sentence structure, a teacher may ask whether a claim is sufficiently supported, whether a source is credible, whether the reasoning contains an unstated assumption, or whether a counterargument has been considered. Such feedback directs students' attention towards the quality of reasoning.

However, teacher practices alone cannot guarantee critical thinking. A teacher may provide challenging questions and sophisticated feedback, but students must still attend to the feedback, participate in discussion, persist through difficulty, and reconsider their understanding. Learning engagement is therefore likely to explain an important proportion of the relationship between teacher support and critical thinking.

Proposition 1: Teacher support is positively associated with students' learning engagement in College English classrooms.

Proposition 2: Teacher support is positively associated with students' critical thinking in College English classrooms.

4. Collaborative Learning in College English Classrooms

Collaborative learning is an instructional approach in which students work together to construct knowledge, solve problems, evaluate ideas, and accomplish shared learning objectives. It differs from unstructured group work because effective collaboration requires meaningful interdependence, individual accountability, reciprocal participation, and cognitively productive interaction.

From a social constructivist perspective, knowledge develops through interaction with others rather than solely through individual reception. Vygotsky (1978) argued that social interaction and guided participation support cognitive development by enabling learners to perform beyond what they could achieve independently. Through interaction, learners externalise their thinking, receive responses from others, identify differences in interpretation, and reconstruct understanding through negotiation.

In collaborative learning, students may explain ideas, question one another, compare evidence, justify positions, identify weaknesses in reasoning, and develop shared conclusions. Such interaction can make implicit thinking visible. Once students articulate their reasoning, their claims become available for examination by both themselves and their peers. Collaborative dialogue can therefore promote reflection and revision in ways that individual task completion may not.

Collaborative learning is especially relevant to College English because language learning requires communication. Group discussions, peer review, collaborative writing, problem-solving, role-based debates, and joint presentations can increase opportunities for meaningful language use. These activities can simultaneously promote critical thinking when students must explain conclusions, assess peers' evidence, resolve disagreement, and defend interpretations.

Gillies (2016) argued that cooperative learning is most effective when students are taught how to interact productively, ask questions, provide elaborated explanations, and support one another's learning. Consequently, effective collaboration requires purposeful instructional design. Teachers must establish shared goals, clarify individual responsibilities, structure interaction, and ensure that tasks require the integration of different contributions.

Collaboration is not inherently productive. Students may divide a task into separate parts without integrating their thinking. More proficient learners may dominate discussion, while other members remain passive. Groups may prioritise harmony and rapid task completion rather than careful evaluation. Students may also avoid challenging weak arguments because they fear interpersonal conflict. Therefore, the effects of collaborative learning depend on task structure, group norms, teacher scaffolding, individual accountability, and the intellectual quality of peer interaction.

Collaborative learning may promote engagement because it increases opportunities for participation and provides students with social and academic support. In a study of College English programmes, Li (2025) examined the relationship between collaborative learning and student engagement through peer support and found that peer support mediated the relationship, while group size moderated the association between peer support and engagement. The findings indicate that collaboration may strengthen engagement by creating responsive peer relationships, although its benefits depend partly on the organisation of the group.

Collaborative problem-solving also appears to support critical thinking directly. Xu et al.'s (2023) meta-analysis found a significant positive overall effect of collaborative problem-solving on critical thinking. The effect was stronger for critical-thinking dispositions than for cognitive skills and varied according to instructional and organisational conditions. These findings indicate that collaboration can provide opportunities for perspective comparison, cognitive conflict, argumentation, and reflective revision, but that such outcomes should not be assumed merely because students are placed in groups.

Learning engagement remains essential within this relationship. Collaborative activities generate opportunities, but students must become behaviorally involved, emotionally willing, cognitively invested, and socially responsive. A student who attends a group discussion but contributes minimally may benefit little from the interaction. Similarly, a student who speaks frequently but does not evaluate peers' ideas may display behavioral participation without meaningful cognitive engagement.

The quality of students' involvement may therefore explain why the same collaborative task produces different outcomes among learners. Those who actively listen, question evidence, compare viewpoints, and revise their understanding are more likely to develop critical thinking than those who participate only to satisfy task requirements.

Proposition 3: Collaborative learning is positively associated with students' learning engagement in College English classrooms.

Proposition 4: Collaborative learning is positively associated with students' critical thinking in College English classrooms.

5. Learning Engagement

Learning engagement refers to the quality and intensity of students' involvement in academic activities. Rather than arising solely from individual characteristics, engagement develops through interactions among learners' personal characteristics, relationships, educational activities, and institutional or classroom conditions (Kahu, 2013). This perspective is relevant to the present framework because it positions engagement at the intersection of classroom environment and student learning processes.

Fredricks et al. (2004) conceptualised engagement as a multidimensional construct comprising behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Behavioral engagement concerns participation, effort, persistence, attention, and task completion. Emotional engagement includes interest, enjoyment, value, belonging, and emotional reactions to teachers, peers, and learning activities. Cognitive engagement involves strategic learning, psychological investment, self-regulation, and willingness to exert the effort required to understand complex ideas.

In language education, engagement also has a particularly strong social and language-focused dimension because language learning frequently occurs through communication and interaction. Svalberg (2009) conceptualised engagement with language as involving cognitive, affective, and social dimensions through which learners actively attend to, analyse, and interact with linguistic knowledge. Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) similarly emphasised that language learner engagement is shaped by the interaction of learners, teachers, peers, classroom relationships, tasks, and motivational conditions.

The present framework therefore conceptualises learning engagement through four closely related dimensions: behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social engagement. Although these dimensions can be distinguished conceptually, they function together in authentic classroom learning. A student may be physically present and complete assigned work while remaining emotionally detached and cognitively superficial. Conversely, a student may be intellectually interested but reluctant to participate socially because of language anxiety. Meaningful engagement

therefore involves more than visible participation.

5.1 Behavioral engagement

Behavioral engagement is reflected in attendance, attention, participation, persistence, preparation, and completion of learning tasks. In College English classrooms, it may include contributing to discussions, completing reading activities, revising written work, responding to feedback, preparing for collaborative tasks, and remaining involved when language activities become difficult.

Behavioral engagement increases students' exposure to learning opportunities. Learners who regularly participate in discussions, complete argumentative tasks, and respond to feedback have more opportunities to practise reasoning than students who remain passive. However, participation alone is insufficient for critical thinking. A student may complete a task without questioning information or examining the quality of an argument. Behavioral engagement must therefore be accompanied by cognitive and emotional investment.

5.2 Emotional engagement

Emotional engagement includes interest, enjoyment, perceived value, confidence, belonging, and emotional connection to learning. Positive emotional engagement can sustain participation in demanding activities, whereas anxiety, boredom, frustration, and fear of evaluation may reduce students' willingness to communicate or consider challenging ideas.

Critical thinking frequently involves uncertainty. Students may need to question familiar beliefs, acknowledge weaknesses in their arguments, or accept that an alternative interpretation is more convincing. Learners who feel psychologically safe and who value the activity are more likely to tolerate such uncertainty. Teacher encouragement and supportive peer interaction can therefore strengthen emotional engagement by making students feel respected and secure enough to take intellectual risks.

5.3 Cognitive engagement

Cognitive engagement refers to the depth of students' mental investment in learning. Cognitively engaged students seek understanding rather than minimal task completion. They connect ideas, monitor comprehension, evaluate information, reconsider interpretations, and persist when reasoning becomes difficult.

This dimension is particularly important for critical thinking because analysis, evaluation, inference, and reflective judgement require sustained cognitive effort. Students must attend to the relationships among claims, evidence, assumptions, and conclusions. They must compare alternatives and monitor whether their own reasoning is consistent. Superficial participation is unlikely to produce these outcomes.

5.4 Social engagement

Social engagement concerns active and reciprocal involvement with teachers and peers. In College English classrooms, students demonstrate social engagement when they listen carefully, respond to others' contributions, build on peers' ideas, ask for clarification, provide constructive feedback, and contribute to shared reasoning.

Social engagement does not refer simply to sociability or interpersonal interaction. It concerns participation that advances learning. A socially engaged student treats peers' ideas as intellectual

resources, responds to disagreement, and helps maintain a productive exchange. This dimension connects collaborative learning with individual cognitive development by transforming peer interaction into opportunities for questioning, explanation, and revision.

6. Learning Engagement and Critical Thinking

Learning engagement may promote critical thinking through several complementary mechanisms. First, behavioral engagement increases students' exposure to cognitively demanding activities. Students cannot develop reasoning through classroom discussion, argumentative writing, peer feedback, or evidence evaluation unless they participate and persist in these activities.

Repeated participation is important because critical thinking develops through practice rather than through the simple explanation of reasoning principles. Students need opportunities to apply evaluative criteria, make inferences, defend interpretations, receive responses, and reconsider conclusions. Behavioral engagement provides the continuity necessary for such practice.

Second, emotional engagement influences whether students are willing to tolerate uncertainty and intellectual challenge. Critical thinking often requires learners to recognise that their initial interpretations may be incomplete or incorrect. It may also require them to defend a position publicly and respond to criticism. Students who perceive value in the activity and feel psychologically safe are more likely to remain involved when their ideas are questioned.

Third, cognitive engagement directly supports the mental operations involved in critical thinking. Analysis, evaluation, inference, and reflection require students to allocate attention, connect information, compare alternatives, monitor understanding, and justify decisions. Cognitively engaged learners move beyond identifying information to examining how conclusions have been constructed and whether the available evidence is sufficient.

Fourth, social engagement exposes learners to alternative viewpoints. Critical thinking can be strengthened when students encounter disagreement, explain their reasoning, evaluate peers' claims, and revise positions in response to evidence. Interaction may reveal assumptions or logical weaknesses that are difficult for an individual learner to recognise independently.

The relationship between engagement and critical thinking is consistent with Social Cognitive Theory. Bandura (1986) proposed that learning and behavior emerge through reciprocal interactions among environmental conditions, personal processes, and actions. In the present framework, teacher support and collaborative learning constitute classroom environmental factors. Learning engagement represents students' active behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social responses to these conditions. Critical thinking represents a higher-order learning outcome that may emerge from sustained participation in reasoning-oriented activities.

Engagement should not be treated merely as another desirable educational outcome. Its primary theoretical value in the present model lies in explaining why similar classroom environments may produce different results among students. Two students may receive the same teacher feedback and participate in the same collaborative activity but differ in attention, emotional investment, persistence, and cognitive processing. Consequently, their critical thinking outcomes may also differ.

Proposition 5: Learning engagement is positively associated with students' critical thinking in College English classrooms.

7. The Mediating Role of Learning Engagement

A mediating mechanism explains how or why an antecedent is associated with an outcome. In the proposed framework, teacher support and collaborative learning are expected to influence critical thinking partly because they shape students' learning engagement.

7.1 Learning engagement as a mediator between teacher support and critical thinking

Teacher support can create favourable conditions for engagement by reducing uncertainty, strengthening perceptions of competence, supporting autonomy, and establishing interpersonal safety. Students who perceive that their teacher values their contributions and provides useful guidance are more likely to participate, persist, ask questions, revise their work, and invest cognitively.

These forms of engagement bring students into sustained contact with the reasoning practices through which critical thinking develops. For example, teacher feedback may encourage students to reconsider the quality of their evidence. However, the feedback is unlikely to influence critical thinking if students ignore it or make only superficial corrections. Students must attend to the feedback, evaluate its relevance, and revise their reasoning. Engagement therefore transforms the instructional resource into an active learning process.

Autonomy support may similarly influence critical thinking through engagement. When students are given meaningful choices and understand the purpose of a task, they may become more willing to examine ideas deeply and take responsibility for their conclusions. Emotional support may reduce anxiety and increase willingness to contribute uncertain or incomplete ideas to discussion. Instructional support may help students understand the reasoning procedures required by a task.

Accordingly, teacher support may not improve critical thinking merely because the teacher is supportive. Rather, it improves the likelihood that students will use available classroom opportunities actively and thoughtfully. Engagement functions as the mechanism through which external support is translated into student learning behavior and cognitive investment.

Proposition 6: Learning engagement mediates the relationship between teacher support and students' critical thinking in College English classrooms.

7.2 Learning engagement as a mediator between collaborative learning and critical thinking

Collaborative learning can create opportunities for engagement by requiring students to communicate, coordinate, explain, compare, and evaluate ideas. Nevertheless, these opportunities produce critical thinking only when students become genuinely involved in the collaborative process.

Behavioral engagement leads students to contribute and remain involved in the task. Emotional engagement sustains their willingness to interact, tolerate disagreement, and respond to feedback. Cognitive engagement encourages them to evaluate evidence, identify assumptions, and integrate viewpoints. Social engagement enables reciprocal reasoning through listening, questioning, explaining, and building on others' contributions.

For example, a group debate may expose students to conflicting positions. However, students will benefit only if they attend to opposing arguments, assess the evidence, and reconsider their own position. A student who simply recites a prepared statement may participate behaviorally without becoming cognitively engaged. Similarly, peer review will promote critical thinking only when students examine the reasoning in one another's work rather than provide general or superficial comments.

Learning engagement therefore helps explain why well-designed collaborative learning can promote critical thinking while poorly implemented group work may not. Collaboration provides the social and instructional opportunity, whereas engagement determines how extensively and deeply students use that opportunity.

Proposition 7: Learning engagement mediates the relationship between collaborative learning and students' critical thinking in College English classrooms.

8. Theoretical Foundation

8.1 Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory provides the principal theoretical foundation for the proposed model. Bandura (1986) argued that human functioning develops through reciprocal interactions among environmental influences, personal factors, and behavior. Individuals do not respond mechanically to their environments. Instead, environmental conditions influence personal beliefs and actions, while individuals also interpret and shape those conditions through their behavior.

Within the proposed framework, teacher support and collaborative learning represent classroom environmental factors. They provide instructional, relational, and social resources that may influence students' responses to learning. Learning engagement represents the behavioral and psychological processes through which students act upon those resources. Critical thinking represents a higher-order learning outcome associated with sustained participation and cognitive investment.

The theory helps explain why the relationships should not be understood as purely direct. A supportive teacher cannot perform the student's reasoning, and a collaborative task cannot guarantee that participants will evaluate ideas. Classroom conditions influence critical thinking through students' active responses. Engagement therefore occupies a theoretically meaningful position between the learning environment and the learning outcome.

8.2 Social Constructivism

Social constructivism complements Social Cognitive Theory by explaining the role of

interaction and shared meaning-making. Vygotsky (1978) maintained that higher psychological processes initially develop through social interaction before becoming internalised by the learner. Language, dialogue, and guided participation enable learners to engage in cognitive activities that may exceed their independent capabilities.

This perspective supports the proposed effects of both teacher support and collaborative learning. Teachers provide scaffolding through questions, explanations, modelling, and feedback. Peers provide alternative viewpoints, clarification, challenges, and shared interpretations. Through dialogue, students externalise their reasoning and make it available for evaluation.

The theory also clarifies why social engagement is relevant to critical thinking. Students do not develop critical thinking solely by receiving information from others. They must participate in interaction by explaining, questioning, evaluating, and revising ideas. Social interaction creates the opportunity for knowledge construction, while engagement determines the learner's active contribution to that process.

8.3 The multidimensional engagement framework

The multidimensional engagement framework explains the different ways in which students become involved in learning. Fredricks et al. (2004) identified behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement as interconnected components. Kahu (2013) later situated engagement within a broader framework involving structural and psychosocial influences, educational interfaces, engagement itself, and immediate and longer-term outcomes.

Language-learning research has further highlighted the social dimension of engagement because interaction is central to language development. Svalberg (2009) emphasised cognitive, affective, and social engagement with language, while Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) discussed engagement as a contextual and relational process shaped by learner characteristics, teacher practices, peers, tasks, and classroom culture.

Integrating these perspectives allows the present framework to treat engagement as more than participation. It includes what students do, how they feel, how deeply they think, and how they interact with others. This multidimensional interpretation is necessary for explaining the development of critical thinking in College English classrooms.

9. Proposed Conceptual Framework

The proposed conceptual framework is represented below:

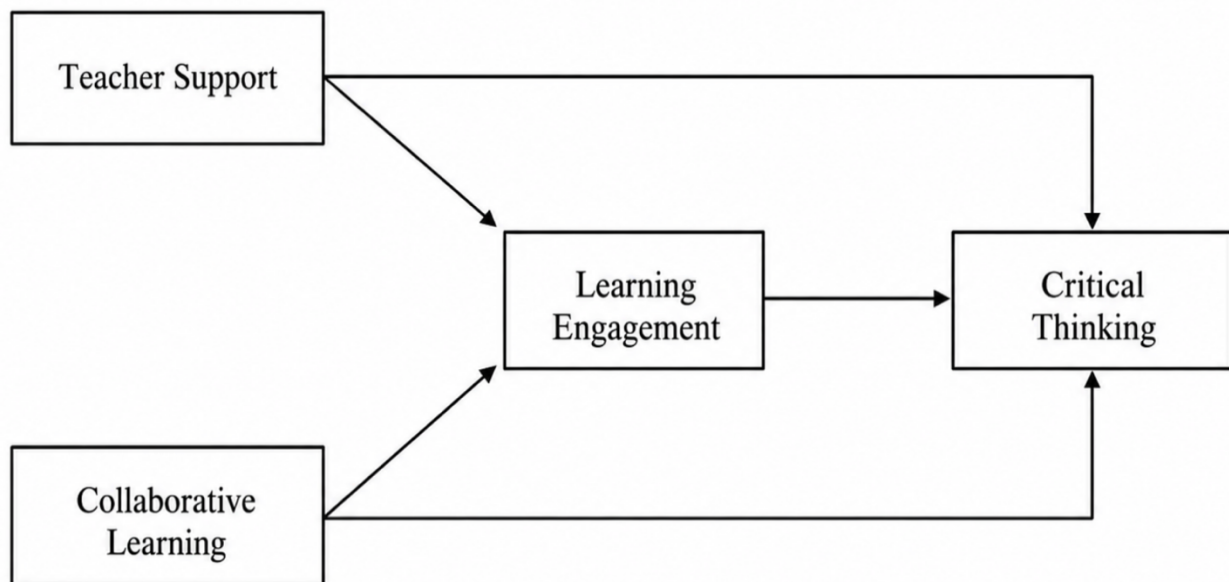


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The framework includes five direct relationships:

1. Teacher support is associated with learning engagement.
2. Collaborative learning is associated with learning engagement.
3. Teacher support is associated with critical thinking.
4. Collaborative learning is associated with critical thinking.
5. Learning engagement is associated with critical thinking.

It also includes two mediated relationships:

1. Teacher support to learning engagement to critical thinking.
2. Collaborative learning to learning engagement to critical thinking.

The direct paths from teacher support and collaborative learning to critical thinking should remain in future empirical models because complete mediation should not be assumed. Teacher support may influence critical thinking directly through explicit questioning, modelling, feedback, and reasoning scaffolds. Collaborative learning may similarly affect critical thinking directly by exposing students to different perspectives and creating cognitive conflict.

The inclusion of both direct and indirect paths would allow future researchers to determine whether learning engagement partially or fully mediates these relationships. Partial mediation would indicate that teacher support and collaborative learning influence critical thinking both through engagement and through additional mechanisms. Full mediation would indicate that their effects operate primarily through students' engagement.

10. Theoretical Contributions

The proposed framework makes several theoretical contributions to research on College English education.

First, it integrates classroom context, student learning processes, and higher-order outcomes into a single model. Previous studies have often examined teacher support, collaborative learning, engagement, or critical thinking separately. The present framework explains how these constructs may function together rather than treating them as isolated educational variables.

Second, the framework positions learning engagement as a mechanism rather than merely an outcome. Engagement is frequently studied as something that teachers and institutions should increase. The present article extends this perspective by suggesting that engagement is also the process through which classroom conditions may contribute to critical thinking.

Third, the model applies a multidimensional interpretation of engagement. Behavioral participation alone cannot adequately explain critical thinking development. Emotional, cognitive, and social engagement are also necessary because students must value the task, tolerate uncertainty, invest mentally, interact with others, and remain open to revising their ideas.

Fourth, the framework distinguishes between the availability of learning opportunities and students' use of those opportunities. Teacher support and collaborative learning create conditions that can facilitate critical thinking, but engagement determines whether students participate sufficiently deeply to benefit from them.

Fifth, the framework contributes to College English research by connecting language-learning processes with broader graduate competencies. Critical thinking is not treated as separate from language learning but as an outcome that may develop through critical reading, discussion, argumentation, writing, peer evaluation, and reflective language use.

Finally, the model offers a theoretically coherent foundation for future empirical analysis. Rather than selecting variables solely on the basis of statistical association, researchers can test a model grounded in environmental, social, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive explanations of learning.

11. Practical Implications

The conceptual framework suggests that College English teachers should not focus solely on designing critical-thinking tasks. They should also establish the engagement conditions that enable students to benefit from those tasks.

Teachers can strengthen instructional support by providing clear task goals, modelling the reasoning process, offering criteria for evaluating evidence, and giving feedback that requires students to make intellectual decisions rather than simply correct language errors. For example, feedback on argumentative writing might ask whether the evidence is relevant, whether the source is credible, whether an alternative interpretation has been considered, and whether the conclusion follows from the reasoning presented.

Emotional and relational support can be strengthened by treating mistakes as opportunities for learning, acknowledging students' perspectives, responding respectfully to disagreement, and ensuring that participation does not expose students to humiliation. Such practices are especially important when learners are expected to express complex ideas in a foreign language.

Teachers can also support autonomy by explaining why a task matters, allowing students to

choose relevant topics or sources, and inviting them to develop their own positions. However, autonomy should be combined with appropriate structure. Students still need clear expectations, reasoning criteria, examples, and scaffolds to participate productively.

Collaborative tasks should require genuine intellectual interdependence. Rather than assigning each group member a separate section, teachers can require students to compare sources, rank evidence, evaluate competing claims, construct joint arguments, and respond to counterarguments. Roles such as evidence evaluator, counterargument developer, questioner, and synthesis writer can help ensure accountability.

Peer feedback should be structured around reasoning rather than grammar alone. Students may be asked to identify the central claim, evaluate the evidence, detect assumptions, assess logical consistency, and recommend revisions. Rubrics and guiding questions can help students engage critically rather than provide vague praise.

Teachers should also monitor the quality of engagement. Frequent participation does not necessarily indicate cognitive investment. Classroom observation, reflective journals, learning logs, peer evaluation, and short metacognitive prompts can help teachers determine whether students are reasoning deeply or merely completing activities.

Institutional support may also be required. College English programmes can provide professional development on autonomy-supportive teaching, collaborative task design, argumentation scaffolds, and engagement assessment. Curriculum and assessment systems should reward analysis, evidence evaluation, and reasoned communication rather than relying exclusively on language accuracy and standardised examination performance.

12.Directions for Future Research

Future studies should empirically test the proposed relationships in Chinese College English classrooms. A cross-sectional survey using structural equation modelling could provide an initial assessment of the direct and indirect relationships. Teacher support and collaborative learning could be modelled as exogenous constructs, learning engagement as a mediator, and critical thinking as the final endogenous outcome.

PLS-SEM may be appropriate when the research objective emphasises prediction, mediation, and the explanation of variance. Researchers should nevertheless justify the choice between PLS-SEM and covariance-based SEM according to the research purpose, theoretical maturity, measurement characteristics, and model specifications.

Future measurement should preserve the multidimensional nature of learning engagement. Behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social engagement could be modelled as dimensions of a higher-order engagement construct. Before testing structural relationships, researchers should assess indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and collinearity.

Longitudinal research would provide stronger evidence regarding temporal ordering. Teacher support and collaborative learning could be measured early in a semester, engagement during the middle of the semester, and critical thinking towards the end. Such a design would be more consistent with the proposed process than measuring all constructs at the same time.

Experimental or quasi-experimental studies could compare conventional College English teaching with instruction that combines autonomy-supportive teaching, structured collaboration, and explicit engagement strategies. These designs would provide stronger evidence concerning whether changes in classroom practices lead to changes in engagement and critical thinking.

Future studies should also use multiple data sources. Teacher support may be assessed through student perceptions and classroom observation. Collaborative learning may be evaluated using interaction-quality rubrics or analysis of recorded group discussions. Engagement may be assessed through self-report, teacher ratings, observation, participation records, and learning analytics.

Critical thinking should ideally be assessed using performance-based measures rather than self-report alone. Suitable assessments might include argumentative writing, evidence-evaluation tasks, scenario-based judgement tests, source-comparison activities, and recorded classroom discussions. Performance-based measures would reduce the risk that findings reflect only students' perceptions of their reasoning abilities.

Multilevel research is also needed because students are nested within classes and teachers. Teacher support and collaborative learning may partly operate as classroom-level conditions, whereas engagement and critical thinking vary among individual students. Multilevel structural equation modelling could distinguish individual perceptions from shared classroom experiences.

Finally, future research should examine boundary conditions. Language proficiency, foreign-language anxiety, group size, task type, assessment design, prior academic achievement, classroom climate, and students' familiarity with collaborative learning may strengthen or weaken the proposed relationships.

13. Conclusion

This conceptual article proposes that teacher support and collaborative learning are important classroom antecedents of critical thinking in College English education and that learning engagement functions as a central mediating mechanism. Supportive teachers provide instructional clarity, feedback, emotional encouragement, autonomy support, and psychological safety. Collaborative learning creates opportunities for explanation, perspective comparison, negotiation, evaluation, and shared problem-solving.

However, these classroom conditions are unlikely to promote critical thinking unless students respond through behavioral participation, emotional investment, cognitive effort, and social interaction. Learning engagement explains how external classroom resources may be translated into the active learning processes necessary for critical thinking.

By positioning engagement between classroom conditions and critical thinking, the framework provides a more complete explanation of how higher-order learning may develop in College English classrooms. It also emphasises that promoting critical thinking requires more than adding discussion or group work. Teachers must establish supportive and appropriately structured environments in which students are willing and able to engage deeply with ideas, evidence, reasoning, and alternative perspectives.

The proposed framework provides a foundation for future empirical research investigating the direct effects of teacher support and collaborative learning and the mediating role of learning

engagement. Its eventual testing may offer practical evidence regarding how College English classrooms can be designed to support both language learning and the development of critical, independent, and reflective thinkers.

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