

Bridging the Participation Gap in Hybrid EFL Contexts: A Conceptual Synthesis of TPACK and Social Presence Theory

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ABSTRACT

The shift toward hybrid learning in university level EFL classrooms has introduced unique challenges, particularly regarding the engagement gap between physical and virtual environments. While face to face sessions tend to facilitate natural interaction, the online component often suffers from a participation challenge that limits students' opportunities for authentic language practice and critical thinking. This conceptual paper aims to identify factors contributing to this decline engagement, ranging from technical barriers and diminished motivation to the sense of psychological isolation students experience when separated from their peer. By synthesizing the TPACK framework and Social Presence Theory, this study proposes a more cohesive hybrid pedagogical approach. The proposed model transcends basic digital literacy by advocating for the strategic use of interactive online methods, gamification elements to boost intrinsic drive, and Project Based Learning (PjBL) to foster collaborative inquiry. The discussions emphasize that bridging this engagement gap requires educators to be not only technically proficient but also pedagogically wise in creating inclusive digital spaces. Ultimately, this conceptual framework provides practical guidance for EFL practitioners to transform passive online presence into active and meaningful learning experiences.

Hibrit EFL Ortamlarında Katılım Açığını Kapatmak: TPACK ve Sosyal Varlık Teorisinin Kavramsal Bir Sentezi

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ÖZET

Üniversite düzeyindeki EFL (Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce) sınıflarında hibrit öğrenmeye geçiş, özellikle fiziksel ve sanal ortamlar arasındaki katılım boşluğuyla ilgili benzersiz zorlukları beraberinde getirmiştir. Yüz yüze oturumlar doğal etkileşimi kolaylaştırma eğilimindeyken, çevrimiçi bileşen genellikle öğrencilerin özgün dil pratiği ve eleştirel düşünme fırsatlarını sınırlandıran bir katılım sorunundan muzdariptir. Bu kavramsal çalışma, teknik engellerden ve azalan motivasyondan, öğrencilerin akranlarından ayrıldıklarında yaşadıkları psikolojik izolasyon hissine kadar bu katılım düşüşüne katkıda bulunan faktörleri tanımlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma, TPACK çerçevesini ve Sosyal Bulunluluk Teorisini sentezleyerek daha uyumlu bir hibrit pedagojik yaklaşım önermektedir. Önerilen model, işbirlikçi sorgulamayı teşvik etmek için etkileşimli çevrimiçi yöntemlerin stratejik kullanımını, içsel motivasyonu artırmak için oyunlaştırma unsurlarını ve Proje Tabanlı Öğrenmeyi (PjBL) savunarak temel dijital okuryazarlığın ötesine geçmektedir. Tartışmalar, bu katılım boşluğunu kapatmanın eğitimcilerin yalnızca teknik olarak yetkin olmalarını değil, aynı zamanda kapsayıcı dijital alanlar yaratmada pedagojik olarak bilge olmalarını gerektirdiğini vurgulamaktadır. Sonuç olarak, bu kavramsal çerçeve, EFL uygulayıcılarının pasif çevrimiçi varlığı aktif ve anlamlı öğrenme deneyimlerine dönüştürmeleri için pratik rehberlik sağlamaktadır.

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INTRODUCTION

The landscape of Higher Education in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context has undergone a significant transformation, primarily driven by the integration of hybrid learning models as a permanent educational standard. This shift reflects a necessary evolution where the combination of face-to-face and online learning is tailored to student characteristics, readiness, and learning autonomy (Sukiman et al., 2022), a trend that is likely to continue in the post-pandemic era (Cahyono et al., 2024). Furthermore, hybrid environments have been found to enhance self-determined motivation and learner autonomy by providing a balanced synergy between real-time interaction and flexible, self-paced learning (Labbafi et al., 2025; Sajib & Vhabna, 2026). Online education, in this regard, has the potential to enrich foreign language learning by offering high-quality experiences (Wu, 2023; Jiang et al., 2023; Lei et al., 2022). However, the effectiveness of this scalable model heavily relies on well-designed environments and supportive instructor behavior to mitigate emotional challenges and optimize the overall learning experience (Ablaña et al., 2025; Karimi & Ashkani, 2025; Liu & Phonggsatha, 2025).

Despite the noted advantages of hybrid models, a critical "paradox of participation" remains a significant hurdle in higher education EFL settings. While students often appreciate how hybrid environments accommodate contextual needs and mitigate initial anxiety (Rofiah et al., 2025), many still harbor pessimistic perceptions toward transitioning into fully online components (Gamage et al., 2022). In these digital spaces, Li and Dewaele (2020) along with Solhi (2024) suggest that EFL learners frequently perceive lower levels of social and academic presence, which adversely influences their emotional dispositions and overall motivation.

Furthermore, as reported by Sendi and Alsaedi (2026), participants often encounter formidable challenges such as frustration with online systems, difficulty in tracking progress, and maintaining focus amidst technical disruptions. This reduction in social presence can lead to diminished engagement compared to natural face-to-face interactions. Ultimately, Nurhayati and Hanafiah (2026) underscore that without strong instructor support and intentionally designed interactive activities, the online component of hybrid learning risks becoming a passive space rather than a platform for authentic language practice. Student participation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class is very important for language skill development (Choukaier et al., 2024), especially for speaking and listening skills (Zannah et al., 2024; Chen, 2024). However, in online teaching, student participation is often lower compared to face-to-face classes. In face-to-face classes, students can directly interact with the teacher and classmates, which encourages them to be more active in discussions and learning activities. On the other hand, in online classes, limited interaction, such as the lack of face-to-face communication, often makes students participate less.

Review of Related Literature

Recent studies show that there are significant challenges in increasing student participation in online classes, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. A study by Zboun & Farrah (2021) found that although online learning offers flexibility, many students struggle to participate actively due to factors such as a lack of social engagement, technical difficulties, and discomfort with virtual communication. A study by Donelan et al. (2025) identified that in online classes, students tend to be more passive and reluctant to speak, which contributes to a decline in their speaking and listening skills. This suggests that online classes often create challenges in direct communication and collaboration between students and teachers.

Several theories support the study of participation in online learning. One is the Social Presence Theory, The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model emphasizes three interconnected aspects of online learning: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Garrison et al. (2000) explain that

effective online learning occurs when these three aspects are well-established, enabling students to interact with their teachers and peers while engaging in critical. Another relevant theory is The Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework is used to explore how teachers integrate technology, pedagogy, and content in teaching. TPACK is highly relevant in the context of teaching English through digital platforms (Luo, 2022; Ma et al., 2024; Alhamid, 2024) because teachers need to combine technology with appropriate teaching strategies and materials that meet students' needs. According to Mishra and Koehler (2006), TPACK highlights the importance of the relationship between three core elements: content (C), pedagogy (P), and technology (T). Teachers must have a strong understanding not only of the English content they teach but also of how to use digital platforms effectively and creatively to support learning goals (Lim et al., 2023; Shiu, 2024; Sierra, 2024).

Various strategies have been suggested to improve participation in online EFL classes. According to some studies, using gamification techniques and project-based learning can enhance student engagement in online learning (Ardhyantama, V et al., 2020; Chukwu, J. , 2023). Gamification creates elements of competition and rewards that encourage students to participate actively, while project-based learning provides opportunities for students to work collaboratively in real-world contexts. Additionally, using interactive digital tools such as online discussion apps and integrated video conferencing can help increase student involvement (Almusharraf, N et.al, 2022).

Despite the growing body of empirical research on hybrid learning challenges, there remains a notable scarcity of deeper conceptual analysis that connects these issues to robust theoretical frameworks. Many existing studies focus primarily on the technical or practical aspects of technology integration, yet often neglect the original conceptual underpinnings that govern student interaction and engagement. Without conceptual clarity, efforts to bridge the participation gap may result in shaky or vague foundations, leading to misconceptions about how digital tools should be pedagogically employed. Specifically, there is a lack of synthesis between the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework, which delineates teacher competence, and Social Presence Theory, which addresses the psychological connection of learners. This article argues that a cohesive pedagogical approach requires a synergy between these two pillars to transform passive online presence into active and meaningful learning experiences.

In light of these gaps, this article aims to provide a comprehensive conceptual synthesis of the TPACK framework and Social Presence Theory to address the participation gap in hybrid EFL contexts. The discussion begins by re-examining the theoretical foundations of both frameworks as the pillars of modern digital pedagogy. Subsequently, the article proposes a unified model that integrates pedagogical wisdom with social connection strategies, such as gamification and Project-Based Learning (PjBL). By doing so, this paper seeks to offer practical implications for EFL practitioners and policymakers to foster a more inclusive and interactive hybrid learning environment. Ultimately, this conceptual analysis serves as a foundation for reimagining how technology can be humanized to enhance student engagement in the digital era.

Effects of Low Students' Participation on Language Learning

Low student participation in online classes can negatively affect English language learning, especially in developing speaking, listening, and critical thinking skills (Iftanti, E. et al., 2023). In EFL learning, active participation is crucial because direct involvement with the teacher and classmates gives students the chance to practice, receive feedback, and deepen their understanding of the language. If students do not participate actively, their language acquisition process may be hindered, which affects their overall progress in English, those are:

Speaking Skills

Active involvement in class discussions and interaction with peers is key to improving speaking skills in English. In face-to-face classes, students have the chance to speak directly with the teacher and classmates. However, in online classes, students' inactivity can reduce their chances to practice speaking in the target language. When students rarely participate, they miss opportunities to practice their verbal expression, which leads to limitations in their speaking ability. The decrease in participation in online learning can also affect students' confidence in speaking (Permatasari et.al,2024). Many students feel nervous or uncomfortable speaking in front of the camera, especially without direct interaction with classmates. This anxiety can prevent them from speaking more, which directly impacts their speaking skills in English

Listening Skills

Listening skills are greatly influenced by direct interaction in class. In online classes, when student participation is low (Hassan et al., 2023), they may not engage in conversations or discussions that allow them to listen to various accents, vocabulary, and sentence structures used in real-life contexts. This reduces their exposure to the target language and slows down their ability to understand spoken language, which is essential in language acquisition. Additionally, inactivity in online classes can reduce opportunities to hear direct feedback from the teacher. In language learning, receiving feedback is very important for improving pronunciation, intonation, and understanding of the messages conveyed in conversations. Without interaction, students cannot hear or process constructive feedback.

Critical Thinking Skills

Active participation also significantly impacts critical thinking ability. In English language learning, discussions and collaboration among students often lead to a deeper understanding of the material being studied. When students engage in discussions or answer questions in class, they are forced to think critically, evaluate information, and form arguments in English. However, in online classes with low participation (Herwati, T. I et al., 2021), the opportunity for critical thinking becomes limited. Without dynamic interaction, students cannot test their understanding through conversations or discussions, which reduces their ability to think analytically and develop a deeper understanding of the language. Additionally low critical thinking cause students difficult to solve the problem (Herwati et al., 2020)

Motivation and Engagement

Low participation in online classes can lower students' motivation to learn English (Tasneem ,2021). Without sufficient engagement, students may feel more isolated and lose their connection to the learning material and the teacher. They may also feel they have no clear goals or that their efforts are not valued, which can ultimately lead to a decrease in motivation to participate further in the learning process (Ginting, 2021). Thus, low participation can hinder various aspects of language development, including speaking, listening, critical thinking, and motivation to continue learning. Therefore, it is important to identify and address the factors that cause low participation in order to enhance the quality of language learning in online classes.

Strategies for Reducing Low Participation in Hybrid classrooms

Improving student participation in online classes is very important to create an interactive and effective learning environment, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching. Several practical and classroom-based strategies have been proven effective in addressing this issue. In this section, various approaches will be discussed that teachers can use to increase student participation in

online classrooms, including interactive techniques, the use of technology, and teaching methods that motivate students to be more active.

Using Interactive Techniques to Increase Engagement

Pedagogical strategies for encouraging active students discussed in terms of theoretical principles and a proposed model for incorporating such strategies when engaged in digital education (Çakmak, 2024). Interactive techniques that involve students in discussions and small group activities are one effective way to improve participation (Bakla & Demiröz , 2024; Dwipayanti et al., 2024). Given the limited face-to-face interaction in online learning, teachers must create opportunities for collaboration between students. For example, using breakout rooms in video conference platforms allows students to discuss in small groups before sharing their findings with the larger class. This helps reduce awkwardness and encourages students to speak more freely, without the pressure of a large audience. Moreover, open-ended questions and topic-based discussions can make students more interested in participating. These techniques encourage students to think critically and speak spontaneously and facilitate live communication (Medynska et al., 2022). The use of "live polls" or quizzes during class also helps keep students engaged and motivates them to respond quickly, providing the necessary feedback for their language development (Utomo & Utama, 2022).

Using Gamification to Increase Motivation

According to Ertan & Kocadere (2022) found that Gamification is one of the most effective approaches to increasing student participation in online learning. By incorporating game elements into teaching, teachers can make the class more enjoyable and competitive, which increases student involvement. In addition, Gamification encourages students to interact more frequently with the learning materials and their peers, while also enhancing their sense of achievement. Meanwhile positive reinforcement can enhance students' motivation (Fatimannisa abd Jamilah, 2024). in line with Temel & Cesur (2024) stated that gamification with Web 2.0 tools including Kahoot! Socrative, Quizizz, and Mentimeter on EFL learners' motivation and academic achievement levels in online learning situations. Meanwhile variety of technical applications impacts the students' participations (Ironsi, 2020)

Project-Based Learning (PJBL)

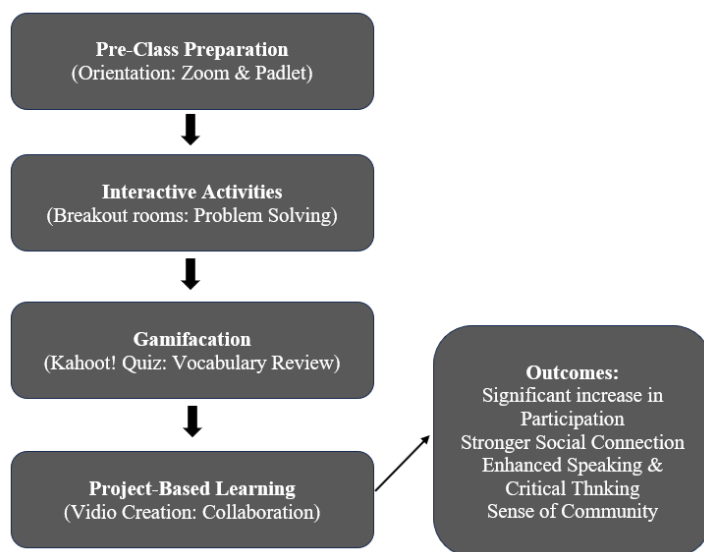
Project-based learning gives students the opportunity to engage directly in projects that are relevant to the real world (Maulina , 2024), while developing speaking and critical thinking skills. These projects can be done by doing assignment (Bhakti et al., 2021) include group presentations, creating learning videos, or developing interactive materials that involve active use of the English language. This method not only boosts involvement but also strengthens students' understanding of the material, as they must apply the knowledge they have learned in practical contexts. Project-based learning allows students to collaborate in groups, strengthening social skills and increasing their sense of responsibility for their learning.

Implementing Strategies in A Hybrid EFL Classroom

Classroom Scenario: In a hybrid EFL classroom, a group of university students is participating in an online English class where participation has traditionally been low. To address this issue, several strategies are implemented to boost student engagement and involvement in the learning process. These strategies include the use of interactive activities, gamification, and project-based learning as shown in the figure 1 below:

Figure 1

The Strategies Include the Use of Interactive Activities, Gamification, and Project-Based Learning



Pre-Class Preparation and Technology Readiness

The initial phase that determines the success of participation is pre-class preparation, which focuses on orientation in using digital tools to minimize technical barriers that often cause students to feel anxious or uncomfortable. The instructor provides brief tutorials on specific functions, such as Zoom breakout rooms for small-group discussions and Padlet as a collaborative brainstorming space, ensuring students possess adequate digital literacy before the class commences. By ensuring that students understand how these platforms operate, technological awkwardness is reduced, thereby making them mentally prepared to contribute actively in the online learning process.

Interactive Activities through Group Discussion

The implementation of interactive techniques within the classroom is achieved by facilitating students to work in small groups to solve real-world problems relevant to the learning topic. The use of breakout rooms is a key strategy for creating a more intimate communication space, which helps reduce the psychological pressure typically felt by students when required to speak in front of a large audience on video conferencing platforms. These activities demand active collaboration and communication in English, which directly supports the development of students' speaking skills and critical thinking abilities through a dynamic exchange of ideas.

Gamification as a Motivational Trigger

Gamification strategies are integrated through the use of interactive quizzes, such as Kahoot!, to review vocabulary and lesson concepts in an enjoyable and competitive manner. This game element, which includes points and rewards, has proven effective in increasing students' intrinsic motivation and encouraging them to interact more frequently with the material and their peers. Through healthy competition, students become more focused and enthusiastic in responding to the instructor's prompts, allowing a previously passive online classroom atmosphere to transform into a much more lively and engaging learning environment.

Language Production through Project-Based Learning (PjBL)

In the final stage, Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is implemented as a means for students to produce language meaningfully through the creation of authentic projects, such as group discussion videos. This method empowers students to practice their language knowledge in a practical context, which not only enhances their engagement but also strengthens personal responsibility for learning outcomes. By working on collaborative projects, students are able to build a stronger sense of community and higher self-confidence in using English to convey their arguments and creative ideas.

LIMITATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Even though the strategies to increase participation in a hybrid EFL class are effective, there are some challenges to consider. One major issue is technical problems, such as poor internet connections or students having trouble using digital tools. These problems can disrupt interactive activities and gamification elements, which may reduce overall participation. Another challenge is student readiness. Some students may feel anxious or lack confidence when speaking English in an online class. This can make it harder for them to take part actively. Teachers need to support these students and help them feel more comfortable. Teacher training is also very important. Teachers need skills to manage online tools and create engaging activities while keeping the class dynamic. Ongoing professional development and training in classroom management, digital tools, and engagement strategies are key to overcoming these challenges and ensuring long-term success.

By addressing these issues, the hybrid EFL class can become more effective for both teachers and students.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving student participation in online English learning classes is a challenge that requires careful and varied approaches. A lot of students face problems engaging in online situations due to issues such as a lack of confidence, limited digital literacy, or technical problems. To address these challenges, teachers can adopt strategies that encourage active involvement and make learning more enjoyable. Interactive strategies, such as group discussions and collaborative tasks, promote communication and teamwork among students. Gamification, which includes activities like quizzes or competitions, makes learning fun and helps students stay motivated. Project-based and problem-based learning allows students to explore real-world topics, encouraging critical thinking and creativity. Using digital tools, such as Padlet, Zoom breakout rooms, or interactive whiteboards, supports collaboration and makes online lessons more dynamic.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no competing interests.

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Author Contributions

Muh. Kusni Mubarak: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, and Visualization. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The study did not generate new datasets.

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Preprint Declaration

This manuscript has not been previously published in any form and is not currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

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