

IMPLEMENTING BLENDED TEACHING AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASS BASED ON UNIPUS: A CASE STUDY OF NHCE READING AND WRITING I

Ying Peng*, HaiYang Zhu

School of Foreign Studies, South China Agricultural University, Guangzhou 510642, Guangdong, China.

**Corresponding Author: Ying Peng*

Abstract: The Unipus platform developed by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) facilitates blended learning, while collaborative learning serves as a highly effective strategy to engage students in offline classroom activities. Taking Section A of Unit 6 in New Horizon College English (NHCE) I: Reading and Writing as a case, this study explores the integration of a Unipus-supported blended teaching model and the Jigsaw technique for college English reading and writing instruction. It constructs an integrated instructional framework combining online blended learning with offline collaborative tasks. Findings from post-intervention student interviews and qualitative evaluations after a semester-long pedagogical implementation indicate notable growth in learners' learning initiative as well as improvements in their content retention and peer engagement.

Keywords: Blended teaching; Collaborative learning; Jigsaw method; Unipus platform; College English reading and writing

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the integration of educational technology into higher education has transformed traditional pedagogical paradigms. Blended learning—combining face-to-face classroom interaction with online instructional resources—has gained widespread adoption in college English teaching across China. By leveraging digital platforms, instructors can extend learning beyond physical and temporal boundaries, offering students flexible access to learning materials. However, effective blended learning requires more than merely providing online resources; it necessitates interactive, student-centered classroom strategies that actively engage learners during offline sessions. Among various cooperative approaches, the Jigsaw technique offers a structured mechanism to foster positive interdependence and individual accountability. This paper explores the operational framework and pedagogical outcomes of integrating the Unipus digital platform with the Jigsaw collaborative method in a university-level English reading and writing course.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND PLATFORM OVERVIEW

2.1 Blended Teaching Framework

Blended Teaching is a systematic instructional design mode proposed by Garrison and Vaughan [1], in which instructors integrate face-to-face in-class teaching and structured online learning activities coherently on digital platforms. Online asynchronous tasks mainly include pre-class preview, material learning, and formative assessments, while offline classroom sessions focus on group collaborative discussions, problem-solving, and knowledge systematization. The two components are closely aligned with curriculum objectives rather than mechanically superimposed, aiming to balance teachers' instructional leadership with learners' autonomous collaborative learning. Typically, this blended model offers broader and deeper instructional coverage compared with traditional lecture-based methods. In the context of New Horizon College English programs, the Unipus platform and the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press's "Sui Shen Xue" mobile application provide students with an extensive array of resources for self-directed English learning.

The theoretical foundation of blended education draws from constructivism, humanistic philosophy, and Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory [2-4]. Constructivism posits that learning is an active process wherein learners construct meaning through interaction with their social and academic environments [2]. From a humanistic perspective, learners are viewed as active and self-directed participants, while teachers function primarily as facilitators of learning rather than transmitters of knowledge [4]. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory further emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural mediation in learning and development [3]. Consequently, blended classrooms reconstruct traditional classroom dynamics, content delivery, and instructional workflows, thereby enhancing learners' autonomous learning capabilities and fostering greater engagement [5].

The advantages of blended teaching lie in two main aspects: first, it addresses the limitation in traditional teaching where excessive reliance on instructors leads to passive learning and low student motivation; second, it expands the temporal and spatial dimensions of instruction beyond conventional frameworks. In traditional pedagogy, teachers

dominate the classroom—delivering lectures, having students take notes, posing questions, receiving responses, assigning homework, grading assignments, providing feedback, and guiding corrections—all within a passive learning framework. Moreover, students with varying knowledge levels attend identical lectures, causing proficient learners to become disengaged while those with weaker foundations struggle to keep pace. To resolve these issues, blended teaching allows students to selectively utilize online resources tailored to their proficiency levels. This shift transforms passive learning into active engagement, enhancing student motivation. Additionally, blended learning enables students to leverage digital tools and educational applications for practice anytime and anywhere, facilitating continuous, self-paced learning.

2.2 The Unipus Educational Platform

The Unipus platform is a comprehensive university foreign language learning system developed by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press [6]. The learning materials on Unipus are closely aligned with national college-level English curricula, such as New Horizon College English, enabling students to engage in targeted reading, listening, speaking, writing, and translation exercises. The platform also offers diverse supplementary resources tailored to varied learner interests, allowing students to expand their general linguistic knowledge [6]. Features include multi-device compatibility, learning data analytics, rich pedagogical resource repositories, and intelligent instructional tools designed to optimize classroom management and formative assessment [7].

For the College English Reading and Writing course, Unipus resources are organized into structured modules, including Preview, Section A, and Section B. Section A typically contains Text A, Language Focus, Structure Analysis and Writing, and Translation. The Text A online module integrates Pre-reading Activities, Background Information, Reading in Detail, Vocabulary exercises, and Reading Comprehension tasks, providing a solid digital foundation for blended instruction.

2.3 Collaborative Learning and the Jigsaw Method

Collaborative learning refers to an instructional strategy where learners work together in structured groups to achieve shared learning objectives. In collaborative classrooms, students clarify common goals and maximize both individual and collective learning capabilities, establishing positive interdependence: group success depends on the active contribution of each member [8]. Theoretical support for collaborative learning stems from social interdependence theory, cognitive elaboration theory, and social development theory. Primary collaborative methods include student group task allocation, team-game tournaments, co-learning approaches, and the Jigsaw technique [8].

Since its introduction to foreign language pedagogy, collaborative learning has been widely implemented across educational levels in China. This study employs a modified version of the Jigsaw method—a cooperative structure that creates an "information gap" within the classroom. The learning task is divided into several independent sections. Students are initially assigned to home groups and then regrouped into temporary "expert teams" to master specific sections. After mastering their assigned material, experts return to their home groups to teach their peers. Finally, individual accountability and group rewards are maintained through formative assessments. In this study, the traditional group test is adapted into online assignments administered via the Unipus platform, generating immediate diagnostic feedback [9].

3 PEDAGOGICAL IMPLEMENTATION: A CASE STUDY

Using Unit 6, Text A ("To Work or Not to Work") from the third edition of New Horizon College English I: Reading and Writing as an exemplar, this section illustrates the instructional design and implementation of the Unipus-based blended collaborative teaching model.

3.1 Preparatory Phase

At the beginning of the semester, the instructor divides the class into fixed, heterogeneous four-person home groups. For a class of 48 students, learners count off from 1 to 12 sequentially to form 12 four-person teams. These groups remain fixed throughout the semester to foster team cohesion and stable peer collaboration. Classroom seating is arranged such that two students sit in the front row and two directly behind them in the second row, facilitating quick face-to-face interaction during group discussions.

3.2 Pre-class Asynchronous Learning

Before class, students access assigned preview materials on the Unipus platform. Given the varying baseline proficiency of non-English majors, asynchronous pre-class study allows students to prepare their assigned textual segments at their own pace. Rather than relying on traditional teacher-led sentence-by-sentence translation, students utilize Unipus digital resources (e.g., "Reading in Detail," Vocabulary lists, and Grammar analyses) to prepare instructional explanations for their assigned paragraphs. For example, Text A in Unit 6 comprises nine paragraphs, divided as follows:

Student 1: Paragraphs 1 and 2

Student 2: Paragraphs 3 and 4

Student 3: Paragraphs 5, 6, and 7

Student 4: Paragraphs 8 and 9

Additionally, all students review the general pre-reading activities and background information on Unipus to ensure a basic understanding of the unit theme.

3.3 Expert Team Lesson Planning (In-Class)

During the initial phase of the offline class, students with identical assigned paragraph numbers across Groups 1–6 and Groups 7–12 assemble into temporary "expert teams" (eight teams in total, each with six members). Each expert team focuses on the same assigned text segment. Group members review their prepared knowledge checklists, which cover key vocabulary, sentence structures, complex grammar points, translation techniques, and paragraph logical transitions. The expert team members conduct collective lesson planning, clarifying key teaching points, resolving mutual doubts, and synthesizing supplementary materials from Unipus. The course instructor circulates among the expert teams to provide targeted scaffolding and resolve complex linguistic queries.

3.4 Home Group Collaborative Peer Teaching

Once expert preparation is complete, the ad hoc expert teams dissolve, and students return to their permanent home groups. Members take turns acting as instructors, presenting their assigned paragraphs sequentially to their teammates. Peer listeners take notes, ask clarifying questions, and discuss challenging language points. If a group encounters unresolved difficulties, the question is flagged for instructor guidance. During this phase, peer teaching encourages active verbalization and concept consolidation. The instructor monitors group discussions to ensure content accuracy and note common linguistic errors for subsequent class-wide feedback.

3.5 Whole-Class Synthesis, Teacher Feedback, and Platform Interaction

Following home group peer teaching, selected group representatives present key sections to the whole class. The instructor then provides systematic feedback, addressing major language challenges, textual structure, and writing techniques. For instance, in "To Work or Not to Work," the instructor highlights rhetorical devices such as parody (referencing Shakespeare's "To be or not to be"), structural transition markers (e.g., "on the other hand," "first," "second," "to summarize"), and reading skills related to signal words. This whole-class consolidation bridges individual textual details with an overarching structural understanding of the text.

Following the face-to-face session, the instructor posts discussion prompts on the Unipus online forum, encouraging learners to reflect on their collaborative process and share learning resources. Finally, formative online assignments (Language Focus, Structural Writing, and Translation) are assigned on Unipus. Automated platform scoring, combined with group reward points for top-performing teams, reinforces individual accountability and team motivation.

The complete operational workflow of the blended collaborative teaching model is summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Operational Workflow of the Blended Collaborative Teaching Model

Stage	Location / Mode	Key Instructional Activities	Role of Unipus Platform
Preparatory Phase	In-class	Formation of fixed 4-person home groups; orientation on Jigsaw rules and seating setup.	Course setup and registration.
Pre-class Phase	Online / Asynchronous	Individual preview of assigned paragraphs; background reading; completing vocabulary/grammar previews.	Provides "Reading in Detail," vocabulary guides, background media, and preview self-tests.
Expert Group Stage	In-class (Offline)	Assembly of temporary expert teams; collective lesson planning; instructor scaffolding and coaching.	Reference platform content to verify grammar analysis and translation standardizations.
Home Group Peer Teaching	In-class (Offline)	Return to home groups; sequential peer teaching; mutual Q&A and structural synthesis.	In-class monitoring and verification of key language points.
Class Consolidation & Post-Class	Hybrid (Offline & Online)	Representative presentations; instructor synthesis on macro-structure; post-class online assignments and forum reflection.	Automated grading of exercises; hosting online discussion forums; recording formative assessment data.

4 INSTRUCTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND OBSERVATIONS

Following a semester of pedagogical implementation, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with selected participating students to evaluate learning outcomes and perception of the blended collaborative model.

Enhancement of Autonomous Learning Motivation: Students reported that the responsibility of peer teaching served as a major motivator for thorough pre-class preparation. As Student A noted, knowing that peers depended on their explanation encouraged them to actively research materials on Unipus and fully master language points prior to class.

Efficiency and Content Quality via Digital Resources: Student B highlighted that the structured, authoritative resources provided by Unipus saved research time and provided reliable linguistic explanations, ensuring that peer-created teaching materials maintained appropriate academic quality.

Deepened Retention and Metacognitive Awareness: Student C stated that explaining concepts to group members significantly deepened their understanding and memory retention of complex sentence structures and vocabulary usage, aligning with cognitive theories regarding the retention benefits of active elaboration and teaching.

Social Cohesion and Interactive Learning Environment: Student D observed that the dual-grouping mechanism (fixed home groups and ad hoc expert teams) expanded social interaction among non-English majors from different academic disciplines, contributing to a supportive peer learning environment and enhanced class cohesion.

5 CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study demonstrated an integrated pedagogical model combining the Unipus digital learning platform with the Jigsaw collaborative technique in a college English reading and writing course. By reallocating lower-level knowledge acquisition to pre-class online asynchronous learning, offline classroom time was effectively dedicated to expert collaboration, peer teaching, and instructor-guided synthesis. Qualitative findings suggest that this approach enhances learner autonomy, content retention, and peer interaction.

Nevertheless, several limitations warrant consideration in future research. First, future studies should incorporate quantitative evaluation methods, such as pre-and-post intervention linguistic proficiency tests and standardized motivational surveys, to provide empirical validation of learning gains. Second, strategies must be developed to ensure language accuracy during peer teaching, minimizing the potential spread of erroneous explanations among lower-proficiency learners. Finally, refined continuous assessment schemes balancing individual platform performance and collective group achievement should be further explored.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

FUNDING

Undergraduate Teaching Reform Project of South China Agricultural University (2025): “Research on Data-Enabled Deep Learning Model for College English—A Smart Practice of Blended Collaborative Learning Based on Unipus” (No. JG2025098).

REFERENCES

- [1] Garrison D R, Vaughan N D. Blended learning in higher education: Framework, principles, and guidelines. Jossey-Bass, 2008. DOI: 10.1002/9781118269558.
- [2] Fosnot C T. Constructivism: A psychological theory of learning // Fosnot C T, ed. Constructivism: Theory, Perspectives, and Practice. New York: Teachers College Press, 1996: 8-33.
- [3] Vygotsky L S. Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.
- [4] Rogers C R. Freedom to Learn: A View of What Education Might Become. Columbus, OH: C.E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1969.
- [5] Hao T T. Construction of a blended teaching model for college English based on the UNIPUS platform. Journal of Henan Polytechnic University (Social Sciences Edition), 2021, 22(6): 90–94.
- [6] Han J J. Research on the effectiveness of blended English teaching based on the Unipus university foreign language teaching platform. Journal of Heihe University, 2020, 11(11): 127–129.
- [7] FLTRP. Unipus university foreign language educational platform. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. 2026. <https://u.unipus.cn/index.html/>.
- [8] Wang T. A brief discussion on collaborative learning. China Journal of Education, 2002(1): 32–35.
- [9] Chen S B, Li J, Wang Y. Research on second foreign language writing instruction from the perspective of collaborative learning. Sichuan University Press, 2019.