

Typical Learner Profiles in College English Classrooms: A Mixed-Methods Study and Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract: While mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) has been widely studied, relevant learner profiles, particularly in the college English classroom, remain underexplored. The article examines learner profiles in China's college English classroom. Based on questionnaire data from 111 students and semi-structured interviews with 5 students and 2 college English teachers, we identify three typical learner profiles: Self-directed elites, GPA-oriented professionals and Classroom gamers. The three learner profiles differ greatly in learning behaviors, motivation, emotions, digital resources use, and course expectations. The paper thus concludes that a one-size-fits-all teaching approach fails to accommodate such learner diversity, and offers action plans for personalized instruction and task design, with implications for learner-centered pedagogy and digital learning tool designers.

Keywords: College English; Learner profile; EFL teaching reform; Digital learning tools

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1. Background

Over the past few decades, digital technologies have been increasingly incorporated into higher education, continuously reshaping the landscape of EFL teaching and learning ^[1]. In China, college English courses, compulsory for all non-English majors in their first two college years, have witnessed the huge impact of mobile applications in vocabulary quizzes, mid-term examinations, and online discussions to sustain EFL instruction ^[2]. Yet, despite this digital advancement, the question of whether such tools can be considered effective and how learner traits affect the college English learning process remains largely unexplored.

Existing studies on mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), in one way or another, acknowledge learners in the same classroom as one learner type; this standpoint has its grounds, as students in one classroom do share similar age, educational background, and years of English learning. But this viewpoint ignores the heterogeneity in college English classrooms, especially with the increasing application of digital

tools. More specifically, an in-depth understanding of college English learner profiles is key for college English teachers to tailor their teaching objectives and materials. Besides, existing studies are either confined to theoretical discussion or merely based on small-scale qualitative data.

Against this background, the paper aims to conduct a mixed-methods study of learner profiles in the college English context. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What learner profiles can be summarized in college English classrooms?

RQ2: What dimensions distinguish these learner profiles from each other?

RQ3: What pedagogical reforms can be done to better college English teaching and learning?

2. Research on learner profile and MALL

Research on learner profiles can be done from different theoretical perspectives, such as cognitive and metacognitive theories, learning strategies, self-regulated learning (SRL), and motivational theories^[3]. Policy-makers, researchers, and teachers in China have tried to classify learners into different groups to improve learning outcomes; the mainstream way is to use placement tests to group students into high-achievers and low-achievers. However, the apparent deficiency of this approach is that it hurts learners' motivation and lacks a normal competitive atmosphere. Besides, mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) adds a new dimension, as digital affordances may change how learners approach language learning.

To address the above problem, more recent studies have used cluster analysis or latent class modeling to identify subgroups of learners in technology using^[4-6]. For example, researchers found that learners could be grouped into integrative and instrumental users. Most recently, a group of researchers proposed a spectrum of mobile learners from "sporadic" to "immersive". However, these studies either focus on general technology use or are conducted among Western learners. In the Chinese college English context, research has mainly examined the efficacy of apps like Baicizhan, Kekeyingyu, or Duolingo, without systematically profiling the users.

Thus, the study combines questionnaire data with semi-structured interviews to ensure the reliability of our findings. Different from existing studies, we treat mobile apps as an emerging part of the college English learning ecosystem.

3. Methods

Quantitative data were collected through an in-class questionnaire to learn panoramic patterns of students' learning behaviors, habits, emotions and expectations. Qualitative data were gathered via semi-structured interviews with both 5 students and 2 teachers to explore perceived challenges, contextual factors, and find explanations for questions unveiled in the questionnaire phase. All data were analyzed separately and then integrated to form a comprehensive knowledge base.

3.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaires were collected from a prominent university in Northeast China. 111 second-year non-English major undergraduates, aged 18 to 21, participated in the data collection. There were 77 males and 34 females. All had taken two semesters of college English courses and had used at least two mobile learning apps (one of them had to be *Speexx*) for English learning.

The questionnaire, developed after a pilot study with 30 students, consisted of three sections: (1) Learning Behaviors—frequency of using apps, time spent on self-study, preference for individual or group work, and use of supplementary materials; (2) Learning Habits—regularity of practice, note-taking strategies, error-correction approaches, and reliance on digital dictionaries; and (3) Course Expectations—preferred teaching modes, desired feedback types, importance of grades or communicative competence, and willingness to engage in extra-curricular tasks. Items were measured on 5-point Likert scales and multiple-choice formats.

The questionnaire was administered online during class time, with a response rate of 100%. Descriptive statistics were computed, and cluster analysis was conducted through SPSS 26.

3.2. Semi-structured interviews

5 students were purposively selected to participate in the semi-structured interviews. In addition, 2 college English teachers with over 20 years of teaching experience were interviewed to provide an instructor perspective on student diversity and classroom challenges.

Student interviews were conducted to explore their daily learning routines, reasons for choosing specific apps or methods, perceptions of course materials and teaching style, and suggestions for improvement. Teacher interviews were administered to focus on learner differences, teaching challenges, and their views on technology integration in their own teaching. Each interview lasted at least 30 minutes in Chinese and was audio-recorded with consent.

All recordings were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis strictly followed a six-phase procedure^[7] to ensure reliable results. Two colleagues of the first author independently coded 20% of the data and achieved inter-coder reliability of 0.86; discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and the inter-coder reliability rose to 0.94 before the rest were coded.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity was guaranteed, and student participants were assured that their responses would not affect their course grades. The study was approved by the university's research ethics committee.

4. Findings

4.1. Quantitative results

Cluster analysis of the questionnaire data yielded a three-cluster solution as the most interpretable model. The clusters (**Table 1**) were distinguished primarily by three variables: self-reported autonomy (e.g., “I set my own learning goals beyond the syllabus”), exam orientation (e.g., “I mainly use apps to prepare for tests”), and social preference (e.g., “I like to learn with classmates and share resources”).

Table 1. Cluster analysis of learner questionnaire data

Clusters	Number of learners	Percentage	Characteristics
Cluster 1: self-regulated explorers	21	18.9%	High autonomy, Moderate exam focus, Low social preference
Cluster 2: test-oriented repeaters	80	72.0%	Low autonomy, High exam focus, Low social preference

Cluster 3: socially motivated collaborators	10	9.1%	Moderate autonomy, Moderate exam focus, High social preference
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Table 1 shows the detailed cluster analysis results. From **Table 1**, we know there are three distinctive learner profiles in this particular college English course. With their quiz grades at hand, we found that the first learner profile, namely, self-regulated explorers, are actually top students. They are characterized by setting higher English learning goals, exploring additional learning content, using diverse digital apps, and valuing language abilities and application over English course grades. They usually set actionable and measurable learning goals for themselves, such as passing IELTS or TOEFL with high scores. The second learner profile, test-oriented repeaters, is largely students in the middle range, who concentrate on past papers, vocabulary drills, and grammar exercises; they regard apps as test-prep tools and rarely venture beyond examination content. They tend to see English courses as a good way to get a better GPA to give them more advantage in their future academic careers. The last learner profile, socially collaborative, is rarer and more complex, because course scores are not that important for them; they always call themselves “*Baizi*” (meaning students aiming for 60 or barely passing the exam). They enjoy in-class discussion and group projects, use apps with social features, and are motivated by gamification.

4.2. Qualitative insights

4.2.1. Student perspectives

Interviews with 5 students not only confirmed the three quantitative clusters but also revealed deeper motivational and emotional findings behind each profile.

To begin with, self-regulated explorers regard EFL learning as a personal journey and expressed frustration with the fixed and less challenging syllabus and simple textbooks. These learners set extra goals, tracked their own progress, and sought authentic and challenging English learning materials. Their main complaint was that the college English course was not helpful. For example:

Student S34: I finish textbook chapters in a month; I turn to podcasts and news because the learning content in our textbook is either outdated or too simple for me. And I will go back to the textbook at the very end of the semester for the final test.

In contrast, test-oriented repeaters spoke with visible anxiety. They drilled vocabulary and past papers exclusively, using apps only for exam simulation. They acknowledged that English learning was either not their interest or not important to them; they’d like to put more effort into their major, but they still wanted to get a great English course score for future academic development. They prioritize clear answer keys, structured revision plans, and more exam-specific tips from teachers. For example:

Student T12: CET-4 and CET-6 are everything for me, and getting a great CET-6 score is significant for my future development, such as scholarship applications and postgraduate admission. I repeat exercises until I memorize the patterns so that I can focus more on my major learning.

The third learner profile, socially motivated collaborators, was rare among Chinese EFL learners. They enjoyed group tasks and classroom presentations, but admitted that peer feedback was often superficial and wanted more teacher feedback. They feared that an exam-focused classroom would drain the fun out of learning. For example:

Student M7: Cooperating with classmates in a gamified English learning task is enjoyable for me; it makes the English learning process less boring. I believe group tasks are the reason why we still go to a face-to-face English classroom, while more and more insightful and engaging learning materials are already

online and free.

After analyzing the three learner profiles in the college English classroom, we identified the following challenges: (a) students' use of digital tools lacks personalized guidance; (b) most students had little time for English self-study because of busy college life; and (c) Most apps target general or international exams, not the local syllabus, forcing students to reconcile two different systems.

4.2.2. Teacher perspectives

Two college English teachers acknowledged classroom diversity but admitted to “one-size-fits-all” teaching due to large class size and time constraints. Teacher A observed, *“I can see who is diligent, but I don’t know their learning strategies; I mainly teach to the middle, and only 10% of in-class time is left for top students and nearly no time for the low-achievers.”* They expressed strong interest in a diagnostic tool to identify student profiles before teaching, which would allow them to design targeted activities, for example, extra grammar support for the second and third types of learners and advanced projects for the first-type learners.

Teachers called for better integration between digital app data and teaching plans. Teacher B said, “Nowadays, digital app learning is treated as a part of formative assessment (10 out of 100 points), but the English learning content in the app is irrelevant to the textbooks. So, we as teachers cannot know whether students really learn something useful from that app or not.”

Overall, teachers believe digital tools have made a great impact on college English learning and have enriched the immersive learning of the non-English majors; and they desire digital tools in assisting differentiated and personalized instruction and data-driven teaching.

4.3. Derived learner typologies

Integrating quantitative clusters and qualitative themes, we define three refined profiles: Self-directed elites, GPA-oriented professionals and Classroom gamers.

The Self-directed elites are intrinsically motivated by a deep desire for language mastery and long-term personal growth. These traits were reflected in their learning behaviors: setting clear learning goals that extend well beyond the prescribed course syllabus; supplementing classroom materials with authentic resources such as BBC News and CNN articles. Emotionally, they tend to maintain a positive outlook, yet they often grow frustrated with oversimplified tasks, and some even struggle with perfectionism as they push themselves to high standards. In the classroom, these learners participate actively in higher-order discussions and debate, but they visibly disengage during routine, mechanical exercises. For teachers, the most effective pedagogical approach is offering optional learning modules and open-ended assignments; teachers should act as facilitators who provide expert, individualized feedback, and they are encouraged to invite these students to mentor their peers, which not only reinforces their own learning but also benefits the wider learning community.

The GPA-oriented professionals constitute the largest group among college English students. They perceive English not as a lifelong skill but as a mandatory hurdle that must be conquered for graduation and career prospects. Consequently, their study behaviors are narrow and repetitive: they spend countless hours drilling vocabulary lists; they use mobile apps exclusively for error correction. Naturally, these students experience high anxiety, low self-efficacy, and frequent burnout. In class, they are attentive and diligent note-takers, but they remain passive participants who prefer lecture-based, structured sessions and shy away from communicative activities for fear of making mistakes. Teachers are recommended to use high-profile

international incidents to help cultivate a crucial conception in those GPA pursuers' hearts: mastering English can make your world larger, wider, and more open. Only when this conception is acknowledged by this type of learner can they actively transform into self-directed elites.

Unlike the first two kinds of learners, the Classroom gamers are rare to be seen in the college English classroom. Relational and social factors, such as a sense of belonging and enjoyment of interesting discussions, drive them. They consistently prefer pair work and collaborative group projects. In the classroom, they are highly active during group activities, and they thrive in role-plays, debates, and other highly interactive language tasks. For teachers, gamification can be leveraged to provide additional spaces for social interaction and for content attraction.

5. Discussion

The three learner profiles identified in the article (Self-directed elites, GPA-oriented professionals and Classroom gamers) resonate with mainstream motivation theories, namely, controlled regulation or autonomous regulation^[8-9], but have different contextual meaning in the Chinese college English setting. They are not abstract typologies because they are deeply influenced or rooted in the CET-4/CET-6 pressure that all students are experiencing. The predominance of GPA-oriented professionals (72.0%) directly reflects the high-stakes nature of college examinations, which function as gatekeepers for student graduation and employment.

In contrast, Self-directed elites demonstrate that top learners are freed from college English tests in a sense and prefer authentic and challenging English learning content. The third learner profile, Classroom gamers, highlights the often-underestimated role of peer influence in technology-mediated learning. These students want to co-construct language knowledge through peer dialogue. This finding challenges the individualistic assumption of many previous MALL studies^[10-11] and aligns with sociocultural theories in China's college English learning context.

Overall, it should be pointed out that our findings call for differentiated instructional arrangements rather than a complete curriculum overhaul. Personalized college English teaching can be achieved through tailored assignments, creative homework, etc. This study is not without limitations. Data come from a single university, which diminishes the generalizability of the findings, and longitudinal studies are needed to observe whether learner profiles shift over time and how they influence the learning effects.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine learner profiles in China's college English classrooms, namely, Self-directed elites, GPA-oriented professionals, and Classroom gamers. Each profile exhibits distinctive learning behaviors, motivational drivers, and emotions towards English learning. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative findings, it has been shown that learner diversity is a tangible reality that affects learner engagement and learning outcomes.

The paper provides practical pedagogical insights for teachers and digital app designers based on empirical evidence. It is recommended that college English departments develop sound screening tests or use high-stakes tests such as CET-4/CET-6 to profile students at the beginning of a course, and use the test grades to arrange student grouping, task design, and teacher feedback. Apart from that, modules on learner diversity and adaptive pedagogy should be incorporated into teachers' training plans. For English learning

app developers, their products' interfaces should be customized for different learners, e.g., “exam mode” for exam preparation and “explore mode” for learning reinforcement.

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