

Collaborative Learning in EFL Classroom: Teachers' Perceived Benefits and Limitations

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Abstract

This study explores English language teachers' perceptions of the benefits and limitations of collaborative learning in English classrooms. Using a qualitative case study design grounded in social constructivist theory, the study involved five English teachers from three senior high schools in West Java, Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling based on their experience in implementing collaborative learning. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. The findings show that collaborative learning is perceived as beneficial in enhancing student participation, confidence, communication skills, vocabulary development, and teamwork, while also promoting a shift toward student-centered learning where teachers act as facilitators. However, several practical limitations were identified, including unequal participation among students, dominance of certain group members, classroom management challenges such as noise and time constraints, and difficulties in assessing individual contributions in group work. Overall, the study concludes that although collaborative learning is pedagogically valuable in English language teaching, its effectiveness depends on careful instructional planning, clear task structure, effective classroom management, and appropriate assessment strategies.

Keywords: Teachers' perceptions, collaborative learning, English classrooms

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, education is required to develop not only academic knowledge but also essential competencies such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and independent learning. These competencies are globally recognized as key skills for facing complex global challenges (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). However, in practice, many classrooms in Indonesia are still dominated by a teacher-centered learning approach, where students tend to be passive and have limited interaction. This condition results in low student engagement and limited development of higher-order thinking skills, thus demonstrating a gap between the demands of modern education and the reality of classroom learning (Suryani et al., 2021; Susanti et al., 2022).

In response to this issue, student-centered learning approaches are increasingly emphasized, one of which is collaborative learning. Based on contemporary theoretical perspectives, collaborative learning emphasizes the importance of structured interaction, active participation, and co-regulation among students in constructing knowledge (Gillies, 2020; Hmelo-Silver & Jeong, 2021; Fredricks et al., 2023). In this approach, students not only learn individually but also collaborate to achieve common goals through discussion, negotiation of meaning, and problem-solving. In Indonesia, this approach has been integrated into educational policies such as the 2013 Curriculum and the Independent Curriculum. However, in practice, the implementation of collaborative learning is often

suboptimal, with group work conducted without a clear structure, resulting in uneven participation.

In the context of English language learning, collaborative learning is crucial because the language acquisition process requires active interaction and communication. Activities such as group discussions, peer feedback, and role-playing provide opportunities for students to use language in real-life situations. Several recent international studies have shown that collaborative learning is effective in improving students' language proficiency, engagement, motivation, and social interaction (Alzubi et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2021; Sato & Ballinger, 2020; Pham & Nguyen, 2022). However, English language learning in Indonesia is often dominated by teacher explanations and grammar exercises, which limits students' opportunities for active communication (Sari & Wahyudin, 2022). This indicates a gap between the potential for collaborative learning and its implementation in practice.

Although collaborative learning has been proven effective theoretically and empirically, its implementation in real classrooms still faces various challenges. Research shows that teachers often struggle to manage group dynamics, ensure equitable participation, and conduct fair assessments (Alzubi et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2021). Furthermore, most previous research is dominated by quantitative approaches focused on learning outcomes, while studies exploring how collaborative learning is implemented in classroom practice are limited. Existing research also tends to discuss the benefits and limitations separately, rather than in a balanced manner. Furthermore, studies in the context of English language learning in Indonesia that focus on teacher experiences are still very limited.

Furthermore, recent educational research emphasizes that the success of a learning approach is determined not only by the method's design but also by how teachers interpret, adapt, and implement it in specific classroom contexts. Teachers' perceptions and experiences play a crucial role in shaping learning practices and determining the successful implementation of an approach (Nguyen & Habók, 2022; Vo et al., 2023). Therefore, understanding collaborative learning from the teacher's perspective is crucial to explaining why theoretically effective approaches may not always work optimally in practice.

Based on this description, the research gap in this study lies in the limited availability of qualitative studies that comprehensively explore teachers' perceptions of the benefits and limitations of collaborative learning simultaneously, particularly in the context of English language learning in Indonesia. Based on this gap, this study aims to explore English teachers' perceptions of the benefits and limitations of collaborative learning in English classrooms. Using a qualitative approach, this study seeks to provide a deeper and more contextualized understanding of how teachers interpret their experiences implementing collaborative learning in real classrooms.

The research question posed is: What are English teachers' perceptions of the benefits and limitations of collaborative learning in English language learning? The novelty of this research lies in its approach, which balances the benefits and limitations of collaborative learning by focusing on teachers' perspectives and the real-world context of English classrooms in Indonesia, which is rarely explored in depth. The results of this study are expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this research enriches the study of collaborative learning by presenting teachers' perspectives as key actors in learning practices. Practically, this research is expected to provide insights for educators in designing more effective collaborative learning strategies and addressing various challenges in their implementation in the classroom.

METHOD

Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore English language teachers' perceptions of the benefits and limitations of collaborative learning in their classroom

contexts. A qualitative approach was chosen because it focused on understanding participants' lived experiences, subjective interpretations, and the meanings they construct in real-life learning situations (Creswell, 2014). This research also adopted a case study design, which focuses on a context-based, in-depth examination of a specific phenomenon in a real-life setting (Yin, 2018). A case study design was deemed appropriate for this research because teachers' perceptions of collaborative learning are inherently shaped by contextual factors such as institutional policies, classroom environments, student characteristics, and individual teaching styles. Rather than isolating variables, this design allows the researcher to investigate the phenomenon in its natural context, thus preserving the complexity of real-world teaching situations. Furthermore, the case study approach allows for the collection of rich, detailed, and multidimensional data that reflect the dynamic interaction between theory and practice. By focusing on a limited system namely, English language teachers implementing collaborative learning in selected schools this study provides in-depth, context-sensitive, and practically relevant insights into understanding how collaborative learning is experienced and interpreted in authentic classroom settings.

Respondents

This study was conducted in three high schools located in West Java, Indonesia, where collaborative learning has been actively implemented in English classes. Participants consisted of five English teachers selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) based on their experience implementing collaborative learning in their teaching practice. The teachers were of diverse genders, including both male and female participants, and had varying teaching experiences ranging from novice teachers to more experienced educators. All participants were actively teaching English at the time of the study and had prior experience using collaborative learning strategies in their classrooms. These characteristics were considered important to ensure that participants could provide rich, relevant, and experience-based insights into the benefits and limitations of collaborative learning in real-life classroom contexts.

Instruments

In this study, the researcher served as the primary instrument, as is customary in qualitative research, while a semi-structured interview guide served as the primary data collection tool. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore teachers' understanding of collaborative learning, their perceived benefits, and the challenges faced in its implementation. The use of semi-structured interviews is supported by recent qualitative research due to its flexibility in exploring participants' perspectives in depth while remaining focused on the primary research issue (Flick, 2022). To ensure the validity of the instrument, the interview guide was developed based on a relevant theoretical framework and then validated through expert assessment by an expert in English language education to assess its clarity, relevance, and appropriateness to the research objectives (Saldaña, 2021). Next, a pilot interview was conducted with a teacher other than the primary participant to test the clarity and effectiveness of the questions, and the feedback obtained was used to refine the instrument. These steps ensured that the interview guide was suitable for use in generating credible and meaningful data.

Data Collecting Technique

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, commonly used in qualitative research to explore participants' experiences and perspectives in depth (Flick, 2022). The data collection process involved several stages. First, the researcher contacted participants and obtained their consent to participate. Next, an interview schedule was arranged based on participant availability. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, with each session

lasting approximately 30–60 minutes. During the interviews, the researcher used an interview guide and asked follow-up questions as needed to clarify participants' answers. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission, and brief notes were taken throughout the interview process. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves a systematic and flexible process for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns in qualitative data. Analysis began with the transcription of all interview recordings, followed by the first phase, data familiarization, in which the researcher read and reread the transcripts several times to gain a deep understanding of the content and record initial ideas. The second phase involved initial coding, in which meaningful data segments relevant to the research questions were identified and systematically labelled across the dataset. In the third phase, theme discovery, the researcher organized similar codes into broader categories and began to identify potential themes that reflected patterns in teachers' perceptions. The fourth phase, theme review, involved checking the consistency and coherence of the themes by comparing them with the coded data and the entire dataset, ensuring that each theme accurately represented the data. In the fifth phase, defining and naming themes, each theme was refined, clearly defined, and appropriately named to capture its essence and relevance to the research focus. Finally, in the sixth phase, namely the preparation of the report, the researcher integrated the themes into a coherent and meaningful narrative, supported by relevant quotations from the interview data, to present a comprehensive understanding of the benefits and limitations of collaborative learning in English classes based on the teachers' perspectives.

RESULTS

Benefits of Collaborative Learning

Increased Student Participation

The findings show that collaborative learning significantly contributes to increased student participation in English learning. Teachers consistently report that when learning activities are conducted through group work, students become more actively engaged compared to traditional teacher-centered instruction. In conventional classrooms, participation is often limited to answering teacher questions or listening to explanations, resulting in only a small percentage of students actively engaging. In contrast, collaborative learning provides opportunities for all students to participate through discussions, sharing ideas, and responding to peers.

Extract 1

*“Students are more active; almost everyone speaks during group discussions.”
(T2)*

The quote above indicates that participation becomes more equitable among students during collaborative activities. Students are not only more engaged but also given equal opportunities to contribute. Furthermore, the increase in participation is evident not only in the number of students involved but also in the quality of engagement. Teachers observe that students begin to show greater initiative in expressing opinions, asking questions, and responding to others' ideas. This improvement is especially evident among students who were previously passive or reluctant to participate. The small group atmosphere creates a more relaxed and less intimidating environment, making students feel more comfortable contributing.

Extract 2

“Students are less afraid of making mistakes in small groups.” (T3)

This finding suggests that the learning environment plays a crucial role in encouraging student participation. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of the assignments requires each group member to contribute to completing the shared work. As a result, students are encouraged to engage more actively, as they cannot rely solely on the teacher or other group members. Thus, collaborative learning not only increases participation quantitatively but also encourages more meaningful and active engagement in the learning process.

Improved Confidence

Collaborative learning also plays a crucial role in boosting students' confidence in using English. Teachers observed significant changes in students who were previously hesitant, passive, or reluctant to speak. In traditional classroom settings, students often feel intimidated when speaking in front of the whole class due to fear of making mistakes or a lack of confidence in their language skills. However, this situation changes in collaborative learning contexts, where students interact in smaller and more supportive groups.

Extract 3

“Students became more confident, especially those who were usually quiet.” (T1)

The excerpt above indicates that collaborative learning contributes to the development of students' confidence, particularly among those who tend to be less active in conventional classrooms. The small-group setting provides a safer and more supportive environment that encourages students to participate more actively. This increase in confidence is closely related to the learning environment created during collaborative activities. In small groups, students do not feel that they are the center of attention, which reduces anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. This allows them to experiment with language use more freely.

Extract 4

“In groups, they feel more comfortable because they aren't immediately judged by the whole class.” (T4)

This finding suggests that a supportive and less intimidating environment plays an important role in building students' confidence. When students feel comfortable, they are more willing to take risks in using English without excessive fear of making mistakes. Furthermore, repeated interaction during collaborative activities further strengthens students' confidence. The more frequently students engage in discussions, the more accustomed they become to expressing their ideas in English.

Extract 5

“They become accustomed to speaking because they often discuss with their friends.” (T5)

This indicates that continuous practice and peer interaction contribute to the gradual development of confidence. Therefore, collaborative learning not only reduces students' anxiety but also fosters confidence through repeated opportunities for communication.

Better Communication Skills

Further findings revealed that collaborative learning significantly contributes to the development of students' communication skills. Teachers reported that group discussions provide more opportunities for students to actively use English compared to traditional teaching, where interaction is typically limited to teacher–student exchanges. In a collaborative environment, students are encouraged to express ideas, respond to peers, and engage in meaningful communication.

Extract 6

“Their speaking skills have improved due to the frequent discussions.” (T2)

The excerpt above indicates that regular interaction in collaborative learning positively affects students' speaking ability. Increased opportunities to communicate allow students to practice English more frequently and in more meaningful ways. Furthermore, communication in collaborative learning is not one-way but involves dynamic interaction among students. They are required not only to express their ideas but also to explain, clarify, and respond to others' arguments, which promotes deeper language use and interactional competence.

Extract 7

“During discussions, they have to explain and respond, so it becomes communication practice.” (T3)

This finding suggests that collaborative discussions create authentic communication situations that encourage students to actively use language for real purposes. Through this process, students develop both fluency and the ability to interact effectively with others. In addition, collaborative learning enables students to provide feedback to one another, including correcting language errors in a supportive manner. This peer feedback allows students to learn from their mistakes in a less formal and less stressful environment. Therefore, collaborative learning not only increases the frequency of communication but also improves the quality of students' language use through interactive and reflective processes.

Teamwork Development

In addition to improving language-related skills, collaborative learning also contributes to the development of students' teamwork skills. Teachers observed that students learned to work together to achieve common goals rather than focusing solely on individual performance.

Extract 8

“Students learn to work together, not just work alone.” (T5)

The excerpt above indicates a shift from individualistic learning toward more collaborative learning behaviors. Students begin to recognize the importance of cooperation in completing tasks and achieving shared objectives. Through group activities, students also learn to divide roles and responsibilities based on their abilities. For example, some students take on the role of explaining ideas, while others focus on writing or organizing information.

Extract 9

“They share roles; some write, some explain.” (T2)

This finding suggests that collaborative learning helps students understand the importance of individual contributions within a group. By taking on specific roles, students become more responsible for their tasks and more actively involved in the learning process. Furthermore, collaborative learning encourages students to support each other throughout the learning process. Students are not only responsible for their own learning but also for helping their peers understand the material. This fosters a sense of responsibility, cooperation, and empathy among group members. As a result, collaborative learning not only improves academic outcomes but also develops essential social and interpersonal skills that are important for students' future.

Limitations of Collaborative Learning

Unequal Participation

Although collaborative learning offers various benefits, the findings reveal significant limitations related to unequal participation among students. Teachers reported that in many group activities, not all students actively contribute to discussions. Some students tend to dominate interactions by frequently expressing ideas and leading the task, while others remain passive and contribute minimally. This imbalance limits equal learning opportunities and reduces the overall effectiveness of collaborative learning.

Extract 10

"Some students are very active, while others are just quiet." (T2)

The excerpt above indicates a clear disparity in levels of student engagement within group activities. While some students take an active role, others tend to remain silent, which weakens the collaborative process and reduces its intended impact. Furthermore, this unequal participation is often influenced by individual differences among students, such as variations in language ability, self-confidence, and personality traits. Students with higher ability or greater confidence tend to take control of discussions, whereas those with lower confidence tend to withdraw and rely more on their peers.

Extract 11

"More capable students usually dominate, while others just follow." (T3)

This finding highlights how differences in ability and confidence shape group dynamics and contribute to imbalanced participation. As a result, collaborative learning may not equally benefit all students, particularly those who are less confident or less proficient. In addition, the lack of clear structure in assigning roles within groups can further exacerbate this issue. When roles are not explicitly defined, participation tends to occur naturally based on students' tendencies, which often reinforces dominance by certain individuals. Therefore, although collaborative learning aims to promote equal participation, its implementation still faces challenges in ensuring that all students are actively and meaningfully engaged.

Time Constraints

Time constraints were also identified as a major challenge in implementing collaborative learning. Teachers reported that group-based activities generally require more time than traditional teaching methods. Collaborative learning involves several stages, including providing instructions, organizing groups, conducting discussions, and presenting results, all of which require sufficient time allocation.

Extract 12

"Group discussions take longer, so sometimes there isn't enough time." (T4)

The excerpt above indicates that collaborative activities tend to be more time-consuming, which can create difficulties in managing limited classroom time. As a result, teachers may struggle to complete all planned learning activities within the allocated time. Furthermore, time constraints often affect the depth and quality of learning. In some cases, discussions must be stopped before students reach a full understanding or complete their tasks, which can reduce the overall effectiveness of the activity.

Extract 13

"Sometimes the discussion isn't over, but time is up." (T2)

This finding suggests that limited time can hinder meaningful learning, as students may not have sufficient opportunities to fully explore ideas or engage in deeper discussion. In addition, teachers face challenges in balancing collaborative activities with curriculum demands. They are required to ensure that learning objectives are achieved within a restricted timeframe, which requires careful planning and effective time management. Without proper control, discussions may take too long and reduce time for other important stages, such as feedback and evaluation. Therefore, time constraints remain a significant barrier to the effective implementation of collaborative learning.

Classroom Noise

Another limitation identified in this study is the increase in classroom noise during collaborative learning activities. Teachers reported that when multiple groups engage in discussions simultaneously, the classroom environment becomes noisier compared to traditional learning settings. While this is a natural consequence of active interaction, it can create challenges in maintaining a conducive learning environment.

Extract 14

"The class becomes noisier during group work." (T3)

The excerpt above indicates that increased student interaction often leads to higher noise levels in the classroom. Although this reflects active participation, it may also disrupt the overall learning atmosphere if not properly managed.

Furthermore, excessive noise can affect students' concentration and focus during learning activities. In a noisy classroom, students may have difficulty hearing their group members clearly, which can hinder effective communication.

Extract 15

"Sometimes students lose focus because it's too noisy." (T1)

This finding highlights the negative impact of noise on students' ability to engage in meaningful discussion. When students struggle to concentrate, the quality of interaction and learning outcomes may be reduced. In addition, classroom noise presents challenges for teachers in managing the class effectively. Teachers must balance allowing students to actively engage in discussions while ensuring that the classroom environment remains controlled and conducive to learning. This becomes even more challenging in larger classes, where noise levels tend to be higher. Therefore, effective noise management is an important aspect that teachers need to consider when implementing collaborative learning.

Assessment Difficulties

The findings also indicate that assessment in collaborative learning contexts is complex. Teachers reported difficulties in evaluating individual student performance in group-based

activities. Because tasks are completed collaboratively, it becomes challenging to determine each student's specific contribution.

Extract 16

"It's difficult to assess each student individually because of the group work." (T5)

The excerpt above highlights a major issue in the evaluation process, where teachers struggle to identify and measure individual performance within group activities. As a result, assessment may not accurately reflect each student's actual contribution and ability. Furthermore, unequal participation further complicates the assessment process. Students who contribute more actively may receive the same grade as those who contribute less when assessment is based solely on group outcomes. This situation raises concerns about fairness and can negatively affect student motivation.

Extract 17

"Those who actively work sometimes get the same grade as those who don't contribute." (T2)

This finding indicates that the lack of differentiation in grading can lead to perceptions of inequity among students, particularly for those who are more actively involved in completing group tasks. In addition, teachers often lack appropriate assessment strategies and tools to evaluate both the process and the product of collaborative learning. Effective assessment requires consideration of multiple aspects, such as participation, interaction, and final outcomes, which are not always easy to measure objectively. Therefore, assessment in collaborative learning requires more comprehensive and carefully planned approaches to ensure fairness, accountability, and accurate evaluation of student performance.

DISCUSSION

This study explores teachers' perceptions of collaborative learning in English classrooms, focusing on its benefits and limitations in real-life classroom implementation. The results indicate that collaborative learning contributes to increased student participation, confidence, communication skills, and collaboration, but also faces several challenges such as uneven participation, time constraints, classroom noise, and assessment difficulties. These findings confirm that collaborative learning has high pedagogical value, but its effectiveness is highly dependent on the context and how teachers design and manage learning practices. This aligns with recent research emphasizing that the success of a learning approach is determined not only by its theoretical validity but also by how teachers interpret and implement it in the classroom context (Nguyen & Habók, 2022; Vo et al., 2023).

One of the main findings of this study is increased student participation and confidence during collaborative learning. This finding aligns with recent research showing that collaborative learning can enhance student engagement and participation in the context of learning English as a foreign language (Alzubi et al., 2024; Sato & Ballinger, 2020). These results suggest that collaborative learning can be a solution to the problem of passive learning still frequently encountered in teacher-centered classrooms, particularly in Indonesia. Small-group environments have been shown to reduce student anxiety and create a more supportive atmosphere, making students more willing to participate. However, unlike some previous studies that consider increased participation as a direct result of collaborative learning, this study shows that other factors such as task design, group dynamics, and the role of the teacher also influence student participation levels. This

confirms that the success of collaborative learning is highly dependent on the quality of its implementation.

Another important finding is the shift in the teacher's role from a transmitter of information to a facilitator of learning. This finding aligns with recent research emphasizing the importance of student-centered learning and the teacher's role as a facilitator (Vo et al., 2023). In this study, teachers played a greater role in guiding interactions, monitoring group work, and providing support when needed, rather than directly delivering material. This shift is important because it can encourage students' self-directed learning and deeper cognitive engagement. However, this finding also differs from some previous studies that assumed this role shift occurred easily. In practice, this study showed that teachers still face difficulties in managing group dynamics and designing effective collaborative tasks. This suggests that implementing collaborative learning requires adequate teacher preparation and professional development.

Despite its many benefits, this study also identified limitations, one of which was uneven participation among students. This finding aligns with recent research showing that some students tend to dominate discussions while others remain passive in collaborative learning (Chen et al., 2021; Pham & Nguyen, 2022). However, this study provides a more contextual understanding by showing that participation inequality is closely related to differences in students' self-confidence and language skills. This extends previous research findings by emphasizing the importance of classroom context factors. Therefore, although collaborative learning aims to increase participation, structured strategies such as role allocation and teacher supervision are needed to ensure the engagement of all students.

Another limitation relates to time management and classroom management. Consistent with previous research (Alzubi et al., 2024), this study found that collaborative learning takes longer than traditional methods because it involves discussion and coordination. However, this study also shows that time constraints are not only caused by the nature of collaborative activities, but also by curriculum demands and classroom conditions. Furthermore, noise in the classroom appears to be a two-sided phenomenon: on the one hand, noise encourages active student engagement, but on the other, it can disrupt concentration if not managed properly. These findings provide a more balanced perspective than previous research, which tends to view noise solely as a problem. Furthermore, assessment in collaborative learning presents complex challenges. Consistent with recent research (Chen et al., 2021), teachers experience difficulties in assessing individual contributions in group work. However, this study also shows that these difficulties are not solely due to the characteristics of collaborative learning but also to teachers' limited understanding of alternative assessment strategies. This suggests that assessment issues are not merely technical but also related to teacher competency. Therefore, improving assessment literacy is crucial to ensure a fair and accurate evaluation process.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature by providing a more balanced and contextualized understanding of collaborative learning, particularly from the perspective of teachers in English classrooms. Unlike many previous studies that primarily focus on learning outcomes, this study simultaneously examines the benefits and limitations of collaborative learning and emphasizes the role of contextual and pedagogical factors in determining its effectiveness. This suggests that collaborative learning is not automatically effective but becomes meaningful when implemented strategically. These findings emphasize the importance of considering real-world classroom conditions in educational research and offer practical implications for teachers in optimizing the implementation of collaborative learning.

CONCLUSION

Based on an analysis of interviews with five English teachers who implement collaborative learning, this study concludes that collaborative learning is considered an effective and

relevant learning approach in English teaching, as it can increase student participation, self-confidence, communication skills, and the development of cooperation. The findings also indicate that the effectiveness of collaborative learning is highly dependent on the teacher's role as a facilitator who guides interactions, monitors group work, and manages classroom dynamics, thus emphasizing the importance of teacher pedagogical competence in its implementation. However, this study also identified several practical limitations, such as uneven student participation, limited learning time, classroom noise, and difficulties in assessing individual contributions in group work. These findings suggest that the success of collaborative learning is determined not only by the strength of its concept, but also by appropriate learning design and classroom management. Therefore, teachers need to implement structured collaborative activities with clear role divisions and appropriate assessment strategies to ensure balanced engagement and fair assessment. Meanwhile, institutional support through professional training is also needed to optimize its implementation in English language learning in the classroom.

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