

COLLABORATION IN BLENDED LEARNING: AN EFL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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Received: 09/08/2024

Accepted: 13/08/2024

Publication: 16/08/2024

Abstract

Blended learning becomes very popular in the EFL context after the adoption of technology into language teaching and learning. This study aimed to explore EFL students' perspectives of collaboration in blended learning focusing on students' experiences and perceptions on their collaborations in blended learning and factors that affected them. This study applied qualitative study with purposive sampling method. The data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews that involved 12 EFL students from a private university in North Sumatra, Indonesia, who have been involved in blended learning. The data were analysed using inductive approach. The raw data were condensed and coded into several categories. The results revealed that students' perceptions in comparing face to face collaboration and online collaboration blended learning were captured in terms of connectivity and technical issues, social presence, communication dynamic, flexibility and time management, and the effectiveness of collaboration and decision-making. The students' perceptions of urgency of collaboration in blended learning were identified in such conditions as idea sharing, sharing roles in decision-making, team efficacy enhancement, dynamic and enjoyable learning, encouragement and motivation, and support in adaptation. Furthermore, the factors that affected students' blended learning collaboration included the support and help from team members, the availability of time, place, and resources, technical issues, cognitive and ability differences, effective communication and interaction, Lecturer's role and involvement, and exposure to diverse ideas. Eventually, this study contributes to improving EFL teaching practices in blended learning settings by providing insights into students' experiences and the factors affecting their collaboration.

Keywords— Collaboration, Blended learning, EFL Students

Introduction

In the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), blended learning which blends traditional in-person instruction with online learning has grown in popularity recently (Sheerah, 2020; Menggo & Darong, 2022). The objective of this method is to optimise the benefits of both modalities in order to improve learning outcomes and experiences. However, the degree of student collaboration greatly affects how effective blended learning is (Utomo, 2023). In order to facilitate social interaction, encourage active engagement, and accelerate language development, collaboration is an essential component of the learning process (Lacaste et al., 2022; Motlagh et al., 2023; Stadler et al., 2020)). While collaborative learning has many potential advantages, putting it into practice in blended learning environments can be difficult, particularly for EFL students who may



encounter particular difficulties related to their academic background and linguistic ability (Nguyen, 2024; Utomo et al., 2024).

Understanding the efficiency of collaborative learning also requires an understanding of how EFL students perceive blended learning environments. Studies have indicated that learners in blended learning contexts have a favourable opinion of their education, emphasising the need of unambiguous guidance and dependable internet access (Alaidarous & Madini, 2016). Furthermore, studies have shown that by encouraging social engagement and motivation, blended learning can improve students' language skills and lower their anxiety in learning English. The importance of having a thorough grasp of EFL students' viewpoints on cooperation in blended learning settings is highlighted by related research findings. For example, other studies showed how well blended learning works to enhance EFL learners' writing abilities at different academic levels (Ramadan, 2020; Zubiri-Esnaola et al., 2020).

Particularly with regard to undergraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, the transition to blended learning has grown more pressing. A thorough grasp of how EFL students perceive and interact with blended learning environments is imperative, as the COVID-19 pandemic has expedited this transformation. Research has indicated that group work is crucial for improving learning results; yet, there is a dearth of information in the literature about the viewpoints of EFL students on this matter. In order to completely comprehend this dynamic, more study is necessary. For example, (Bersamin et al., 2024) highlight the importance of investigating how EFL students evaluate the influence of group collaboration on their learning experiences.

Furthermore, the persistent challenges created by the epidemic and the rapid expansion of educational technologies highlight the need of investigating EFL students' opinions regarding blended learning. Furthermore, by offering insightful information about the long-term consequences of group collaboration in blended learning settings, a longitudinal study could assist teachers in creating more potent plans that will help EFL students succeed academically. To guarantee that instructional strategies are adapted to match the needs of EFL students and promote the best possible learning outcomes, it is crucial to carry out in-depth study on their opinions regarding blended learning.

Literature Review

The shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated the transition from traditional face-to-face learning to online and blended learning models. This shift has been necessitated by the need to maintain academic continuity and ensure student engagement despite the challenges posed by the pandemic. Studies have highlighted the effectiveness of blended learning in maintaining academic continuity and ensuring student engagement. For instance, a study by Li (2022) examined students' perceptions of online classes during the pandemic. The study found that students believed a blended model that combines both classroom and online modes is necessary for the post-pandemic era, as it enhances students' preparedness for unexpected circumstances and fosters a more sustainable online learning culture. Lemay et al. (2021) looked at how education changed to an online format during the pandemic. While they pointed out that taking classes online had advantages like building a virtual learning community and improving students' digital learning abilities, they also had drawbacks like difficulty managing time, difficulties with adaptability, and technological difficulties.

In addition, teachers' perspectives have also been examined regarding the abrupt transition to online learning. Garcia et al. (2023) examined the perspectives and experiences of educators in relation to the sudden shift to online instruction. The study discovered that variables including internet connectivity, digital infrastructure, administrator support, and learning settings affected teachers' views and experiences during this shift. This related study can be taken into account in discussing how students' perception relates to the teacher's point of view.

In the EFL context, blended learning has become a prominent pedagogical strategy because it provides a dynamic and adaptable learning environment (L.-A.-P. Nguyen, 2024). The motivation behind and obstacles facing university lecturers who want to implement blended learning in their language classes were investigated by T. N. Nguyen et al. (2018). The research emphasised the significance of teacher motivation and support in the successful implementation of blended learning, highlighting the need for professional development and teacher excitement for the successful integration of this approach. For example, Menggo and Darong (2022) investigated the demands of 21st-century skills promotion using a needs analysis of academic English speaking materials. The impact of blended learning on improving student learning outcomes—specifically, on the development of critical thinking, communication, and teamwork skills—was highlighted in this study. Blended learning has the potential to enhance students' academic English ability and equip them for the challenges of the twenty-first century, according to the findings.

Furthermore, from teachers' perspective, there are a number of consequences for EFL teachers from Nasrullah et al. (2023) study on the blended learning strategy for in-service EFL teachers. In order to improve learning autonomy and English competence, the study highlights the use of technology. Effective content delivery in blended learning situations requires EFL teachers to be adept with digital tools. This includes creating a smart learning environment by providing rich sources of material, interactive assessments, and a conducive milieu for learning, which accelerates English proficiency by offering diverse exposure and interactions. The research underscores the importance of self-independent learning in the context of blended learning. EFL teachers should design instruction to adapt to new learning situations, moving away from a teacher-centered approach to a more student-centered one. This adaptation is crucial for meeting the expectations of modern learners who have access to knowledge everywhere and anytime. The report also emphasises how important it is for blended learning to be inclusive and flexible. To provide learning autonomy and accommodate the uniqueness of their students, EFL teachers should be flexible in their approach. The capacity to adjust is essential for developing a customized educational experience that caters to each student's unique needs.

Research Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative study approach to explore the perspectives of EFL students on collaboration in blended learning environments. The qualitative study method was chosen to provide insights into the experiences and perceptions of EFL students, allowing for a detailed understanding of the complexities involved in collaborative learning within blended settings.

Participants

The participants of this study were EFL students enrolled in a blended learning program at a private university in Medan, Indonesia.. The selection of participants was based

on purposive sampling. A total of 12 students participated in the study.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study involved semi-structured interviews with the participants. The interviews were conducted in a private setting to ensure that participants felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. The interview questions were designed to explore the students' experiences with collaboration in blended learning, including their perceptions of the comparison between face to face and online learning, the urgency of students' collaboration in blended learning, and the factors that affected student's collaboration in blended-learning.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using an inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). The interview data were transcribed into a raw data collection. The raw data were condensed and categorized to identify key themes and patterns. This method allowed for a detailed examination of the interview responses, enabling the extraction of meaningful insights. The categorization process facilitated a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Results and Discussion

This study explored students' perceptions from the perspective of the comparison between face to face and online learning, the urgency of students' collaboration in blended learning, and the factors that affected students' face to face and online collaboration. The data that were coded similarly were found, and these were then connected to create themes and subthemes about the objectives of the study. Regarding the students' perceptions on the comparison between face to face and online learning, data analysis revealed 6 conditions including flexibility and time management, communication dynamics, effectiveness of collaboration indecision making, comfort in expressing opinions, impact of technical issues, and social presence.

Comparison between Face to face and Online Collaboration

The first interview session explored students' experiences in face to face classroom and in online one and how both settings can be compared based on their collaboration experiences. Students compared face to face and online learning in terms of connectivity and technical issues, social presence, communication dynamic, flexibility and time management, and the effectiveness of collaboration and decision-making.

First, students perceived that online learning is prone to connectivity problems and technical glitches, which can interrupt the learning process. These disruptions created experiential troubles and hinder effective communication among members of the students group. In contrast, students found that face-to-face learning was free from such technical issues, allowing for uninterrupted interactions. The absence of these challenges in a physical classroom contributes to a more seamless learning experience. As a result, students often find face-to-face learning to be more preferable.

Second, students viewed social presence in both settings. The students believed that face-to-face learning fosters a stronger sense of social presence through nonverbal cues, enriching the overall students' learning experience. In contrast, online learning lacks this element, which can make interactions feel less personal. This absence led to feelings of isolation for some students. Additionally, the difficulty in conveying ideas effectively online

was another challenge for students. Students felt the online learning bordered their sense of learning presence.

Third, Online learning provides students with increased flexibility, allowing them to manage their schedules more independently. This freedom, however, sometimes blurred the boundaries between their academic responsibilities and personal life. On the other hand, face-to-face learning offers a more defined and consistent schedule. Some students find this structure helpful, as it brings a sense of order to their daily routine. The clear separation between study time and personal time in face-to-face learning is particularly valued by those who prefer a more organized approach.

Fourth, Face-to-face collaboration is considered by the students more practical and effective, particularly in decision-making. In-person interactions enable clearer communication and foster a stronger emotional connection among group members. This personal engagement enhances the collaborative process. As a result, decisions are often made more efficiently in face-to-face settings.

The Urgency of Students' Collaboration in Blended Learning

Second session of the interview captured students' opinion about the urgency of collaboration in a blended learning settings. The results showed that students perceived the urgency of collaboration in terms of idea sharing, sharing roles in decision making, team efficacy enhancement, dynamic and enjoyable learning, encouragement and motivation, and support in adaptation.

In students' point of view, sharing ideas is considered highly important because it facilitates the exchange of knowledge and diverse perspectives. This collaborative process enriches students' learning experience by incorporating various viewpoints. Students believed that effective idea sharing promotes deeper understanding and innovation. It also helped students build on each other's insights, leading to more comprehensive solutions. In short, the ability to share ideas is crucial for maximizing the learning and problem-solving experiences.

According to the students, collaboration was vital in decision-making, as it enabled the integration of multiple viewpoints and expertise. By working together, students can consider a broader range of information and perspectives. This collective approach leads to more informed and balanced conclusions. The collaborative process helps ensure that decisions are well-rounded and take various factors into account. The positive of this experience was that the effective collaboration enhances the quality of decision-making in the students' group.

Additionally, effective teamwork significantly boosts project efficiency by facilitating the exchange of ideas and maintaining clear communication. This collaborative approach streamlines processes and enhances coordination among team members. By working together, teams can address issues more quickly and avoid duplication of effort. The improved efficiency often leads to faster project completion. Thus, effective teamwork not only saves time but also optimizes project outcomes.

Collaboration also adds a dynamic element to the students' learning process, making it more engaging and enjoyable for them. Working together allowed students to interact actively, which enhances their overall experience. This social aspect of collaboration fosters a sense of community and connection among students. This interactive approach kept students more invested in their studies.

Other points of urgency were the affective issues. The encouragement and motivation from team members have a positive effect on the group's overall effort and enthusiasm. When

individuals in a team actively support and inspire each other, it enhances collective motivation. This positive reinforcement boosts the group's energy and commitment to their goals. The collaborative spirit fostered by mutual encouragement leads to increased productivity and morale. Consequently, a supportive team environment drives greater success and engagement. Collaboration facilitated students to adapt to the blended learning environments. By working together, students navigated the challenges of transitioning between online and in-person formats better. Collaborative efforts provided support and facilitated a smoother adaptation to the different modes of learning. This teamwork helps students share strategies and resources, making the transition less daunting. The collective experience of working together in various formats enhances comfort with the blended learning approach.

The Factors that Affected Students' Face to Face and Online Collaboration

Third session of the interview explored students' perspectives of affective factors of collaboration in blended learning. Students perceived the factors into some dimensions including support and help from team members, the availability of time, place, and resources, technical issues, cognitive and ability differences, effective communication and interaction, Lecturer's role and involvement, and exposure to diverse ideas.

Students believed that the factor of a member's ability to assist and support others greatly improves group collaboration and effectiveness. They thought when a team member provided help, it strengthened the group's cohesion and productivity. This support fostered a collaborative environment where all members can contribute more effectively. Consequently, the group's performance and success can be enhanced. The presence of supportive individuals is crucial for achieving optimal results in collaborative efforts.

The next factor was the availability of appropriate times and locations for face-to-face interactions. Students perceived that this factor plays a critical role in the effectiveness of collaboration. When students have access to suitable meeting times and venues, it facilitates smoother and more productive in-person discussions. Additionally, financial considerations and access to resources are important factors that influence the ability to engage in collaborative activities. Limited financial resources or inadequate resources can hinder the ability to participate effectively in both face-to-face and online settings. For online collaboration, these factors also impact how well students can connect and contribute. Thus, ensuring that both logistical and financial aspects are addressed is crucial for fostering effective collaboration. Overall, adequate planning and resource allocation are key to successful collaborative efforts in any learning environment.

Technical factors were also captured in students' perceptions. Signal strength and technical aspects, such as the functionality of the platform used, significantly affected the quality of their online collaboration. Poor signal strength and technical issues triggered disruptions in their communication and hinder effective interactions. These disruptions caused it difficult for students to engage fully in collaborative activities. Issues like lag, connectivity problems, and platform malfunctions detracted from the online learning experience. To ensure smooth and productive online collaboration, addressing these technical challenges becomes essential. Reliable technology and robust platform functionality are crucial for maintaining effective online collaborations. This finding is relevant to the previous studies Alaidrus and Madini (2016) indicated the perception of education among students in blended learning environments is positive, highlighting the importance of consistent internet access. This phenomenon happened in the area with limited or unreliable internet connection.

Regarding cognitive factors, differences in cognitive capacity and individual abilities impact the effectiveness of student collaboration. These variations influenced how well students contribute to and engage in group activities. The students believed that their diverse cognitive strengths affected how tasks were approached and completed because they needed to advocate this challenge. Understanding and managing these variations remains important for optimizing students' collaborative efforts.

Furthermore, effective collaboration relies heavily on good communication practices, mutual respect, and a clear understanding of each member's role. Maintaining open and respectful communication helps ensure that all team members feel valued and heard. Understanding each person's role within the group clarifies responsibilities and expectations. Active interaction among team members promotes engagement and contributes to a more dynamic collaborative process. These elements are essential for fostering a productive and harmonious team environment. Without them, collaboration can become less effective and cohesive.

The teacher's factor was also expressed by the students. The presence and involvement of lecturers were crucial for providing guidance and support during collaborative activities. Their engagement helped steer students' discussions and ensured that the collaboration remains focused and productive. Lecturers offer valuable insights and feedback, which can enhance the quality of the group's work. Their support also addressed any issues or challenges that arose during the collaboration. Effective lecturer involvement is a major factor to improve the overall collaborative experience. In line with this study, the teacher's role was also figured by Alaidarous and Madini (2016) as a crucial factor for their contribution in preparing for unambiguous learning instruction. Moreover, Nasrullah et al. (2023) emphasized the role of teachers in designing a supportive blended learning environment.

The exposure of all members' ideas was also highlighted by students as a crucial factor in blended learning. The thought that access to diverse ideas and perspectives enhanced collaboration by broadening the range of viewpoints. This variety contributes to more creative and innovative solutions in the group. It also improved problem-solving by incorporating multiple approaches and insights. Exposure to different ideas fosters a richer and more dynamic collaborative environment. So, diverse perspectives led to more effective and well-rounded outcomes that students' group can consider.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to point out EFL students' perceptions on collaboration in blended learning. Comparing the collaboration in face to face learning and online learning, this study identified criteria including: time management and flexibility, communication dynamics, decision-making effectiveness in collaboration, comfort level when expressing opinions, influence of technical difficulties, and social presence. In addition, Students' perceptions of the importance of cooperation in blended learning were centred around idea sharing, roles sharing in decision making, enhancing team efficacy, engaging in dynamic and exciting learning, providing encouragement and incentive, and aiding in adaptability. Moreover, related to factor that affected students' collaboration in blended learning, Students' perceptions of the factors included the following aspects: team members' support and assistance; time, location, and resource availability; technological difficulties; disparities in

ability and cognition; good interaction and communication among students, the role and commitment of the lecturer, and exposure to a range of ideas.

This study has captured the EFL students' voice about collaboration in blended learning. As the integration of technology in language teaching is prominent currently. The setting of blended learning has become a popular option in the context. Therefore, the students' perspectives and experiences remain urgent to improve the blended learning setting. However, the teacher's voice is also an essential part to make the blended learning experience better for teacher and students. Future study needs to advocate how students' perception is considered by teachers in order to improve the blended learning setting for collaborative learning.

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