

EFL STUDENTS' VOICES OF BLENDED COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN COMPLETING DIGITAL COMIC PROJECTS

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Abstract: Advances in technology have made it possible to conduct collaborative learning online via the Internet. Blended collaborative learning combines online knowledge with on-site meetings to allow students to complete tasks and projects together in a group. This research aimed to elaborate voices of freshmen EFL students toward blended collaborative learning including perceived benefits, challenges, and how the students overcame the challenges, especially in completing digital comic projects. This phenomenological study was conducted at a private university in Indonesia. A total of 18 students participated in this study. They were interviewed face-to-face to obtain the data. The data were analyzed by qualitative data analysis by preparing the data, coding, and generating themes. The findings indicate the perceived benefits which included academic improvement, social and psychological benefits, and digital technology mastery. Additionally, challenges were found in terms of having different perceptions and ideas, lack of motivation and low responsibility to participate, and digital technology barriers. To tackle the problems, some efforts were made including building effective communication via collaborative tools, distributing various and equal roles, and learning from various sources.

Keywords: collaborative learning, blended collaborative learning, EFL classroom, digital projects

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INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, collaborative learning has been applied by many educators and researchers as one of the essential approaches in teaching. Lin (2015) describes collaboration as a situation in which two or more people learn or try to learn something together. From a cognitive point of view, collaborative activities such as explaining or discussing with peers are considered to change the cognitive structure of an individual. In terms of a sociocultural perspective, by engaging participation in collaborative activities, an individual can internalize values to put into practice (Fischer et al., 2013). Furthermore, interaction and discussion between group members is a means of transferring information as well as a bridge to support participation, cooperation, and responsibility (Novita et al., 2020; Vega-Abarzúa et al., 2022). Students who have positive social-emotional interactions will create

effective collaboration and bring about beneficial effects on their learning outcomes (Huang & Lajoie, 2023).

It is also important to note that some studies have also evaluated the implementation of collaborative learning. Chen (2017) revealed that college students in Taiwan perceived collaborative learning beneficial since it facilitated them to solve a problem in a group, rather than doing it individually. Students were also satisfied with peer work including peer review and peer coaching. In Law et al. (2017), students perceived an improvement in learning engagement through participation with other students. Also, they demonstrated positive behavior, interest in learning, commitment, and worked hard in a group. A study by Qureshi et al. (2020) suggested the implementation of collaborative learning in teaching and learning in tertiary education as it could enhance students' academic development. Similarly, students perceived that collaborative learning made a considerable impact on peers' interaction and knowledge sharing (Ansari & Khan, 2020).

In the context of teaching English as a foreign language, collaborative learning has been widely applied to develop language skills. Rodphotong (2018) showed that students' communicative competence increased significantly after collaborative learning was implemented. Regardless of their language proficiency level, all learners can benefit from participation in a collaborative dialogue (Scotland, 2022). Babiker (2018) proved that students considered collaborative learning effective in increasing oral interaction and making them speak English more fluently. This is caused by several factors such as the role of discussions in groups, exchange of experiences between members, and corrections of pronunciation. Collaborative learning also increases students' confidence when speaking English because being in a small group reduces stress and provides mutual support (Fatimah, 2019). Numerous claims also show that collaborative work in language classes will reduce students' dependence on teachers and develop their ability to actively participate in conversation (Ibrahim et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 which impacted the educational sector has shifted face-to-face meetings to either completely or partially online modes. Students who are not accustomed to the situations of online learning will encounter enormous difficulty in adapting new methods of learning because they cannot collaborate with their peers. In addition, the students' might face some difficulties in completing their assignment due to less interaction with their teachers (Suhartina et al., 2022). In a study conducted by Banihashem et al. (2023), students found it hard to coordinate and interact with their friends, especially in doing group work, which later contributed to high workload. Sipeki et al. (2022) also confirmed that interruptions of interaction with other students as well as teachers are one of the triggering factors for stress during online learning. Furthermore, Quraishi (2023) revealed that during online learning, students missed the collaborative aspects of their education. The interactions over virtual meetings without physically seeing each other have contributed to the lack of engagement, whereas engagement can be used to measure students' academic performance.

Apart from that, the instruction of remote learning during the pandemic has fostered teachers and students to employ technology in their classrooms (Su, 2023). The immersion of technology in education is effective in supporting innovations in learning (Prayudha, 2023). The use of technology also encourages some new ways of teaching. Blended collaborative learning is one of these. Through the advance of technology, it is now possible

to implement collaborative learning online via the internet. Blended collaborative learning combines online learning and onsite meetings in such a way that students can accomplish their tasks or projects with their group. In a study conducted by Lambropoulos and Pitsou (2020), the overall implementation of blended collaborative learning at the university level was successful and deemed satisfactory and useful by the students. Furthermore, the use of a blended approach through eClass, flipped classroom, and onsite meetings contributed to students' active engagement. Similarly, Jong (2016) who researched the effect of the blended learning environment in an online course indicated that compared to students in the conventional teaching, those who were in the blended learning environment showed more interactions and had more opportunities to be involved in learning.

In the context of teaching EFL, Motlagh et al. (2023) revealed that blended collaborative learning contributed to better performance of students' English reading comprehension especially in terms of understanding the concept of English texts and using proper vocabulary to complete the texts. Butarbutar et al. (2023) found that blended collaborative learning was successful to implement in teaching speaking English as a foreign language. Moreover, technology in blended collaborative learning supported students to be more self-directed and independent. Another study carried out by Avci and Adiguzel (2017) came to the conclusion that mobile blended collaborative learning supported an authentic setting for learning English and contributed to students' improvement in communication skills and vocabulary knowledge. In terms of writing skills, Hasanuddin et al. (2019) proved that students' scientific writing ability including vocabulary mastery and the use of effective sentences and paragraphs increased through blended learning-based collaborative learning.

Despite some previous studies on both collaborative learning and blended collaborative learning, no research has exclusively addressed the implementation of blended collaborative learning in completing digital comic projects in EFL classrooms. As it is also recommended by Fang et al. (2022) that it is important to obtain students' perceptions and suggestions as a part of teaching reflection and to modify the teaching and learning process. Therefore, this research aimed to elaborate voices of freshmen EFL students toward blended collaborative learning including perceived benefits, challenges, and how the students overcame the challenges. It is also hoped that the results of this research can enrich literature about the use of blended collaborative learning in EFL classrooms.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research design

Considering the purpose of this research, it was carried out using a qualitative-phenomenological study. It was applied in this study because the researchers intended to understand students' experiences in completing digital comic projects using blended collaborative learning. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a phenomenological study elaborates a group of individuals who experience similar phenomenon. In this research, the individuals were some freshmen EFL students, while the phenomenon was the learning situation in which blended collaborative learning was used in completing digital comic projects.

Participants of the Study

The participants were eighteen undergraduate students of the first semester of Nursing study program who enrolled English course. The participants were selected because they were actively involved in the process of blended collaborative learning and willing to participate in this study after filling out an informed consent. In qualitative research, it is important to purposefully select the participants to help the researchers understand the problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Research Setting

This qualitative study was carried out in the even semester of the 2022-2023 academic year at a private university in East Java, Indonesia. In this university, all the lectures are delivered in Indonesian language, but one-semester English course is compulsory for all undergraduate students.

Research Instrument

The main data were obtained through a semi-structured interview with the participants. The researchers prepared an interview guide with three key questions including participants' perceived benefits (How do you perceive the benefits of blended collaborative learning in completing your digital comic projects?), perceived challenges (How do you perceive the challenges of blended collaborative learning in completing your digital comic projects?), and solutions to the challenges (How did you and your group members overcome the challenges/problems?). However, apart from the three questions, the researchers could elicit more information from the participants. During the interviews, the researchers captured information from the participants by using a voice recorder application in a smartphone.

Data Collection

The participants employed blended collaborative learning in completing their English digital-end-of projects in the form of digital comics. The steps of blended collaborative learning can be perceived in the following figure (Figure 1) and followed by the explanation.

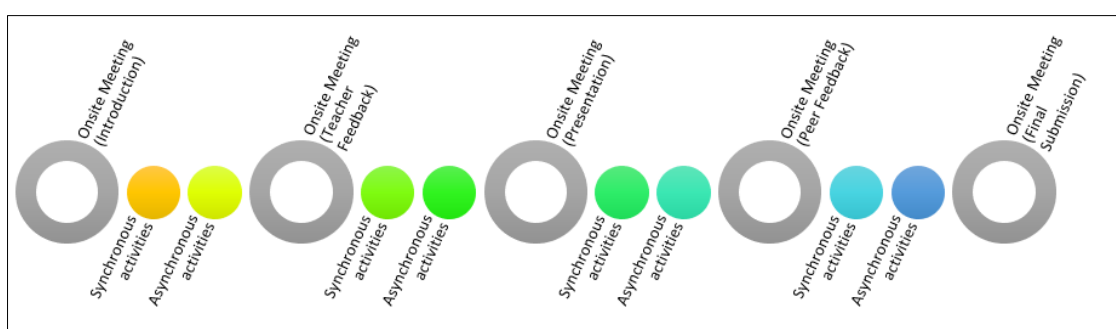


Figure 1. The Implementation of Blended Collaborative Learning

In the first onsite meeting, the participants were introduced to the digital projects they had to complete at the end of the semester. Besides, they were divided into twelve groups with different topics in Grammar such as nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, etc. They were required to submit a series of comics that were created digitally through <https://app.pixton.com/>. The dialogs in the digital comics should contain one Grammar

topic. In addition to having collaboration inside the classroom, the participants were encouraged to continue their discussion online via synchronous and asynchronous modes. In the second onsite meeting (teacher feedback), the participants showed their first draft to the lecturer to obtain feedback. After getting feedback from the lecturer, the participants carried on their projects through online collaboration. From the online collaboration, the participants could revise and improve their projects to be prepared for the presentation in the next onsite meeting. In the third onsite meeting (presentation), the participants presented their projects to the whole classroom. In the fourth onsite meeting (peer feedback), the participants obtained constructive feedback from their peers. Then, the participants revised their projects via online collaboration. In the last onsite meeting, the participants submitted their projects to the lecturer. One of the student's digital comic projects can be perceived in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Student's Digital Comic Projects entitled "Space Attack."

After employing blended collaborative learning, the researchers collected the data by conducting a semi-structured interview to eighteen participants from June 20, 2023, to June 27, 2023. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and one-on-one. Before the interviews, the researchers prepared a voice recorder application in a smartphone to record the information provided by the participants. The approximate time of each interview was 30 to 40 minutes. After the interviews were complete, the researchers played the recording and transcribed the interview results to be prepared for analysis. In addition to the interviews, the researchers wrote observation notes obtained from observing students' WhatsApp group history videos and Pixton digital comic maker.

Data Analysis

The three research questions in this study led the way for data analysis. Data analysis in the phenomenological study highlights the significant sentences or statements that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced certain phenomena (Creswell & Poth,

2018). According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), there are five main steps of qualitative data analysis which include 1) preparing the data for analysis, 2) reading all the data, 3) coding all of the data, 4) generating themes, and 5) representing themes. To begin the analysis process, the researchers collected all data from the interview transcripts. Then, the researchers read all the transcripts which later started the coding process. In this step, the researchers reread the data for the recurring themes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

In this research, some emerging and predetermined codes were found from the results of the interview. From those codes, the researchers could generate some themes related to each research question. Table 1 presents detailed information about codes and themes in this research based on each research question.

Table 1. Codes and Themes of the Data Analysis

Research Questions	Codes	Themes
How the EFL students perceive the benefits of blended collaborative learning in completing digital comic projects?	Increasing students' understanding of the materials; promoting collaborative skills; digital technology mastery; raising personal values, facilitating effective communication and discussion, more focused and continued evaluation	Academic improvement; social and psychological benefits; digital technology mastery
What are the challenges/problems experienced by the students while carrying out blended collaborative learning?	Different ideas among teammates; lack of responsibilities and awareness of teammates either in onsite or online meetings; poor teamwork; slow internet connection; problems with the use of Pixton; ineffective communication; free riding	Communicational challenges; moral issues; technological barriers
How the students overcome the challenge/problems encountered while carrying out blended collaborative learning?	Effective communication; encouraging online discussion; building trust in the group; improving collaborative skills; practicing with group members; asking the lecturer; learning from YouTube and other media	Building effective communication via collaborative tools; assigning different roles; learning from various sources

Data in Table 1 indicates several themes generated from the interview results for the first research question regarding perceived benefits. They are academic improvement, social and psychological benefits, and digital technology mastery. For the second research question about perceived challenges, three main themes are identified. They are communicational challenges, moral issues, and infrastructural challenges. Finally, for the third research question about solutions, the generated themes are building effective communication via collaborative tools, assigning different roles, and performing regular monitoring and evaluation.

EFL Students' Perceived Benefits of Blended Collaborative Learning in Completing Digital Comic Projects

The first perceived benefit of blended collaborative learning was academic improvement. In the process of making presentations and digital comics, the students worked together to discuss and share the materials. One of the students revealed that through a small group discussion, he/she listened, read, spoke, and wrote more, and thus he/she obtained more knowledge and information. Another student also pointed out that his/her understanding of Grammar materials improved because his/her group discussed the materials continuously either onsite or online. He/she added, that when the discussion in the classroom was unfinished, his/her group continued the discussion at home through WhatsApp group. One other student mentioned that blended collaborative learning eased her/him to master the materials for a variety of learning methods. In the process of making digital comics, his/her group discussed plots and dialogs of the comics face-to-face in the classroom, and then the member in charge created the predetermined plots and dialogs at his/her respective home. Since Pixton digital comic maker is not equipped with a live chat feature, the group members utilized WhatsApp group for confirmation and clarification.

...Because we were working together in a group, I listened, spoke, read, and wrote more often, which makes me learn and master more material. (S1)

... Even though we can't meet in person, we can communicate via WhatsApp group using its features such as chat, telephone, or group video call. (S2)

...my mastery of grammar material is increasing, ... because the materials and methods are varied. We got the materials from various sources, ... we initially discussed the plots in the classroom, and then we made the comics at home. I also chatted to my friends in WhatsApp group when I faced difficulties. (S4)

In addition to academic improvement, the students benefited greatly from blended collaborative learning in terms of social and psychological aspects. In terms of social benefits, some students perceived that blended collaborative learning was interesting and enjoyable. They also felt more comfortable when learning together with their friends. One of the students mentioned that he/she was not worried to ask questions or clarification because his/her friends would help.

... I and my friends felt that completing this task (the digital comic projects) was not a burden, rather, we found it interesting. (S3)

Learning was more fun and enjoyable for me... (S5)

The benefits are that we can feel responsibility, develop leadership skills, and learning is also more enjoyable. (S13)

In the psychological benefits, some other students mentioned that blended collaborative learning increased their self-confidence and self-esteem, and reduced anxiety.

... increase self-confidence because we work together. And we contribute to each other's thoughts, and solve problems together. (S8)

... makes us more confident when speaking English. (S12)

I am more confident to give presentation...(S16)

... increase positive attitude, and self-confidence...(S17)

I can increase my self-confidence by speaking in front of many people. (S18)

The last perceived benefit was regarding the digital technology mastery. In performing blended collaborative learning, the students employed WhatsApp application especially WhatsApp group and Pixton digital comic maker. For most of the students, it was their first-time using Pixton digital comic maker to create digital comics collaboratively.

...know more about digital technology (S6)

... mastery of new technology. It is something new that I have ever experienced (S7)

... can master digital technology in making presentations and comics. (S9)

EFL Students' Perceived Challenges of Blended Collaborative Learning in Completing Digital Comic Projects

The first challenge of blended collaborative learning was communicational challenges. One of the students revealed having "different ideas" among team members as the potential misunderstanding within the group. Moreover, some students also indicated challenges related to ineffective communication.

... sometimes different ideas between friends created obstacles. (S1)

... some had difficulty in communicating and exchanging ideas or expressing opinions. (S3)

The obstacles may be differences of opinion and in understanding the materials between us (the group members) ... (S4)

Unfortunately, during discussion in WhatsApp group, sometimes one or two of our group members did not respond...(S6)

... at first our team members could not establish effective communication in WhatsApp group... (S8)

In addition to communicational challenges, the participants complained a lack of motivation and low responsibility among members. Lack of responsibility made students did not actively contribute to group discussion. Some students were free riders who tended to refrain from participating in the group tasks, and thus it affected the overall group performance.

... low motivation due to lack of personal responsibility. There were members who did not do the task so that it affected the performance of other members. (S2)

... some members did not participate in working together on the task. (S11)

... someone was just being a burden on the group and it's very frustrating. (S12)

... some friends did not contribute anything and were ignorant. (S15)

... irresponsible friends were less responsive when there was a discussion...(S16)

The last challenge was related to the technology. Since blended collaborative learning employed both online and onsite meetings, the students had to handle some online applications which were either familiar or unfamiliar to them. Some students mentioned that it was hard and confusing for them to create digital comics because they never used Pixton application previously.

... when creating comics with the Pixton application, because we haven't really mastered it. (S5)

At first, we felt confused because we had to adapt to an application that had never been used before... (S7)

... we had a little trouble putting our ideas into comic forms. (S9)

I found it difficult to use the Pixton app and create a comic storyline. (S10)

How EFL Students Overcome the Challenges

For the first challenge regarding communicational challenges, many students suggested building effective communication both onsite and online meetings as the solution. One student revealed that his/her group attempted to get together and talk about each member's personal problem so that each member felt appreciated and respected. Similarly, another student mentioned that his/her group met and tried to solve the problems together. After everything was clear, everyone in the group could work optimally. In terms of online discussion, some students assumed that the use of WhatsApp group was enormously useful.

- ... asking each member to express opinions or exchange ideas with each other in order to achieve the goal... assure them that their opinions will be accepted and respected ... (S1)
- ... invite the whole group to solve the problem and find a solution according to the collective decision. (S2)
- ... to overcome this, we discussed the opinions and then we collaborated. (S3)
- ... always communicate so that no one in the group was silent/not working. (S5)
- ... by creating WhatsApp group and we discuss in the group. (S7)

For the second challenge related to moral issues, some students mentioned about assigning different roles to the group members. By distributing various roles, all members of the group could participate in completing the projects and minimize free riding. By doing this, the members ended up with supporting each other and reminding other members' job.

- ... divided the tasks equally, with no one being overburdened....(S16)
- ... divided tasks so that they (the free riding students) do not always depend on others for their work. (S17)
- ... we divide the tasks according to each member ability (S6)
- ... supported friends so that the task could be completed optimally. (S4)
- ... reminded of his responsibilities. (S18)
- ... encouraged the passive friend to respond during the discussion. (S8)

Finally, regarding the digital technological challenges, the students seemed to learn from various sources. One student mentioned that when the problems related to the use of application could not be solved in group, his/her group members asked the lecturers. Another student stated that his/her group frequently learned from the internet especially YouTube.

- ... keep trying, even though we initially tried to press haphazardly but eventually we were able to use it well. (S9)
- ... asked the lecturers who knew more about using the application. (S10)
- ... watched tutorials on the internet or YouTube. (S11)
- ... study each tool/button in the application with friends. (S12)

Discussion

The first perceived benefit of blended collaborative learning was academic improvement especially in grammar mastery. The findings indicate that students' academic improvement was affected by several factors such as having learning partners, continuous learning environment, multiple exposure, and diverse methods in learning. These findings are the

same as some other researchers, like Khalil (2018) who researched the use of Google Applications, Google Docs and Google Classroom, as online collaborative tools in improving students' grammar skills. Similar to this current research, Khalil (2018) highlighted the advantage of Google Applications in establishing collaborative learning environment which supported teacher and student interactions. Interaction in online learning environments seeks to combine technology with traditional media and is not limited to an instrumental approach (Motlagh et al., 2023). It is important to note that interaction among peers is an essential factor in determining the success of collaborative learning (Lambropoulos & Pitsou, 2020). In this research, Pixton and WhatsApp group have been proven to provide intense communication among group members when finishing their projects because they aid each group member to keep connected at home.

Regarding social and psychological benefits, the findings suggested that blended collaborative learning was considered interesting and enjoyable and could increase students' self-confidence as well as reducing anxiety. The results, similar to those in Cantika and Fudhla (2023), show that internet-assisted collaborative learning increase students' self-confidence because the students were given plenty of opportunities to actively participate in collaborative work. Hasanuddin et al. (2019) also indicated that blended collaborative learning made students more confident among their members. Furthermore, one of the research participants stated that his/her self-confidence increased because his/her group members were very supportive. According to Ansari and Khan (2020), high degree of interaction among students or between students and teachers will lead to better students' engagement. Additionally, working together with friends produces more results and brings more pleasure (Vijayalakshmi & Kanchana, 2020). In other words, collaborative work enables students to support each other, makes them feel more appreciated and valued, and thus it affects positively to students' psychological state. Besides, the involvement of technology in blended collaborative learning has brought new experiences for students in doing their final projects. The findings show that the students learned new applications which eased them in completing the projects. In the previous study, Magen-Nagar and Shonfeld (2018) confirmed that a high level of online collaborative learning stimulated positive attitudes to technology. They also assumed that involving students in this type of learning can reduce technology anxiety while increasing confidence and enjoyment of technology simultaneously.

On the other hand, students perceived challenges in blended collaborative learning are in terms of different perception and ideas, lack of motivation, low responsibility to participate, and difficulty in using a new application. This concurred with results from another researcher who found that lack of participation by other group members was a serious challenge in online collaborative learning (Muuro et al., 2014). Additionally, Muuro et al. (2014) has identified another challenge such as lack of feedback from both peers and teacher; however, in the current research the participants did not mention lack of feedback as one of the obstacles. This is because during onsite meetings the students obtained feedback from their teacher and peers after presenting their projects in the classroom, in which conversely, the onsite mode was absent from the previous study. In terms of lacking of motivation, the results of this study are in accordance with Ibrahim et al. (2015) who confirmed that an irresponsible attitude from unmotivated students was one of the

limitations of collaborative learning in ESL classroom. For this matter, some students will be a free rider who tends to rely on other students and increase group's burden.

In terms of solving the encountered problems, the participants mentioned about building effective communication withing group members, distributing various and equal roles, and learning from multiple sources. The results are congruent with Wijaya (2021) who emphasized that positive relationships between group members must be maintained continuously, otherwise all learners experience learning breakdowns. In this research, the students divided the task equally for each member and depending on his/her ability. According to the participant, such method made collaborative work more effective and decreased the possibility of free riders. Additionally, in establishing good communication and preventing miscommunication among members, the participants created WhatsApp group. This is also confirmed a previous study by Avci and Adiguzel (2017) which mentioned that the use of WhatsApp in blended collaborative learning provided great accessibility for the students to communicate anytime and anywhere without any boundaries between formal and informal situations.

To sum up, from the students' point of view, blended collaborative learning indeed offer considerable benefits both academic and non-academic aspects, however, at the same time, the teachers must be able to recognize the challenges and problems which the students might face during the process. The teachers can anticipate the challenges and initiate quick steps in prevailing over the encountered issues so that the students can obtain optimal results.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the participants in the current research perceive blended collaborative learning enormously useful. The benefits in terms of academic achievement are based on students' experiences in learning with partners who can support each other. Since collaborative work is also conducted online through Pixton and WhatsApp group, the students realize the existence of continuous learning environment to help them complete the projects. Additionally, collaborative work also increases students' self-confidence and self-esteem because completing a certain project together makes them more appreciated and supportive. More important, the use of technology in collaborative learning has reduced technology anxiety and promoted students' enjoyment. Regarding perceived challenges, some common issues in collaborative learning are noticed such as different ideas among members, lack of motivation and participation, and problems related to technology usage. To tackle the problems, some special efforts are made including establishing effective communication through WhatsApp group, distributing different roles, and learning from various resources. Finally, since this research merely analyzed the results of students' interviews, further research should explore deeper the findings by conducting classroom observations and analyzing students' projects.

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