

Exploring Students' Learning Outcomes through a Collaborative Learning Practice

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Abstract

To keep up with the global shift in approaches to education, it has become important to create a learning-centered classroom. The present research aims to find out the effect of collaborative learning on students' outcomes. The framework developed for evaluating student outcomes (Tiven et al., 2018) was used to evaluate the general and global learning outcomes of 35 undergraduate English specialization students through their reflective journals. This research is qualitative in nature. The findings revealed that collaborative learning offers the necessary skills to be a global citizen. It is, therefore, recommended to carry out a community engagement project for collaborative learning.

Keywords: collaborative learning; general learning outcomes; global learning outcomes

Background

It is challenging to create an active learning atmosphere which places students at the centre of learning, especially for those who are studying English as a foreign language (EFL) in the higher education context. In teaching Communicative Skills, which focuses on the communicative competence of students, it is sine qua non to design learning practice that can bridge the needs of the real-world scenarios that allow students to interact with each other in this globalized world. In other words, the hidden crux of doing this is to make students be the global citizens. In building blocks for such kind of learning atmosphere, collaborative learning is, in fact, indispensable for students. Thinking skill and higher-order learning are being emphasized in collaborative learning (CL), which is included in cooperative learning (OECD, 2010). Through working in group, students are engaging in their learning by performing the tasks collaboratively. Johnson & Johnson (1999) defined CL as a set of teaching and learning strategies promoting student collaboration in small groups (two to five students) so as to optimize their own and each other's learning.

Gokhale (1995) (cited in Laal and Ghodsi, 2011) views CL as a process in which learners at different levels perform together in small groups toward a common goal by taking individual accountability and personal responsibility to achieve the group's goal. The grouping and pairing of learners for the specific learning purpose also advocate the concept of CL.

Opportunity to both learn from and teach others provides positive interdependence that creates more productive effort rather than competitive. Academic benefits promised by the use of CL strategy include promoting critical thinking skills, active involvement in learning process, improvement in classroom results and modeling appropriate student problem solving skills (Laal and Ghodsi, 2011).

'Collaborative Learning' according to OECD (2010) places an emphasis on thinking skill and learning cooperatively. Students learn by working together with others to achieve a certain goal that enhance their teamwork in the learning process. Students' engagement in learning and responsibility for their tasks enable them to be a global citizen.

The latter 'learning outcomes' was reviewed with the focus on the areas described in the framework designed for evaluating the learning outcomes of a digital citizen (Tiven et al., 2018). According to Cabezudo et. al. (2008), general learning outcomes can be measured with the notion of digital competency applying in academic and non-academic activities (as cited in Tiven et al., 2018). Furthermore, Tiven et al. (2018) suggested that students boost improvement in general learning outcomes through their digital literacy (DL), ability to use

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advanced technology. Additionally, as mentioned in Tiven et al. (2018), Venville and Dawson (2013) recommended that students' appreciation and awareness in the use of the variety of language skills (LC) is also regarded as one of the general learning outcomes. In addition to digital literacy and language skills, Bandura (1977) confirmed self-efficacy (SE) as one of the learning outcomes, referring one's ability and motivation to learn, to adapt, and to take responsibility for their actions particularly in challenging situations. More importantly, Tiven et al. (2018) cited Hattie et al., (2017) to define academic engagement (AE) which occurs when students are privileged to connect their current learning and experiences to the real-world issues. Next area claimed by Cottrell (2011) is critical thinking (CT) which can be defined as skills of solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating possibility, and making decisions.

The empirical indicators developed by Tiven et al., (2018) identify global learning outcomes which are complex and pose particular challenges for evaluation. Through collaboration, students investigate and define their own identity and culture, as well as those of others, leading to the effective collaboration with people of diverse culture and background. As a result, students have appreciation for diversity (AD) (Kubal et al., 2003 as cited in Tiven et al., 2018). Another global learning outcome associated with the appreciation for diversity is cultural understanding (CU); recognizing characteristics and valuing cultural norms. Edwards & Mercer, 2014 mentioned that cultural understanding can be initiated by learning about cities, countries, and cultures as a connection and interaction network, which should influence how their cultures and present in the classroom and outside. (as cited in Tiven et al., 2018). Global knowledge (GK) frames understanding the world and helps students become global citizens who are able to share and exchange information and cooperate with other communities. This also determined that students' engagement and finding solutions to global problems utterly indicates the meaning of global engagement (GE) (Tiven et al., 2018).

Collaborative learning has been extensively studied in recent years. Slavin (1995) pointed a requirement to improve the integration of cooperative learning and curriculum rather than focusing on one specific area. One study used cooperative learning strategies in appreciating English poetry which was carried out in 2009 in the context of Kyaing Tong University by Dr Thiri Aung. The researcher studied the effect of using cooperative learning strategies with the first-year English specialization students. Another study was done in the aspect of collaborative experiential learning in order to measure the quality of EFL students' descriptive writing.

The primary focus of this paper is on investigating the outcomes of the students achieved from collaborative learning. What makes it different from the previous stated papers is that the present research focused on the study of the collaborative learning mixed different-level groups: second-year and fourth-year English specialization students. According to Minott (2008), the use of reflective journals navigates students' learning experiences expressing differences and similarities in feelings and understandings with their existing knowledge, cultural understanding and awareness in how the process can be applied to their future professionals. Bashan and Holsblat (2017) recommended that reflective journals can be used as a research tool that provides qualitative evidence to track the data for teaching-learning process. The entries of the reflective journal can be valuable resources to explore the stages of the significant development among team work. Bashan and Holsbat (2017) cited Anderson (2012) that the use of journaling practice distributed as a pedagogical instrument to encourage students' reflection, criticism, and self-analysis.

In this study, the students' reflective journals were used as the source of data for the analysis of the students' learning outcomes. To examine the learning outcomes, the framework developed by Tiven et al. (2018) was used in order to categorize the reflections into respective groups for the general and global learning outcomes. Throughout the power point

presentations, the students have gained not only general learning outcomes but also global learning outcomes that shape and facilitate them to be global citizens developing in the area of global engagement.

The aim of the present paper is to observe collaborative learning among different groups in the context of the tertiary level education. The objectives are to evaluate the general learning outcomes and to investigate the global learning outcomes of selected tertiary level English specialization students. Based on the aim and objectives, the research questions were formulated.

- (1) What kind of general learning outcomes are acquired by learning collaboratively?
- (2) What are the global learning outcomes that are gained from collaborative learning for presentation skills?

Methods

In this research, the subjects were 8 fourth-year students and 27 second-year English specialization students aged 18- 21 from remote areas: there were 8 male students and 27 female students from different cultural backgrounds and sharing a similar limited educational technological background, that is, all study participants had considerable experience in language learning and applying educational technology. As the main purpose of the present study is to investigate students' general and global learning outcomes via collaborative learning, it was necessary to build a collaborative learning environment to achieve the same goal. To facilitate a collaborative learning environment, students were randomly divided into eight groups that included one senior and four junior students, diverse not only in age also in culture and knowledge on local and global issues. Objectives of the collaboration were to develop teamwork and shared learning experiences by exchanging and promoting critical thinking that can generate learning outcomes.

The participants were assigned three PowerPoint presentations (20 minutes) and one round table discussion (50 minutes) in the second semester of 2018-2019 Academic Year. The teacher emailed the guidelines for presentation to the groups. They had to do the one presentation per three weeks, each taking different roles for each presentation. They were allowed a free choice of topics related to their coursebook, Global English, prescribed for Communication Skills module. They had to take their roles such as presenter, making PowerPoint and searching for references, thereby avoiding repeated role. They were required to keep their reflective journals of their task and teamwork. They were expected to document their teamwork experiences, including benefits and pitfalls, and any insights they had earned and to express themselves originally as the journals were not graded. The reflective journals were submitted to the teacher after each presentation. A total of 105 reflective journals written for 3 presentations the students had made were collected as the data. These journals were analysed using the evaluation framework developed by Tiven et al. (2018) to categorize their learning outcomes with knowledge, skill, attitudinal and behavioral indicators. This framework helps identify global and general learning outcomes that are intertwined. It initiates the educators and evaluators to realize multiple learning outcomes in both global and general aspects.

Results

Drawing upon the data, the findings of the outcomes of the students' collaborative learning were presented. In order to answer the research questions raised for this paper, data analysis was carried out using the grid developed by Tiven et al. (2018): the general learning outcomes indicators; and the global learning outcomes indicators for a digital citizen.

Dealing with the general leaning outcomes, the analyzed data revealed that the students have the ability to utilize technology to foster learning. While they were preparing their power point presentations, they used online resources effectively as their learning hubs, for example Google, Facebook and other websites. They searched for reliable sources through different websites. They also used applications to make their presentation more interesting. What is more, they solved their technical problems together which they encountered during their learning. Their reflections follow:

- *We search the information from the Google and face book. We took a note and we make power point.*
- *I think making present gives me many new vocabulary by searching facts in google.*
- *We make a photo edit with some application it make me easy.*
- *I find on Google and I don't know what to do. It was lucky to have this senior.*

Regarding language skills, the students improved their speaking skills which they had to focus on most in giving presentations. Based on the collected data, they had more confidence as they prepared their own presentation and they repeatedly practised their presentation. As a result, they began to have more confidence, in their speaking skills in particular.

- *I finally can speak English and do presentation in front of many people.*
- *By writing it by ourself, we would be more convenient when we are giving presentation.*
- *I practiced speaking again and again.*
- *Our senior is so good and she explain us everything that we don't know.*

Achievement of study goals by practising and working together is also noted. Being introduced into a new learning environment led to the attainment of new knowledge as the students had opportunities for peer learning and self-evaluation. For the former, they showed their understanding of the value of learning in groups. The latter was found in their statements e.g. the need to learn digital skills and the need to improve presentation skills. Some of these are described in the following statements.

- *After presentation, my friends said that I moved my body like a vocalist. But I got many lessons from this.*
- *I get many experience and I had learned unity is the most important thing do something with group.*
- *Now, I prove difficulty. So, after this second-year exam, I made a decision, I must learn computer.*
- *In the second presentation, my working skill is increased more than the first time.*

Next, students' appreciation for learning and active involvement in academic activities can be regarded as students' 'academic engagement.' The data from the students' reflections pointed out that students were able to link their academic works to their future careers.

- *This experience is affected on me very well because this is useful for me when we working the job.*
- *In preparing for this presentation, we studied many facts to give main points.*
- *We discussed with our groups about what kinds of presentation and how to present.*
- *If we have a chance next time we can do better and better.*

These facts described the quality of the students' investment in learning as well as the students' engagement in academic works which was brought about successfully through the collaborative learning arena.

The students' critical thinking was conveyed through the facts that they had to negotiate among their group members in choosing topics, and they are committed to carrying out the assigned tasks. The following evidence shows the development of thinking skills which was found as the result of collaborative learning.

- *First, we think to present about the cleanest country in the world. But cleanest countries is changed in every year. So, we choose "France country"*
- *We discuss to do "The harvest festival" but our senior doesn't agree because there is no information about this festival.*
- *The problem that I faced in this presentation is that the topic I choosed is seem to be easy but it's too much information for me to pick up some important sentences and conclude.*

As regards the global learning outcomes, having positive attitude towards diversity and appreciating others' culture were recognized although the students have different social and cultural backgrounds. The following data expressed students' appreciation for diversity:

- *I don't know well about Buddhish but now I become know about Buddhish. I'm Kyaing Tong townfolk, but I don't know well about Kyaing Tong. But during discuse about KT with my friends and senior, for our presentation I become know goodly; and*
- *Group work is a good job because we can share knowledge and exchange ideas.*
- *The relationship between my seniors and my audience are more familiar that the past.*

Having positive attitude towards diversity is one of the main characteristics of global learning outcome. So, enhancing appreciation of differences through collaborative learning plays a vital role to raise 'appreciation for diversity.'

Another global learning outcome, the understanding of culture, was also noticed. The students gave presentations on a variety of topics, most of which are from cultural contexts. They selected customs, traditions and cultures of local-ethnic groups for presentation. The data that showed students' cultural understanding are:

- *We can know more knowledge by presentation. We can know Keng Tong history, Luttu tradition and Shan foods.*
- *I wanna visit those places by talking our senior and then know about the twin dragon statues history.*

On top of that, the topics that the students chose covered multiple socio-economic areas related to global issues. The following data demonstrate the students' global knowledge.

- *She did the topic of H1N1, at that moment this diseases is popular in the world. The majority of people died for this diseases. I think, the audience will get knowledge and protected from H1N1.*
- *We presented about the advantages and disadvantages of social media.*

Considering presented data, participant students showed to a certain extent their 'global knowledge,' which frames their understanding of the world issues which can possibly help them become global citizens who are able to share and exchange information and cooperate with other communities.

Discussion

Based on the results of this study, the "students' learning outcomes" categorized by Tiven et al. (2018), the framework indicated the cluster of learning outcomes that ultimately support education in preparing for students to deal with the challenges of today.

Though the participants have limited IT knowledge, they are experienced in accessing reliable references. Enchantments in technology knowledge, appreciation for using digital tools to research and learn support the results of the study (Cabezudo et. al. (2008). Therefore, the evidence from the students' reflective journals indicated an increase in students' ability to use

the technology for their studies after they had been assigned PowerPoint presentations for collaborative learning. In other words, the learning setting promotes the students' 'digital literacy,' which is one of the general learning outcomes for a digital citizen.

Collaborative learning environment accelerates the development of students' communicative skills, mainly speaking skills. These findings shed the light partially on the students' improvement in their 'language communication,' the general learning outcome. The result also provoked the educator to facilitate integrated language activities in future.

Collaborative learning also encourages the students to develop self-efficacy by exposing them to unfamiliar viewpoints, situations, and problems. Making PowerPoint presentation and giving presentation empowered them and develop self-efficacy' which is also the general learning outcome and helped them boost their motivation and confidence. However, the journal entry "*We don't have much problem as our senior was done nearly all the details*" signaled the educator to focus on individual participations during their task.

The findings for 'academic engagement' of this study are consistent with those of Hattie et al., (2017), where students became motivated to accomplish the assigned tasks and aware of their own improvement and willing to continue academic work across academic years. Students' increasingly taking active role in learning and ability to link the knowledge in and outside the classroom illustrated the general learning outcome.

Throughout the process of presentations, the students encountered some constraints that they had to address and solve in order to reach their learning goals. The students, however, were willing to approach the problems, and performed the tasks successfully. This accelerates development of 'critical thinking' to meet the needs of the real-world scenarios

Therefore, concerning Research Question 1, the students displayed enhanced digital literacy, language communication, self-efficacy, academic engagement, and critical thinking. These areas are related to the general learning outcomes of a digital citizen.

The current study has also explored one of the global learning outcomes, 'appreciation for diversity', by creating collaborative learning environment. Collaboration fosters awareness of individuals and shared concepts of identity (Tiven et al., 2018). The reflective entries echoed collaborative learning to the maximum extent practicable, offering ability to appreciate diversity.

It is evident from the reflective entries that individual perceptiveness on other cultures, values, beliefs and practices are influenced by multiple aspects whereas others have simultaneous awareness of differences from their own. The profound interest in and respect for others culture enable the students bridge the gaps and creates common ground. The learning outcome of 'cultural understanding' showed the same trend as Edwards & Mercer's (2014) as the students recognized a wide range of cultural norms. By doing group presentations, the students attained more cultural understanding, which is advantageous in communicating and collaborating with others not only within but also outside academic settings. In other words, this development in 'cultural understanding' allows the students to learn and build relationship with working people from different cultural backgrounds in real life setting.

Sharing information through collaborative learning supports them to become global citizens who have 'global knowledge' and are responsible for a better world. The study found that students addressed global issues and acquired knowledge on global community.

Surprisingly, the 'global engagement' was not traced in collaborative learning as they did not perform any community engagement during their collaborative learning apart from giving presentations. Although they showed their interest in global issues, there was no measure that they implemented.

With regard to Research Question 2, focusing on the global learning outcomes, the students achieved improvements in all of the mentioned areas, except global engagement. The need for integration of a community-based project is identified as a result of this outcome.

Conclusion

The present study observed the EFL students' learning outcomes through reflective journals in order to examine the effect of collaborative learning. According to the findings, the students improved in the use of information and communication technology, using English for presentation, building individual capacity, linking what have been learned in class with the real world, and problem solving and critical thinking. These improvements were termed as the general learning outcomes in accordance with the evaluation framework of Tiven et al. (2018). As for the global learning outcomes mentioned in that framework, the students' appreciation for diversity, their understanding of one's culture and that of others, and global knowledge were found. However, global engagement which is one of the global learning outcomes was not observed in collaborative learning for presentation. As this study was limited to only one semester, the Second Semester of 2018-2019 Academic Year, its scope is restricted. However, the present study highlighted the learning outcomes of students' collaborative learning in the context of the tertiary level. And it is recommended that a small-scale community engagement project be conducted as part of collaborative learning.

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