The Voices of EFL Student Teachers toward Task-Based Activities Model in a Collaborative Virtual Learning Environment

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Abstract. The provision of social space for students to engage actively and meaningfully in the ongoing virtual teaching-learning environment is an essential part of the language classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the society of group and peers' life creates effective learning experiences where students can learn from each other. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate the voices of student teachers towards the implementation of the task-based activities model in a collaborative virtual learning environment (VLE) over the course of a semester. To achieve this, 105 EFL students were randomly recruited from an English elective course at a private university in *Yogyakarta*, Indonesia. The participants worked together (both in pairs and in a group) to achieve a common goal by finishing five digital projects. In addition, qualitative data were gathered from classroom observation, interviews, documentation, and online class surveys. The results demonstrate that most participants responded positively within collaborative remote learning through task-based activities circles in terms of cooperation, time management, problem-solving, task strategies, shared decision-making, and behavior. However, some students encountered problems and suggestions were then proposed to improve the learning model in the present study. Finally, pedagogical implications were addressed and further work for educators interested in replicating the study was proposed.

Key words: EFL student teachers; task-based language learning (TBLL); collaborative learning; virtual learning environment (VLE).

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INTRODUCTION

Student-centered learning is strongly effective in promoting students' active roles in the twenty-first-century classrooms (Keiler, 2018; Partanen; 2020). To fulfill this, teachers should flip their roles from the transmission model of knowledge authority to facilitator of learning, which emphasizes cognitive and social processes. In facilitating effective learning experiences, social space should be provided for students to work in a society of group and peers' environments. This creates an interactive learning circumtances, where students can interact with their fellow students and learn the learning materials together. A report published by Roy (2017) showed that the implementation of team-based learning classroom venture is further interesting because "it allows more advanced students to learn independently of the class and the weaker students to try out alternatives and watch other partners engaging in useful activities that tie in directly with the lecture content (p. 4)." In this way, the students are responsible to provide support and giving motivation to group members until the assignments are completed and well-graded. Furthermore, group learning activities develop their deeper social engagement, understand diverse cultural background self-development, and collaborative skills. For example, students learn how to listen and negotiate with others to build up their new knowledge, understand the tasks, execute the projects, and solve authentic and real-world problems in the group. Due to the above-mentioned benefits, the use of collaborative group tasks is often adopted in many of the world's second language (L2) classrooms as part of teaching methodological paradigm dominated by communicative, project-based learning (PBL), and task-based language learning (TBLL) approaches (Almulla, 2021; Jones, 2019). A relatively large number of different results have been obtained by browsing the literature on the topic. Many studies highlighted that group activities are beneficial classroom instructions to encourage students' learning opportunities on the constructed tasks. In addition, it promotes interactive learning environments, increases cognitive development, motivation, and language production (Gillies, 2019; Poupore, 2016; Zhang, 2018). For example, a pedagogical practice, such as collaborative writing (CW) project generally

gives positive learning experiences for students, particularly their behavior and motivational changes (Zhai, 2021).

The advancement of technology supports the implementation of e-collaborative learning. It can provide flexibility of learning in a language-rich environment, where teachers and students determine when, where, and how to learn. Some collaborative online tools (e.g., Padlet, Google Docs, Planboard) help teachers to define learning goals, design appropriate materials and assessments. Furthermore, the synchronous and asynchronous learning tools offer students to collaborate and work together in a team, such as planning, brainstorming concepts, discovering, analyzing, exchanging ideas, making decisions, and developing learning content, to achieve common goals. Despite this, studies showed that students perceived obstacles when working and collaborating within a group, such as low-quality coordination, poor communication, lack of collaborative skills, different shared goals, and bad relationships among group members (Baloche & Brody, 2017; Le et al., 2018). Successful group works require complex elements and vital dimensions, such as high-level and on-task dialogue, technical skills, time management, group participation, positive socio-emotional group ethos, and willingness to cooperate with others (Ernest et al., 2013; Veldman et al., 2020; Weinberger & Shonfeld, 2020).

Collaborative learning has been widely explored by some previous studies. However, prior studies which focused on how collaborative learning integrated with task-based learning facilitates emergency teaching-learning activities for EFL students, relatively unexplored. To fill this empirical gap, this present study attempts to explore students' learning experiences toward task-based activities in a virtual-based collaborative environment. After analyzing the preliminary study, the following research question was then formed "What are EFL student teachers' hands-on learning experiences (positive and negative) towards digital projects creation in virtual collaborative language learning environments?"

METHODS

A case study design was selected to understand the meanings of EFL student teachers' voices toward task-based activities model in a collaborative virtual learning environment. In social science, this type of study characteristically investigates naturalistic-specific phenomena in-depth and within a real-life context, in which multiplicity strands of data sources are used (Corbett-Whittier, 2013; Graurer, 2012; Yin, 2018). The study was conducted in an educational technology course known as CALL, which was offered in fully online formats due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were 105 third-and-fourth years higher education students from a private university in *Yogyakarta*, Indonesia. They were full-time prospective English teachers with prior experiences of learning with a collaborative method. However, they have never been enrolled in an online course before. Therefore, taking online courses during one semester-long was their first experience. At the beginning of the course, some participants did not know each other because the course offered was elective and the participants varied from different batches. The majority were female with 72.4% (N=76), and 27.6% (N=29) were male, aged from 16 to 20 years (54.3%) and 21 to 25 years (45.7%), respectively. They had diverse characteristics in terms of time spent using technology for learning, confidence and comfort levels, and the first time using digital tools for learning languages. The detailed demographic information of participants could be seen in Table 1.

At the end of the course, data was collected through an open-ended questionnaire, individual interviews, and group discussion. The open-ended questionnaire was designed to elicit participants' statements regarding their self-evaluation over the collaborative task-based activities model and their general experiences (e.g., perceived usefulness, positive or negative feelings, beliefs and social interaction problems) in the process of completing all projects. It consists of two main questions. The first question was administered for participants to choose improved aspects after course enrollment. Each aspect invites them to explain and provide example(s) as their behavioral evidence report. In total, 105 questionnaires were filled in complete and usable. To get more detailed and additional information, individual online interviews were administered to 25 participants, of which six joined group discussions through the Zoom Cloud Meetings App. Furthermore, a schedule was set with the participants and it was conducted in three weeks. The time allocation for individual interviews was 15-30 minutes, while for the group discussions were 30-45 minutes. Then, the participants were asked to collect their collaborative digital projects through e-mail,

WhatsApp, and Telegram. Finally, the lecturer-student and student-student interactions in every class meeting were also observed and recorded. All the video-recorded data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, following Boyatzis (1998) and Nowel et al. (2017). The transcript and the video were repeatedly read and listened to as well as coded for emerging themes.

Table 1. Demographic Information

Variables	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	29	27.6
	Female	76	72.4
	Total	105	100
Age	Between the ages of 16-20	57	54.3
	Between the ages of 21-25	48	45.7
	Total	105	100
Started using digital tools for learning language(s)	Prior to age 10 years	33	34.3
	Age 10 to 15 years	65	63.8
	Age after 16 years	2	1.9
	Total	105	100
The level of using digital tools for learning language(s)	Very Good	23	21.9
	Good	57	54.3
	Acceptable	25	23.8
	Total	105	100
Confidence level to use digital tools for learning language(s)	Completely Confidence	13	12.4
	Fairly Confidence	56	53.3
	Somewhat Confidence	34	32.4
	Slightly Confidence	2	1.9
	Total	105	100
Comfort level to use digital tools for learning language(s)	Completely Comfortable	25	23.8
	Fairly Comfortable	53	50.5
	Somewhat Comfortable	24	22.9
	Slightly Comfortable	2	1.9
	Not at all Comfortable	1	0.9
	Total	105	100
Time spent to use digital tools for learning language(s)	5 or more hours	34	32.4
	About 3–4 hours	48	45.7
	About 1–2 hours	18	17.1
	Less than 1 hour	5	4.8
	Total	105	100

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, key insights were reported as global themes that emerged from analyzing the open-ended questionnaire, interview, and group discussion collected last semester. The analysis of qualitative data produced seven themes, including 1) cooperation, 2) time management, 3) problem-solving, 4) task strategies, 5) decision-making, 6) behavior, and 7) other aspects of technological knowledge, autonomous learning, and content knowledge.

Cooperation

The first theme was cooperation. Working virtually in a group may pose challenges for students to manage and finish the digital tasks successfully. This is evident when students are involved in new circumstances with different fundamental characteristics, such as diverse batches, different classmates, multi-age friends, and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, several factors, including adaptability, interpersonal trust and concern, commitment, group reliability and dependability, agreement, and social relationships, have been acknowledged as important ingredients for determining the effectiveness of teamwork. In the case of having diverse viewpoints, the group members are expected to make rational decisions together. With this perspective in mind, three participants succinctly noted:

"In the group project, a long process was experienced while trying to finish it. [Therefore], we decided to divide the tasks into several parts based on the number of people in one group. Then, everyone had a responsibility to do their part. For example, I made the 2nd meeting's learning activity from the beginning till the end of the day. I was focused on listening skills while other members were focused on reading, writing, and speaking activities." – Individual interview and Reflective writing (ST08)

"I think collaborative learning was beneficial. The discussing and brainstorming parts enabled me to understand the way my friends think. [Furthermore], we try to connect ideas and produce great work. Sometimes, my friends give me suggestions for the improvement of my part." – Reflective writing (ST11)

"Working together in a group to complete this task is very rewarding. We could adapt to a new environment, exchange opinions, support each other, combine different ideas and come up with new ideas." – Individual interview (ST29)

Time management

The second theme was time management. The students should find agreement regarding the scheduled group discussion since they were separated by distance and their activities. Some students also take part-time jobs after the class; therefore, they only have time at the weekend or night. Furthermore, some living far from the city

usually experience internet connection problems during the night. Others admitted that they have to allocate extra time to do the time-consuming tasks. To this regard, four participants shared their thought:

"I always make a schedule when I got an assignment. I usually write it down on the whiteboard. It works to remind me the timeline to finish the project." – Group discussion (ST07)
"Sometimes, I have to add extra time to do peer or group assignment because the digital project is time-consuming." – Group discussion (ST08)
"We are afraid that we cannot finish everything on time. Therefore, we make a timeline. Every member of the group has consciously to remember the deadline." – Group discussion (ST09)
"It is essential to match up plans for discussion since we are separated by distance and business. Therefore, we tried to make schedules." – Reflective writing (ST42)

Problem-solving

The third theme was problem-solving. The students were involved in striving for solutions when facing real-world problems in conducting digital projects. Therefore, they should work together with their critical thinking, collaboration skills, multiple strategies, and diverse perspectives in taking appropriate actions to solve the problems. Four participants stated:

"We had trouble when deciding what kind of activities and applications to use for the learning process. Therefore, in the group's discussion, the internet was browsed together to obtain a bunch of activities and applications that we can use to provide students with the exciting activities using the fun methods and applications." – Individual interview (ST18)
"Group project makes us easily finish the work compared to individual assignments. There were some topics or theories that we did not fully understand, and thoughts were shared in group discussions by using Google Meet or Zoom Meeting. Furthermore, we could ask our lecturer when we faced with difficult tasks."– Individual interview and Reflective writing (ST14)
"Shortcomings in group assignments are the timing of each member's work. It is not easy to manage the schedule. We made WA group to discuss the work and remind each other about the deadline." – Individual interview (ST01)
"We faced many obstacles such as bad signals, running out of quota, slow response of WA group chat, and many more. For example, one of the members of my group has trapped in a flood disaster and was not able do her part. Therefore, others members had to help her finish it." – Group discussion (ST02)

Task strategies

The fourth was task strategies skill. In collaboratives activities, students are encouraged to work in a team. This is because this skill helps them to process their tasks and achieve common goals in a community of learners. The students will determine the pathway and strategies for completing the tasks on schedule. Two participants stated:

"We have to make LMS for two weeks in a group of 4-5 people. Before that, we took some notes concerning the skills to be taught and the questions to be used in implementing those skills. Furthermore, we decided on the basic competence to make it easier for us to choose the materials. After that, a rough draft about the activities was made with the materials that suit the grade, topic, and the learning activities." Reflective writing and individual interview (ST22)
"Before executing the digital project, brainstorming was usually conducted in WhatsApp video call or Google Meet. Then, we made a timeline to know the part of the task to be conducted first. In doing this, the easiest is usually chosen before the most challenging one." – Individual interview (ST24)

Shared decision-making

The fifth theme was shared-decision making. The essence of working in a team is making decisions regarding a wide range of different ideas. Rationally, the team should be able to choose and understand the context within the various concepts presented. Sometimes, the process of making a decision creates conflicts and debates. Therefore, the students should learn how to become better and mature at making group decisions in this phase. Two students reported:

"The process of looking for materials, choosing appropriate digital media, and creating assessments is the most prolonged process. We should complete the task in one week. [Therefore], a long time was needed to discuss

and combine our works." – Individual interview (ST21)
"There are various LMS available on the internet, such as Google Classroom, Edmodo, ClassDojo, and Blackboard. Due to these different options, polling was conducted and finally ClassDojo was used to design the online learning. The lesson topic was about asking for and giving information about time, day, month, and date. The material was suitable for 7th-grade students." – Reflective writing (ST80)

Behavior

The sixth theme was behavior and it referred to students' feelings in completing five digital projects in a collaborative virtual learning environment. Usually, the students will perform better and feel motivated at doing projects they enjoy. As a result, they will actively participate in the group discussion forum. However, every group member is responsible for familiarizing themselves with any kinds of learning contexts and circumstances. By far, seven pre-service English teachers shared their feelings:

"I actively took part in group discussion, but I had shed some tears working on this project because it was difficult and pretty challenging." – Group discussion (ST17)
"It was nerve-wracking when we were trying to find a good LMS that we can easily access for teaching-learning activities." – Group discussion (ST16)
"The assignments were fun with a lot of new things. I am happy to work with all my group members in creating a good online course." – Reflective writing (ST76)
"I enjoy finishing all digital projects because my friends and the lecturer support me." – Reflective writing (ST92)
"Online learning was boring since we only see a laptop, smartphone, and books. The learning situations were totally different from face-to-face learning. But, working together in a group can improve my motivation to do the assignment and finish it in time." – Individual interview (ST19)
"First of all, I thought it was challenging for me, but I am happy with my group. My friends help me to understand the task. They encourage me to change my mindset that the job is not difficult and we can do it together." – Individual interview (ST04)
"[Referring to the group in which one of the members had flood disaster]…This is where we, as a student, have to learn and grow up to possess a quality of humanism." – Group discussion (ST03)

The seventh theme was other aspects and three sub-categories were identified. They are 1) technological knowledge, 2) autonomous learning, and 3) content knowledge. These sub-categories were presented in the following discussion.

Technological knowledge

The first category was technological knowledge, which denotes students' understanding of how technology is conceptualized and used in the educational context. It includes their capability to design user-friendly digital materials for teaching-learning activities from reliable sources and choose proper applications for an effective learning environment. As four prospective teachers explained:

"Designing digital worksheets or LMS requires creativity and high accuracy. [In addition], the digital materials should be user-friendly for students and presented interestingly." – Reflective writing (ST66)
"The task was enjoyable, but it involved a lot of creativity. I learn a lot about making appealing digital teaching media, from the most effortless to the advanced apps." – Reflective writing (ST52)
"I learn many things in the CALL class. I have become more creative in designing and uploading the materials. [Moreover], I know how to choose proper applications to make the learning process more effective and interesting." – Individual interview (ST20)
"Before joining the CALL class, I only knew about Quizzes, Kahoot, Google Form, Google Classroom, YouTube, and TED Talks for the teaching-learning process, but after joining CALL course, I became very conversant with the technology application, such as Edpuzzle, Canva, Wordwall, etc."– Individual interview (ST15)

Autonomous learning

The second category was autonomous learning. This salient learning approach referred to the strategy to enhance the participants' potential ability and capacity to continuously control learning activities, such as spontaneously setting targets, determining goals, finding web sources for learning outside the classroom, selecting learning strategies, monitoring their learning progress, and evaluating what they have

learned. Furthermore, they also have the desire and freedom to learn independently. In recent years with the advent of advanced technology in education, students can use modern technology to serve their learning, improve their English proficiency, and build up learning efficiencies. Two participants characteristically noted:

"The class activities encourage me to learn more about other various digital tools for learning." – Group discussion (ST03)
"Before I ask for help from my friends or lecturer when I find difficulties in understanding a particular topic, I try to find reliable references on the internet." – Group discussion (ST04)

Content knowledge

The third category was content knowledge (CK). It can be regarded as one of the fundamental components of teachers' knowledge when designing and implementing technology-integrated classroom instructions. In addition, it represents teachers' deep understanding of the subject matter for teaching at school, particularly the concepts and theories in ELT. It may affect students' learning progress and their achievement gains. Two student teachers admitted to this by writing:

"It improves my reading and writing skills. For example, we need to read a lot of references to write an essay for our LMS." – Reflective writing (ST67)
"In designing a lesson, we need to choose appropriate video for listening activities. [Therefore], we need to watch several videos on YouTube. I think it can enhance our listening skills." – Reflective writing (ST71)

The results of the open-ended questionnaire in the form of checkboxes which asked about students' improved aspects after CALL course enrollment were summarized and illustrated in Figure 1. The students reported that they have positive experiences with the task-based activities model in a collaborative virtual learning environment. They noted that the model could improve cooperation (N=94), task strategies (N=87), time management (N=82), problem-solving (N=78), behavior (N=72), decision-making (N=65), and others (N=40).

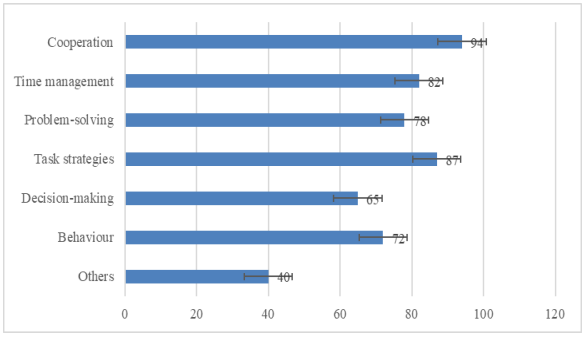

Figure 1. Descriptive statistics of positive experiences about the task-based activities model in a collaborative virtual learning environment in coding

CONCLUSION

Using a case study research design with the integration of various data collection tools, this study have found that collaborative remote learning through task-based activities circles positively impacts EFL students' cooperation, time management, problem-solving, task strategies, shared decision-making, behavior, technological knowledge, autonomous learning, and content knowledge. Indeed, the group cooperation model is vitally essential and valuable for improving students' self-development in a learning community. Also, this collaborative skill is one of working needed skills to obtain better jobs in future employment. As presented in the questionnaire and interview results, the students generally appreciate the model of group learning activities in the CALL course. Further on, the students' voices were used to evaluate and set up or redesign the course. Therefore, this study gives significant contributions to the body of literature in the ELT area, particularly the design of classroom instructions with a collaborative learning model in the online education mode.

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