

## **EFL Pre-Service Teachers' Attitude towards Collaborative Learning in Virtual Learning Environment**

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**Abstract :** *The current study aims to investigate EFL pre-service teachers' perception of Collaborative Learning (CL) in the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). 72 pre-service teachers took part in this study by doing questionnaires consisting of 24 Likert-scale questions and 2 open-ended questions, which were conducted to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. It can be drawn from the results that pre-service teachers have a positive attitude toward CL, even in VLE and that they are aware of the benefits of this method in their study. However, besides those difficulties related to the Internet and technology, they emphasized that time management, the commitment of members, interaction, and activities assigned by teachers during the discussions are four most challenging factors when applying CL online. Therefore, some coping strategies were also presented in the study. The findings of the current study support the need for the integration of courses that aims at training pre-service teachers how to apply CL effectively not only in physical classes but also in VLE as we are living in the Industrial Revolution 4.0 into the current teacher training program at UFLS.*

**Keywords:** *EFL pre-service teachers, Collaborative Learning, Virtual Learning Environment.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools have been forced to close temporarily to encourage social distancing and deter the transmission of the virus. As a result, the term virtual learning environment (VLE) has arisen to describe web-based communications platforms which allow students to access different learning tools and resources. Even before the pandemic, digital technology has gradually modified the patterns of our lives, especially education. Many programs have been used to improvise with remote learning such as Zoom or Google Meet. At University of Foreign Language Studies - The University of Da Nang (UFLS - UDN), Microsoft Teams has facilitated educational activities.

Turning to language learning, due to the need for communication among non-native speakers, English as a foreign language is being taught in many countries, including Vietnam. Being able to use this language efficiently means that language learners manipulate their linguistic knowledge and produce grammatically and contextually accurate sentences (Brown, 2007). Therefore, Collaborative Learning (CL), which involves groups of learners working together to solve a problem and reach their planned objective (Brown, 2008), is considered as an advantageous approach in language learning.

However, it is unclear whether CL is still beneficial to students in VLE. Therefore, the importance of pre-service teachers' experience about CL activities as learners in their curriculum should be paid more attention (Lyman and Davidson, 2004), as CL must be modeled for the pre-service teachers and experienced by them as learners.

As a result, the researchers found it necessary to shed light on pre-service teachers' perception of CL in EFL virtual classes to ascertain the productivity of EFL CL activities and the difficulties that make CL less appealing, along with some strategies for an effective CL. The findings of the study may pose some implications for the current teacher training courses in the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) program at UFLS. Training for the pre-service teachers and the instructors about CL to eliminate the problems resulting from the lack of information about its essential characteristics should be considered. The current study put forward two research questions:

1. How do EFL pre-service teachers' perceive the use of CL in VLE?
2. What are the difficulties experienced by pre-service teachers while engaging in EFL CL activities in VLE?

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1. Social constructivism**

CL is grounded in social constructivist learning theory or social constructivism, a term developed by the Russian psychologist - Lev Vygotsky, which emphasises that learning and knowledge development is facilitated by interaction and collaboration (Dillenbourg et al., 2009). One of the main constructs of Vygotsky's theory is the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which subjects the role of the instructor to an individual's learning. The ZPD is the distance between two development levels, one is when students solve problems independently and the other is when they are under instructor's guidance or collaboration with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, Roth and Lee (2007) deduced that working with others collaboratively is a part of the learning process through which an individual becomes a piece of the collective picture.

Social constructivism emphasizes the need for CL. Learning is stimulated through collaboration among learners, and between learners and instructors. Based on this theory, the present research explored UFLS pre-service English teachers' perceptions of collaborative group work and how individuals learn in them.

### **2. Benefits of CL**

CL yields positive results in students' social interaction skills according to Cohen & Cohen (1991), as learners are obligated to cooperate, interact with their friends so as to solve the problem together. In relation to EFL learning, Long & Porter (1985) stated that in small groups, learners are willing to make an attempt to contribute to the group discussion using the second language.

Apart from students' development, recent studies have shown that teachers could also derive substantial benefits when implementing CL. Teachers have more opportunities to observe students, how they explain and defend their reasons, ask questions and discuss their ideas and concepts (Cooper, et al., 1984). That is to say, teachers are provided with an overview of their students' learning process which may be more objective than written exams only.

Numerous plus points of CL in more contexts other than EFL have been discovered but few studies were able to find out whether or not CL provides similar benefits to EFL learning and teaching in VLE as it does in other contexts. Thus, this current research aims specifically to investigate if EFL CL in the online setting proves to be as beneficial as identified by previous researchers.

### **3. Crucial elements for an effective CL:**

In order for CL to be successful, teachers are required to incorporate its five elemental components, namely: positive interdependence, individual account individual accountability, promotive interaction, appropriate use of social skills and group processing (Johnson et al., 2006). In fact, these five elements play a pivotal role in distinguishing CL from simply putting students in groups to learn.

- Positive interdependence: Members have to believe that they are linked with others and if one of them fails to do their part, everyone suffers from consequences. It encourages students' effort to succeed as they perceive each member as a unique contributor and all are vital for the group to accomplish the goals
- Individual accountability: All students in a group are responsible for doing the share of the work and for penetration of all of the learning material.
- Promotive interaction: Members are obliged to support and encourage each other to learn by explaining what they understand and by gathering and sharing knowledge.
- Social skills: Students are encouraged and assisted to develop and practice such skills: trust-building, leadership, decision-making, communication, and conflict management skills.
- Group processing: They set group goals together, periodically assess what they are doing well as a team, and identify modifications that would be made to function more effectively in the future.

CL is considered organised only when groups evidently present these five basis elements and vice versa. Considering that there is little preparation for teachers and students to understand basic factors to successfully establish collaboration in VLE (Guzzetti & Stokrocki, 2013), this study wishes to emphasize the need for a training course about CL, even in VLE for EFL pre-service teachers.

#### **4. EFL CL implementation in Asian countries and in Vietnam**

Although literature reviews suggest that CL is advantageous, its desired outcomes have not been achieved in the context of Asian countries including Vietnam due to many reasons. First and foremost, Tan et al. (2007) stated that students were accustomed to passive ways of learning, which means that they listen to their teachers, take notes, and prepare for tests and examinations in accordance with what they have taught. In the Vietnamese EFL teaching context, learners are not given sufficient exposure to the language outside of classes (Do, 1996; V.C Le, 1999) so skills and benefits that they acquire from joining CL activities are rarely used and maintained.

Despite those difficulties, a study conducted by Pham (2007) shows that teachers seem to recognize the benefits of CL in their contexts and believe that there could be some ways to use EFL CL effectively. They even wish to learn this method from others to see how group work could be implemented successfully with large classes or low motivated students. They just need to be trained and oriented, or supported and well-prepared for EFL CL. Taking these points, the idea of helping EFL pre-service teachers to become familiar with CL and the use of CL through training or orientation needs to be taken into consideration. Therefore, the researchers aim to identify their attitude towards EFL CL to help raise the awareness and beliefs among pre-service teachers about appropriate ways for EFL learners to achieve their optimal learning as well as to improve their communicative abilities.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

This study aims at finding the attitude of pre-service teachers at UFLS towards EFL CL. Both quantitative and qualitative research approaches were employed, in which quantitative data were reinforced by qualitative data.

The study involved 72 third-year and last-year students at UFLS. The participants were at that time taking a four-year BA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) program. Their ages range from 21 to 24.

With a comprehensive review of the literature on teachers and students' perception of CL, a three-part questionnaire was constructed with a list of possible inclusions. Part One was designed to collect demographic information from the respondents, including personal information, years of learning English and teaching experience. Part Two comprised 24 items divided into five categories, namely Frequency of group activities, Benefits of CL perceived by pre-service teachers, Limitations of CL perceived by pre-service teachers, How students work in an online group, and pre-service teachers' attitude towards CL in VLE, respectively. Part Three consisted of two open-ended questions to clarify the difficulties when CL is organized online and ask for suggestions from the participants. The researchers combined open-ended questions with the aim to discover the responses that individuals give spontaneously, and thus avoiding the bias that may result from suggesting responses to individuals as in the previous questionnaire (Urša et al., 2003).

Data from the Part One and Part Two of the questionnaire were tabulated and analysed using Ms Excel. The surveys about EFL pre-service teachers' attitudes toward the use of CL were investigated by using the following 5-point Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree.

Regarding Part Three, the analysis process started with open-coding where participant's responses were thematically coded after intensive readings in order to find similarities or differences within the responses to the questions. After that, codes were joined together using axial coding to identify any interconnections among the previous sub-categories and classify them into other more semantic and succinct themes.

### **IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **1. EFL pre-service teachers' perception of CL on VLE**

*Table 1. Categories to evaluate the effects of online CL on EFL pre-service teachers' study*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Statement</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>
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<i>Frequency of group activities</i>	In online English classes, I often use group discussions and activities.	72	3.86
	I'm familiar with group study.	72	4.36
<i>Benefits of CL perceived by pre-service teacher</i>	When I work in a group, my teaching skills improve.	72	3.9
	This approach trains me how to be a good leader and a good follower.	72	4.25
	When I work in a group, I enhance my communication skills through interaction with my peers.	72	4.36
	The lessons become more interesting with group activities.	72	4.17
	It takes less time to complete the assignment, when I work with other students.	72	4.19
<i>Limitations of CL perceived by pre-service teachers</i>	Working in groups is a waste of time as we keep explaining things to others.	72	2.86
	The work takes longer to complete when I work with other students.	72	2.69
	I do not think a group grade is fair.	72	3.08
	I find it hard to express my thoughts when I work in an online group	72	2.86
<i>How students work in an online group</i>	People listened to one another.	72	3.81
	Group members were asked to expand on a point they were trying to make.	72	4.28
	When I work in a group, I am able to share my ideas.	72	4.22
	Some members dominated.	72	3.72
	Group members considered a number of ideas before coming to a decision.	72	4.11
	When I work with other students, the work is divided evenly.	72	3.83
	My group members help explain things that I do not understand.	72	4.31
<i>Pre-service teacher's attitude towards</i>	I think other students CANNOT contribute to my English.	72	2.5
	I willingly participate in group activities.	72	4.14
	I prefer the class to have more group activities rather than individual study.	72	3.92
	I think I will use the CL method in my future teaching career.	72	4.25
	Working in a group provides a chance to explore great teaching ideas of others to enhance my teaching perspective.	72	4.33

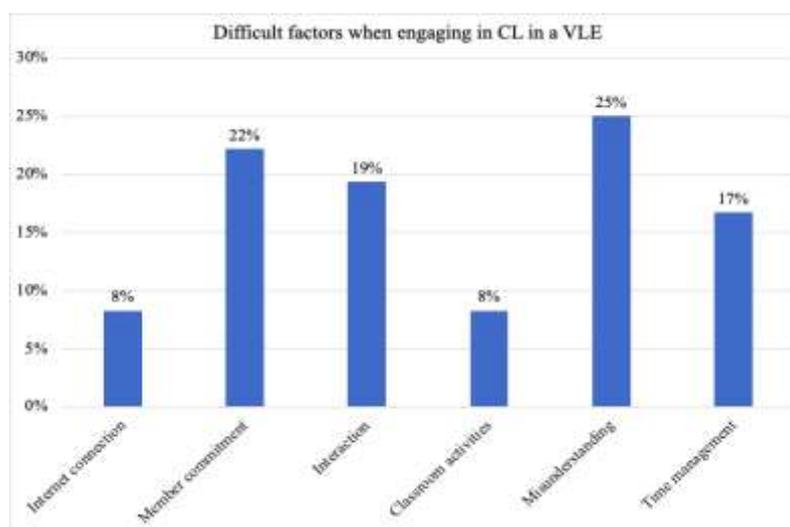
<i>CL in VLE</i>	I feel that I'm skilled enough to practice collaborative learning with my future pupils.	72	3.86
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As Table 1 reveals, most of the items got high ratings with items 2 and 5 getting the highest point (M=4.36). It can be seen that pre-service EFL teachers from the Faculty of Teacher Education are frequently exposed to CL methods, even in VLE. Most of them are able to perceive the benefits of CL in VLE and control over some common issues in the group working process. In general, they seem to have a positive attitude towards the use of pair/group-work in their online EFL context, which can be the base for EFL CL application and development.

The pre-service EFL teachers seem to notice the advantages of CL in improving their transferable skills, especially communication skills. This finding is in line with other foregoing research about the advantages of CL in students' learning mentioned in the Literature review. In terms of limitations when participating in online discussions, most respondents show neutral viewpoints as these obstacles are still within their capability. During these online collaborative activities, the productivity level is considerably high as students actively play their parts in groups, as perceived by their peers. While it is true that the domination of some members has emerged as a contentious issue, other factors such as the cooperation of team members, equally divided workloads, the willingness to voice one's opinion as well as accepting others' have apparently been fostered throughout these sessions. Thus, the answer for the first research question is that pre-service teachers' attitude towards CL in VLE is quite positive as most of them opine that the implication of CL is undeniably crucial in educational settings and they are eager to utilize this technique in their future classes.

## 2. Factors affecting the efficiency of CL on VLE and coping strategies

### 2.1. Difficulties when organizing CL in VLE



**Figure 1.** Difficult factors when engaging in CL in a VLE

Beside the objective reasons which are the intermittent Internet connection and background noise (8%), misunderstanding and member commitment are the most concerning issues of CL in VLE, which accounted for 25% and 22% of the total proportion. When asked about what factors they found the most challenging during these online group work sessions, most pre-service teachers express their worry about how to manage time and ensure that other members are also doing the work:

*“Since we don't have much chance to express our ideas through gestures or facial expressions, misunderstandings between team members may occur. Consequently, I think it takes longer to reach an agreement as you know, most of our time is spent on unraveling the arguments.”*

*“Others sometimes don't pay attention and do other things. I feel like only the leader is in charge of the task. Finally, it turns out that some members have not done the work properly as they didn't spend enough time doing it. Some even have not done their parts and as a result, the team is late for the deadline.”*

In addition, concerns over interaction in online classes are also mentioned several times in the answers (19%). In the extracts below, participants elaborated upon the worries they have experienced in online group working, which affects the work productivity:

*“We can't respond to others immediately and don't have a chance to express our ideas through gestures, voice and facial expressions.”*

In addition, many pre-service teachers implied that time management, which is double the frequency rate of Internet connection, is another issue that they have to deal with most of the time being involved in online group work.

*“Time management is what makes it complicated when doing group work online. Some members never show up on time for the discussion so we all have to wait for them.”*

Another factor reported by the participants is the “unstable Internet connection” and “background noise”, which only made up 8% of the repetition rate.

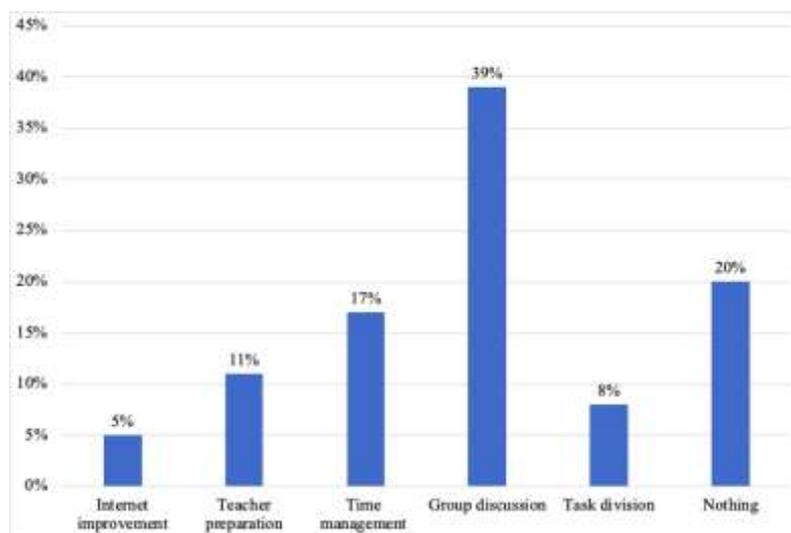
Last but not least, a minority of respondents blamed on the activities during online group work:

*“Sometimes the online lessons are tedious as the activities are not interesting. Actually, the only form of group work in online classes I've ever done is when the teachers assigned us to different channels or breakout room to discuss and we usually finish the tasks before the time given.”*

As for Internal factors, pre-service teachers in this study suffered the most from the irresponsibility of some students and misunderstanding during the working process. This raises concern about the next issue, time-management, because it is time-consuming to solve the conflicts and disagreements while discussing in a limited amount of time, let alone when some members refuse to do the work. Also, the lack of direct communication when working online would stimulate more arguments since implicit meanings through gestures or facial expression could not be seen.

Turning to External factors, erratic Internet connection and background noise could be annoying as they distract participants from focusing on the group work. It was also reported that online CL are not appealing since the activities are boring and cannot keep them occupied long enough.

## 2.2. Strategies for an effective CL in VLE



**Figure 2.** Strategies to deal with online CL problems

In order to tackle the aforementioned problems, respondents proposed some coping strategies which were allocated into 6 categories, namely Internet improvement, Teacher preparation, Time management, Group discussion, Task division and Nothing.

Different ways to enhance understanding level according to how students discuss in groups were recommended by a majority of respondents, for example:

*“To me, respecting other opinions is not easy in face-to-face contexts, let alone VLE so when working in groups, I often ask my teammate to be attentive to make sure that everyone would be heard. We also take turn to speak.”*

*“We tend to make video calls instead of texting in a group chat. By this way, we are able to express our ideas more precisely and also make sure that we are all putting our minds to the project.”*

Nearly one fifth of the participants suggested that deadlines and meeting time should be strictly set to mitigate the waste of time while meeting online as can be seen in these answers below:

*“We should schedule in advance and those who are late will be given more work.”*

*“We usually stay up late or take advantage of break time to discuss the problem. Online meetings are time for work division and everyone takes care of their part, of course we all set a due date for our tasks. Then we would meet again for feedback and comments.”*

Following that, 11% of the answers mentioned about teacher preparation, as presented in these answers below:

*“Teachers should prepare some interesting games or activities for online classes before asking us to work in groups to keep us busy and make full use of the group working time.”*

*“I think teachers should always keep an eye on every group to make sure that they are doing the work, not just simply give a task without any further explanation.”*

A few suggestions relating to task division were also added:

*“I think all members in a group need to know how to divide the assignment into small tasks effectively so that they can handle it within the limited time.”*

*“From my perspective, we should create a to-do list for the week or each day with what the group needs to get done.”*

Similar to the difficulties, because Internet connection is shown to be one of the least worrying factors, only 5% of participants mentioned it in their solutions. *“Using headphones and finding a workplace with good wifi connection”* is recommended.

Surprisingly, 20% pre-service teachers reported that they do nothing when the facing the problems or simply *“wait until the connection gets better”* and *“wait for the leader to divide the task.”*

The strategies recommended by pre-service teachers are varied which could be divided into two categories, Personal solutions and Institutional solutions. The most cited solution is about how to efficiently debate in group discussion by being attentive and keeping in contact with others. Moreover, most pre-service teachers emphasize the importance of reaching an agreement on a fixed schedule and deadline, which deters indolent students from being idle. As for how to make sure everyone is doing the task during group work activities, breaking down the assignments into smaller parts should be considered. In terms of Institutional solutions, besides connecting to a stable network, it is of equal importance that instructors diversify the activities for group working in MS Teams. The others show no interest in solving these problems as they think that there is nothing they can do, or know how to do to make better group work. This means that they may still have no ideas, or have vague knowledge about CL as well as its application. Therefore, not only pre-service teachers of EFL should be oriented and well-trained about CL, which will enable them to perform well with this learning method in their EFL environment.

## V. CONCLUSION

Pre-service EFL teachers from the Faculty of Teacher Education are frequently exposed to CL methods, even in VLE. Most of them are able to perceive the benefits of CL in VLE and control over some common issues in the group working process. In general, they seem to have a positive attitude towards the use of pair/group-work in their online EFL context, which can be the base for EFL CL application and development. While CL is conducted online, Internal factors such as misunderstanding, interaction, member commitment and time management are the most concerning matters. Following that, participants in this study pointed out other External factors concerning the class activities and Internet connection. The strategies recommended by pre-service teachers are varied. These answers emphasize the need for information and guidance on how to collaborate and manage time and workload in a group. It is also necessary for instructors to know how to establish, promote, and maintain group work, how to hold groups, make individuals responsible for being on task, and how to intervene when problems occur (Lotan, 2004). To overcome this situation the pre-service teachers should go through a series of workshops about how to conduct CL in VLE.

The findings from the survey's data put forward several implications for pre-service teachers, mentors, and teacher training programs. It is of paramount importance to raise awareness and widen the knowledge of CL and its application methods among the EFL students and teachers. Additionally, CL application is not only essential to English learners and teachers but also educational managers. To be more specific, when they design teaching materials, construct curriculum and syllabus, or prepare facilities, EFL CL should be focused for students to fully develop their collaboration skills.

Further research should focus on investigating EFL CL application, not only at not only at tertiary level, but also in secondary and primary schools, in online context, to identify the features of CL, to promote communicative ability, in this era of globalization and internationalization when English is a global language. This study is limited to the pre-service teachers of English so further studies should be conducted with students or teachers of other languages at UFLS to determine whether the type of major they are enrolled in and their social background influences the study results.

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