



Beyond Expectations: Navigating the Gap Between Anticipated and Realized Collaborative Learning in Higher Education in Nepal

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Abstract

Collaborative learning is an effective approach in higher education to enhance students' critical-thinking, problem-solving, and self-regulation skills. However, its implementation remains limited in many Nepalese institutions. In this context, this study aimed to explore the experiences of M.Ed. students of Department of English Education, University, T.U. focusing the gap between anticipated and realized collaborative learning experiences. The qualitative survey design was used for the study and questionnaire were data collection tool. A google form was circulated to 40 Master's level students via email and the data were thematically analyzed. The findings reveal that while students recognize the potential benefits of collaborative learning, they rarely get the opportunity to participate in such activities during the course cycle. When they do get the chance, they enjoy the opportunities. They advocated for a collaborative learning environment, focusing on preparing students for their future careers as teachers, and seeking equal opportunities for all participants.

Introduction

Collaborative learning is a group process where everyone is involved in task performance and values peer interaction to build shared understanding (Roselli, 2016). It is based on Vygotsky's social learning

theory that highlights the importance of social interaction and cultural context in facilitating full cognitive development. Vygotskian social learning theory emphasizes the critical role of socio-cultural interaction in the development of cognitive skills (Harvey & Charnitski,

1998; Vygotsky, 1987; Zaretskii, 2009). The theory argues for the existence of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where a child's current level of development can be enhanced through communication and mediation with an adult or a more competent peer.

Collaborative learning is a widely used pedagogical approach in higher education that is recognized for its potential to enhance student engagement, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and self-regulation, amongst other competencies (Kreber & Cranton, 2000; Lou, Abrami, Spence, Poulsen, Chambers, & d' Apollonia, 2017; Johnson & Johnson, 1999). It can be an effective method for enhancing language proficiency (Chung & Crook, 2002). It includes a wide range of techniques such as group/pair works, task-based learning activities, problem-based learning activities, fieldwork, and cooperative learning activities (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). By engaging in group activities and tasks, students are able to receive support and feedback from their peers, which can help to improve their language skills and increase their confidence in using the language (Hsu, 2016). Additionally, collaborative learning can foster a more interactive and supportive learning environment, which can lead to better motivation and engagement among students (Kolb, 1984). For Falcione, Campbell, McCollum, Chamberlain, Macias, Morsch, & Pinder (2019), collaborative learning is not merely a means of transferring information from teacher to students, but rather a process of students working together to achieve a shared goal. There is a significant relationship between collaborative learning and students' social interaction skills (Ghavifekr, 2020).

Because of its effectiveness in learning, social well-being, the demand for collaborative learning approach in all levels and contexts

of education is increasing worldwide (Kreber & Cranton, 2000). Since 2014, Tribhuvan University in Nepal has implemented a semester-based Master's program, which has also focused on the maximization of collaborative learning in and outside the classroom. The new curricula have focused on collaborative learning activities not only in teaching/learning activities but also in internal evaluation process. Most part of internal evaluation is based on classroom participation, presentation, assignments and testing (Bhattarai & Dhakal, 2020). Classroom activities and presentations are anticipated to be collaboratively performed in group. The activities include group work, pair work, project work, fieldwork, task-based activities, and other activities that develop students' responsibility and confidence.

However, despite the many benefits associated with collaborative learning and anticipation of their maximum use, there is a significant gap between what students anticipate and what they actually experience in collaborative learning environments. This discrepancy can be attributed to a variety of factors, including differences in student expectations, individual learning preferences, and varying levels of participation and engagement. In this context, the main objective of the study was to analyze the gap between anticipated and realized collaborative learning opportunities in Nepalese higher education drawing example from Master's level English education at Tribhuvan University.

Research Methods and Procedures

The study used qualitative survey design involving 40 students as sample population who were studying Master's level fourth semester in the Department of English Education, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur. The students were selected using convenience

sampling technique, and were invited to participate in the study via messenger groups. The interested students were asked to respond on their pace providing adequate deadline. Oral consents were taken from the informants before responding to the survey form, and they were assured that their names and responses would be kept confidential.

To collect data, a collaborative learning survey form was created using Google Forms and circulated to the students via email. The form consisted of 50 questions, including 48 multiple-choice and 2 open-ended questions. They covered common types of collaborative learning such as think-pair-share activity, task-based learning, project-based learning, and problem-based learning activities, group work, group and pair discussion, collaborative presentations, peer-correction, Jig-saw techniques, peer-editing, and their roles in classroom environments. The multiple-choice questions were further grouped into various themes, including the collaborative learning environment created in the classroom, the degree of students' involvement, the types of activities they engaged and time provided for individual thought and response. Similarly, other groups were types of collaborative activities employed, opportunities to share ideas and responses, opportunities to summarize pair/small group discussions for the large group, frequency of involvement in problem-solving activities. Besides, these teachers' guidance and actions towards problem-solving and their frequency, opportunities for extension of time to understand and discuss the problem and propose a solution, case studies in groups, opportunities for peer teaching/presentations and their frequency, opportunities for small group discussions, and the types of groups used such as temporary or fixed.

Additionally, the survey included questions about the frequency of pre-class group tasks, multiple-choice quizzes in the classroom, and the mode of submission for answers. Other questions explored the types of collaborative learning activities used, students' perceptions of the collaborative learning environment, and their experiences with collaborative activities. Questions also asked about their satisfaction with resources and teaching aids available during collaborative work, as well as their satisfaction with their grades. The survey also inquired about the impact of collaborative learning on their performance and interpersonal skills. The last two questions were open-ended, in which students were asked to share their opinions on the collaborative learning environment provided by the department and their experiences with teaching strategies during different semesters, provide feedback to the teachers and the department.

All the data received from the survey, both closed-ended and open-ended questions, were qualitatively analyzed and thematized. The responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed to identify common themes and patterns in the data. The analysis was conducted manually creating the matrix of description, categorization and axial thematization.

The study followed research ethics. All participants provided oral consent before responding to the survey form, and were assured that their names would not be exposed in the analysis. The survey link was distributed with a cordial request explaining the objective of the study and ethical considerations. The findings and conclusion from the study were verified through an in-person validation process.

Result and Discussion

The objective of the study was to find out the gap between anticipated and realized collaborative learning opportunities of students in English. The responses of all 40 students regarding opportunities and their involvement in collaborative learning activities exposed that they got occasional chances to participate in such activities because the majority of classroom activities were conducted using lecture method with only a few classes utilizing task-based, problem-based, and project-based techniques. The details of result and discussion have been given the succeeding sections:

Result. The analysis of the data reveals three principal themes: collaborative learning ‘just in name!’, collaborated less but engaged more, and closing the gap: achieving collaborative learning. The detail analysis has been given below:

Collaborative learning ‘just in name!’

The students’ responses indicate that the application of collaborative learning approach in teaching by teachers was scarce. Only a limited number of teachers provided adequate feedback and learning materials to their students. The majority of the students reported a dearth of classroom interaction, which resulted in limited student participation. The traditional teaching method of lecture-based instruction predominates among teachers, leading to the confinement of students in a passive listener role. The respondents not only shared the type of learning activities they engaged in but also conveyed their displeasure and dissatisfaction with their passive role in the classroom and the teachers’ pedagogical delivery when compared to other universities. The excerpt below reveals this fact:

It is irritating that almost all of the teachers use only the teacher-centered method; exclusively the lecture method- in every semester which makes us passive. We get only theoretical knowledge on our subjects. As a student, I am not completely satisfied with the way they involve us in learning activities and I think compared to other universities our teaching learning strategies are quite insufficient according to time.

The excerpt exposes that the lecture method was the dominant technique used by almost all of the teachers leading to passive learning experiences for students, who found it "irritating", resulting in the acquisition of solely theoretical knowledge on the subjects. The students were also dissatisfied with the overuse of the lecture method over their desire for more demonstration classes. In this regard, one student said,

I believe that the lecture method is not suitable for every subject. Instead of simply lecturing about new teaching methods, I suggest our teachers demonstrate these methods in the classroom by, for instance, conducting demonstration classes. It allows us to see these methods in action and understand better on how to implement them in the real classrooms.

Through the given excerpt, the student indicates the unsuitability of the lecture method for every subject and also reverses their preference of a more active approach to learning. The student suggests the teacher conduct demonstration activities in the classroom. It shows that the student values active and experiential learning and that seeing these methods in action can help them better

understand how to implement new techniques effectively. Furthermore, students were also tired of the overuse of old PowerPoint slides. Students were dissatisfied with the lecture that heavily relied on old PowerPoint slides. In this regard, one student said, "In our department, almost all of the classes are only lecture driven, they are commonly based on PowerPoint presentations. But the slides are old, prepared some years ago." Overall, it highlights the importance of using effective and engaging teaching strategies and up-to-date materials to keep students engaged and motivated in their learning.

Students also revealed that very few teachers attempted to promote classroom interaction and students' participation through the use of collaborative or student-centered teaching methods, but on a small scale. The used collaborative activities were only as part of internal assignments required for assessment purposes. Therefore, students felt that the use of collaborative learning was only in name, as the curriculum advocated for student-centered teaching and collaborative learning but was not implemented effectively, giving rise to a "talked most, practiced less" situation. The given excerpt exposes this fact:

In my opinion, collaborative learning should be implemented in teaching and learning practices. However, the reality is that it's more of a concept than a reality, as not all teachers are willing to adopt it. Despite being a popular topic of discussion, collaborative learning is not commonly practiced in our department. Only a few teachers use this approach in their classes; however, it's not done consistently. Additionally, during the two-year period, we've had limited opportunities to engage in group

discussions during class, except for when working on group assignments.

The student exposes that the majority of teachers are not willing to adopt a collaborative learning approach confining it to more of a concept than a reality. The student perceives a lack of commitment in the teachers towards implementing collaborative learning activities in the classroom teaching and if a few teachers attempt to use this approach in their classes, but not consistently. All these situations created a significant gap between 'what is talked about' and 'what is actually implemented' regarding collaborative learning. Even if they were involved in collaborative activities, they had had limited opportunities to group discussions, except when working on group assignments. Group project works are restricted as an assignment for the internal assessment purpose that is almost mandatory in their course cycle. The students get an opportunity in 'peer-teaching' during the teaching practice program in the fourth semester of the course cycle. Except for these, teaching-learning practices usually rely on the lecture method. The limited number of teachers who attempted to use collaborative learning approaches in the classroom dominantly used group work and peer-presentations as the prototypes of collaborative learning activities. The following excerpt of a student confirms this fact:

One of the frequently used teaching techniques by our instructors are cooperative learning or group tasks. Essentially, we actively participate in presenting and completing assignments related to the topic either individually, or in groups.

Overall, the result shows that the lecture method was the predominant teaching method that narrowed down the space of collaborative learning in and out of the classroom but while using this approach the teachers would form small groups of two or three students and assign each group a topic for collaborative presentations. Some teachers who used this approach attempted to incorporate collaborative learning activities to the greatest extent possible.

Collaborated Less, but Engaged More. The idea ‘collaborated less, but engaged more’ in this particular context means that very few collaborative learning activities were used during the whole semesters, but those which were used opened up extensive engagement opportunities to the students. The study found that very few teachers employed collaborative learning activities, but while they conducted students were often involved in ‘think, pair and share’ activities and in analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing a given topic. They were often given discussion topics and sometimes specific problems with necessary guidance toward solution. During group work activities, the roles of teacher were mostly to assist and monitor students’ activities and sometimes to instruct. While students’ roles were to participate in ‘think, pair and share’ activities. It was also found that very few teachers introduced case studies and provided sufficient time to work in groups, share their analysis among other groups and to continue their work until they completed. Besides these, they would sometimes get an opportunity to play roles, presentation, discussion and clarification of their solutions, however, they were only as parts of assignments.

The students reported that peer support, interpersonal skills, fluency, enhancement of reading habits, presentation skills,

enhancement of their depth of knowledge were the most positive impacts of collaborative learning activities. Moreover, they found collaborative learning activities were enjoyable, supportive, and a confidence booster, which increased habits of risk-taking in learning, developed mutual understanding and intimacy among friends.

Although collaborative learning is widely taken as a valuable tool for engaging students and promoting deeper learning, M.Ed. level students rarely get the opportunity as teaching is still a heavy reliance on the lecture method. While students got chances, they enjoyed the opportunities, especially, for discussion and problem-solving, as well as the support they received from their peers.

The study stimulated the faculty members to incorporate more collaborative learning activities in their teaching learning activities, valuing the role of traditional lecture-based instruction to some extent. By doing so, one can create an engaging and effective learning environment in the department and narrow down the gap and achieve collaborative learning environment.

Closing the Gap: Achieving Collaborative Learning. In response to open-ended questions, the students were fervently advocating for an education experience that goes beyond traditional classroom instruction. Specially, they were demanding that instead of treating them solely as regular students, teachers should focus on preparing them for their future career as teachers. They were suggested that collaborative learning be given more emphasis in the classroom, while minimizing the amount of lecturing that takes place. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to create a collaborative learning

environment where students can work together to learn and develop their skills.

The students recognize the importance of motivation of students in achieving successful collaborative learning. They believed that it is essential for teachers to encourage and motivate students to participate in collaborative learning activities, which will result in a more engaging and effective learning experience. Their feedback clarifies that they were in favor of collaborative learning activities, and therefore, they appealed to the teachers to maximize the use of collaborative learning in the classroom. The following excerpt might verify this reality:

In order to provide prospective teachers with a great learning experience, it is important for teachers to implement effective teaching strategies. Collaborative learning is an effective way for learners to gain knowledge and experience, as it provides ample opportunities for them to collaborate and learn from each other. To maximize the benefits of collaborative learning, teachers should minimize lecture time and create a fully collaborative learning environment that motivates students to actively engage in the learning process.

Students were requesting for the implementation of cooperative learning methods that involve giving and receiving feedback, as well as engaging them in task-based activities. They were also seeking equal opportunities for all participants in such collaborative learning environments to facilitate meaningful learning. The students believed that maximizing collaborative learning opportunities will lead to more effective learning outcomes. It reveals that

students were advocating for a collaborative learning environment that is suitable for the present generation learners. The following excerpt reveals this fact:

Adopting collaborative learning strategies across all teachers can make teaching more interesting and engaging. To achieve this, teachers should provide feedback to pairs and facilitate their answers while engaging them in task-based activities. It is also essential to focus on introverted students and boost their confidence, as only extroverted and fluent students tend to benefit from collaborative learning.

This excerpt discusses the potential benefits and challenges of implementing collaborative learning strategies in educational settings. First, it suggests that adopting these strategies across all teachers can make teaching more interesting and engaging for students. This is because collaborative learning often generates more active participation and interaction among students, which can lead to a more dynamic classroom environment. To achieve this, the student, through this excerpt, recommended that teachers should provide feedback to pairs and facilitate their answers while engaging them in task-based activities. This indicates that collaborative learning requires active teacher involvement in guiding students through their collaborative activities.

However, this excerpt also notes that some students, particularly introverted students, may not be benefited as much from collaborative learning as their extroverted counterparts. This highlights the importance of ensuring that collaborative learning strategies are implemented in a way that provides equal opportunities for all students

to participate and succeed. Overall, it suggests that collaborative learning strategies can be a valuable tool for promoting engagement and active learning in educational setting, but it requires careful implementation to ensure that all students can benefit from it. Besides these, some students also suggested all the teachers to prioritize collaborative learning strategies over excessive lecturing. In this regard a student said:

All teachers should prioritize collaborative learning strategies over lecturing methods to ensure that all students benefit from meaningful learning experiences. Collaborative activities should be integrated into every classroom to make learning effective and comprehensible. It is a highly effective learning strategy for the present generation as it fosters better learning habits among students and provides a platform for sharing ideas. Therefore, we suggest to continue using collaborative learning strategies consistently.

This excerpt argues for the importance of prioritizing collaborative learning strategies over traditional lecturing method in order to provide meaningful learning experiences for all students. Through this excerpt, the student suggests that collaborative activities should be integrated into every classroom practice to make learning effective and comprehensible. This excerpt exposes the student's belief that collaborative learning is a highly effective strategy that should be used across all subject areas. It also highlights the benefits of collaborative learning for the present generation, as it fosters better learning habits among students and provides a platform for sharing ideas. The student perceived collaborative learning strategy as an effective strategy in the educational landscape of

21st century, but it can be fully beneficial if it is used consistently across all subject areas.

In the similar vein, students also argued that collaborative learning should be a consistent practice, not just something that's done for assignments. Groups should be formed to provide equal responsibility and opportunity, and to prevent passive students from falling behind. Learner-centered teaching is essential for effective learning, and collaborative tasks should be incorporated into the curriculum. Teachers should aim to develop students' skills, rather than just teaching for the sake of teaching. Discussion topics should be introduced before class to engage students, and student-centered methods should be prioritized. The practice-based approach should be used to enhance learners' efficiency. The following excerpt reveals this fact:

I believe that creating a collaborative learning environment in the classroom should be a top priority for teachers. While collaborative learning was only given as an assignment in my experience, I think it should be expanded and made more active. To promote equal responsibility and opportunity for all students, teachers should consider creating groups, as passive students may otherwise be left behind.

The student expressed that creating a collaborative learning environment in the classroom should be a top priority for teachers. She expressed her dissatisfaction that although collaborative learning environment has multiple benefits in quality enhancement of education it was not used regularly in her the classroom. She recommended to increase the use of collaborative learning techniques in classroom teaching beyond confining its use in a single assignment. In addition, she stated

that creating groups can help promote equal responsibility and opportunity for all students. Overall, this excerpt highlights the value of collaborative learning, and suggestions for how to make it more effective and inclusive for all students. In the similar line, another student said:

In order to promote effective learning, teachers should use a variety of strategies such as collaborative learning, project-based learning, and a communicative approach. My suggestion for all teachers is to make classrooms more interactive by giving students collaborative tasks and using student-centered teaching strategies. Instead of using lecture-based methods, teachers should focus on student-centered methods that allow students to take a more active role in their learning.

Through this excerpt the student suggested that teachers should use a variety of strategies to promote effective learning. The student also believed that using different approaches can help engage them and promote learning outcomes. The strategies mentioned were collaborative learning, project-based learning, and a communicative approach that involve active engagement, collaboration, and communication among students. Therefore, teachers should make their classrooms more interactive by giving students collaborative tasks and using student-centered teaching strategies for effective learning. The student argued that students should be actively involved in their own learning and teachers should facilitate that process. But expressing dissatisfaction towards most of the teachers' teaching activities, he said:

Unfortunately, some teachers may only teach for the sake of teaching rather than

providing valuable skills and knowledge to their students. To combat this, I suggest that teachers should start their classes with a discussion or assign research tasks prior to the lecture so that students are actively engaged in finding answers.

This excerpt reveals that some teachers teach for the sake of teaching, simply fulfilling the requirements of a syllabus or curriculum that cannot develop skills and knowledge of their students. To combat this issue, teachers should start their classes with a discussion or assign research tasks prior to the lecture. By starting with a discussion or research task, students can become more involved in their own learning process and be better prepared to engage with the lecture material. Overall, the excerpt highlights the student's concern that some teachers might not be providing valuable skills and knowledge to their students. The student suggested that starting classes with discussions or research tasks could help combat this issue by promoting active engagement and helping students better prepare.

Discussion. The use of collaborative learning as a pedagogical approach in higher education has been extensively studied by scholars such as Kreber & Cranton (2000), Lou et al. (2017), and Johnson & Johnson (1999). Although the approach has the potential to enhance student engagement, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and self-regulation, among other competencies, the findings suggest that collaborative learning is not extensively used in teaching in the Department of English education. Traditional lecture-based instruction is prevalent, resulting in limited student participation and passive learning. However, students desire more demonstration classes and active learning experiences to enhance language proficiency.

The lack of commitment from teachers towards implementing collaborative learning is evident from limited opportunities for group discussions during class, except for when working on group assignments. Although Hsu (2016) states that students can receive support and feedback from their friends, improve language skills and develop their confidence, in case of this department the implementation of collaborative learning activities is restricted to a few teachers who use them sporadically. As a result, students feel that collaborative learning is 'just in name.' However, when students do get the opportunity to participate in collaborative learning activities, they enjoy the opportunities for discussion and problem-solving, as well as the support they receive from their peers.

Students found that peer support, interpersonal skills, fluency, enhancement of reading habits, presentation skills and enhancement of their depth for knowledge were the most effective part of collaborative learning activities. The students' responses confirm Kolb's (1984) ideas that collaborative learning activities were also enjoyable, supportive, a confidence booster, that increased habits of risk-taking in learning, developed mutual understanding, and developed intimacy among friends.

The students advocate for teachers to focus on preparing them for their future careers as teachers, instead of solely treating them as regular students. They suggest that collaborative learning be given more emphasis in the classroom while minimizing the amount of lecturing that takes place. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to create a collaborative learning environment where students can work together to learn and develop their skills. The students recognize the importance of motivation in achieving successful collaborative learning and suggest

implementing cooperative learning methods that involve giving and receiving feedback, as well as engaging in task-based activities.

Conclusion

Collaborative learning can be a valuable tool for engaging higher level students and promoting deeper learning. Nevertheless, students of Department of English education rarely get opportunities to participate in collaborative activities, except for assessment purpose, as teaching is still heavily reliant on the lecture method. The students advocate and demand for a more collaborative learning environment, where they can work together to learn and develop their critical-thinking, problem-solving skills and self-esteem working with others. They highlight that by prioritizing collaborative learning strategies over traditional lecturing methods, meaningful learning experiences can be provided for all students. Finally, the study, as a whole, indicates the importance of implementing more collaborative learning activities in higher education in Nepal to promote deeper learning and to prepare students for their future careers. As this study was a small piece, it attempted to explore the students' experiences and opinions regarding the teaching learning activities especially the gap between their anticipation and realization. This study was completely relied on the responses of Master level third semester students studying English at Department of English Education, University Campus, T.U., Kirtipur. The department was purposively selected based two main criteria: 1) it is the English education hub; and (2) it is the department where I work due to what I could collect reliable data. My stance regarding the result is that I have drawn is completely time and context specific. Therefore, I never claim it for very wider generalization. However, at the same time, I am confident that the result

provides new information in the field of teaching and learning process that is going on at Tribhuvan University and provoke the researchers to carry out extensive research to understand how teaching learning processes going on in Nepalese higher education in the 21st century.

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