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Collaborative Learning in EFL Classrooms at a Pesantren: A Qualitative Exploration of Teachers' Strategies, Students' Perceptions, and Contextual Constraints

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Abstract

English language teaching in Indonesian Pesantren faces challenges due to the prioritization of Arabic and religious subjects, demanding schedules, and multilingual environments. This study explored the implementation of collaborative learning in EFL classrooms at a Pesantren in Amuntai District, South Kalimantan, focusing on teaching strategies, students' perceptions, and contextual factors. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research involved two EFL teachers and students from class XI-A, including six students selected for in-depth interviews. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, then analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that teachers primarily implemented collaborative learning through dialogue practice and group discussions, reflecting the traditional Pesantren practice of *halaqah*. Students generally expressed positive perceptions, reporting improved speaking opportunities, motivation, and confidence, despite challenges involving unequal language proficiency and uneven participation. The Pesantren's communal culture supported collaboration, while strict schedules and limited instructional time posed constraints. The study concludes that collaborative learning can be effectively integrated into Pesantren-based EFL classrooms by adapting teaching strategies to local pedagogical traditions and providing institutional support.

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Introduction

English plays a crucial role as a foreign language in Indonesia, enabling learners to access international knowledge, continue their studies, and participate in global competition (Agustin, 2021). Nevertheless, English language teaching still encounters ongoing challenges, particularly within rural and religious educational settings such as Pesantren (Kholili, 2021). In Amuntai, South Kalimantan, Pesantren function as institutions that integrate formal education with Islamic values, discipline, and communal life. In this setting, English is often considered less important than Arabic and religious subjects, which influences how both teachers and students perceive its relevance (Istiqomah Rahmawati et al., 2021). Students also come from varied educational backgrounds and must manage multiple languages—Arabic, Indonesian, English, and local languages—alongside demanding academic routines, conditions that may reduce motivation to learn English (Emawati et al., 2024; Fatihah, 2022).

One instructional approach that shows potential in this context is collaborative learning, an alternative to conventional teacher-centered methods (Kamal et al., 2024) grounded in sociocultural and humanistic theories. In practice it may involve group discussions, peer tutoring, project-based activities, or halaqah-style learning circles in which students jointly construct understanding. In EFL contexts, collaborative learning has been found to increase motivation (Namaziandost et al., 2019) and to improve reading (Rosnaningsih, 2017), speaking (Babiker, 2018), listening (Adnan Salih & Abdelameer, 2022), and writing (Al-Yafaei & Mudhsh, 2023). Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development further explains how interaction with peers moves learners from assisted performance toward independent competence (Robertson & Jung, 2016).

Despite these advantages, implementing collaborative learning in Pesantren may differ from its application in mainstream schools (Azizah et al., 2025). As institutions that integrate academic instruction with religious and character development, Pesantren position teachers not only as instructors but also as moral and spiritual mentors (Fatihah, 2022; Ilyasin, 2020). Practices such as halaqah-based learning may align naturally with collaborative principles, while more teacher-centered traditions such as talaqqi require careful integration with peer-based approaches. The key challenge lies in adapting collaborative learning to Pesantren values while addressing practical constraints such as students' workload, limited facilities, and uneven motivation.

Although collaborative learning has been widely examined in higher education and general school contexts (Azizah et al., 2025; Emawati et al., 2024; Fajar, 2019; Ritonga et al., 2024), limited attention has been given specifically to Pesantren settings, where strong religious orientation, structured daily routines, multilingual demands, and the relatively lower status of English may produce different patterns of implementation. This study therefore examines the implementation of collaborative learning in an EFL classroom at a Pesantren in Amuntai District, focusing on teachers' strategies, students' perceptions, and the contextual factors influencing its implementation. Specifically, the study explores the collaborative learning strategies employed by EFL teachers and how these strategies are implemented in classroom practice. It also investigates students' perceptions of collaborative learning, including its perceived benefits, challenges, and effects on their motivation and language development. Furthermore, the study examines the institutional and classroom-level constraints and affordances that shape the implementation of collaborative learning within the Pesantren environment.

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Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore teachers' and students' experiences of collaborative learning in EFL classrooms within a Pesantren setting. A case study approach was chosen because it enabled an in-depth, empirically grounded understanding of a complex social phenomenon through multiple sources of evidence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Heale & Twycross, 2018). The study was conducted at a private Islamic boarding school in the Amuntai district, South Kalimantan, selected purposively because English was not taught intensively there, resulting in relatively low student proficiency—conditions that made the site particularly relevant for examining how collaborative learning is enacted under constraint. Two English teachers participated, both holding a bachelor's degree in English Language Education and more than five years of teaching experience, selected through purposive sampling on the basis of their academic background, teaching experience, and regular use of collaborative strategies in their classrooms. The student population comprised all 33 students of one intact class, XI-A, aged 15 to 16, whose classroom activities were observed throughout the study. From this class, six students representing low, medium, and high English proficiency were further selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews, following Creswell and Creswell's (2018) recommendation for maintaining a manageable yet diverse qualitative sample. Pseudonyms (T1 and T2 for teachers; ST1–ST6 for students) were used throughout to protect participants' confidentiality.

Data were collected through three complementary instruments: a structured classroom observation checklist adapted from Brown and Kennedy (2011), which recorded interaction patterns, group roles, and teacher facilitation; semi-structured interviews with teachers and selected students, each lasting approximately 30–45 minutes, supplemented by focus-group interviews to capture students' collective perspectives; and document analysis of teachers' lesson plans and instructional materials (Bowen, 2019). The combination of observation, interview, and document data supported methodological triangulation. Data collection proceeded across three phases: a pre-implementation phase in which permissions and informed consent were obtained; an implementation phase involving twice-weekly classroom observations over two weeks; and a post-implementation phase in which final interviews were conducted and observation records, field notes, and documents were reviewed and organized for analysis.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Christou's (2023) six-step process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Interview transcripts and observation notes were repeatedly reviewed to identify recurring patterns related to teachers' strategies, students' perceptions, and contextual influences on collaborative learning. Trustworthiness was supported through triangulation of data sources and ongoing consultation with academic supervisors during data interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process (Richards & Schwartz, 2022).

Results and Discussions

This section presents the findings of the study, organized according to the three research questions: the strategies teachers used to implement collaborative learning, students' perceptions of the practice, and the contextual constraints and affordances that shaped its implementation in the Pesantren EFL classroom.

1. Teachers' strategies in implementing collaborative learning

Interviews and classroom observations showed that both teachers implemented collaborative learning mainly through two related strategies: dialogue practice and group discussion. Dialogue practice involved students working in pairs or small groups to read, rehearse, and perform conversational dialogues, developing speaking, pronunciation, reading comprehension, and grammar awareness simultaneously. The activity typically began with the teacher explaining the objective and modelling correct pronunciation and intonation before students practiced collaboratively and answered comprehension questions. T1 described the procedure:

> *"Kegiatan dialog diawali dengan siswa membaca dan mempraktikkan dialog secara berpasangan sebelum menjawab pertanyaan pemahaman. Guru terlebih dahulu menjelaskan tujuan pembelajaran, kemudian memberikan contoh pengucapan dan intonasi yang tepat." (Int.T01)*
> *[Dialogue activities began with students reading and practicing dialogues in pairs before answering comprehension questions. The teacher first explained the objectives and modeled correct pronunciation and intonation, while students practiced speaking, reading, and grammar simultaneously with the teacher's guidance and feedback] (Int.T01).*

Both teachers considered dialogue practice effective, particularly because it combined communicative performance with comprehension tasks. T2 explained that "pembelajaran kolaboratif efektif diterapkan pada materi seperti dialog... juga cukup efektif untuk materi yang berbasis teks" [collaborative learning is effective for material such as dialogue... and is also effective for text-based material] (Int.T2). Observations confirmed that students were visibly more engaged during paired dialogue practice than during teacher-centered explanation, frequently repeating sentences and correcting each other's pronunciation. The second strategy, group discussion, was used mainly in reading comprehension activities. Students worked in groups of three to five with assigned roles—reader, note-taker, or presenter—discussing a text for around 10–15 minutes before presenting their findings while other groups responded or added ideas. T1 explained:

> *"Diskusi kelompok terutama diterapkan dalam kegiatan membaca. Siswa bekerja dalam kelompok yang terdiri atas tiga hingga lima orang dan diberikan peran tertentu, seperti membaca teks, mencatat informasi penting, atau mempresentasikan hasil diskusi." (Int.T01)*
> *[Group discussion was primarily used for reading activities. Students worked in groups of three to five and were assigned specific roles such as reading, note-taking, or presenting, after which other groups were encouraged to respond, add ideas, or provide corrections] (Int.T01).*

Teachers observed that students frequently mixed English with Bahasa Indonesia and Arabic during discussions a pattern they did not view negatively but rather as part of students' gradual process of building confidence and habituating themselves to spoken English (Int.T1). Group work also increased overall speaking time because students no longer had to wait individually for a turn: "mereka menjadi lebih aktif dibandingkan sebelumnya... mereka tidak harus menunggu giliran satu per satu, tetapi dapat berbicara secara bersamaan" [they become more active than before... they do not need to

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wait for turns one by one but can speak simultaneously] (Int.T1). At the same time, teachers noted that students were initially uncertain how to begin discussions and often waited passively for instructions, which required teachers to circulate actively among groups to monitor participation and encourage quieter students.

Beyond these two activities, observations revealed a consistent instructional cycle across lessons: teacher explanation of objectives and materials, collaborative group work with assigned roles and interdependent tasks, group presentation with peer feedback, and teacher reinforcement that summarized the discussion and corrected errors. T2 explained how groups were structured: "Guru mengelola pembelajaran kolaboratif dengan membentuk kelompok heterogen yang terdiri atas empat hingga enam siswa... setiap siswa diberikan peran yang jelas..." [The teacher managed collaborative learning by forming heterogeneous groups of four to six students, assigning clear roles such as leader, note-taker, presenter, and timekeeper, and providing interdependent tasks] (Int.T2). This cycle indicates that collaborative learning in this setting was carefully scaffolded rather than left to unstructured group work, with teachers continuing to act as facilitators throughout.

2. Students' perceptions of collaborative learning

Interviews with six students revealed generally positive perceptions of collaborative learning, organized around several recurring themes: a more comfortable learning environment, increased speaking opportunities, enhanced motivation, and specific challenges. Students consistently reported feeling more relaxed and less anxious when learning in groups than individually. ST2 explained: "Kalau kami berdiskusi dalam kelompok, saya merasa lebih nyaman bertanya kepada teman daripada langsung bertanya kepada guru" [When we discuss in groups, I feel more comfortable asking questions to my friends than asking the teacher directly] (Int.ST2). ST3 similarly noted that group work was "menyenangkan karena kami bisa lebih banyak berinteraksi dengan teman" [enjoyable because we can interact more with friends], which made the atmosphere feel more relaxed (Int.ST3).

Students also perceived collaborative learning as expanding their opportunities to practice speaking English. ST6 explained that group presentations in particular trained speaking ability: "kegiatan itu membuat kemampuan saya meningkat, terutama dalam berbicara... kami diminta untuk melakukan presentasi di depan banyak orang" [it made me more capable, especially in speaking, because we are usually asked to present in front of many people] (Int.ST6). ST2 added that teacher feedback during these activities helped build courage to speak despite the risk of error, while ST3 and ST4 described how seeing peers practice or speak first reduced their own hesitation and nervousness.

Motivation was similarly reported to increase through peer influence, though in different directions depending on students' proficiency level. ST6 noted, "Ketika melihat teman yang kemampuannya lebih baik, saya menjadi termotivasi untuk bisa seperti mereka" [When I see friends who are better, it motivates me to be like them] (Int.ST6), while ST1 a higher-achieving student explained that being grouped with lower-proficiency peers was itself motivating "karena saya bisa mengajari mereka" [because I can teach them] (Int.ST1). ST4, however, cautioned that motivation could also spread negatively, as being placed with disengaged group members risked lowering one's own effort (Int.ST4).

Despite these benefits, students identified two closely related challenges. The first was differing English proficiency among group members, which sometimes caused misunderstanding and left lower-proficiency students unable to keep pace: "saya merasa tidak sepenuhnya memahami materi ketika teman-teman yang lain sudah memahaminya" [I feel I do not fully understand the material when other friends already understand it] (Int.ST5). The second was unequal participation, described by ST4 as

feeling unfair "karena hanya beberapa orang yang mengerjakan tugas" [because only a few people do the work] (Int.ST4), and echoed by ST6, who noted that some group members remained passive and made excuses to avoid contributing (Int.ST6).

3. Contextual constraints and affordances

The third research question concerned the institutional and cultural factors shaping implementation. Beyond the proficiency and participation gaps already noted which teachers also linked to "dominant" students who silenced quieter peers (Int.T02) and to "free rider" problems that burdened stronger students while leaving weaker ones without progress (Int.T2) two further contextual layers emerged: cultural norms and institutional routines. Respect-based cultural norms within the Pesantren shaped how openly students interacted during discussions. T1 explained that students' strong respect for authority sometimes made them reluctant to voice opinions that differed from a teacher's or a more capable peer's, preferring instead to defer to more dominant group members (Int.T1). At the same time, the teacher noted that these same values of politeness and discipline supported an orderly, low-conflict classroom atmosphere, so that respect-based norms functioned simultaneously as a constraint on open exchange and as a support for classroom management.

Institutional routines presented a further constraint. Students described dense daily schedules combining formal lessons, religious studies, dormitory activities, and extracurricular commitments as a source of fatigue that reduced their capacity for group work: "Kami merasa lelah karena jadwal sebelumnya sudah penuh... hal itu membuat kerja kelompok menjadi lebih sulit" [We feel tired because the schedule is already full... it makes group work more difficult] (Int.ST1); ST5 added that boarding-specific activities on certain days left no time to focus on collaborative tasks at all (Int.ST5). In response, T1 adapted lesson design by breaking collaborative tasks into smaller stages across meetings or selecting simpler formats such as pair work when time was limited (Int.T1). Teachers also reported limited access to professional training in collaborative pedagogy, relying instead on informal peer sharing and ongoing self-directed practice (Int.T1; Int.T2). Despite these constraints, the Pesantren's communal, shared-living culture was repeatedly identified as an affordance: because students already lived, studied, and interacted together outside formal lessons, they brought an existing familiarity and cohesion into classroom group work that supported collaborative interaction.

4. Discussion

The findings show that collaborative learning in this Pesantren EFL classroom was not a single undifferentiated activity but was implemented through two concrete, scaffolded strategies dialogue practice and group discussion through which classroom interaction shifted from a teacher-centered to a more student-centered orientation. This is consistent with the view that collaborative learning constitutes active learning in which students construct knowledge through meaningful interaction (Lu & Smiles, 2022) and with the broader shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogy (Scheurs & Dumbraveanu, 2014). Throughout both strategies, teachers continued to act as facilitators who structured tasks, monitored groups, and redistributed dominant students, confirming Burns and Pierson's (2014) argument that teacher facilitation, rather than unmediated peer contact, is what sustains productive collaboration.

An important contribution of this study concerns the multilingual texture of collaborative interaction. Students frequently blended English with Indonesian and Arabic during discussions, and teachers interpreted this not as failure but as a scaffold supporting students' gradual confidence-building in English, a more nuanced picture than studies conducted in monolingual classroom settings. This

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finding also resonates with the way traditional halaqah pedagogy, an Islamic oral tradition of circular, dialogic learning (Ahmed, 2017; Wegerif et al., 2019), provided an existing cultural template onto which collaborative activities could be layered, echoing Durian et al.'s (2019) argument that traditional instructional models remain relevant when adapted to contemporary pedagogical needs.

Students' predominantly positive perceptions more comfortable learning environments, expanded speaking opportunities, and heightened motivation align with prior research showing that collaborative learning lowers anxiety and increases willingness to communicate (Aini et al., 2019; Gillies & Boyle, 2010; Hariyadi, 2024). From a sociocultural perspective, these gains can be explained through peer scaffolding within learners' Zone of Proximal Development, where interaction with more capable peers supports movement toward independent competence (Robertson & Jung, 2016). At the same time, students' reports that peer enthusiasm could motivate but peer disengagement could equally demotivate reflect the socially contagious nature of motivation within group settings (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012), underscoring that the quality of collaborative learning ultimately hinges on group composition rather than on the technique alone.

The challenges identified, unequal proficiency and uneven participation, mirror findings from Hariyadi (2024) and Le et al. (2018), who similarly found that competence gaps shape participation patterns in collaborative EFL classrooms, and from Felder and Brent (2021) and Basri (2025), who documented dominant members and "free riders" as recurring obstacles to collaborative learning. Notably, the present study shows that heterogeneous grouping alone did not guarantee peer scaffolding; in several instances, stronger students completed tasks independently rather than guiding weaker peers, suggesting that mixed-ability grouping must be paired with explicit role structures and teacher monitoring to translate proximity into genuine support.

The contextual findings extend this literature by situating these general challenges within the specific religious and institutional fabric of the Pesantren. Respect-based cultural values, consistent with Lin's (2023) findings on the influence of cultural norms on cooperative behavior, both constrained open disagreement and supported classroom discipline, an ambivalence that appears distinctive to religiously structured educational settings compared with mainstream EFL classrooms. Similarly, the dense daily schedule combining religious, academic, and boarding-life obligations, consistent with Fatihah's (2022) account of demanding Pesantren routines, constrained the time available for extended collaborative tasks, requiring teachers to adapt through simplified, staged, or shorter collaborative formats, an adaptation that aligns with Dwi's (2025) emphasis on structured task organization as a determinant of collaborative learning effectiveness. Limited access to professional development, echoed in Antil et al. (2018), Alfallaj (2016), and Siegel (2025), further suggests that sustaining collaborative learning in this context depends on institutional investment in ongoing teacher training, not only on individual teacher effort.

At the same time, the Pesantren's communal, shared-living culture emerged as a genuine affordance rather than merely a constraint, providing students with pre-existing peer familiarity that is not typically available in day-school EFL classrooms. This finding suggests that, rather than being an obstacle to overcome, the Pesantren environment offers structural conditions, cooperation, communal routine, and sustained peer contact, that are in principle well matched to the social premises of collaborative learning, provided institutional constraints on time and training are addressed.

Conclusion

This study examined how collaborative learning was implemented in an EFL classroom at a Pesantren in Amuntai District, South Kalimantan, from the perspectives of teachers' strategies, students'

perceptions, and contextual constraints and affordances. The findings show that teachers implemented collaborative learning mainly through dialogue practice and group discussion, delivered through a structured cycle of explanation, collaborative task work, presentation, and teacher reinforcement, with halaqah-style traditions providing a culturally familiar foundation for these activities. Students generally perceived collaborative learning positively, reporting a more comfortable learning environment, greater opportunities to practice speaking, and enhanced motivation through peer interaction, although they also identified unequal English proficiency and uneven participation as persistent challenges. Implementation was further shaped by the Pesantren's communal, shared-living culture, which supported cooperation and peer familiarity, while respect-based cultural norms, dense daily schedules, and limited professional development opportunities constrained the depth and consistency of collaborative practice.

Taken together, these findings suggest that collaborative learning can be successfully implemented in Pesantren-based EFL classrooms, not by importing the approach wholesale, but by adapting it to the institution's existing pedagogical culture and by addressing the practical constraints of student workload and teacher preparation. For teachers, this implies designing collaborative tasks with clear roles, balanced group composition, and active monitoring to prevent both dominance and free-riding. For institutions, it implies providing greater scheduling flexibility and sustained opportunities for professional development in collaborative pedagogy. As this study was conducted in a single Pesantren with a limited number of participants and relied primarily on interviews and observations at one point in time, future research involving multiple Pesantren, or examining specific collaborative techniques such as jigsaw or think–pair–share in greater depth, would help further clarify how collaborative learning can be sustained within Islamic boarding school contexts.

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