

Implementing collaborative learning in Indonesian secondary EFL Classrooms: Teacher practices and contextual challenges

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative learning (CL) provides opportunities for interaction and peer support in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, but its implementation can vary according to learners, tasks, and classroom conditions. This qualitative descriptive study explored how secondary-school English teachers implemented CL and the challenges they encountered in their classrooms. Seven English teachers from two vocational high schools and one general high school in West Java, Indonesia, participated in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Each teacher was observed once during an 80-minute lesson, resulting in a total of 560 minutes of classroom observation. The data were analyzed thematically. The findings identified five main areas of CL implementation: heterogeneous and random grouping for peer interaction, collaborative projects and problem-oriented tasks, interactive and technology-supported activities, teacher facilitation and monitoring, and attention to both group and individual performance. The teachers also encountered interconnected challenges related to unequal participation, differences in learner readiness, language use, planning and assessment, and access to classroom and digital resources. The interview and observation data were broadly consistent in showing the active role of teachers in organizing and supporting collaborative work although some practices reported in the interviews were not visible during the particular lessons observed. Overall, the findings suggest that CL in these secondary EFL classrooms was implemented not as a fixed set of techniques but as an adaptive and teacher-mediated practice. Teachers adjusted grouping, tasks, support, and resources in response to learner readiness and classroom conditions. These findings highlight the importance of understanding CL as a context-sensitive practice in secondary EFL education.



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1. Introduction

Collaborative learning (CL) has become an important part of communicative language teaching because it creates opportunities for students to use language while working with others (Kazlaris et al., 2025; Salmanova, 2025). In EFL classrooms, however, meaningful collaboration involves more than placing students in groups or changing classroom seating arrangements. Its implementation is shaped by the tasks designed by teachers, students' readiness to participate, and the conditions in which learning takes place (Bai et al., 2025; Hartono & Anggriawan, 2025). These conditions are particularly important in contexts where classroom interaction tends to be teacher-dominated or where only a small number of confident students actively participate.

CL generally refers to learning situations in which students work together to solve problems, complete tasks, or produce shared outcomes (Vidyarthi, 2024). Pothou et al. (2024) further describe collaboration as a process involving mutual influence and contribution, in which students share ideas, discuss concepts, and explain their understanding to one another. In language classrooms, such interaction provides opportunities for learners to exchange ideas, negotiate meaning, and use English for a shared purpose. Previous studies suggest that well-organized collaborative activities can encourage communication and greater involvement in EFL learning (Alzubi et al., 2024b; Koç, 2018).

In this study, CL is understood as a learning process in which students work toward a shared goal through interaction, contribution, and shared responsibility. This understanding distinguishes CL from simply completing a task in a group. Collaborative and cooperative learning are closely related, but they are not treated as entirely interchangeable in this study. Research on cooperative learning commonly emphasizes more structured elements, including positive interdependence, individual accountability, interaction, social skills, and group reflection (Adl-Amini et al., 2024). CL, as used in the present study, places broader emphasis on how students construct understanding through interaction and shared activity. Nevertheless, concepts such as interdependence and individual accountability remain useful for understanding why some forms of group work lead to more meaningful participation than others.

This view of CL is consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which views learning as a socially mediated process in which interaction with others plays an important role in learners' development (Vygotsky, 1978). From this perspective, learners may accomplish tasks with guidance and support that they would find difficult to complete independently. This idea is particularly relevant to EFL classrooms, where students may differ considerably in their language proficiency, confidence, and readiness to participate. Interaction with teachers and more capable peers can provide support that helps learners participate in classroom tasks and gradually become more independent.

Sociocultural theory has also been used in EFL contexts to explain how interaction, mediation, and collaborative activity contribute to learning and knowledge development (Purwanti & Hatmanto, 2019; Purwanti & Prasanti, 2025). More specifically, peer interaction can create opportunities for scaffolding within learners' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), as students receive explanation, modelling, feedback, and other forms of support from more capable peers (Purwanti et al., 2026). From this perspective, CL can be understood not simply as a classroom technique but as a socially mediated learning process in which teachers and peers support learners' participation and development.

In practice, CL can take many forms in EFL classrooms, including role-play, text discussion, problem-solving, presentations, projects, and jigsaw activities (Persico et al., 2009). Digital tools may also support students in preparing, discussing, and sharing their work. When meaningfully connected to learning tasks, such tools can increase engagement and encourage critical thinking (Nguyen, 2021; Kalkhambkar et al., 2024). Similarly, project- and problem-based activities can provide opportunities for students to work together in addressing cognitive and social challenges (Hendarwati et al., 2021). However, neither group work nor the use of technology automatically creates collaboration.

How students are grouped can also influence the collaborative process. Teachers may organize students randomly, allow them to select their own groups, or deliberately create mixed-proficiency groups. Heterogeneous grouping can provide opportunities for peer support, particularly for learners who need additional linguistic assistance, while structured grouping may help promote both shared responsibility and individual contribution (Koç, 2018). At the same time, mixed-proficiency groups can create new difficulties when more proficient students carry most of the workload or less confident students become dependent on their peers. Friendship-based groups may similarly reinforce unequal participation or exclude some learners. For this reason, group composition needs to be considered alongside task demands and individual responsibilities (Le et al., 2018).

Teachers remain central to this process. They select appropriate activities, organize groups, explain expectations, monitor participation, and respond when difficulties arise. Their role often becomes particularly important after collaborative work has begun. Teachers may need to clarify instructions, provide language support, encourage quieter students, or intervene when responsibility is distributed unevenly. Van Leeuwen and Janssen's (2019) systematic review showed that teacher guidance during collaborative learning involves monitoring interaction, identifying students' needs, and providing support according to the situation. Thus, giving students a more active role does not reduce the importance of the teacher. Instead, the teacher's role shifts toward facilitating and mediating the collaborative process.

Despite its potential, CL can be difficult to implement consistently. Teachers may face challenges related to lesson planning, classroom management, student participation, assessment, and institutional conditions. Some teachers may find it difficult to move from conventional instruction to more collaborative approaches or to translate general principles of collaboration into workable classroom activities (Chakyarkandiyil & Prakasha, 2023; Nongni, 2021). Assessment can also be challenging because a shared product may represent group achievement without showing how much each student has contributed. Teachers may respond by combining group scores with individual presentations, classroom observation, rubrics, or peer assessment, although fair assessment remains influenced by learner-, teacher-, and institution-related constraints (Jalilzadeh & Coombe, 2023).

Learner characteristics add another layer of complexity. Students may remain silent because of anxiety, low confidence, or difficulty expressing ideas in English (Hanh, 2020). Differences in proficiency and learning pace may also make equal participation difficult. In school-level EFL classrooms, participation can be shaped by peer relationships, teacher support, and opportunities to use English meaningfully (Sufian & Rahman, 2024). These learner-related challenges may interact with practical constraints such as limited instructional time, classroom arrangements, unequal access to digital devices, and insufficient institutional support.

Recent studies have documented many of these issues, although they have examined them in different contexts and from different perspectives. Le et al. (2018) investigated barriers to effective student collaboration from teacher and student perspectives, while van Leeuwen and Janssen (2019) synthesized research on teacher guidance in primary and secondary education. Other studies have focused on particular dimensions of collaborative learning, such as technology-supported engagement (Nguyen, 2021), assessment constraints (Jalilzadeh & Coombe, 2023), and learner participation in primary-school EFL classrooms (Sufian & Rahman, 2024). Together, these studies provide important insights into the conditions that shape collaborative learning, but they do not fully explain how secondary-school EFL teachers manage several of these conditions within the same classroom practice.

Research in EFL and school settings provides further points of comparison. Alzubi et al. (2024b) examined EFL teachers' perceptions of student engagement in CL and identified barriers related to proficiency differences, unequal participation, time, resources, and professional preparation. However, the study was conducted in higher education and focused primarily on student engagement. Adl-Amini et al. (2024), meanwhile, combined teacher interviews, surveys, and classroom observations in German schools and found considerable variation in the quality of cooperative learning implementation. Their findings highlight the difference between simply using group work

and creating conditions for productive collaboration, although the study examined cooperative learning across school subjects rather than the language-specific demands of EFL classrooms.

Taken together, these studies point to a more specific gap. There is still limited understanding of how secondary-school EFL teachers manage collaborative learning as a whole classroom practice while dealing simultaneously with differences in language proficiency, student participation, task demands, assessment, available resources, and institutional conditions. This gap is particularly relevant in the Indonesian secondary-school context, where vocational and general high schools may present different classroom demands. In addition, studies that draw on both teachers' accounts and direct classroom observations can provide a fuller picture of how reported CL practices are reflected in particular classroom lessons.

The present study addresses this gap by examining CL practices among English teachers working in vocational and general high schools in West Java, Indonesia. Rather than testing the effectiveness of a particular collaborative technique, the study explores how teachers organize and facilitate CL and the challenges they encounter in doing so. By drawing on both teacher interviews and classroom observations, the study provides a context-sensitive account of how CL is adapted and mediated within secondary EFL classrooms. Viewed through a sociocultural perspective, the study also highlights the role of teacher and peer support in shaping participation within classrooms characterized by differences in learner readiness and contextual conditions. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do secondary-school EFL teachers implement CL in their classrooms?
2. What challenges do secondary-school EFL teachers encounter when implementing CL?

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to investigate how English teachers implemented collaborative learning (CL) and the challenges they encountered in EFL classrooms. This design was appropriate for describing teachers' practices and experiences within their actual classroom contexts rather than examining the effectiveness of a particular CL technique (Doyle et al., 2020; Creswell, 2018).

2.2 Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted during the first semester of the 2025/2026 academic year at three public secondary schools in West Java, Indonesia: two vocational high schools and one general high school, referred to as Vocational School A, Vocational School B, and General High School C.

Seven English teachers with prior experience implementing CL were selected through purposive sampling, which enabled the selection of participants whose experiences were relevant to the research questions (Campbell et al., 2020). Their teaching experience ranged from 10 to 23 years across vocational and general secondary-school contexts. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities (Godfrey-Faussett, 2022). Their profiles are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' profile

Participant	Pseudonym	Gender	School	Length Experience of Teaching
1	Mrs. Dona	Female	Vocational School A	23 Years
2	Mrs. Dela	Female	Vocational School A	20 Years
3	Mr. Shabar	Male	Vocational School A	Over 10 Years
4	Mrs. Novella	Female	Vocational School A	15 Years
5	Mrs. Salsa	Female	Vocational School A	15 Years
6	Mrs. Dino	Female	Vocational School B	10 Years
7	Mrs. Yuni	Female	General High School C	22 Years

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The interviews explored teachers' implementation of CL and the challenges they encountered. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions informed by issues surrounding CL discussed by Le et al. (2018) and was reviewed by the research supervisor for clarity and relevance. Semi-structured interviews were used to provide sufficient structure while allowing participants' experiences to be explored in depth (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

Each teacher participated in one 30–45-minute interview, which was recorded with permission and transcribed. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian, and excerpts selected for reporting were translated into English and checked against the original transcripts to maintain their intended meanings.

Each teacher was also observed once during a regular 80-minute English lesson, resulting in 560 minutes of observation. Using an observation checklist, one member of the research team documented group organisation, student interaction, teacher facilitation, participation, assessment, and learning resources. Field notes captured additional classroom events and contextual details. The observation data were used to compare teachers' reported practices with those visible during the observed lessons, providing methodological triangulation with the interview data (Busetto et al., 2020; Noble & Heale, 2019).

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analysed thematically through familiarisation, initial coding, categorisation, and theme development (Naeem et al., 2023; Nowell et al., 2017). The analysis was primarily inductive, with codes and categories developed from recurring patterns in the data and subsequently organised around the two research questions concerning CL implementation and its challenges. Two researchers independently examined the data and compared their coding and emerging themes to reach a shared interpretation. Observation checklists and field notes were then examined alongside the interview data to identify convergence and differences between teachers' reported and observed practices.

2.5 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was supported through methodological triangulation of interview and observation data, supplemented by field notes that provided contextual information (Noble & Heale, 2019). Two researchers were involved in coding and theme development, and interpretations were discussed within the research team. The data, codes, and themes were also reviewed repeatedly to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts and observed classroom practices (Nowell et al., 2017).

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Permission was obtained from the English Language Education Department and participating schools before data collection. Participants were informed about the study and provided consent for participation and interview recording. Teacher pseudonyms and anonymized school labels were used to protect confidentiality (Godfrey-Faussett, 2022), and all research data were used solely for research purposes.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Implementation of Collaborative Learning in EFL Classroom

a. *Heterogeneous grouping and peer support*

Small-group work was the most common form of CL reported by the participants. All seven teachers organized students into groups for discussions, text analysis, projects, and other shared tasks. The groups generally consisted of four or five students although their size varied according to the class and activity. Several teachers formed heterogeneous groups by distributing students with different levels of English proficiency. Mrs. Dona explained: "*The more proficient students are*

distributed across the groups. We do not put all the high-achieving students in one group and all the lower-achieving students in another. They are distributed so that the groups are balanced."

According to the teachers, this arrangement allowed students with stronger English skills to support classmates who had difficulty with vocabulary, text production, or task comprehension. Mrs. Dela used a similar strategy after becoming familiar with the students' abilities. She initially allowed students to choose their own groups but later arranged them more deliberately because friendship-based grouping often produced an uneven distribution of ability.

Mrs. Yuni also balanced students' proficiency but added assigned responsibilities. A more proficient student usually served as the leader, while other members acted as secretary, resource finder, or timekeeper. These roles made individual contributions clearer and prevented the leader from completing the entire task alone. Other teachers used random grouping. Mr. Shabar, Mrs. Novella, and Mrs. Dino formed groups through counting, digital spinning applications, picture-matching activities, or other random procedures to encourage students to work beyond their usual friendship circles.

Classroom observations provided partial support for the practices described in the interviews. Small-group arrangements were observed in the lessons of six participants, where students discussed tasks and shared responsibilities. Assigned roles were visible in Mrs. Dela's classroom, while Mrs. Dino's students changed roles during the activity. However, the observation checklists did not always indicate whether groups had been intentionally balanced by proficiency. Mrs. Dona's observed lesson primarily involved an individual application-letter task, although students occasionally assisted their classmates.

b. Collaborative projects and problem-solving

The teachers also implemented CL through projects and problem-oriented tasks. These activities included text production, information gathering, case analysis, and group presentations. Working together enabled students to exchange ideas, divide responsibilities, and assist group members who experienced difficulty.

Mrs. Dona provided a vocationally relevant example. During a lesson on procedure text, students visited the school workshop to gather information about a CNC machine. They identified relevant vocabulary, observed how the machine operated, and discussed their findings before completing the English task. Mrs. Dona explained:

"The students are divided into small groups and directed to the workshop to take notes and write about the machinery, in this case a CNC machine. They need to collect vocabulary related to the machine and find out how to operate it. After that, they discuss the information in their groups."

The activity connected the English lesson with knowledge relevant to the students' vocational program. Rather than working only with textbook material, the students gathered information from their surroundings and used it as the basis for their group discussion and language task.

Other teachers adapted collaborative tasks to their subject matter and classroom needs. Mrs. Dela used group projects for text production and analysis, allowing students who understood the task more quickly to support those who had difficulty developing sentences or organizing ideas: *"I usually implement CL when students are working on a project. For example, I ask them to write or analyze a text. In a group, students who understand the task can gradually guide those who still have difficulty."*

Mr. Shabar and Mrs. Novella gave students problems to discuss before presenting their responses while Mrs. Yuni used case analysis when teaching discussion text. Although the teachers sometimes referred to these activities as Project-Based Learning or Problem-Based Learning, they varied in duration and complexity, ranging from extended projects to shorter problem-oriented tasks.

The classroom observations provided evidence of several forms of collaborative task work. In the lessons of six participants, students exchanged information, discussed answers, or prepared shared responses and presentations. In Mrs. Dino's procedure-text lesson, for example, students worked in

groups on the assigned task. The field notes showed that students participated in the activity and carried out different responsibilities within their groups. Similar collaborative work was also visible in lessons involving genre-based texts, where students discussed or completed tasks together. However, the observations did not always show complete Project-Based Learning or Problem-Based Learning cycles. Mrs. Dona's observed application-letter lesson, for example, was primarily individual, although students occasionally assisted their classmates. This suggests that the collaborative practices described in the interviews were not necessarily used in every lesson or in the same form.

c. Interactive and technology-supported activities

In addition to group discussions and projects, several teachers used interactive and technology-supported activities to encourage communication and participation. These included English debate, jigsaw, team tournaments, pair work, language games, group presentations, and digitally supported tasks. The teachers selected the activities according to the lesson objectives, students' readiness, and available resources. Mrs. Dela, for example, used English debate when students were sufficiently confident and willing to express their ideas. She said,

I have tried using English debate in the classroom, but I cannot use it in every class. In passive classes, I cannot conduct a debate. In active classes, even if their English is not yet accurate, the students are willing to express their ideas and speak in English.

This excerpt shows that the choice of activity was not based solely on students' English proficiency. Their willingness to participate and take risks in using English also influenced her decision. In classes where students were less responsive, she preferred activities that placed fewer demands on spontaneous speaking.

Other teachers combined interactive activities with digital tools. Mrs. Salsa used jigsaw activities and team-based vocabulary tournaments in which students exchanged information and worked toward a shared task. Mrs. Dino combined small-group discussion, jigsaw, and pair learning with digital platforms such as Padlet and a class Instagram account. Padlet was used for self-introduction activities, while Instagram provided a space for students to produce and share their work. Mr. Shabar also incorporated video materials into peer-learning activities and used Quizizz to review students' understanding after collaborative tasks.

The classroom observations provided evidence of some, but not all, of these practices. Group presentations were observed in Mrs. Dela's and Mrs. Yuni's lessons, while Mr. Shabar combined peer learning with video material and Quizizz. A group tournament was also observed during Mrs. Salsa's procedure-text lesson. However, activities such as debate and jigsaw were not used in the particular lessons observed.

d. Teacher facilitation and group monitoring

The teachers did not leave students to manage collaborative activities entirely on their own. During group work, they moved around the classroom, observed participation, responded to questions, and intervened when necessary. Monitoring was particularly important because some students remained passive or depended on more active group members. Mr. Shabar emphasised the need to observe each group throughout the activity, and he stated: *"Each group needs to be monitored and observed so that the students do not remain passive. The active ones should not always be the same people because passive students sometimes depend on those who are more active."*

Mr. Shabar paid particular attention to less active students and sometimes moved them to another group when he felt that the existing arrangement did not encourage their participation. Other teachers described similar practices, although the ways they provided support varied. Mrs. Dela stayed close to the groups, responded to students' questions, and adjusted her assistance according to their needs. Mrs. Novella sometimes consulted group leaders before approaching members who were not participating, while Mrs. Salsa combined monitoring with assigned roles and communicated with group leaders to identify difficulties and individual contributions. Mrs. Dino and Mrs. Yuni also moved between groups and checked students' responsibilities during the activity.

These facilitative practices were also visible in the classroom observations. Teachers circulated around the classroom or remained attentive to students' work, checked their progress, clarified instructions, and assisted students who experienced difficulty. Monitoring was particularly noticeable in Mr. Shabar's and Mrs. Dino's classrooms, where the teachers approached different groups and checked how the tasks were being completed. In Mrs. Dela's lesson, several students required closer assistance because they did not immediately understand the instructions. Thus, the observations were broadly consistent with the teachers' accounts that their involvement continued after collaborative activities had begun.

e. Group and individual assessment

The teachers reported considering both group and individual performance when assessing collaborative activities. Although students often completed tasks together, most participants said that they did not rely solely on the quality of the shared product. They also considered individual participation, communication, and responsibility during the collaborative process. Mrs. Dona, for example, distinguished between collective and individual performance: *"There are group and individual assessments. For the group, I can use a checklist or a rubric. For individuals, I can use peer assessment."*

The teachers described different ways of identifying individual contributions within group work. Mrs. Dela relied mainly on direct observation while moving between groups, paying attention to cooperation, discipline, responsibility, and students' involvement in the task. Mr. Shabar and Mrs. Salsa reported using separate criteria for collaborative performance and individual participation, while Mrs. Salsa sometimes asked group members to evaluate one another's involvement. Mrs. Novella and Mrs. Yuni assessed the shared outcome while also requiring individual students to speak during group presentations. According to their accounts, this allowed them to consider individual performance even when the task had been prepared collectively.

The degree of formality in these reported assessment practices varied. Some teachers described using prepared instruments such as rubrics, checklists, and peer assessment, while others relied more on their observations of students during group work or presentations.

Compared with the interview accounts, these detailed assessment practices were less clearly visible in the classroom observations. In several observed lessons, teachers monitored students' participation, responses, and task completion, and group presentations or shared products were also present in some classes. However, the observation records did not consistently show whether these activities were formally assessed or whether separate individual and group scores were assigned. For example, Mrs. Dona's observed application-letter lesson focused mainly on an individual task and did not involve the assessment of a group product. Therefore, the observations provided evidence that teachers paid attention to students' participation and task performance, but they offered only partial evidence for the specific assessment procedures described in the interviews.

3.2. Challenges in implementing collaborative learning in EFL Classroom

a. Limited motivation and unequal participation

Limited motivation and unequal participation were the most frequently reported challenges in implementing CL. Teachers described students who remained silent, avoided the task, used their phones for unrelated activities, or relied on more active classmates to complete the group work. Mrs. Dona, Mr. Shabar, Mrs. Dino, and Mrs. Yuni encountered similar patterns across different classes. Some students showed little interest because they considered English difficult, while others continued to depend on particular group members even after receiving encouragement. Teachers responded by directing questions to less active students, checking their responsibilities, and providing repeated encouragement. Nevertheless, a small number of active students often carried a greater share of the work.

Mrs. Dela described a case in which limited participation was not caused by rejection from the group. One student repeatedly chose to work alone despite being invited to participate. Mrs. Dela said: *"Some students take it easy, do not want to work hard, and do not want to join the group. I*

once had a student who was invited by the others but still chose to complete the assignment individually." Although Mrs. Dela accepted the individual work, the situation created difficulty in assessing collaborative responsibility because the student had not participated in the group process.

Participation was also described as varying according to classroom and social conditions. Mrs. Novella observed that students were sometimes less responsive during afternoon lessons when they were tired. Mrs. Salsa used assigned roles to involve students who tended to leave the task to other group members. She also reported that classmates' reactions could discourage some students from speaking English: *"When someone speaks English, the others sometimes say, 'You are showing off' or 'You are acting English.' Being teased like that affects their motivation."*

The classroom observations were broadly consistent with the teachers' accounts of unequal participation. Passive or distracted students were noted in Mrs. Dona's and Mr. Shabar's lessons, while differences in students' levels of participation were visible in Mrs. Salsa's, Mrs. Dino's, and Mrs. Yuni's classes. Most students completed the assigned tasks, but some group members took more initiative than others. Thus, completion of a group task did not necessarily mean that all members participated to the same extent.

b. Learner diversity and uneven readiness

Learner diversity presented another challenge in implementing CL. Students differed in English proficiency, learning pace, confidence, and willingness to participate. Differences also appeared across classes, meaning that an activity that worked well with one group of students did not necessarily produce the same response in another. Mrs. Dela described this contrast between active and passive classes: *"Participation is generally good, but some classes are active and others are passive. An activity may work in an active class, but when I use it in a passive class, it may not work."*

In addition, Mrs. Dona, Mr. Shabar, Mrs. Novella, Mrs. Dino, and Mrs. Yuni reported similar differences. Some students understood the lesson quickly, while others required additional explanation, encouragement, or peer support. More proficient students could help classmates who experienced difficulty, but this arrangement sometimes led to dependence and an uneven distribution of work. The teachers therefore adjusted group composition, the pace of instruction, and the level of support according to the characteristics of each class.

The teachers' accounts also suggest that readiness to participate was not determined solely by English proficiency. Students whose English was still developing could participate actively when they were confident and willing to express their ideas. Conversely, students who appeared to have sufficient knowledge sometimes remained less involved because they lacked confidence or were reluctant to speak in front of others. According to the teachers, these differences became more noticeable in activities that placed greater demands on students' participation, such as debates, case analysis, English discussions, and group presentations.

The classroom observations provided some evidence of these differences. Across several lessons, students varied in how quickly they responded to tasks, how confidently they participated, and how much prompting or assistance they needed from the teacher. However, the observation checklist did not systematically measure students' English proficiency, learning pace, or confidence. Therefore, the more detailed evidence concerning differences in learner readiness came primarily from the interviews.

c. Language barriers to collaboration

Language use presented another challenge in implementing CL. According to the teachers, some students had difficulty understanding instructions, expressing their ideas, or following collaborative tasks when English was used extensively. Limited vocabulary and unfamiliarity with classroom English sometimes meant that students needed further explanation before they could begin working with their groups. Mrs. Novella experienced this problem when giving instructions entirely in English, and she stated:

Sometimes the students do not understand what we mean, especially when the instructions are given fully in English. Even after we use body language and emphasize the important points, some students still do not understand what we want them to do.

This difficulty concerned not only students' general proficiency but also their ability to process English instructions while preparing to work with others. Mrs. Dino reported a similar experience after attempting to use English throughout an entire lesson. She mentioned: *"I once tried using English for the whole lesson. I also used demonstrations, but not all of the students understood. In the end, I had to use Indonesian."*

Mrs. Dela and Mrs. Yuni described related difficulties. Some students could complete written tasks but struggled to express the same ideas orally because they rarely used English in everyday communication. Others needed more time and repeated explanation before they understood the lesson. These difficulties reduced the time available for discussion, task completion, and presentation. Students who were uncertain about the instructions or lacked the language needed to express an idea were also more likely to remain silent or depend on a more proficient group member. The teachers responded by repeating and simplifying instructions, using gestures, allowing strategic use of Indonesian, encouraging peer explanation, and providing additional time. These strategies helped students understand the task and participate in group interaction.

Compared with these interview accounts, evidence of language-related difficulties was less visible in the classroom observations. In Mrs. Dela's observed lesson, some students required clarification before proceeding with the task. In most of the other observed lessons, however, students generally appeared to understand what they were expected to do. The observation checklist also did not document students' vocabulary difficulties or their use of English and Indonesian in sufficient detail to determine how frequently these language-related difficulties occurred.

d. Planning, time, and assessment constraints

Planning, time, and assessment presented another set of challenges in implementing CL. The teachers described collaborative lessons as requiring preparation not only of the learning task but also of group arrangements, instructional procedures, media, time allocation, and assessment. At the same time, classroom conditions did not always develop as planned, requiring teachers to adjust their activities while the lesson was in progress. Mr. Shabar described collaborative lesson planning as a complex process: *"Preparing the lesson plan can be difficult because it is complex. We have to think from the beginning about what we are going to do and how the activity will be carried out."*

The teacher needed to consider the learning task, instructional model, media, group arrangement, and available time. Mr. Shabar found problem-oriented activities more manageable within a regular lesson, whereas extended projects often required several meetings.

Mrs. Dela, Mrs. Novella, Mrs. Dino, and Mrs. Yuni described similar gaps between planning and classroom practice. Mrs. Dela prepared alternative activities because the same plan could produce different results across classes. Mrs. Novella found that responsibilities outside the classroom sometimes reduced preparation time, while Mrs. Dino noted that modules prepared before the semester did not always reflect the pace of individual classes. Mrs. Yuni added that student absences, particularly those of members expected to support their groups, could disrupt planned activities. These conditions required teachers to adjust the activity, pace, or level of support while the lesson was in progress.

Assessment presented an additional difficulty when students submitted only one shared product. As Mrs. Salsa explained: *"The problem for the teacher is assessment. We do not assess only attitudes but also competence. However, there is only one product, and it is the result of their work together. That is what makes it difficult."*

According to the teachers, a shared product did not always make each student's contribution visible. As described in the previous section, some teachers responded by monitoring individual participation, using separate criteria, assigning roles, conducting peer assessment, or requiring

individual students to speak during group presentations. However, the teachers differed in how formally these procedures were applied.

The classroom observations provided more limited evidence of planning and time constraints. Most of the observed lessons proceeded within the available instructional time. However, Mr. Shabar's lesson was interrupted by another school activity, while Mrs. Novella experienced a brief delay when connecting the projector. The observations also showed teachers making adjustments as activities progressed, although the reasons for these adjustments were not always directly observable. Similarly, as noted in Section 3.1.5, detailed procedures for separating group and individual assessment were not consistently visible during the observed lessons.

e. Resource and institutional constraints

The availability and accessibility of resources varied across the schools. While some participants considered the facilities and institutional support available to them adequate, others described difficulties related to equipment, digital access, classroom space, and specialised language-learning facilities. Mrs. Dona and Mrs. Dela reported that projectors, laptops, books, and internet connections were generally available in their schools. For these teachers, access to resources was not described as a major constraint on their collaborative activities.

Other teachers, however, experienced difficulties in accessing or using particular resources. Mr. Shabar explained that equipment was available but not always easy to access when several teachers needed it at the same time: *"The equipment is actually available, but sometimes we have to carry a projector or speaker, and sometimes teachers need it at the same time. Using it can become complicated."*

Mr. Shabar sometimes used students' mobile phones as an alternative when equipment was less accessible. Mrs. Novella described a similar difficulty in accessing a projector, although this was later addressed by borrowing one for a longer period.

Other constraints concerned classroom arrangements and students' access to digital resources. Mrs. Salsa reported that limited classroom space and inflexible seating made group arrangements more difficult. Mrs. Dino noted that students did not have equal access to mobile phones or internet data. She explained: *"Not all students have a mobile phone. Some bring a phone but do not have internet data. Sometimes we share a connection so that the learning activity can continue."*

Teachers described several ways of responding to these conditions. Mrs. Dela, for example, shared internet access when needed and prepared printed materials as an alternative to digital resources. Mrs. Yuni identified the absence of a language laboratory as one limitation in her school and relied instead on resources that were already available in the classroom.

Some of these resource-related issues were also visible during the classroom observations. In Mrs. Novella's lesson, connecting and accessing the projector caused a brief delay before the activity continued. In the other observed lessons, resource constraints were not always directly visible, even though teachers described experiencing them at other times. The observations therefore provided examples of particular resource-related difficulties but did not indicate that such constraints occurred consistently across all lessons or schools.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Teachers' Implementation of Collaborative Learning

The findings suggest that CL in these secondary EFL classrooms was implemented not as a fixed instructional technique but as an adaptive and teacher-mediated practice. Teachers combined grouping strategies, collaborative tasks, interactive activities, monitoring, and assessment according to lesson purposes, learner readiness, and classroom conditions. Although students assumed greater responsibility for working with peers, teachers continued to organise, monitor, and support the collaborative process, a pattern particularly evident in the classroom observations.

From a sociocultural perspective, these practices reflect learning as a socially mediated process in which teachers and peers support learners in accomplishing tasks they may find difficult to complete independently (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers mediated collaboration by arranging groups, clarifying instructions, adjusting assistance, and encouraging less active students, while more proficient peers supported classmates with vocabulary, task comprehension, and text production. This is consistent with research showing that peer interaction can provide scaffolding within learners' Zone of Proximal Development (Purwanti et al., 2026). However, peer support did not necessarily ensure balanced participation; when less confident or proficient students relied excessively on stronger peers, support could become dependence.

This tension was particularly evident in group formation. Teachers used heterogeneous grouping to facilitate peer support and random grouping to broaden interaction beyond friendship circles, reflecting evidence that ability differences and friendship patterns can shape collaboration (Le et al., 2018). Yet grouping alone did not ensure meaningful interaction. Its effectiveness depended on task demands, distribution of responsibilities, and teacher responses to unequal participation. Similarly, teachers adapted projects, problem-oriented tasks, debates, games, presentations, and digital activities according to lesson objectives, students' confidence and willingness to participate, and available resources. Vocationally situated tasks further demonstrated how collaboration was embedded within specific curricular contexts rather than applied as a standard procedure. These findings support previous research showing that shared activities can create opportunities for language use and social interaction (Alzubi et al., 2024a), while highlighting the importance of adapting them to particular learners and contexts.

Technology was similarly used as a resource rather than as a defining feature of CL. Platforms and digital materials such as Padlet, Instagram, videos, and Quizizz supported content sharing, task production, or lesson review, but their collaborative value depended on how students interacted around the task. More broadly, teacher facilitation remained central across both digital and non-digital activities. Teachers monitored participation, clarified instructions, responded to difficulties, and adjusted support as activities progressed. This corresponds with van Leeuwen and Janssen's (2019) account of teacher guidance as monitoring interaction, identifying learner needs, and providing appropriate support. Thus, CL was student-centred without being teacher-absent; greater student responsibility transformed rather than removed the teacher's mediating role.

Assessment further illustrates this teacher-mediated character. Teachers reported attending to both shared outcomes and individual contributions through observation, peer assessment, presentations, assigned roles, or separate criteria, reflecting concerns with individual accountability in collaborative learning (Le et al., 2018). However, classroom observations provided only partial evidence of these detailed procedures. Formal rubrics, peer assessment, and separate group and individual scoring were not consistently visible during the observed lessons. This difference likely reflects the scope of the two data sources: interviews represented teachers' experiences across multiple lessons, whereas each observation captured only one 80-minute lesson. The two sources therefore offered complementary rather than identical evidence of assessment practices.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that effective CL depended less on any single technique than on how teachers coordinated grouping, task design, peer support, facilitation, and accountability in response to learner and classroom conditions. The study therefore contributes a context-sensitive view of CL as an ongoing process of instructional adjustment in which teachers assemble and modify collaborative elements rather than apply a uniform model across classes.

4.2. Challenges in Implementing Collaborative Learning

The challenges encountered by the teachers were interconnected rather than isolated classroom problems. Unequal participation, learner readiness, language-related difficulties, planning and assessment demands, and resource constraints often overlapped. Implementing CL therefore involved more than organising students into groups; teachers had to create conditions in which students with different abilities, confidence levels, and willingness to participate could contribute while managing the practical demands of the lesson.

Unequal participation was particularly evident across the interview and observation data. Although students generally completed assigned tasks, some members assumed greater responsibility than others, confirming that completion of a group product does not necessarily indicate balanced participation. Similar concerns have been reported by Le et al. (2018), who identify unequal contribution, differences in competence, friendship patterns, and limited collaborative skills as difficulties in group learning. In this study, participation was also associated with perceived difficulty in English, confidence, fatigue, willingness to participate, and peer reactions. For example, Mrs. Salsa reported that students could be teased for speaking English, illustrating how the social environment could influence willingness to participate. Learner diversity further complicated this pattern: students differed not only in proficiency but also in learning pace, confidence, and willingness to communicate. While support from more proficient peers could provide scaffolding within learners' Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978; Purwanti et al., 2026), repeated reliance on stronger students could reinforce unequal participation. Peer assistance was therefore most productive when it enabled rather than replaced learners' own involvement.

These findings also indicate that readiness for collaboration extended beyond English proficiency. Students with developing English could participate actively, whereas those with adequate language knowledge were not necessarily willing to contribute. Different activities also placed different demands on learners, requiring teachers to consider confidence, willingness to communicate, and task demands alongside linguistic ability. Language nevertheless remained important because English functioned both as the subject of learning and, to varying degrees, as the medium for collaborative work. When students had difficulty understanding instructions or expressing ideas, teachers used simplified explanations, gestures, peer assistance, additional time, and strategic use of Indonesian. From a sociocultural perspective, such support can be understood as mediation that enabled participation rather than as evidence that collaboration had failed.

Language-related difficulties, however, were more prominent in the interviews than in the classroom observations. Only limited instances of difficulty understanding instructions were recorded during the observed lessons, while most students appeared able to proceed with their tasks. This difference should be interpreted cautiously because interviews reflected teachers' experiences across multiple classes and lessons, whereas each observation covered only one 80-minute lesson and did not systematically document vocabulary difficulties or patterns of English and Indonesian use. The evidence therefore suggests that language difficulties were situational rather than demonstrating that they occurred consistently across the observed classrooms.

Planning, assessment, and resources created additional demands. Teachers had to consider task design, group composition, students' pace, available resources, and ways of recognising individual contributions, while adapting activities to absences, extended discussions, interruptions, or technical problems. Assessment was particularly challenging when a shared product obscured individual contributions, leading teachers to report using monitoring, assigned roles, peer assessment, presentations, or separate criteria, consistent with concerns about individual accountability identified by Le et al. (2018). However, these detailed assessment procedures were only partially visible in the observations, again reflecting the broader temporal scope of interviews compared with a single observed lesson. Resource constraints were similarly context-dependent: some teachers reported adequate facilities, while others experienced difficulties with equipment, classroom space, internet access, digital devices, or specialised facilities. Thus, the issue was often accessibility rather than complete absence of resources, and teachers responded by sharing or borrowing equipment, using available devices, or preparing non-digital alternatives.

In summary, the challenges of CL emerged through interactions among learner readiness, linguistic demands, participation, accountability, and contextual resources. These dimensions could reinforce one another: language difficulties could increase the need for peer support; concentrated reliance on stronger students could produce unequal participation; and unequal contributions could make individual assessment more difficult. Rather than representing a fixed causal sequence, these patterns show that implementing CL required ongoing adjustment across learner, task, language, and contextual dimensions. The contribution of this study therefore lies in showing not only what

challenges teachers encountered, but how they worked within them by modifying tasks, providing linguistic and interpersonal support, monitoring participation, and adapting available resources.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how secondary-school EFL teachers implemented collaborative learning (CL) and the challenges they encountered across three schools in West Java, Indonesia. The findings show that CL was implemented through different grouping strategies, collaborative projects and problem-oriented tasks, interactive and technology-supported activities, teacher facilitation, and attention to both group and individual performance. Across these practices, teachers did more than assign students to work in groups. They organised group membership, adjusted tasks, monitored participation, provided support, and responded to difficulties that emerged during the collaborative process. CL in these classrooms can therefore be understood as an adaptive and teacher-mediated practice rather than a fixed set of instructional techniques.

The implementation of CL was accompanied by several interconnected challenges. Teachers described unequal participation, differences in learner readiness, language-related difficulties, planning and time demands, assessment concerns, and variations in access to classroom and digital resources. These challenges did not occur independently. Differences in proficiency, confidence, and willingness to participate could shape how students engaged with collaborative tasks, while reliance on particular group members could make individual contributions more difficult to identify. Resource and institutional conditions also varied across schools, requiring some teachers to adjust activities or use alternative materials and facilities.

These findings have several practical implications for secondary EFL classrooms. Rather than applying the same collaborative activity across different classes, teachers may need to consider students' readiness, the linguistic demands of the task, group composition, and the resources available. Clear responsibilities, manageable tasks, appropriate language support, and continued monitoring can help teachers make students' participation more visible during group work. Where digital resources are limited or difficult to access, collaborative activities can also be designed around readily available materials and non-digital alternatives. At the school level, accessible classroom resources and opportunities for teachers to share practical strategies for managing collaborative work may further support the use of CL in different classroom contexts.

This study involved seven teachers from three secondary schools in West Java, and each teacher was observed during one 80-minute lesson. The findings should therefore be understood as a contextual account of teachers' practices and experiences rather than as a general description of secondary EFL classrooms. In particular, some practices reported in the interviews were not consistently visible during the observed lessons, reflecting the different scope of the two data sources. Future research could include repeated classroom observations across different types of collaborative activities and involve teachers and students from a wider range of secondary-school contexts. Further studies could also examine how students experience peer support, individual responsibility, and language use during collaborative work.

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