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Exploring Social Presence through Group Collaboration in Blended Learning

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Abstract

Previous studies on blended learning (BL) have explored students' satisfaction, perception, and motivation. However, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the impact of group collaboration on students' learning experiences within blended learning environments. Using a qualitative approach, this study explores what 30 Thai English as a foreign language (EFL) vocational students think about their blended learning environment and how working in groups improves their learning. Findings from the interviews revealed that group collaboration is crucial for communication, understanding the topic, completing tasks, and building relationships and trust among students. Specifically, the research highlights how collaborative efforts foster greater student engagement, accountability, and a sense of community within blended learning environments. It also contributes significantly to the existing body of knowledge, underscoring the essential nature of group collaboration within BL settings. The findings hold valuable implications for teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers, suggesting avenues for leveraging blended learning and group collaboration to optimize language learning outcomes and enrich the overall educational experience for students.

Keywords: Blended learning, ESP, group collaboration, learning experience, social presence

Technology integration in education has become indispensable across many classrooms, reshaping teaching methodologies and instructional practices. Scholars and education practitioners were convinced that such technology integration in the classroom offered positive learning achievements among students and transformed traditional classroom learning, providing a better learning environment for learners (Ulla & Perales, 2021; Ulla et al., 2020). As a result, many schools and universities worldwide have revisited their curriculum, ensuring that technology is well-integrated into the syllabi.

One apparent evidence of how technology is integrated into teaching and learning is blended teaching and learning, where face-to-face classroom instruction is combined with computer-mediated instruction (Graham et al., 2005). In other words, blended learning (BL) represents a distinctive educational approach characterized by its tailored features encompassing assessment, support, feedback, and social interaction, and many studies attest to its beneficial impact on student learning. For instance, BL allows students to learn beyond conventional class hours and from any location (Graham et al., 2005). Additionally, Cleveland-Innes and Wilton (2018) also claimed that "blended learning can improve students' ability to learn collaboratively, think creatively, study independently, and personalize their own learning experiences to meet their specific needs" (p.1). It may also engage students with various learning activities, enabling them to practice the target language (Na Wang et al., 2021). In other words, the BL model provides students with a unique learning experience since they are provided with two modes of learning, online and in-person, where they can use the internet network to access the material, complete the exercises, and discuss and communicate with the teacher.

Although Monteiro and Morrison (2014) mentioned that, unlike in-person learning, BL may challenge students to learn collaboratively since there is a spatial distance between them, Ellis et al. (2016) argued that group collaboration in BL may allow students to work together to enhance the learning experience. As a central learning component, group collaboration in BL can also be an effective method for creating a social presence that promotes a connection between learners, contributing to their learning motivation (Molinillo et al., 2018). It also allows students to learn from one another, develop new skills, and form meaningful connections. Moreover, through group collaboration, students can gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter by discussing their ideas and challenging each other's views (Monteiro & Morrison, 2014). In other words, collaborative group work can be used as one of the teaching methods in blended learning to develop students' language skills when interacting with other learners.

Previous studies (see Andujar & Nadif, 2022; Na Wang et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2020) have investigated various aspects of students' satisfaction, perception, and motivation in a BL environment. However, these studies did not examine the role of group collaboration in BL contexts. Moreover, studies exploring the impact of group collaboration on students' learning outcomes (Dyson et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2018) have not been specifically conducted within a BL setting. This indicates a scarcity of research on BL, particularly within the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), with a specific focus on how group collaboration shapes learners' educational experiences. Research concentrating on ESP contexts could shed light on the efficacy of utilizing group collaboration as a pedagogical strategy in a blended learning

ESP program, offering learners an optimal setting to refine and improve their English language skills.

Literature review

Blended Learning in English language teaching (ELT)

Blended learning has been gaining acceptance among educators and administrators (Fenech et al., 2021) because of its vast potential to combine in-person instruction and ICT integration, giving students a new learning modality. Garrison and Vaughan (2008) defined BL as combining traditional classroom teaching methods and online learning for students learning the same content in the same course. Simply put, BL combines learning in the classroom with books and learning in the school with the internet or online, allowing students to respond quickly to the learning materials, web challenges, and teacher-led exercises (Hockly, 2018).

In English language education, several studies (Kazakoff et al., 2018; Moradimokhles & Hwang, 2022; Wang, 2021; Wong et al., 2020) have explored the BL practice in different contexts, and mostly these studies presented BL's positive impact on students' learning achievements. For example, Moradimokhles and Hwang (2022) did an experimental study comparing the effects of blended learning (BL) and online learning on 60 nursing students' ability to learn English in Iran by randomly splitting them into three groups. The control group completed activities based on tasks for improving general English skills while receiving a communicative approach to general English language teaching. With the LMS educational methodology, the online group received instruction in general English. The blended learning experimental group also received instruction in general English. When the students completed a posttest in conventional general English (TOFEL), the result demonstrated that the blended learning group outperformed the other groups in improving general English proficiency.

Similarly, Wong et al. (2020) also explored the effects of blended learning on students' autonomy, motivation, and academic success by using short stories in English language teaching (ELT) in Malaysia. 116 upper secondary students participated in a quasi-experimental study that utilized two teaching pedagogies: a blended learning classroom for the experimental groups and a traditional learning classroom for the control groups. The independent t-test was used to analyze the differences between the two groups and showed no discernible difference in their academic achievements. However, blended learning had an advantage over conventional learning regarding learner autonomy and students' motivation.

Na Wang et al. (2021) also conducted a study on EFL learners' perceptions of blended learning (BL). Their research revealed that a blended approach, incorporating online synchronous–asynchronous learning alongside offline face-to-face instruction, fostered a conducive environment for English language learning. The study, involving 1603 Chinese EFL students enrolled in a BL course, indicated that students expressed favorable views toward BL. They noted its effectiveness in enhancing learning, promoting active engagement with English, and facilitating the development of English proficiency.

In an ESP context, Gaffas (2023) investigated students' perceptions of e-learning experiences in virtual and blended ESP courses in EFL within an ESP context, comparing two cohorts of Saudi undergraduate students. One cohort participated in a virtual learning environment, while the other engaged in a blended learning environment. The findings revealed that the virtual group demonstrated a significant increase in proficiency with the learning management system,

perceived ease of use, and eagerness for collaborative activities compared to the blended group. However, the researcher emphasized that blended learning should be viewed not solely as a method for teaching course material but as a means to motivate students and enhance online possibilities while retaining aspects of face-to-face instruction.

These studies underscore the growing acceptance of blended learning (BL) among educators, as it enables the integration of traditional in-person teaching with information and communication technology (ICT). BL not only presents a novel learning approach but also enhances students' overall English proficiency and positively impacts learner autonomy and motivation. Nonetheless, it's crucial to acknowledge that some scholars argue BL shouldn't be limited to content delivery but rather be leveraged to inspire students. Therefore, they advocate for a balanced approach that combines online alternatives with face-to-face instruction.

Collaboration and Social Presence in Blended Learning

In the context of online and blended learning, social presence refers to the ability of the learners to manifest their personal identity within the virtual community. This encompasses demonstrating authenticity as learners progress through the phases of acquiring a social identity, engaging in purposeful communication, and establishing connections (Kreijns et al., 2014). As Kreijns et al. (2014) emphasized, social presence is pivotal in the learning process, acting as a critical variable that significantly influences the level of participation and social interaction within a learning group. The demonstration of social presence by group members becomes a decisive factor in the effectiveness of online learning experiences. Thus, sustaining a robust online social interaction environment relies on establishing and maintaining a strong social presence, fostering a genuine connection and collaboration among learners in the digital space.

Studies that explore the concept of social presence have been mostly conducted within the context of online learning. For instance, Phirangee and Malec (2017) acknowledged that since high dropout rates in online courses were due to students feeling lonely and disconnected because of their geographical separation, many teachers concentrated on the "social nature of learning" by creating a sense of community and social presence in their courses. This highlights the importance of students engaging in academic discourses and collaborative exchanges regarding the course material in online learning. However, Lowenthal and Dennen (2017) argued that the social presence of online learners is subject to variation, primarily contingent upon their level of participation in the class. This means that the extent to which they are socially anonymous is not determined by the number of their contributions but rather by the extent to which they disclose identity cues in their course communications (Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017).

In a recent study conducted by Guo et al. (2023), the researchers examined the impact of the multi-dimensional construct of social presence on the behavior of online learners. Using a survey with 237 online learners in China, the findings indicated that intimate and immersive social factors favorably influence the satisfaction derived from the learning experience. In other words, since "social presence plays an important role in influencing learning satisfaction and continuous intention" (Guo et al., 2023, p. 1087), exploring its role in group collaboration in a BL setting is also important.

Furthermore, the concept of social presence extends its significance to collaboration in ELT, particularly in online and blended learning environments. In ELT, collaboration typically

involves allocating language tasks to pairs or small groups of students. Storch (2018) mentioned that pair or group work offers learners numerous occasions to employ the target language, aligning with communicative methodologies for language pedagogy. It also enhances the social and affective dimensions of second language (L2) learning (Zubiri-Esnaola et al., 2020). Since language learning occurs through social interaction (Spada & Lightbown, 2019), where individuals collaborate with more capable peers to resolve problems, collaborative learning in ELT has become an important consideration in language classroom activities. This concept becomes a critical variable directly impacting the learning process, influencing the level of participation and social interaction within a learning group. Studies conducted in the context of online learning, including those by Phirangee and Malec (2017) and Guo et al. (2023), underscore the importance of creating a sense of community and social presence to address issues such as student loneliness and disconnection from geographically separated online courses.

Considering collaborative language learning in ELT, the link between social presence and collaboration becomes evident. As language learning inherently involves social interaction (Spada & Lightbown, 2019), collaborative learning has become crucial in language classroom activities. However, while most existing studies on group collaboration in ELT (Lin, 2013; Liu et al., 2018) concentrated on the traditional, general, and academic language classroom teaching and learning environment, only a few studies explored collaboration within blended learning and ESP courses. Although a few studies examined group collaboration in technology-enhanced language learning (see Li, 2018; Su & Zou, 2022), highlighting its positive impact on student learning outcomes, group collaboration in BL setting in an ESP course needs to be explored more to provide valuable insights into its implementation as a pedagogical strategy in a BL environment, facilitating an optimal learning environment for language learners. In other words, the effectiveness of social presence in facilitating collaboration in these contexts remains a vital research area, offering potential insights into implementing collaborative strategies as pedagogical tools in BL environments for language learners.

The present study explores Thai English as a foreign language (EFL) vocational students' perceptions of the BL environment of their ESP course and what role group collaboration plays in enhancing their learning experience. Specifically, the present study addresses the following questions:

1. What perceptions do Thai EFL Vocational students have regarding the blended learning environment of their ESP course?
2. How does group collaboration shape the learning experience among Thai EFL Vocational students in an ESP blended learning course?

Methodology

The present investigation is an exploratory qualitative study (Hunter et al., 2019) examining Thai vocational students' perceptions of and experiences regarding group collaboration in an ESP blended learning course. An exploratory qualitative study explores a phenomenon of interest that has not been explored, gaining insight into the experiences and perceptions of the research participants (Hunter et al., 2019). In the current study, the phenomenon explored is group collaboration in blended learning. The researchers believed that group collaboration reinforced Thai vocational students' learning experiences in a blended learning modality.

Context and Participants

The participants of the study were the students of the first author in a vocational school in Thailand. These students were enrolled in English for Business, requiring them to use the English language for their future careers as seafarers. A total of 30 second-year students (three males, 27 females), whose ages ranged between 19 and 21, took part in the study. They were majoring in Logistics and Supply Chain Management.

The first author informed the students about the purpose of the study. They were also told that their participation was voluntary and that no points would be given for their grades whether they participated in the interview or not. Anonymity and confidentiality were also emphasized to the participants. The participants participated in a ten-week (30-hour) ESP blended learning course in the second semester of 2022. The ESP blended learning consisted of 9 hours of synchronous online learning sessions using *Google Meet*.

Tools and data collection

As an exploratory qualitative study, it employed a structured individual interview to gather the data for the study. The individual interview was conducted in December 2022. Since there were 30 students, the individual interview was conducted in two sessions, with students divided into two groups. Group 1, composed of 15 students, was scheduled for the morning's structured individual interview, and group 2, composed of 15 students, for the afternoon's structured individual interview. The individual interview, which was conducted in Thai and with the help of two Thai lecturers as the interviewers, lasted between five to ten minutes. Such interview time was only short because of the nature of the interview, which was exploratory with structured interviews, and only four questions were asked.

Furthermore, before the interview, these two Thai lecturers, who had previously taught English, received guidance from the researchers on the content and methodology of the structured interview. They were told to use either the Thai language or the English language in the interview. In addition, they were also informed to stick to the prepared interview questions shown below and allow the students to express their answers to the questions freely. With consent from the students, the interview was recorded using a mobile phone.

The individual interview looked into Thai EFL vocational students' perceptions regarding the blended learning environment of their ESP course and how group collaboration shapes their learning experience. The following were the interview questions used in the study.

- a. Can you share your perceptions and experiences regarding the blended learning environment in your ESP course?
- b. In your opinion, how does group collaboration influence your learning experience in the ESP blended learning course? Could you provide specific examples or instances where collaborative activities have positively affected your language learning tasks?
- c. Have you encountered any challenges or obstacles in participating in group collaboration within the blended learning setting? If so, how did you and your group members address these challenges?
- d. Considering your experiences, in what ways do you believe group collaboration contributes to your understanding of language topics in the blended learning environment?

Data Analysis

The data from the interview were read repeatedly to determine whether the research questions posed for the study were addressed. The researchers carefully sorted and evaluated the data in a *Microsoft Excel* file to have a deeper knowledge of the qualitative information. Also, the data were manually coded by (a) "making the text manageable," (b) "hearing what was said," and (c) "developing theory" (Lewins & Silver, 2007, 262-267) using Braun and Clarke's (2006) theme analysis method. The coded data were then discussed and finalized among the researchers to reflect the study's objectives. Finally, transcripts were forwarded to each participant for member checking, where students read the transcripts to validate the data. The results of the analysis were then used to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the ESP blended learning course for Thai EFL vocational students.

In presenting the findings, students were given pseudonyms (ST1, ST2...) to withhold their identity and maintain anonymity.

Findings

The study's findings underscore the positive impact of blended learning on group collaboration and students' learning experiences. Students expressed favorable perceptions of blended learning, highlighting its capacity to facilitate collaboration among classmates, fostering a sense of responsibility, and aiding in the accomplishment of language learning tasks. The following interview excerpts revealed that group collaboration was perceived as effective when all members actively participated and cooperated, emphasizing the importance of collective engagement for successful outcomes.

Blended learning allows group collaboration.

Students held positive perceptions as regards the conduct of blended learning. One of the things they mentioned was that blended learning allows them to collaborate with their classmates, giving them a sense of responsibility toward their language learning and accomplishing their assigned tasks. One student opined:

Most of the learning tasks in our class were assigned to groups since our class is blended. Each group has to do the task and complete it on time. Because everyone is responsible for sharing their ideas, the task can proceed without delay, and then we can present our assignment confidently since we help each other. (Student 1)

Students also highlighted that blended learning united them as group members when doing their assigned tasks. In other words, since some class sessions were done face-to-face, some language learning activities were also assigned to groups to accomplish. Although everyone had a specific assigned task, such a task enabled them to work and cooperate with the rest of their group members to accomplish their assigned tasks.

It (blended learning) encourages unity and collaboration among the group members during group discussion and brainstorming, resulting in a wide range of creative ideas that contribute to the success of the group's tasks. We cooperated to complete our tasks on time because our learning experience with blended learning was not dull. (Student 2)

However, students also noted that group collaboration could only become effective if all group members worked together. One student said:

Group work operates more effectively when everyone is engaged in the tasks, collaborating and working with the rest of the group members. I think it is important to think of our group tasks and the group as a whole. If others do not cooperate and if others do not join in the brainstorming sessions, I think everybody will fail. Everyone must help and cooperate. (Student 3)

Blended learning shapes the learning experience.

Since the class was blended, students felt they could experience the learning process in two different ways, allowing them to interact with their classmates and do the tasks independently. Students noted:

In blended learning, we study in two ways. First, we learn inside the classroom and then in an online format. It improves our studies because our teacher helps us understand our lesson. (Student 4)

Learning accessibility was also emphasized by the students as one of the advantages of blended learning, enhancing their learning experience. They perceived that not only their learning of the language but also their interactions with their classmates were improving.

Our interactions with classmates are more accessible, and my learning experience is improving. My groupmates and I can easily communicate because our teacher provides us with online learning materials that we can access to study anytime to gain more knowledge and complete tasks on time. (Student 6)

Blended learning facilitates learning communication.

Generally, the interview also revealed that blended learning was not only perceived as a platform for group collaboration, which could potentially shape their learning experience, but it also facilitated learning communication with their teacher and classmates. Such communication was also perceived to improve their language learning experience.

Besides improving my understanding of the logistics topic, it also enhances my ability to read, write, and communicate clearly with my teacher and group mates and inspires me to study. (Student 8)

It should also be noted that the findings from the interview also highlighted that as an ESP course, where these Thai EFL vocational students learned together in blended learning, students perceived that blended learning enabled them to communicate effectively with their groupmates to finish their assigned tasks.

We focus on our assigned tasks as a group and communicate more efficiently, which helps us finish our assignments more quickly. (Student 9)

Moreover, blended learning facilitates communication between and among students. It was also perceived as a tool to improve their general communication, especially with their teacher, since they needed to communicate in English.

Blended learning helps me improve my communication with my teacher and classmates; it also helps us understand and learn more as we study logistics and supply chains. It gives us more comprehensive knowledge about this subject and makes studying enjoyable by offering variation. (Student 10)

When students were asked how group collaboration shaped their learning experience in an ESP blended learning course, these three themes were formulated: *sharing ideas with the group*, *making language learning tasks manageable*, and *improving one's understanding of the topic*.

Sharing ideas with the group

One of the students' common responses regarding their learning experience in blended learning was the idea of group sharing of their ideas. One of the students emphasized that “we are able to share our ideas freely within the group,” giving them control of their learning, focus, and creativity.

Working as a group helps us focus on our assigned tasks and communicate more efficiently, which allows us to finish assignments more quickly. We share each other's opinions on how to accomplish the learning task creatively. Our group leader always asked our opinion, and he listened to all of us. (Student 11)

However, it was also noted that although students could freely express and share their ideas with the group, they also recognized some instances where they faced challenges in meeting all the group members. They noted that some members could “not participate in some online or face-to-face meetings because they have other work.” Moreover, students also reported that some students who participated in the meeting “did not share their ideas and were silent throughout the meeting.” For some students, encouraging their group members to share their opinions and collaborate while doing their tasks seemed effective. The students perceived that assigning tasks to their group members would make their tasks easier and faster. They also said they can effectively complete their tasks through online and face-to-face meetings.

We encouraged our group members to hear and share our ideas and opinions from various viewpoints. We split our tasks and discussed our suggestions to determine the main idea of the written text. Through online and face-to-face group meetings, our group collaboration generates new ideas and completes our tasks effectively. (Student 11)

Despite these issues, students acknowledged that their group leaders knew how to facilitate the group discussion, giving other members of the group who were inactive the platform to express their thoughts and opinions. One of the students mentioned how important group collaboration is in blended learning.

Because everyone is responsible for sharing their ideas, the task can proceed without delay, and we can then present our assignment confidently because we helped each other. (Student 12)

Furthermore, group collaboration not only allowed each group member to suggest and express their opinions to generate new ideas but also gave them the opportunity to practice more and better understand the language.

Every time a group meeting takes place, we brainstorm and collaborate to develop new and imaginative ideas as we always read and write to improve our language skills. Every group member's suggestions are used to generate alternatives and choose new ideas. Then, if we are not satisfied with the outcome, we do it again until we reach our desired conclusion. (Student 13)

Making language learning tasks manageable

The interview also revealed that group collaboration in blended learning made their language learning tasks manageable, making them more engaged in the learning process. One student reported that “using online resources and activities has allowed us to become more involved in the learning process,” as they can access materials whenever needed. Additionally, using online resources and activities has allowed students to become more creative in their learning. They can create their own materials and activities by designating the group members' tasks.

In every group task, we always prepare ahead and assign tasks to our group members. We will decide who takes the written text's first part of the information, who will take the second part of that information, and so on. Our group practiced speaking and reading with other members after using the internet to translate languages. Group work operates more effectively when everyone engages and collaborates to think through our tasks. (Student 14)

Improving one's understanding of the topic

Thai vocational students thought their ESP blended learning course helped them better understand the logistics topic in English. One student explained that their ESP blended learning experience “has helped me develop new ideas about the logistics topic” and that they can complete their tasks more successfully through group collaboration.

Every meeting in the ESP blended learning course develops new ideas from our group because we like to learn more about English with logistics topics. The success of our group collaboration is based on our ability to work as a team. To be kind to each other with our tasks, we encourage group members to hear our ideas to collaborate more effectively as we complete our group tasks. (Student 15)

Enhancing students' understanding of the topic was also noted as one of the impacts of group collaboration in blended learning ESP courses.

Improve our understanding of supply chain and logistics topics through technological applications and English language instruction. It also enhances my ability to read, write, and communicate clearly with my teacher and group mates and inspires me to study harder. (Student 16)

Discussion

The present exploratory qualitative study explores the perceptions and experiences of Thai vocational students regarding group collaboration within a BL course. Through the lens of social presence, the findings reveal how group collaboration enhances communication, interaction, comprehension of topics, task performance, and developing relationships and trust among students. Furthermore, students exhibit a favorable view of ESP blended learning, noting its positive influence on their language learning journey. This finding corroborates previous research by Andujar and Nadif (2022), Na Wang et al. (2021), and Wong et al. (2020), which highlighted students' high satisfaction, perception, and motivation levels within a blended learning environment.

Moreover, the study presents compelling evidence supporting the beneficial impact of BL on group collaboration and the overall learning experiences of Thai EFL vocational students in their ESP course. For instance, students express positive perceptions of BL, attributing its

success to its capacity to foster collaboration, cultivate a sense of responsibility, and facilitate the completion of language learning tasks. Although Monteiro and Morrison (2014) noted that while face-to-face learning and BL differ in terms of spatial distance, the finding of the present study confirmed what Ellis et al. (2016) acknowledged that collaborative group work in BL can improve the learning process. In other words, group collaboration in BL is a key learning element that can effectively establish a social presence among learners, enhancing their motivation to study (Molinillo et al., 2018). Not only does BL enable students to study collaboratively, acquire new abilities, and establish significant relationships, but by engaging in group collaboration, students can enhance their understanding of the subject matter by exchanging ideas and questioning each other's perspectives (Monteiro & Morrison, 2014). Thus, this finding suggests that collaborative group work can be utilized as a teaching approach in BL to enhance students' language abilities through peer interaction.

However, it should also be noted that while the significance of group collaboration emerges as a recurring theme, the findings also suggest that group collaboration is contingent upon active participation and cooperation from all class members. In other words, BL may only serve as a catalyst for group collaboration, fostering an environment only if students collectively assume responsibility for their language learning endeavors. In addition, in the blended learning setting, where physical interactions are limited, collaborative activities are deemed essential in fostering student connections. While the literature highlighted by Phirangee and Malec (2017) cautions about potential feelings of loneliness and disconnection in blended learning, our study reveals a strong social presence among students, contributing to shared connections and familiarity. This social presence, as indicated by Kreijns et al. (2014), plays a pivotal role in motivating students to actively participate, contribute ideas, and engage in group discussions, ultimately enhancing their motivation and sense of belonging in the learning community.

Furthermore, in contrast to the idea that group work lacks consistent efficacy (Lin, 2013), our participants underscore the indispensable role of each member's active engagement and commitment to the group's objectives. This reinforces the notion that successful group collaboration hinges on effective communication, mutual respect, and encouragement among members, cultivating an atmosphere where students can freely exchange ideas while attentively listening to others. Such principles are also echoed in collaborative learning paradigms outlined by Sun et al. (2017), advocating for student collaboration in idea exchange, questioning, problem-solving, project engagement, and reflective learning. While acknowledging the positive impact of group collaboration on language learning tasks within blended learning contexts, students emphasized the imperative need for participation and cooperation from all group members to enhance productivity. This resonates with findings from Dyson et al. (2021) and Liu et al. (2018), highlighting the beneficial role of group collaboration in students' learning outcomes. In other words, the findings suggest that active involvement, mutual consideration, and effective collaboration emerged as pivotal elements for successful group endeavors in blended learning environments. Thus, considering the flexibility inherent in BL, incorporating both face-to-face and online components may also enhance accessibility and interaction among the students. As a result, students also underscore the positive impact of BL on their communication skills, both with classmates and teachers, attributing it to the integration of English language instruction within the ESP course.

Finally, the current study contributes to the existing literature as the findings indicate that group collaboration may not only work in the face-to-face classroom setting, but it may also be crucial

in BL, where it fosters a sense of responsibility and accountability among students concerning their learning outcomes, contributing to and developing a sense of belonging within an online social community of learners. Since language learning is closely tied to social interaction, collaborative learning is also essential in language classroom activities, not only in the face-to-face classroom environment but also in the BL environment. We also argue that when students work with their classmates in a BL environment, they not only foster a supportive learning environment but also have a strong social presence giving them a chance to innovate their learning and express their creativity.

Limitations

While the current study presents Thai vocational students' perceptions of and experiences regarding group collaboration in an ESP blended learning course, it has limitations. First, the study was conducted using individual interviews. Although the interviews explore how group collaboration impacts students' learning experience in blended learning, they did not present a causal relationship and correlation between students' blended learning experience and their learning achievements. Such a limitation can be addressed by future research studies employing quantitative tools. Second, the context is limited only to an ESP course in a vocational school in Thailand. Studies that examine other contexts in higher learning institutions would yield a new perspective on how group collaboration impacts the implementation of blended learning.

Conclusion

This exploratory qualitative examines how group collaboration impacts Thai vocational students' perceptions and experiences of BL. It supports previous research by confirming BL's positive influence on motivation, perception, and satisfaction while delving into how group collaboration in BL translates to successful language learning outcomes. The findings revealed that group collaboration is critical in BL, not only encouraging students to feel more responsible and accountable for their learning outcomes but also making them feel they belong in an online social community of learners.

The study highlights the importance of active participation and engagement of every group member in achieving a strong social presence and productive group collaboration. The student's perception of the effectiveness of group work depends on each participant's willingness to contribute to the group's goals. In addition, BL's open communication facilitates a learning community where students can exchange ideas, generate fresh perspectives, and share knowledge to achieve a consensus on their learning objectives. Thus, group collaboration in BL provides a supportive learning environment that encourages language learning innovation and fosters critical interpersonal and communication skills necessary for future career success.

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Appendix A

Data coding

Codes	Grouping of Codes (categorizing)	Themes formulated
groups brainstorming unity group tasks cooperation	Collaboration	Blended learning allows group collaboration
interaction learning improvement learning accessible improved understanding enhances knowledge engaging lessons widen knowledge deeper understanding improved communication	Learning experience	Blended learning enhances learning experience
communicating the teacher ability to communicate improved communication clear communication group communication efficient communication	Learning communication	Blended learning facilitates learning communication
members share ideas group task participation members' ideas group meeting new ideas discuss ideas brainstorm imaginative ideas	Group sharing of ideas	Sharing of ideas with the group
completing tasks quickly sharing of tasks doing tasks lightly group tasks assignment tasks arrangement assignment	Making tasks manageable	Making language learning tasks manageable
develop new ideas improvement of reading skills comprehensive knowledge understanding the lesson improved understanding	Topic understanding	Improving one's understanding of the topic

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