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FOSTERING SUSTAINABLE EFL LEARNING THROUGH COLLABORATIVE READING AT A THAI TECHNOLOGICAL INSTITUTE

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Abstract

Reading in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is often perceived by learners as demanding and time-consuming, particularly when undertaking individual assignments. This study investigates the perceptions of first-year EFL undergraduate students regarding collaborative English reading within a Foundation English course at a private technological institute in Bangkok, Thailand. Employing a mixed-methods research approach, data were carefully collected through structured questionnaires from 50 convenience-sampled students, and further complemented by in-class lecturer observations. The findings demonstrate that students perceived the academic and social benefits of collaborative reading to be very high. Observations confirmed that collaborative reading not only outperformed individual reading but also fostered highly meaningful peer interactions, significantly increased motivation to learn, and enhanced overall text comprehension. Furthermore, this collaborative pedagogical approach effectively bridges language acquisition with sustainable education by developing the critical teamwork and problem-solving skills necessary for global engagement. Ultimately, integrating collaborative reading into EFL classrooms significantly boosts learner confidence, offering valuable interdisciplinary strategies for educators aiming to cultivate sustainable learning environments and prepare students for complex future challenges in higher education.

Keywords: Collaborative Reading, EFL Instruction, Sustainable Education, Reading Comprehension, Learner Perceptions

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Introduction

Reading plays a fundamental role in language acquisition. (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). Evidence from various studies indicates that reading comprehension plays a major role in strengthening language skills among EFL learners. (Jittisukpong & Kosashunhanan, 2022). Most language learners, however, regard reading as a demanding skill that requires grasping the meanings of words, sentences, and text structures. (Boonruang, 2019). In the context of studying English as a second or foreign language, learners face several obstacles in mastering English reading skills (Chalak, 2015). According to Jittisukpong & Inpin (2017), ESL/EFL learners in Thailand faced similar challenges in mastering English reading skills, which may stem from ineffective teaching; therefore, more attention and research are necessary to address these obstacles.

Based on the researchers' experiences as English language instructors teaching reading skills at a private technological Institute in Thailand, classes normally consist of a mixture of high- and low-English-proficiency students. Each student brings a different background and possesses varying levels of English reading comprehension. Weak students who lack background schemata of the topics being read may not even know what they are reading. Sometimes, students do not understand the meaning of certain words used by the writer and are unable to identify the main ideas of the text. As a result, weaker students often struggle to participate in reading-related class activities—such as discussions, answering comprehension questions, or summarizing the text—because they cannot fully understand what the writer is trying to say. In response to these problems, group work or collaborative learning can be a pedagogical approach that facilitates students' sharing, discussion, and exchange of information and knowledge during the reading comprehension process.

Collaborative learning, also known as CL, has been referred to by numerous terms, including cooperative learning, collective learning, peer teaching, and team learning (Jittisukpong & Inpin, 2017). It is a well-established strategy extensively used in academic settings to enhance students' learning through collaboration. According to Ardi (2015), collaborative learning encompasses a variety of educational approaches that involve a joint intellectual effort by students and teachers. As Ibrahim & Adnan (2019) noted, a key feature that drives collaborative learning and motivation is the way students work together in small groups to support one another's learning. These group-based interactions promote not only academic achievement but also a sense of mutual responsibility. In line with this, Häll (2012) emphasized that effective collaborative learning involves elements such as positive interdependence, individual accountability, and promotive interaction. Their research found that groups exhibiting these features demonstrate improved reading comprehension, greater engagement, and increased confidence when dealing with complex texts. Therefore, in the context of reading instruction, encouraging students to read collaboratively in groups allows them to complement one another's strengths and compensate for weaknesses. As they contribute to the group's understanding, they also learn from their peers' insights. Consequently, weaker or shy students, who may be reluctant to speak in whole-class settings, often feel more comfortable sharing their ideas in smaller groups. Likewise, more proficient students tend to feel positive about supporting their less confident classmates. Collaborative reading can help students improve their English reading comprehension. However, it remains unclear whether students recognize the benefits and value of collaborative reading.

Reading is a key component of language acquisition and a crucial element in developing the 21st-century skills needed to address complex, real-life challenges, particularly those related to sustainable development. In a rapidly globalizing society, EFL students face the dual challenge of mastering a foreign language while simultaneously engaging with global knowledge systems to make informed, interdisciplinary choices. Collaborative reading emerges as an effective instructional strategy that bridges this gap. By fostering critical thinking, complex problem-solving, communication, and teamwork, this approach inherently

cultivates a sustainable learning environment. This collaborative pedagogical experience not only enhances students' comprehension of English texts but also equips them to analyze sustainability issues critically, thereby integrating language acquisition with sustainable education. Developing these interdisciplinary competencies empowers EFL students to participate in sustainable initiatives across Asia actively, demonstrating that collaborative reading is an indispensable strategy for fostering sustainable EFL learning in higher education. While prior studies have established the importance of reading comprehension for EFL learners, many students continue to struggle with this demanding task, particularly in traditional individual settings. This research addresses a significant gap by investigating how collaborative reading can simultaneously support language acquisition and foster sustainable education. Therefore, this study explores the perceptions of first-year undergraduate students regarding collaborative English reading in a Foundation English course at a private technological institute in Thailand. By integrating language instruction with broader interdisciplinary and sustainability themes, this research highlights how diverse student backgrounds enrich collaborative interactions. Ultimately, by fostering these collaborative learning environments, educators can not only enhance English proficiency but also cultivate sustainable learning habits and critical problem-solving skills necessary to navigate future global challenges.

Literature Review

The Importance of Reading and its Processes

Reading comprehension is considered a necessary skill in second-language learning, as it helps learners understand texts, build vocabulary, and improve overall language proficiency (Ha, 2021). According to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, language input is the most essential element in language acquisition (Lu & Ng, 2013). Johnson (2012) also agrees that reading comprehension is very important because it is a process through which learners gain input. Without understanding input at the right level, learning does not occur. Grabe & Stoller (2019) point out that reading is one of many human activities people engage in every day. Highlighting the vital role of reading in acquiring a language, “reading is a process of perceiving and understanding written language”.

Reading comprehension typically involves both top-down and bottom-up processes, as frequently discussed in academic literature (Alderson, 2000). Top-down processing is the use of learners' background knowledge and experiences to understand information. In comparison, bottom-up processing involves “using knowledge of word meanings and discourse markers such as first, then, and after that to organize the understanding of a text in a step-by-step manner”. In other words, learners read the words and combine them to understand the sentence as a whole.

In summary, reading is an essential skill for language learning, as it enables learners to acquire information and develop understanding. To comprehend the meaning of a text requires the simultaneous use of two distinct processes: top-down and bottom-up processing.

Collaborative Learning

In today's world, collaborative learning has become an integral part of language education, enhancing the quality of learning by encouraging students to work in pairs or small groups (Ibrahim & Adnan, 2019). Collaboration entails exchanging ideas, coordinating with team members, and contributing collectively to a shared project. When students engage in collaborative learning, they experience an active and effective learning process, enabling teachers to support the development of academically strong learners (Grabe, 2009). Collaboration, or collaborative learning, enables students to talk, exchange, and share information or ideas while working as a team. A typical collaborative learning group consists of two to five members, allowing for balanced interaction and ensuring that each member can

contribute meaningfully. Within such groups, students often take on different roles, such as discussion leader, note taker, question generator, or summarizer. These roles not only help structure group work but also ensure that learners develop responsibility, accountability, and a variety of communication skills. Consequently, they gain advantages by encountering a variety of viewpoints from individuals with different backgrounds, as they interpret the same material through multiple perspectives.

This approach is consistent with the results of a study examining the effectiveness of collaborative learning on the reading comprehension of female students. The study sample comprised 30 students in the experimental group, selected from standard VIII students at Albayan Model School for Girls, Jeddah, using a convenience sampling technique. It was found that collaborative learning showed a positive impact on the experimental group's reading comprehension. The performance of students introduced to the technique improved significantly. Not only did the level of achievement increase, but the students' confidence also rose, and they felt satisfied applying the reading strategy to any text. In addition, past research pointed out that students can better understand certain concepts or retain knowledge in long-term memory through collaborative learning. Therefore, the usefulness of collaborative learning can be categorized into academic and social benefits as follows:

1) Academic Benefits: In learning a second or foreign language, students can gain many benefits from working and learning together. Collaborative learning encourages interaction among learners, which is essential for language development. Through interaction, learners have opportunities to receive feedback, negotiate meaning, and practice language skills in a social context. This interaction is crucial because it helps learners recognize the gap between their current language abilities and the target language's norms, thereby facilitating language acquisition. Additionally, collaborative activities promote a supportive learning environment where learners can experiment with language use without the fear of making mistakes. Socio-cultural theory underlines the importance of social interaction in cognitive development, suggesting that learners construct knowledge through collaborative dialogue. In this context, peers play a vital role in each other's learning by providing scaffolding that helps learners reach higher levels of understanding and language proficiency (Zhang et al., 2013). Moreover, collaborative learning fosters learner autonomy and motivation. When learners work together, they take responsibility for their learning and engage more deeply with the content (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997). This increased engagement can lead to greater motivation and a more positive attitude towards language learning (Manolescu, 2022). In summary, collaborative learning activities offer numerous academic benefits for SLA, including enhanced interaction, a supportive environment, increased autonomy, and motivation. These elements help create a more effective and enriching language-learning experience.

2) Social Benefits: Collaborative learning also brings important social advantages to students. These activities promote positive interdependence among learners, fostering a sense of teamwork and cooperation (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). This positive interdependence encourages learners to support each other's success, fostering important social skills such as communication, empathy, and conflict resolution. Through collaborative learning, learners also have the opportunity to work with individuals from diverse backgrounds, promoting cultural understanding and appreciation (Johnson et al., 2014). Moreover, collaborative activities encourage active participation and engagement, reducing feelings of isolation and enhancing a sense of belonging within the learning community (Kahu, 2013). This sense of belonging is essential for learner motivation and well-being, as it fosters a supportive environment in which learners feel valued and respected (Gillies, 2022). Collaborative learning also provides opportunities for peer mentoring and leadership development, as learners take on different roles and responsibilities within group tasks (Dillenbourg et al., 2009). In summary, collaborative

learning activities offer numerous social benefits for learners, including the development of teamwork skills, cultural competence, a sense of belonging, and leadership capabilities.

Barriers to Effective Collaborative Reading

Collaborative learning, an instructional process that encourages students to work together to achieve common goals, has been widely recognized for its potential to enhance learning outcomes, especially in language teaching and reading activities. However, the practical implementation of collaborative learning in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context presents several challenges. Thai university students struggle with reading because they are unable to use suitable strategies while engaging with texts. In addition, their reading performance is influenced by factors such as past school policies, instructors, and their own learning behaviors. While collaborative learning is designed to leverage students' diverse abilities by fostering mutual support, differences in language proficiency can still pose practical challenges in EFL classrooms. In practice, high-proficiency students may unintentionally dominate discussions. In contrast, lower-proficiency students may remain passive or hesitant to participate due to fear of making mistakes or being judged by their peers. Without proper facilitation, these imbalances can hinder equal participation and reduce the overall effectiveness of collaborative learning. Cultural differences also pose significant challenges in collaborative learning in EFL settings. Students from different cultural backgrounds may have varying attitudes toward collaboration, communication styles, and learning preferences. For instance, some cultures emphasize individual achievement and may not value group work as much. In contrast, others may adopt a more collectivist approach but face difficulties adapting to a Western-style educational setting that encourages open dialogue and critical thinking (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). These cultural discrepancies can create misunderstandings and impede the collaborative process.

Additionally, the lack of adequate training for both teachers and students in collaborative learning strategies is a considerable barrier. Teachers may not be sufficiently prepared to facilitate collaborative activities effectively, lacking the necessary skills to manage group dynamics, address conflicts, and ensure equal participation. Similarly, students may lack the collaborative skills needed to engage constructively with their peers, such as active listening, negotiation, and conflict resolution (Chang-Tik et al., 2022). Without proper guidance and support, collaborative learning activities can become disorganized and counterproductive.

Technological challenges also play a role, particularly in settings where digital tools support collaborative learning. Limited access to technology, insufficient digital literacy, and technical difficulties can hinder the seamless integration of collaborative tools, thereby affecting the quality and consistency of collaborative learning experiences (Chang, 2024).

Furthermore, assessing collaborative learning poses its own set of challenges. Traditional assessment methods, which focus on individual performance, may not adequately reflect the contributions and learning gains from collaborative activities. Developing fair and effective assessment strategies that recognize both individual and group achievements requires careful consideration and may demand additional time and resources from educators (Jacobs et al., 2002). In conclusion, while collaborative learning holds significant promise for enhancing EFL education, addressing the challenges related to proficiency disparities, cultural differences, inadequate training, technological issues, and assessment methods is crucial for its successful implementation. Educators need to adopt a comprehensive approach that includes professional development, culturally responsive teaching strategies, and the effective use of technology to create an inclusive, supportive, collaborative learning environment.

According to the reviewed literature, reading comprehension in a second or foreign language is a complex process that involves both top-down and bottom-up processing and requires learners to integrate prior knowledge with textual cues. Collaborative learning is an effective instructional approach that not only fosters language development through interaction and

negotiation of meaning but also enhances learners' motivation, autonomy, and social skills. However, challenges such as proficiency disparities, cultural differences, insufficient training, technological barriers, and assessment limitations may reduce the effectiveness of collaborative practices. Although previous studies have investigated collaborative reading in diverse EFL contexts, little research has examined learners' perceptions and classroom experiences in Thai technological institutes. Understanding these perceptions is crucial because they influence learner engagement, the adoption of collaborative strategies, and learning outcomes. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining students' perceptions within the context of a specific private technological institute in Thailand. The findings offer preliminary insights into collaborative reading practices in EFL classrooms that may inform future pedagogical frameworks and teacher training, particularly for managing mixed-proficiency groups.

Research Methodology

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, and the core principles of collaborative learning, which collectively explain how collaborative reading facilitates both language acquisition and sustainable education. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, cognitive development relies heavily on social interaction, suggesting that learners co-construct knowledge through collaborative dialogue. Within the context of collaborative reading, this social interaction fosters collective understanding and the critical problem-solving skills essential for interdisciplinary inquiry. By working cooperatively to navigate complex texts, students not only decode grammatical structures but also negotiate meaning and engage in critical discourse on broader sustainability topics. Furthermore, SLA theory reinforces the idea that interactive peer environments accelerate the acquisition of linguistic and cognitive competencies. Through these collaborative dynamics, encompassing positive interdependence and individual accountability, students develop the robust teamwork skills necessary to address complex global challenges and sustain lifelong learning.

Research Instruments

Questionnaires and teachers' observations were used to collect data. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items, in which students rated their level of agreement with statements about the academic and social benefits of collaborative reading on a 5-point Likert scale. To ensure language accuracy and content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by three English department teachers, all of whom hold Ph.D. degrees in English Language Teaching and English Studies. Items with IOC values ranging from 0.50 to 1.00 were deemed acceptable. The overall Item Objective Congruence (IOC) index was 0.80, indicating good validity. Cronbach's alpha was then calculated to assess the instrument's internal consistency, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.95 ($\alpha = 0.95$), indicating excellent internal consistency for the modified questionnaire. In addition to the questionnaire, the teacher's participant observations were used as a supplementary instrument to provide deeper insights.

The Statistics Used for Analyzing the Data

The collected data were analyzed using a computer program to calculate frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, all participants were provided with a comprehensive Participant Information Sheet outlining the study's purpose and procedures. Informed consent was formally obtained from all participants, ensuring strict adherence to standard academic research ethics, voluntary participation, and confidentiality.

Research Results

This perception-based mixed-methods study employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches to understand EFL learners' experiences with collaborative reading comprehensively. The quantitative data from the questionnaires provided a general picture of students' perceptions regarding the usefulness and motivation associated with collaborative reading activities. To enhance qualitative depth, in-class observations and reflection discussions were conducted to explore students' interactions and engagement during these exercises. The use of this mixed-methods approach was justified by the need to quantify positive impressions of collaborative reading while simultaneously exploring the nature of students' social interactions and personal knowledge that influence their views on sustainability. By combining both types of data, the research provided a balanced approach to studying the issue. It highlighted the academic and social benefits of collaborative reading, emphasizing its relevance to fostering sustainable attitudes among students. This approach ultimately offered a more comprehensive perspective on how collaborative reading serves as an effective tool in EFL teaching.

The mean scores and standard deviation were calculated to assess the students' perceptions of the benefits of collaborative reading in the classroom. The findings are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Levels of Agreement towards the Benefits of Collaborative Reading

Items	$\bar{X}$	SD	Level
Academic Benefit			
1) Group reading improved learning and teamwork skills.	4.37	0.72	Very high
2) Group reading produced better results than reading alone.	4.47	0.82	Very high
3) Group reading is crucial in the classroom.	4.10	0.60	High
4) Group reading helped me expand my academic vocabulary.	4.30	0.84	Very high
5) Group reading allowed me to receive valuable and helpful feedback from other team members for effective reading.	4.33	0.88	Very high
6) Group reading enabled me to share knowledge and information from the texts with other team members.	4.47	0.68	Very high
7) Group reading allowed me to finish reading exercises more quickly	4.33	0.84	Very high
8) Group reading helped me answer reading exercises more accurately	4.30	0.79	Very high
9) Group reading helped enhance my cognitive thinking.	4.20	0.66	High
10) Group reading enhanced my ability to comprehend what I read.	4.33	0.71	Very high
Academic Benefit Average	4.32	0.31	Very high
Social Benefits			
11) Group reading makes learning more enjoyable and fun for all members.	4.30	0.54	Very high
12) Group reading allowed team members to explain and clarify difficult concepts for one another.	4.33	0.55	Very high
13) Group reading enabled all team members to assist each other in their learning.	4.50	0.57	Very high
14) Group reading builds trust and reliability among team members.	4.27	1.02	Very high
15) Group reading promoted communication among peers.	4.30	0.79	Very high
16) Group reading promotes friendly and supportive relationships among participants.	4.27	0.87	Very high

Items	$\bar{X}$	SD	Level
17) Group reading reduces feelings of loneliness and fosters a strong sense of belonging within the group.	4.20	0.99	High
18) Group reading fosters appreciation and acknowledgment of diverse ideas within the group.	4.40	0.56	Very high
19) Group reading helps members develop strong bonds that enable effective teamwork and cooperation.	4.43	0.77	Very high
20) Group reading increases active participation and engagement during group activities.	4.50	0.68	Very high
Social Benefit Average	4.35	0.68	Very high
Overall Average	4.34	0.39	Very high

The above statements were divided into two fields: academic benefits and social benefits. To analyze the data, the mean and standard deviation are used. The table above indicates that the students' perceptions towards the usefulness of collaborative reading in terms of academic benefits were at a very high level ($\bar{X} = 4.32$). Similarly, the students reported having a very high level of agreement towards the benefits of collaborative reading in terms of social benefits ($\bar{X} = 4.35$, $SD = 0.68$).

In addition to the mean scores for each field, it is worthwhile to examine the mean scores for each item to gain further insights. Regarding the academic benefits, the highest mean score was recorded in Item 6 ($\bar{X} = 4.47$), followed by Item 2 ($\bar{X} = 4.47$) and Item 1 ($\bar{X} = 4.37$). This shows that all students agreed on the positive impacts of collaborative reading in the classroom. For social benefits, Item 13 showed the highest mean score ($\bar{X} = 4.50$), followed by Item 20 and Item 19 ($\bar{X} = 4.50$), ($\bar{X} = 4.43$), respectively, indicating that the use of collaborative reading in the classroom was acknowledged and deemed useful by the students.

However, in the academic field regarding reading collaboration as being essential in the classroom, Item 3 earned the lowest mean score ($\bar{X} = 4.10$). This may be because some students feel that group reading takes too much time when friends in the group read at different speeds. Therefore, they might not regard collaborative reading as being so important. Interpretive insights suggested that lower-scoring items were likely influenced by students' discomfort with group dynamics and a preference for independent study, which may have hindered their appreciation for collaborative reading. Furthermore, unfamiliarity with collaborative learning techniques may have led to a lower perceived effectiveness of the activities, thereby impacting their overall ratings.

In addition, the teacher observed that while some students were working on their worksheets, others began using their mobile phones to look up the meanings of unfamiliar words. It was clear that the students shared the workload to complete the task. During the reading phase, they stayed silent, focusing on the text. However, the teacher had to remind them of their roles in group work. After that, they turned to their group members and began discussing and sharing what they had learned to reach an accurate understanding. Another point the researcher observed is that all the students came from different faculties, yet they were able to work together in groups and interact with one another. Finally, every group submitted the reading worksheets on time.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study highlights the significant potential of collaborative reading as a powerful pedagogical approach for fostering sustainable EFL learning among undergraduate students. The findings clearly indicate that engaging in collaborative reading activities yields substantial academic and social benefits, moving beyond traditional language instruction to cultivate a sustainable educational environment. Academically, the results revealed that collaborative

reading emphasizes student-to-student interaction, allowing students to provide scaffolding to help their peers better understand the text. In terms of language learning, students benefited from scaffolding through peer interactions, as learning occurs not only through expert support but also from peers with varying levels of proficiency. The students agreed that discussing and negotiating meanings gave them opportunities to receive helpful feedback, making the content clearer and easier to understand. This substantiates the concept of co-constructive cognitive development through social interactions (Barkley et al., 2014), where more proficient students assist their peers, leading to effective reading comprehension through interaction and shared understanding.

From a social perspective, the students strongly agreed that collaborative reading enhances motivation, fosters friendship and trust, and develops their social skills. These impacts reflect the core benefits of social learning, demonstrating that relationships and mutual trust are strengthened when students support one another and respect diverse viewpoints. Furthermore, the teacher's observations confirmed that working together created an enjoyable classroom atmosphere across different faculties and fields of study, boosting learners' self-confidence. The diversity of the students allowed the groups to engage in deep discussions, promoting peer support and a sense of community. By overcoming reading difficulties collectively, students strengthened social bonds and increased their active involvement. For instance, more competent readers provided weaker students extra time to understand challenging vocabulary. In comparison, weaker students contributed unique insights, bridging the knowledge gap and fostering a shared learning experience essential for academic achievement.

Overall, the collaborative reading process provided students with valuable linguistic and cognitive input through the active exchange of ideas, constructive feedback, and debate over diverse interpretations of texts. Such peer-to-peer interactions not only helped students identify their strengths and areas for improvement but also significantly deepened their text comprehension. More importantly, this cooperative dynamic outperformed individual reading efforts and bridged language acquisition with sustainable education by developing effective reading strategies, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. By engaging in this collaborative environment, learners gained interdisciplinary insights that support their immediate academic performance and cultivate the competencies necessary for global awareness. Ultimately, integrating collaborative reading into EFL classrooms significantly boosts learner confidence, motivation, and self-esteem, offering educators valuable interdisciplinary strategies to prepare students for the complex, multifaceted challenges of modern higher education and global sustainable development.

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