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English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Students' Perceptions of Collaboration in Oral Presentation Preparation

Summary

Collaboration is necessary in many employment-related contexts since prospective employees are expected not only to be able to speak foreign languages but also to work both individually and in a team. This case study focused on Lithuanian university students' perceptions of collaborative learning, specifically focusing on group/pair work used in oral presentation preparation in an English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. Thus, through an online questionnaire, the study aimed to investigate the effects group/ pair collaboration may have had on these EFL learners, the development or improvement of various language and other skills and perceptions of their learning experiences while collaborating. The findings show that the positive aspect of this collaborative EFL activity was related to the caring relationships that the students built with their peers. These relationships helped them to feel comfortable and accepted, distribute the tasks equally, enjoy learning English, boost their English and improve presentation preparation skills.

Keywords: EFL, collaboration, higher education, presentations, student opinions, learning experiences.

ANGLŲ VALODAS KĀ SVEŠVALODAS (EFL) STUDENTU IZPRATNE PAR SADARBĪBU MUTVĀRDU PREZENTĀCIJU SAGATAVOŠANĀ

Kopsavilkums

Sadarbība ir nepieciešama daudzos ar nodarbinātību saistītos kontekstos, jo no potenciālajiem darbiniekiem tiek sagaidīta ne tikai svešvalodas prasme, bet arī prasme strādāt gan individuāli, gan komandā. Šajā gadījumā izpēti uzmanība tika pievērsta Lietuvas augstskolu studentu priekšstatiem par sadarbību mācīšanās procesā, īpaši koncentrējoties uz grupu/pāru darbu, ko izmanto mutvārdu prezentāciju sagatavošanā angļu valodas kā svešvalodas (EFL) nodarbībās. Tādējādi, izmantojot tiešsaistes aptaujas anketu, pētījuma mērķis ir noskaidrot, kāda ir grupu/pāru sadarbības ietekme uz šiem EFL studentiem, dažādu valodas un citu prasmju attīstīšanu un uzlabošanu, kā arī

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2023

[https://doi.org/
10.37384/
SM.2023.15.042](https://doi.org/10.37384/SM.2023.15.042)

uz to, kā viņi uztver savu pieredzi par sadarbību ar citiem studentiem mācību laikā. Iegūtie rezultāti liecina, ka šī sadarbības aktivitāte EFL jomā deva pozitīvu rezultātu: gādīgas attiecības, ko studenti izveidoja ar saviem vienaudžiem. Šīs attiecības palīdzēja viņiem justies ērti un pieņemtiem, vienlīdzīgi sadalīt uzdevumus, izbaudīt angļu valodas apguvi, uzlabot angļu valodas un prezentāciju sagatavošanas prasmes.

Raksturvārdi: EFL, sadarbība, augstākā izglītība, prezentācijas, studentu viedokļi, mācību pieredze.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a 21st-century skill, collaboration is needed in many employment-related contexts, so prospective employees are expected not only to be able to speak foreign languages but also to work and make decisions both individually and in a team. Since schools and institutions of higher education prepare their students for the job market, they also integrate collaborative strategies and activities in various disciplines. This article focuses on university students and their perception of collaboration in an English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom because foreign language classes are no longer only about writing, reading, listening and speaking skills (now mediation and interaction are emphasised as well) but also about the so-called 4Cs, one of which is collaboration. The other Cs are creativity, communication, and critical thinking (Huang 2021; Erdogan 2019). They are all associated with innovation and globalisation, as potential employees must be creators, critical thinkers, communicators, and collaborators in our digital era (Erdogan 2019). The 4Cs are often learned and practised at the same time because learning happens while interacting with others through collaborative activities (Huang 2021). Students gain and build knowledge through social interaction while working together.

Most of the latest studies on collaboration in EFL settings have investigated how collaborative learning affects writing (Stell 2018). Little research, however, has examined the effects that group or pair collaboration in oral presentations may have on EFL learners, the development or improvement of various language and other skills and perceptions of student learning experiences, all of which the study in this paper aimed to explore. It was hoped to shed some light on the issue by administering an anonymous online questionnaire to Lithuanian university EFL students. Its results were processed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis, as these methods were deemed appropriate for the context of this study.

2. COLLABORATION: WHAT TO CONSIDER?

To begin with, it is pertinent to define collaboration. The definition may differ greatly depending on the activities carried out while collaborating. For example, “Collaboration in writing is a process where there is a negotiation for the creation of simple texts” (Alban Defilippi, Miller, Ramirez-Avila 2020: 55). However, in education, it is often seen as “a method of teaching and learning in which students team together to explore a significant question or create a meaningful project” (Soleimani Moghaddam, Heidari 2018: 523), “an alternative model of learning” (Ismail, Lustyantie, Emzir 2020: 83), a learning strategy (Anggraini, Rozimela, Anwar 2020) or technique (Fakhruldeen 2021). Moreover, Garcia-Sanchez (2016) has compared collaboration to assembling a jigsaw puzzle, since the participants involved in the process aim to reach a common goal by contributing and supporting each other. Even peer assessment or feedback through such assessment can be seen as collaboration, but students whose skills are peer-assessed often prefer their teachers' assessment rather than the one carried out by their peers (Daukšaitė-Kolpakovienė 2022). Therefore, students' views of collaborative learning may differ depending on the type of task(s) assigned and the culture or language they need to use (Stell 2018).

Earlier studies reveal numerous benefits of collaborative learning in the EFL context. Unlike some teachers, who find it difficult to manage their classrooms in which students do collaborative tasks (Koç 2018), a significant number of studies show that students usually like collaborative activities (Huang 2021; Ismail, Lustyantie, Emzir 2020; Koç 2018; Murtiningsih 2016). They enjoy group work, are active and engaged, have positive learning experiences, improve their communication in English (Huang, Jiang, Wu, Xu 2021; Oxford 1997), social interaction and accountability (Huang et al. 2021), problem-solving, active learning (Rahman, Hatomi 2021), distribution of workload and responsibility (Murtiningsih 2016; Rahman, Hatomi 2021; Stell 2018), idea-exchange (Huang 2021), higher-order thinking (Susanti et al. 2020) and digital skills (Huang et al. 2021), while the activity that is carried out is perceived as useful and enriching (Alban Defilippi, Miller, Ramirez-Avila 2020), both educational and entertaining (Huang et al. 2021), as it is experienced through meaningful and authentic learning (Huang 2021). Collaborative learning also fosters student

motivation (Garcia-Sanchez 2016; Koç 2018), interaction (Garcia-Sanchez 2016) and peer correction (Ismail, Lustyantje, Emzir 2020). Through collaborative learning, students become critical thinkers and develop self-confidence while improving their linguistic skills (Soleimani Moghaddam, Heidari 2018). In addition, collaborative learning was noted as effective for strong students and those considered as weak or of lower proficiency (Anggraini, Rozimela, Anwar 2020; Ismail, Lustyantje, Emzir 2020; Soleimani Moghaddam, Heidari 2018), as they can exchange ideas and get help (Koç 2018). In short, the findings of prior studies are twofold: those directly related to the skills of the English language (linguistic skills) and other (e.g., soft) skills.

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Most of previous studies on collaboration in the EFL setting have rarely focused on such skills as speaking (e.g., Soleimani Moghaddam, Heidari 2018; Huang 2021) or reading (Fakhruldeen 2021; Susanti et al. 2020) but have been concerned with writing (Alban Defilippi, Miller, Ramirez-Avila 2020; Anggraini, Rozimela, Anwar 2020; Biria, Jafari 2013; Ismail, Lustyantje, Emzir 2020; Hosseini, Bavali, Rezvani 2020; Khatib, Meihami 2015; Kos 2023; Lázaro-Ibarrola, Villarreal 2021; Murtiningsih 2016; Stell 2018; Villarreal, Gil-Sarratea 2020), for instance, to produce an argumentative essay or even a video project (e.g., Huang et al. 2021) in pairs or groups in a physical (such as a classroom) or online (e.g., Alban Defilippi, Miller, Ramirez-Avila 2020) environment, using traditional paper-based activities (Stell 2018) or working on tasks through various interactive tools, such as Padlet (Alban Defilippi, Miller, Ramirez-Avila 2020), wikis (Hosseini, Bavali, Rezvani 2020), virtual learning environments or simply tablets (Couvaneiro, Pedro 2015) without specifying particular tools on them. Such studies frequently used pre- and post-tests (e.g., Alban Defilippi, Miller, Ramirez-Avila 2020) to determine the effect of collaboration on students' (foreign language) skills. Therefore, they implemented collaboration with the aim of improving such skills (Alban Defilippi, Miller, Ramirez-Avila 2020).

As far as specific writing skills are concerned, many studies have researched the impact of collaboration on them through the earlier-mentioned writing tasks. The study by Anggraini, Rozimela and Anwar (2020) used collaborative writing in the experimental group, while traditional ways were used in the control group. Writing tests revealed that there were better results in writing, in terms of richer vocabulary and content, improved grammatical accuracy, and

increased confidence to write in the experimental group. In the same study, the students perceived peer feedback and collaborative writing with Padlet positively (Anggraini, Rozimela, Anwar 2020). Still, the medium of collaboration was a substantial success factor, which simultaneously led to satisfaction with the activity itself. Similarly, Li and Zhang (2021) revealed improvement in individual students' writing regarding vocabulary, language use, content and organisation after oral collaborative group activities. The results were obtained by dividing their study participants into the experimental and control groups, and they were later tested through a writing task. Stell (2018) also pointed out that collaborative writing positively affected text accuracy, complexity and fluency when texts were written in pairs rather than alone (the same students did activities alone and then in pairs; then their performance was compared). Likewise, the research by Khatib and Meihami (2015) showed that students' performance was better in writing activities when individual and group work were compared using statistical measures. The students were able to learn from each other and, just like in the study by Anggraini, Rozimela and Anwar (2020), improve their vocabulary, grammar, content and organisation in the writing task they did (Khatib, Meihami 2015). Moreover, Villarreal and Gil-Sarratea (2020) found that while working in pairs, students wrote higher quality and more accurate texts (essays) in terms of grammar and lexis and had better content, structure, and organisation than those produced by individual students. The researchers used a pre-test (essay writing individually), then employed collaborative writing and examined the writing of randomly selected pairs. In other words, collaborative writing seems to have a positive effect on English vocabulary, grammar, accuracy, fluency, content, and organisation. Khatib and Meihami (2015) propose that various linguistic skills (not only writing) could successfully be improved with collaboration. However, currently, a very limited number of such studies are available.

On the other hand, by using a t-test, Biria and Jafari (2013) did not find significant differences in terms of fluency in writing tasks (script writing) carried out by groups and individual students, while Stell (2018) revealed that collaboration did not affect text complexity when writing was done in pairs. Villarreal and Gil-Sarratea (2020) noted similar findings on text complexity and fluency while doing collaborative writing. Unlike some authors of the positive findings discussed above, Li and Zhang's (2021) statistical analysis

showed that collaborative activities did not help students improve their writing, especially mechanics (e.g., punctuation, spelling and others), since they are related to writing conventions and knowledge of particular rules. In addition, Rahman and Hatomi (2021) demonstrated that when collaborative learning happened online (e.g., on WhatsApp), technical and support issues lowered students' motivation and limited peer feedback. This means that online or physical environments may affect the perception of collaborative activities and student motivation.

Earlier studies on collaborative tasks, such as collaborative writing activities, indicated particular disadvantages unrelated to language skills. For instance, certain group members may dominate (Anggraini, Rozimela, Anwar 2020; Murtiningsih 2016), the workload may be distributed unfairly (Anggraini, Rozimela, Anwar 2020; Murtiningsih 2016; Rahman, Hatomi 2021) and the differences in student opinions may cause conflicts (Anggraini, Rozimela, Anwar 2020). These probably were the reasons why sometimes over a third of the respondents preferred working individually rather than with peers (e.g., Anggraini, Rozimela, Anwar 2020). Other challenges that collaborative tasks may cause are related to time management because such activities require more time and student interdependence (Murtiningsih 2016). Thus, even though students mostly like collaborative tasks, a substantial number of students do not prefer them (Koç 2018).

Teachers' opinions also vary. In some studies, teachers believed collaborative activities increased student motivation for learning, had a positive effect on student active class participation (e.g., Couvaneiro, Pedro 2015) and were useful and changed the classroom climate (Zheng, Yu, Lee 2021). Nevertheless, some other EFL teachers were hesitant or not in favour of using group work frequently (Koç 2018; Zheng, Yu, Lee 2021). Some of the reasons were related to the noise and students' use of their mother tongue (Koç 2018). One possible explanation for conflicting findings in the discussed studies might lie in different research designs, tasks, contexts, methodologies and other aspects.

3. METHODOLOGY

Involving participants (N = 19; 16 females and 3 males) of upper-intermediate level English, this case study focused on Lithuanian university students' perceptions of collaborative learning, with a

specific focus on group/ pair work for oral presentations (i.e., jointly made presentations). It aimed to investigate the effects group/ pair collaboration may have had on EFL learners, the development or improvement of various language and other skills and perceptions of their learning experiences. The students of this study were studying English as an obligatory study subject for all first-cycle students at Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) in Kaunas, Lithuania. They took part in the study on a voluntary basis in 2023. Almost half of them – 47.4 % – were 19 years old, 21.1 % were 18, 21.1 % were 20, while the rest of the sample was 22 or older (10.5 %). The majority of the study participants were female students – 84.2 % (15.8 % were male students). This gender imbalance was accidental, but at the same time, it is pertinent to note that it is quite common in Lithuanian higher education. This may also be related to the fact that the study was carried out at a liberal arts university. In contrast, technological universities in the country are more likely to have higher numbers of male students in their study programmes. As the numbers of male and female participants differed greatly, a comparative approach was not used, and the results, it seems, will reflect mostly the point of view of female students, even though they will be referred to as “students” without specifying their gender further in this article.

An online questionnaire on Google Forms was created specifically for the study. This tool was chosen because it is liked by university students more rather than the tool of Forms on Microsoft 365, which is a very similar tool. Many university students prefer using Gmail rather than Outlook, which the university requires, but they are allowed to use their chosen email providers as additional or even the primary means to receive information related to their studies. The students' anonymity was also ensured as they did not need to sign in, and no information related to student identities was collected. The questionnaire through which the data were collected involved both positive and negative questions and statements and sometimes asked for open-ended explanations to receive additional data that would help understand and interpret the study findings. Descriptive statistics (with the help of MS Excel) was used to analyse the responses to closed-ended questionnaire items. Thematic analysis was adopted to reveal the main themes regarding the EFL learners' perspectives on using collaboration in presentation preparation in their explanations. To be more precise, the students' answers were read carefully several times; salient themes were

identified and grouped with illustrative quotes. Thus, the study was both quantitative and qualitative.

The task that the EFL students did was not created specifically for this study, as it is one of the regular tasks done every semester in the class of upper-intermediate English at the university. It is meant to practice students' academic skills and, in a way, display their readiness to continue their English studies later at C1/C2 levels in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses related to their fields of study, as A1–B2 level courses are those of general English. The above-mentioned questionnaire was filled in by the students who worked in pairs or groups of three to prepare presentations for their English class, which was taught by one teacher. They were grouped based on their study programmes so that they could work with their coursemates. If there was no one else studying in the same or related study programme or field, the students worked alone but were not given the questionnaire and were not included in the study because no collaboration could be observed in their activity. Nineteen is the number of students who actually worked collaboratively. All the students were given the same task: to select a recently published scientific article related to their field of study and on an interesting topic, read it, identify the most important aspects, summarise it, paraphrase it and present orally what it was about with slides in a physical classroom. They were provided with specific guidelines to follow and the evaluation criteria set for such presentations by the Institute of Foreign Languages at the university.

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4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, the students were asked to provide their own definitions reflecting their understanding of collaboration. The following are some selected quotes from the language learners' answers (the students' language here and elsewhere was not corrected):

You do the work 50/50 with another person. (student 2, subsequently S2)

A term to describe [...] two individuals work towards the same goal. (S3)

Working together to achieve a common goal. (S7)

Working together, finding answers and solutions together. (S13)

It's working together with one or more people by helping and putting let's say almost the same amount of work. (S14)

In other words, they usually emphasised working together by contributing equally in order to reach a common goal. However, the comments do not really show whether the students see it as a (useful) skill, whether they like it or not and whether it is easier or more difficult when they work with others while doing various tasks at university or outside the university. Less than half of all the students – 42.1 % had had some collaborative experience (presumably at university) before the activity in their EFL class, 26.3 % had had much, 21.1 % had had little, and 10.5 % had had no such experience. Consequently, it is impossible to claim that the students had very limited collaborative experience, but the degree of such experience definitely varied. Regardless of their experience, they knew what collaboration was about and were able to define it.

It was interesting to learn which languages the students used to communicate while collaborating in order to do their tasks. The students were Lithuanian, but the preparation of presentations was happening as a month-long project being done mostly outside the classroom, so it was assumed that English might not have been used very much, even though the task was meant for their English class. The findings show that 52.6 % of the students used only Lithuanian while preparing a presentation collaboratively, but 42.1 % used both English and Lithuanian. The numbers probably would have been different if the students had been required to do the task in class, as English classes at the university level resort to the use of English most of the time and students' native languages are used as a strategy of translanguaging in particular activities, for instance, to provide translation or explanation when other means are not sufficient. Here are some students' explanations on the use of different languages for collaboration while preparing oral presentations:

Just to make it easier to communicate with each other while also saving time. (S2)

Lithuanian – because it's easier to come to an agreement because it's both of our native language. English, because the presentation is in English so there are some thing we have to discuss or at least mention to come to an arrangement. (S3)

We are all Lithuanians. (S4)

Usually we speak in Lithuanian because we are more used to it, but sometimes it is much faster or easier to express yourself in English. (S5)

Because the easiest way to collaborate is in native language. (S11)

My colleague was Lithuanian, so it was easier to work in our native language. (S13)

In short, the students who used Lithuanian, their native language, found it to be more useful, as it was easier and allowed them to communicate faster and more efficiently. However, some students discussed some aspects of their presentations in English, as the presentation had to be delivered in English, and the use of the English language helped them understand particular presentation requirements and criteria in the same way.

Related to the above-discussed use of several languages for collaboration was the question of the means of communication the students employed. It is interesting but unsurprising that 63.2 % of them collaborated online by texting or messaging. Only 26.3 % collaborated face-to-face, while others used other ways to communicate outside the classroom. While explaining their answers the students mentioned that the means of communication in order to collaborate was selected among them based on the ease and comfort of communicating through various technologies:

It is easy just to text with your group mates. (S1)

It's easy. (S2)

In the given circumstances, we found it more comfortable to communicate that way. (S3)

Because then we can do it from the comfort of our home and do it every spare minute we have instead of having to drive back and forth for hours just to meet up for an hour. (S4)

No need to meet up, saves time to text and call. (S9)

We can stay at home and do the project whenever we want. (S10)

It is the most comfortable way so everyone can be involved in this process. (S11)

It was much easier to connect online. (S17)

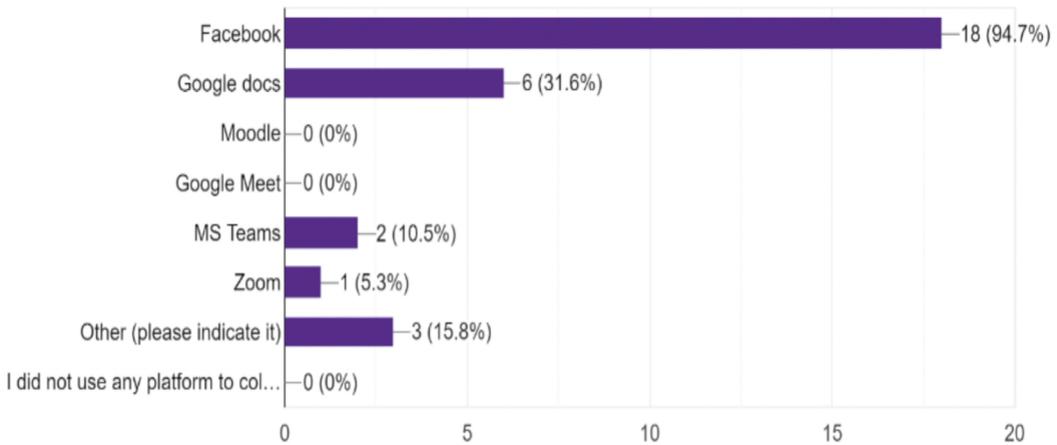
In order to do the EFL task, collaboration usually happened using different online platforms and tools (sometimes several tools by the same pair or group). The most popular one was Facebook, which was used by 94.7 % of the students (see Figure 1). The second most popular one was Google Docs, as 31.6 % found it helpful for collaborative presentation preparation.

Others did not have similar popularity: 10.5 % of the students used MS Teams, 5.3 % used Zoom, and 15.3 % employed other tools they did not indicate. As the students were able to indicate all the tools or platforms, they used by choosing more than one option, it is evident that the same pair/group may have used more than one.

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Figure 1. **Platforms for student collaboration**



Even though Moodle is the learning management system used actively by the university, none of the students used it to collaborate in order to prepare presentations for their EFL class. This is not surprising since university students quite often see Moodle only as a platform to receive study materials, not to communicate with other students or their teachers. MS Teams is used for distance, blended and hybrid learning at the university, but its teachers are strongly advised not to use Facebook and other social media platforms and applications for their classes and course materials, although, as this study has revealed, they could be more appealing for EFL students and save their time while carrying out certain activities. Currently, the author of this article does not plan to replicate the study with a focus on the discussed students' preferred means of communication for collaboration. Still, it could serve as a possible research direction in the future.

While preparing their presentations, the EFL students engaged in a variety of collaborative activities: 94.7 % had collaborative discussions; 84.2 % collaboratively searched for materials (the search for scientific articles using Google and/ or scientific databases the university subscribes to is meant here); 31.6 % did collaborative writing (in English) and the same amount did peer assessment or review while rehearsing their presentations before the delivery in class. Yet, it appears that the collaborative task itself was not perceived by all the students in the same way, as 36.8 %

thought it boosted their confidence, 31.6 % felt just the opposite, and 31.6 % did not know how to refer to their experience. Here are some examples of positive views:

Having another colleague to work beside me ensures a better experience and mood overall. (S3)

This collaboration helped me find my first friend who is very encouraging and supports me through hardships. (S6)

The following are some negative views:

I like doing work on my own. (S2)

I felt that my partner was not doing their part and just wanted me to do everything and that annoyed me. (S9)

The opinions on whether collaborative presentation preparation promoted the students' learning autonomy were divided almost equally as well, as 36.8 % agreed it did, 31.6 % said it did not and 31.6 % did not have an opinion. Here are some positive views on learner autonomy:

Yes, I had to take responsibility for my part of the presentation and help when my partner needed help. (S5)

I got to know how to work for good results. (S9)

Here are some negative views:

It just gave me a reason to be angry at someone. (S3)

I work better alone. (S7)

Nevertheless, more students felt intrinsically motivated – 42.1 % and fewer were not sure – 25.3 %. The same amount, 31.6 %, answered negatively. Some of the comments on the promotion of intrinsic motivation can be seen below:

Yes, [I felt motivated] because I can't fail others. (S5)

The way I see how my colleagues are motivated to succeed motivates me as well. (S6)

When I saw my pair [mate] doing work, I wanted more to do it too. (S11)

In other words, seeing other pair or group members work increased students' intrinsic motivation and encouraged them to do their part of the task. This probably would not have happened while working alone. Later, the students were asked whether this collaborative activity had heightened their self-esteem. The number of those who said yes and no was the same – 36.8 %. Others were not certain about it. The negative answers were mostly related to the fear of public speaking (in English) or the students' dislike of presentations in general. In contrast, the positive ones reflected the need to step up for the good of a pair or group and help others.

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The opinions on whether the activity increased their confidence in writing/ making a presentation/ slides (in English) were divided, as 36.8 % said yes, and the same amount did not know. In comparison, 26.3 % admitted this was not the case. Some of the students' comments emphasised their confidence about specific presentation skills, for instance: "It increased my confidence in paraphrasing since the presentation required to paraphrase everything to our best ability" (S7). Paraphrasing was studied by these EFL students in class, and later, they had to apply the knowledge they had previously gained practically in their presentations as well.

It can be stated that the activity of collaborative presentation preparation definitely did not lower the following student anxieties: the general anxiety related to the English language, the anxiety related to the study subject of English as a foreign language at the upper-intermediate level, and the anxiety of public speaking, since a significant number of students (52.6 %) noted so in their answers. On the other hand, 26.3 % did not have any anxiety (which was helpful for their teacher to know), and for 15.8 % of the study participants, the level of anxiety decreased. Others were not sure about it. Below are some examples reflecting the opinion of the majority (negative/ did not decrease their anxiety):

I am [still] afraid of making mistakes. (S1)

It made my anxiety worse. (S8)

I still need a lot of practise to make the anxiety disappear. (S13)

The examples of positive opinions are the following:

Yes [it became lower] because if I fail, someone can help me out. (S3)

Yes. It did [become lower], since I realized the task was achievable. (S6)

That is, those students who felt their anxiety towards the English language, their English class or public speaking decreased thought so because while working in pairs or groups, they were never alone and could expect help from other students while delivering their presentations, which in turn made them be at ease. In addition, working together made them realise the task itself was not as difficult as it might have seemed at first sight or as it might have seemed if they had needed to work alone.

Collaborative presentation preparation was also perceived as time-consuming (52.6 %) or even a waste of time (31.6 %). Yet, the activity helped to build caring relationships with their peers, as it was noted by 63.2 % of the students. 31.6 % did not build such

relationships, while others could not provide any answer. The quotes below reflect the opinions of the majority that made new friends through the activity:

We get to know each other better. (S2)

During our conversations, our friendship status increased because of the time and experience we shared. (S3)

I made a friend. (S6)

I was able to talk to the person about other things. (S7)

The last question of the questionnaire provided the study participants with a list of 21 statements and asked them to choose as many as possible to reflect on their overall collaborative experience while preparing an oral presentation for their EFL class. They confirmed that the students established friendships, which in turn helped to feel comfortable and equal, provide guidance to peers, distribute tasks, achieve mutual understanding, realise their ideas were accepted by the pair/group members, boost their English and presentation preparation skills.

Such friendships may have been one of the main reasons that caused the students to change their opinions about the subject of upper-intermediate English as well, as over 42.1 % felt that their attitude towards it had become better. An example illustrating another reason for changing opinions is: "It is more interesting than doing exercises" (S4). Therefore, it seems that the activities done in a foreign language classroom can greatly affect students. If the activities they do are interesting, the students' attitudes towards the study subjects can become more positive, bringing more benefits in learning outcomes. According to Vytautas Magnus University regulations, undergraduate students of all study programmes, except for the ones of English Philology, must study English until level C1/C2 proficiency (according to the CEFR) is achieved if these students are not able to provide proof, such as international certificates, of having achieved it earlier. As a result, some students may feel unhappy they are forced to study something they do not want to, especially when the subjects are not directly related to their fields of study. Another reason for resistance is the students' selfperceived excellent proficiency in English after graduating from high school. However, the university placement test quite often shows otherwise, and thus, such students are required to study lower levels of English to fill in their knowledge gaps and improve their skills. It seems that the task of collaborative oral presentation preparation contributed to changing the negative or reserved students' attitudes and making

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them more positive. However, 26.3 % of the study participants were not sure if their opinions changed, and the rest of the sample (31.6 %) did not change their opinions (but it was not clear if the opinions were positive or negative).

At the very end of the questionnaire, the study participants could provide any comments they wanted to. Most students had nothing to say, and one complained that they did not like pair and group work. However, there was one that is relevant while discussing the study findings in particular: "Even though this task annoys me a little, we're doing it. It let me find a friendship and find new things in knowledge which I wouldn't have looked for myself" (S17). This comment again emphasises relationships and friendships that individual students could build through the collaborative activity they did in their EFL class. At the same time, they could gain knowledge related to their fields of study while reading scientific articles in English.

5. CONCLUSION

As the study participants defined the essence of collaboration in terms of working together with others to achieve a particular goal, it is not surprising that the positive effect of collaborative oral presentation preparation was the caring relationships that they built with their peers. These relationships helped them to feel comfortable and accepted, provide guidance, distribute the tasks among their group members equally, and feel that their opinions were heard.

Since the students were Lithuanian, naturally, they usually used their native language to build such relationships and do collaborative activities, as the students mostly worked outside the EFL classroom. Still, the main reason for the language choice was the ease of communication. However, the use of both English and Lithuanian was not much less widespread, as the content of the presentations they were preparing was in English. In addition, usually, the students resorted to online communication while collaborating, mostly on Facebook, since it was easier and more comfortable that way. The activities they engaged in online were collaborative discussions, searching for materials, writing, and peer assessment, which they had initiated themselves. Through these activities, they enjoyed learning English and improved it as well as their presentation preparation skills. Moreover, quite a significant

number of students changed their attitudes towards studying English as well and had more positive views than before.

Nevertheless, the findings of the study should be interpreted with caution, as it is not possible to claim that collaborative oral presentation preparation boosted students' confidence, learning autonomy, self-esteem, intrinsic motivation or confidence in writing/ making a presentation and slides (in English), as the opinions and experiences were very much divided. Moreover, for over half of all the study participants, the activity did not decrease their level of anxiety related to public speaking in English or giving presentations in general. Furthermore, some students saw collaborative presentation preparation as time-consuming or a waste of time, and only a small number improved their interpersonal communication skills. These results obtained in the study are not in line with those by Huang (2021), that the students did improve such skills and found it useful to practice time management and other soft skills. Notwithstanding the findings, knowledge about students' perceptions might be helpful to EFL teachers in teaching and EFL learners in learning any (language) skill collaboratively.

There are several limitations in the study. Students' opinions are subjective and may or may not reflect on the factual improvement of their certain skills, but as the study did not include any pre-test and post-test or did not compare (statistically or otherwise) individual and collaborative presentation preparation activities, it is not possible to double check if students' opinions match the reality. In addition, the findings may not yield generalisability due to the limited number of participants and the gender imbalance. On the other hand, positive opinions may encourage EFL teachers to initiate student collaborative work in oral presentation preparation in the future, which would be a satisfactory result of the study in the long term.

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