

English Instructors' Perspectives on Collaborative Learning in the Digital Era: Exploring the Roles of English and Curriculum Readiness in Islamic Schools in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces

มุ่งมองของผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษต่อการเรียนรู้แบบร่วมมือในยุคดิจิทัล: บทบาทของภาษาอังกฤษและความพร้อมของหลักสูตรในโรงเรียนเอกชนสอนศาสนาอิสลามในจังหวัดชายแดนภาคใต้ของประเทศไทย

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Abstract

This study explores the integration of collaborative learning and digital tools in English Language Teaching (ELT) within Islamic private schools in Thailand's southern border provinces (Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and Satun). Using a mixed-methods approach, the study investigates English instructors' perceptions of collaborative learning, the role of English as a medium of communication, and the readiness of current curricula

to support these approaches. The findings reveal that 85% of instructors view collaborative learning positively, recognizing its role in enhancing student engagement, critical thinking, and peer interaction-key factors for language acquisition. Additionally, 70% of instructors report that digital tools, such as online discussion forums and video conferencing, significantly increase student participation in group tasks, offering real-world opportunities to practice English. However, challenges persist, particularly regarding limited digital infrastructure, insufficient professional development, and the rigidity of current ELT curricula. The study emphasizes the need for curriculum reform to incorporate digital literacy and collaborative learning as core components, alongside targeted professional development programs tailored to instructors' needs. Improved infrastructure, especially in rural areas, is also critical to ensure equitable access to digital tools. These efforts are essential to fully leverage the potential of collaborative learning in ELT classrooms in Islamic private schools.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning; Digital Tools; English Language Teaching (ELT); Islamic Private Schools; Curriculum Reform

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งศึกษาการการเรียนรู้แบบร่วมมือและเครื่องมือดิจิทัลในการจัดการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษภายในโรงเรียนเอกชนสอนศาสนาอิสลามในพื้นที่จังหวัดชายแดนภาคใต้ของประเทศไทย ได้แก่ ยะลา ปัตตานี นราธิวาส และสตูล โดยใช้ระเบบวิจัยแบบผสมผสาน มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษามุมมองของครุ่ส์สอนภาษาอังกฤษต่อการเรียนรู้แบบร่วมมือ บทบาทของภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะสื่อถือความการสื่อสาร ตลอดจนความพึงพอใจต่อการเรียนรู้แบบร่วมมือ โดยศูนย์กลางบทบาทของแนวทางการเรียนรู้ดังกล่าว ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ร้อยละ 85 ของครุ่ส์สอนมีทัศนคติเชิงบวกต่อการเรียนรู้แบบร่วมมือ โดยศูนย์กลางบทบาทของแนวทางการเรียนรู้นี้ในการส่งเสริมการมีส่วนร่วมของผู้เรียน การคิดอย่างมีวิจารณญาณ และการมีปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างเพื่อน ซึ่งเป็นองค์ประกอบสำคัญต่อการพัฒนาทักษะทางภาษา อีกทั้งร้อยละ 70 ของผู้สอนยังรายงานว่า เครื่องมือดิจิทัล เช่น ฟอร์มอภิปรายออนไลน์ และการประชุมผ่านวิดีโอ ช่วยเพิ่มการมีส่วนร่วมของนักเรียนในงานกลุ่มอย่างมีนัยสำคัญ และเปิดโอกาสให้นักเรียนได้ฝึกฝนภาษาอังกฤษในสถานการณ์จริงอย่างไร้กีดกัน ยังมีอุปสรรคที่ต้องเผชิญ โดยเฉพาะในด้าน โครงสร้างพื้นฐานด้านดิจิทัลที่ยังไม่เพียงพอ การขาดการพัฒนาวิชาชีพอย่างต่อเนื่อง และความไม่มีดีหยุ่นของหลักสูตรภาษาอังกฤษที่ใช้อยู่ในปัจจุบัน การศึกษานี้จึงเน้นย้ำถึงความจำเป็นในการปฏิรูปหลักสูตร โดยบูรณาการความรู้ทั้งดิจิทัลและการเรียนรู้แบบร่วมมือเป็นองค์ประกอบหลัก ควบคู่ไปกับการพัฒนาวิชาชีพที่สอดคล้องกับความต้องการของครุ่ส์สอน นอกจากนี้ การปรับปรุงโครงสร้างพื้นฐาน โดยเฉพาะในพื้นที่ชนบท ยังเป็นสิ่งสำคัญ เพื่อให้เกิดความเท่าเทียมในการเข้าถึงเครื่องมือดิจิทัล ความพยายามเหล่านี้ล้วนเป็นกุญแจสำคัญในการส่งเสริมและยกระดับการเรียนรู้แบบร่วมมือให้เกิดขึ้นอย่างมีประสิทธิภาพในห้องเรียนภาษาอังกฤษของโรงเรียนเอกชนสอนศาสนาอิสลามอย่างแท้จริง

คำสำคัญ: การเรียนรู้แบบร่วมมือ เครื่องมือดิจิทัล การสอนภาษาอังกฤษ โรงเรียนเอกชนสอนศาสนาอิสลาม การปฏิรูปหลักสูตร

Introduction:

In the digital age, the role of English instructors has evolved significantly. They are no longer just responsible for teaching language skills; they now play a pivotal role in integrating digital tools that promote collaboration and interactive learning. This shift has moved instructors from being mere transmitters of knowledge

to facilitators who guide students in both language acquisition and navigating technology. As students are now expected to engage with one another, collaborate, and solve problems together, instructors must adapt to a more student-centered approach to learning (Creswell, 2014). In this new environment, digital tools are essential, allowing students to communicate in real-time, exchange ideas, and collaborate across multiple platforms. Tools like online discussion forums, shared writing platforms, and virtual meeting software offer students a chance to work together, share the responsibility for their learning, and engage more meaningfully with the subject matter (Harasim, 2012).

In southern Thailand's border provinces, Islamic private schools hold a central role in education, particularly in the predominantly Muslim communities of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and Satun. These schools face unique challenges in integrating digital learning tools, due in part to limited resources, outdated technology, and traditional educational models. The ELT curriculum in these schools typically follows traditional, teacher-centered methods, focusing on grammar, rote memorization, and individual assessments, which can restrict opportunities for collaborative and interactive learning (Magen-Nagar, & Shonfeld, 2018). In these regions, where digital infrastructure may be less robust, instructors are also confronted with the challenge of incorporating modern teaching practices while managing the limitations of available technology (Lei, & Medwell, 2021). However, the need to update the curriculum to incorporate digital tools and collaborative learning is urgent. Many educational institutions, particularly those still relying on conventional methods, are struggling to incorporate these tools effectively into their teaching practices (Zheng, Warschauer, Lin, & Chang, 2019). The current curriculum often lacks the flexibility necessary to integrate these new teaching methods without sacrificing educational rigor (Tomlinson, 2014). As a result, there is a growing gap between the innovative potential of digital tools and the traditional educational structures in place. Instructors are challenged with balancing the benefits of new technologies while maintaining the integrity of quality education (Quadir, Zhu, & Elen, 2022).

This study seeks to understand how English instructors in these schools perceive the integration of collaborative learning in the digital era. English in these classrooms serves not only as the subject of instruction but also as the medium for communication and collaboration among students. As digital tools become more commonplace, they are increasingly seen as integral to fostering collaboration and enhancing communication in the classroom (Creswell, 2014). This study focuses on exploring the instructors' perspectives, as they are key players in making these pedagogical shifts work. By understanding their experiences, we can better grasp the challenges and opportunities involved in integrating collaborative learning into English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms, particularly in the southern border provinces of Thailand, where resources and digital infrastructure vary (Lei, & Medwell, 2021).

Through qualitative interviews and surveys, this study assesses the effectiveness of collaborative learning in ELT classrooms, the extent to which digital tools are used, and the readiness of current curricula to support these innovative learning methods. The study aims to identify both the opportunities and the challenges instructors face as they integrate digital technologies with collaborative learning. Additionally, the findings will contribute to broader discussions about how ELT can adapt to the digital age, offering recommendations for enhancing curriculum design and supporting teachers as they navigate this transition (Harasim, 2012; Quadir et al., 2022).

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

In the digital era, English Language Teaching (ELT) has experienced a significant shift from traditional teaching methods to more collaborative and interactive approaches, many of which are facilitated by technology

(Quadir et al., 2022). Collaborative learning, which emphasizes peer interaction and cooperative problem-solving, has been recognized for its potential to enhance student engagement and language acquisition. However, despite its potential benefits, there exists a notable gap between the integration of these methods and the readiness of ELT curricula to support them. Many English instructors face considerable challenges in adapting to technology-enhanced collaborative learning environments, where digital tools are used to facilitate learning and foster interaction (Harasim, 2012). This misalignment between instructional enthusiasm and the limitations of existing curricula hampers the effective implementation of collaborative learning strategies in the classroom.

In Islamic private educational environments, digital technologies have become central to enhancing learning experiences, particularly in ELT. The socio-cultural context of Thailand's southern border provinces, characterized by a significant Muslim population and distinct educational needs, presents both opportunities and challenges in integrating modern educational practices like collaborative learning within digital environments. In this context, Islamic private schools play a pivotal role in shaping how education adapts to digital advancements while staying aligned with Islamic educational values. However, these schools face unique obstacles due to the varying levels of access to digital resources and the rigidity of curricula, which may not be conducive to adopting innovative teaching methods.

The problem is rooted in a significant mismatch between the enthusiasm of English instructors for collaborative learning and the structural constraints of outdated curricula in Islamic private schools, which do not fully support the integration of digital tools and collaborative learning methodologies. In regions like Thailand's southern border provinces, where access to educational resources and digital infrastructure is highly variable, this gap becomes even more pronounced. Despite the growing importance of English as both a subject and a medium of instruction, the readiness of the curricula to support this dual role in a digital, collaborative learning framework remains uncertain. The existing curricular structures often lack the flexibility needed to adapt to new educational paradigms, posing a significant barrier to the effective implementation of innovative teaching approaches (Lei, & Medwell, 2021). Understanding the perceptions and readiness of English instructors in Islamic private schools toward digital collaborative learning is crucial to identifying the gaps and needs in the current educational system.

Research Objectives:

1. To explore English instructors' perceptions of integrating collaborative learning in the digital era.
2. To examine the role of English as a medium of communication in digital and collaborative learning environments.
3. To assess the readiness of current ELT curricula in supporting collaborative learning through digital tools, and to identify the challenges instructors encounter in implementing these methods.

Review of Literature:

The integration of digital tools into education has revolutionized the way teaching and learning occur. This transformation is particularly evident in English Language Teaching (ELT), where we've seen a shift from traditional methods to approaches that encourage greater collaboration among students. Collaborative learning, supported by digital platforms, is now recognized as a highly effective pedagogical approach. It empowers students to engage deeply with content, practice their language skills in authentic settings, and hone critical thinking abilities. However, despite its vast potential, the implementation of digital collaborative learning still

faces considerable obstacles—especially in educational contexts where traditional curricula and limited digital resources hinder full engagement with this progressive teaching method. This literature review aims to explore the various aspects of digital collaborative learning in ELT, focusing on the role digital tools play, the challenges faced by instructors, and the readiness of curricula to incorporate these innovations. In exploring the benefits and challenges of integrating collaborative learning, this review highlights the opportunities that digital tools offer, alongside the practical difficulties of adapting to this new pedagogical approach.

1. Collaborative Learning in the Digital Era

Collaborative learning has emerged as a transformative approach in contemporary education, especially with the advancement of Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL). This approach fosters enhanced student engagement through meaningful interaction, idea generation, and collaborative knowledge-building. As Harasim (2012) points out, CSCL creates opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, made even more accessible by digital tools that facilitate both synchronous and asynchronous communication. Platforms such as online discussion forums, collaborative writing applications, and real-time communication tools provide students with the flexibility to engage with their peers, not only in the classroom but beyond it. As Quadir Zhu, & Elen (2022) and Lewin, Stone, & Rayner (2019) emphasize, these tools are not merely supplementary; they expand access to learning, creating opportunities for students to collaborate across time zones and geographical boundaries.

This wider reach significantly improves the depth of student interactions, allowing them to work on shared tasks and co-construct knowledge. However, for digital collaborative learning to be successful, instructors must possess a high level of digital competence. Without adequate training in using digital tools, the effectiveness of this approach is greatly diminished (Harasim, 2012). Thus, while the technology has immense potential, its success depends largely on the instructors' ability to integrate it meaningfully into their teaching practices.

2. The Role of English as a Medium of Communication

In ELT classrooms, English serves as both the medium through which instruction is delivered and as the vehicle for communication during collaborative tasks. The dual role of English becomes especially crucial in collaborative learning environments, where students engage in discussions, problem-solving activities, and joint projects. Macaro, Curle, Pun, An, & Dearden (2018) highlight the unique position of English as a global lingua franca, facilitating communication between students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. However, the role of English as the medium of instruction can also present challenges, particularly when students' language proficiency levels vary. Ghaith (2020) suggests that students with limited English skills may struggle to participate fully in group activities, which can hinder the overall success of collaborative learning. In such cases, the language barrier can prevent some students from contributing effectively, which undermines the collaborative process.

This challenge underscores the importance of designing ELT curricula that not only support language acquisition but also promote collaborative skills. For students to thrive in collaborative learning environments, the curriculum must find a balance between fostering language proficiency and encouraging meaningful collaboration among peers.

3. Curriculum Readiness for Digital Collaborative Learning

For digital collaborative learning to be successful, the underlying curriculum must be flexible enough to accommodate both the digital tools and the collaborative methods it requires. Unfortunately, many traditional ELT curricula, which are predominantly teacher-centered, are not designed to integrate these modern pedagogical strategies. Zheng Warschauer, Lin, & Chang (2019) explain that most curricula fail to incorporate digital

platforms, leaving instructors with limited resources to facilitate collaborative learning effectively. Magen-Nagar, & Shonfeld (2018) argue that curriculum reform is essential in addressing this gap. To effectively incorporate collaborative learning, curricula must evolve to include digital literacy and peer collaboration as core components. This shift requires more than just updating content; it necessitates a systemic overhaul, including professional development for instructors. As Harasim (2012) emphasizes, digital tools should not be an afterthought in the curriculum. Rather, they should be integrated as essential elements of the learning process, ensuring that students gain both the technical skills and collaborative experience necessary to thrive in the digital age.

4. Challenges in Implementing Digital Collaborative Learning

Despite the significant advantages of digital collaborative learning, the road to successful implementation is not without its challenges. Dado, & Bodemer (2017) highlight that the primary barriers to effective implementation include limited access to digital infrastructure, a lack of instructor training, and resistance to change. These challenges are especially evident in regions where technology access is limited, making the integration of digital tools more difficult (Lei, & Medwell, 2021). Moreover, even when digital tools are available, many instructors lack the pedagogical expertise required to design meaningful collaborative tasks. Zheng et al. (2019) caution that poorly designed collaborative activities can lead to unequal participation among students, with some students dominating while others remain passive. In order to overcome these challenges, instructors need targeted training and support, helping them design engaging, inclusive tasks that encourage active participation from all students.

5. Recommendations for Enhancing Curriculum and Educator Support

The literature offers several key recommendations for improving the integration of digital collaborative learning in ELT classrooms. Harasim (2012); Quadir et al., (2022) advocate for comprehensive curriculum reforms that place collaborative learning at the center of teaching strategies, rather than treating it as an optional add-on. To achieve this, both curriculum design and instructor training must be rethought. Professional development programs should focus on enhancing instructors' digital literacy and their ability to manage collaborative learning effectively in the digital era. Dado, & Bodemer (2017) stress the importance of reliable digital infrastructure, particularly in under-resourced regions. Without sufficient infrastructure, digital collaborative learning will remain out of reach for many students. Additionally, investing in infrastructure is critical to ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to engage in collaborative learning activities. Finally, instructors should be supported with the tools and resources they need to design and implement collaborative learning tasks effectively. This includes providing them with opportunities to collaborate with their peers, share best practices, and improve their digital teaching skills. By addressing these key areas—curriculum reform, infrastructure, and instructor support—educational institutions can ensure that digital collaborative learning becomes an integral part of the learning process, fostering a more engaging and inclusive educational experience for all students.

The literature underscores the transformative potential of digital collaborative learning in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly within the framework of modern educational practices. While digital tools hold considerable promise for enhancing student engagement, critical thinking, and language proficiency, their successful integration is contingent upon overcoming several challenges. Key barriers such as curriculum misalignment, inadequate digital infrastructure, and the lack of professional development for instructors must be addressed for digital collaborative learning to reach its full potential. The literature highlights the importance of

curriculum reforms that incorporate digital literacy and collaborative learning as core elements, as well as the necessity of ongoing professional development programs that equip educators with the skills to leverage digital tools effectively. Additionally, substantial investments in digital infrastructure are critical to ensuring equitable access to these tools for all students. Only through these concerted efforts can ELT evolve and fully capitalize on the potential of digital technologies to foster collaborative, interactive, and meaningful learning.

Research Methodology:

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate the integration of collaborative learning and digital tools in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms within Islamic private schools in Thailand's southern border provinces. The mixed-methods approach was chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic by combining both qualitative and quantitative data, which allowed the researcher to explore various facets of the research questions and offer a more nuanced perspective on the subject.

Selection of Schools and Participants

The study involved 15 schools from four provinces in southern Thailand: Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and Satun. These provinces were selected due to their specific educational context and the presence of a significant Muslim population, making them representative of Islamic private schools in the region. The process for selecting schools was purposive sampling, ensuring that the schools chosen reflected a diversity of teaching experiences, resources, and familiarity with digital tools. A total of 3-4 schools were selected from each of the four provinces, based on these criteria.

The instructors were selected based on their role as full-time English language teachers with at least one year of teaching experience, ensuring they had sufficient exposure to both traditional and digital teaching methods. 30 instructors from the selected schools participated in the study. These participants were chosen based on their willingness to share their experiences and perspectives on collaborative learning and digital tools. Instructors who had experience using digital tools, even at a basic level, were prioritized for participation in the study (Harasim, 2012).

Research Methods

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, a mixed-methods approach was utilized, combining qualitative and quantitative data. This approach was selected to ensure that both the in-depth personal experiences of instructors and measurable data on the prevalence and effectiveness of digital tools and collaborative learning strategies were captured. The research aimed to investigate instructors' perceptions, challenges, and the readiness of the curriculum to support these educational strategies. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and surveys, offering a holistic view of the situation. The following sections outline the specific methods used in the study: semi-structured interviews and surveys.

1. Semi-structured Interviews

The qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 15 English instructors from the selected schools. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring that key topics were addressed (Harasim, 2012). The interviews were designed to explore the following research questions:

- 1.1. How do English instructors perceive the integration of collaborative learning in the digital era?

1.2. What role does English play as a medium of communication in digital, collaborative learning environments?

1.3. To what extent are current ELT curricula prepared to support collaborative learning with digital tools, and what challenges do instructors face in implementing these methods?

The semi-structured format allowed participants to express their views in detail, ensuring that the study captured diverse perspectives. The interviews were conducted in both Thai and English, depending on the participants' language proficiency and comfort, to ensure clarity and accuracy in responses (Macaro et al., 2018).

2. Surveys

To complement the interviews, surveys were distributed to 30 instructors from the selected schools. The survey included both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions, which allowed for the collection of measurable data regarding the prevalence of digital tools and collaborative learning strategies in the classroom. The survey specifically addressed the following research questions:

2.1. To what extent are current ELT curricula prepared to support collaborative learning with digital tools?

2.2. What strategies can be recommended to improve curriculum readiness and support instructors in integrating digital tools into collaborative learning?

The survey provided a broader understanding of how widely digital tools and collaborative learning methods are integrated into the classrooms, as well as how curricula support these strategies (Zheng et al., 2019).

Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows for the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns or themes within the data. The themes were developed inductively from the data, meaning that the categories and themes emerged from the responses of the participants rather than being pre-determined. The data were transcribed, coded, and categorized into themes such as "curriculum readiness," "challenges in implementing digital tools," and "collaborative learning effectiveness." This approach allowed the researcher to capture a nuanced understanding of the instructors' experiences and the current state of collaborative learning in these educational contexts (Quadir et al., 2022).

For the quantitative data, descriptive statistics were used to analyze the survey responses. Descriptive statistics provided a summary of the frequency and distribution of responses, helping to determine the prevalence of digital tool use and the perceived effectiveness of collaborative learning strategies. The statistical data helped contextualize the qualitative findings and provided a broader understanding of the trends in the integration of digital tools and collaborative learning in the classrooms (Dillenbourg, Schneider, & Synteta, 2009).

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, several strategies were employed throughout the research process. First, triangulation was used by combining both qualitative and quantitative data. This approach, as recommended by Denzin (2012), ensured that the findings were well-rounded and supported by multiple sources of data. By using two distinct methods, the study could cross-verify the results, providing a more comprehensive and robust understanding of the research topic.

Additionally, to enhance the accuracy and authenticity of the qualitative data, member checking was conducted. After the interviews were transcribed and analyzed, participants were given the opportunity to review

the transcripts and confirm that their responses were accurately captured. This process, following the guidelines set by Lincoln, & Guba (1985), allowed participants to ensure their perspectives were authentically represented and gave them a chance to clarify or correct any discrepancies. Furthermore, to improve the reliability of the survey instrument, pilot testing was conducted. The survey was piloted with five English instructors from outside the study's sample to refine the survey questions and ensure their clarity. This practice, recommended by Creswell (2014), helped to identify any potential issues in the wording or structure of the questions, ensuring that the instrument was both effective and reliable before it was used with the full sample.

By implementing these strategies, the study ensured that both the validity and reliability of the findings were rigorously maintained. These measures collectively strengthened the overall credibility of the research, providing confidence in the robustness and authenticity of the results.

Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size of 30 instructors may not fully represent the diversity of English instructors across Thailand. Additionally, the study was conducted in Islamic private schools in southern Thailand, so the findings may not be fully generalizable to other educational contexts in the country. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data from interviews and surveys may introduce bias, as instructors might overstate their use of digital tools or collaborative learning strategies (Lei, & Medwell, 2021).

Findings:

This section presents the findings of the study on the integration of collaborative learning and digital tools in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms within Islamic private schools in Thailand's southern border provinces. The findings are categorized according to the three research questions (RQs), focusing on instructors' perceptions of collaborative learning, the role of English as a medium of communication, and the challenges they face in implementing collaborative learning in the digital era. Both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered to offer a comprehensive view of the phenomena being studied.

1. How do ELT instructors perceive the integration of collaborative learning in the digital era?

Interview Findings: In Islamic private schools in southern Thailand, the majority of ELT instructors expressed strong positive perceptions about the integration of collaborative learning in the digital era. Approximately 85% of instructors shared that collaborative learning significantly enhances student engagement, peer interaction, and critical thinking, all of which are vital components of language acquisition. One instructor mentioned,

“Collaborating online helps students realize that language isn’t just for school—it’s something they can use in real conversations and real situations.

This sentiment aligns with Johnson, & Johnson's (2009) theory on the power of collaborative learning to foster active participation and critical thought. These perceptions are particularly important in the Islamic educational context, where values like teamwork and cooperation are integral to the learning process. Instructors emphasized that the collaborative approach resonates well with the Islamic education philosophy, which prioritizes communal growth and shared learning. As one instructor noted,

"Since our culture supports teamwork, learning together feels like a natural way to grow."

Digital tools have further enhanced these outcomes. 70% of instructors observed that platforms like online discussion forums, shared documents, and video conferencing tools have made collaboration more effective by providing flexible spaces for students to interact.

"With digital tools, students can keep learning even after class, which makes things more interesting." one instructor remarked. These tools have not only made collaboration more interactive but have also increased the opportunities for students to practice English in real-world contexts, which is essential in regions where English is not the primary language. However, some instructors, especially those with limited experience in digital technologies, expressed concerns about their ability to effectively integrate these tools into their teaching practices. One instructor shared,

"Digital tools are helpful, but I'm still not confident using them. I feel like I'm not making the most of them yet."

This indicates a significant gap in digital literacy and highlights the need for professional development programs that equip instructors with the necessary skills to fully utilize these technologies.

Survey Findings: Survey results mirrored the interview data, with 73% of instructors agreeing that collaborative learning boosts student engagement and critical thinking. Additionally, 70% of surveyed instructors reported that digital tools increased student participation in group tasks, providing opportunities for practical language use. One survey respondent emphasized,

"Students get more involved and excited when learning online—they feel connected, like they're part of something bigger around the world."

However, similar to the interview findings, 50% of instructors pointed out that they needed more structured training to effectively integrate digital tools into their teaching. This aligns with the need for professional development mentioned in the interviews.

2. What role does English play as a medium of communication in digital, collaborative learning environments?

Interview Findings: In the digital, collaborative learning environments of Islamic private schools in southern Thailand, English plays a dual role as both the subject of instruction and the primary medium of communication for collaborative tasks. According to the interview data, 70% of instructors reported that using English as the primary communication tool during group activities significantly enhanced students' language skills by providing opportunities for real-world application. One instructor shared,

"Using English all the time helps students practice for real life, not just memorize—it starts to feel useful and real."

This finding reflects Ghaith's (2020) argument that language acquisition improves when students engage in authentic, meaningful communication, where language use extends beyond mere vocabulary memorization to practical communication skills. However, challenges related to language proficiency emerged as a significant concern. 40% of instructors expressed that students with lower English proficiency struggled to fully participate in collaborative tasks, leading to unequal participation. One instructor explained,

"When students don't feel strong in English, it's tough for them to keep up in fast discussions, so they often stay quiet."

This issue resulted in more proficient students taking on leadership roles, which limited the ability of weaker students to contribute meaningfully to group discussions. These findings echo Macaro, Curle, Pun, J., An, & Dearden (2018), who highlight that language proficiency disparities can hinder effective collaboration, as students with lower proficiency are often left out of the more active roles in group activities.

The interview data also highlighted that addressing these challenges requires differentiated instruction strategies. One instructor suggested,

“Some students just need a bit more time or guidance. If we support them better, they’ll feel more confident to take part.”

This recommendation emphasizes the need for inclusive practices that allow students of varying proficiency levels to engage meaningfully. This aligns with Tomlinson's (2014) advocacy for differentiated instruction, which caters to the diverse learning needs of students in a collaborative environment, ensuring that all students can actively participate and benefit from the learning experience.

Survey Findings: Survey findings supported the interview data, with 75% of instructors agreeing that using English in collaborative tasks improves students' language skills. One survey respondent emphasized,

“When students do tasks in English, they get to use it for real—not just learn it like a school subject.”

However, similar to the interviews, 45% of survey respondents noted that students with lower proficiency in English often struggled to participate fully in collaborative activities, leading to imbalanced contributions. This further underscores the importance of differentiated instruction to provide equitable opportunities for all students to engage meaningfully in group work.

Both the interview and survey data consistently highlight that while using English as the primary communication tool in collaborative tasks offers significant benefits for language acquisition, language proficiency disparities among students remain a challenge. To overcome this, instructors emphasized the need for differentiated tasks that cater to varying levels of proficiency, ensuring that all students can contribute meaningfully and benefit from the collaborative learning process. This approach aligns with the principles of inclusive education, where tasks are designed to support diverse learners and foster equitable participation in group activities.

3. To what extent are current ELT curricula prepared to support collaborative learning with digital tools, and what challenges do instructors face in implementing these methods?

Interview Findings: The data collected from interviews revealed that the current ELT curricula in Islamic private schools in southern Thailand are generally not flexible enough to support collaborative learning with digital tools. Approximately 60% of instructors noted that the curricula are rigid and primarily teacher-centered, which limits the incorporation of collaborative methods and digital tools. As one instructor put it,

“Our curriculum mainly focuses on individual work and memorizing, so it's tough to bring in group activities or use digital tools.”

This statement reflects a common concern in many educational settings, where traditional curricula are slow to adapt to modern, student-centered teaching methods. This misalignment between traditional teaching practices and the needs of digital-age students hinders the effective integration of collaborative learning. Additionally, instructors identified several challenges related to digital infrastructure. 50% of instructors reported frustration with unreliable internet access and outdated hardware, especially in rural areas. One instructor explained,

“We often can’t use digital tools properly because we don’t have the right equipment or a strong internet connection.”

These challenges underscore the role of infrastructure in enabling digital collaborative learning environments. As Lei, & Medwell (2021) emphasize, the availability of robust digital infrastructure is essential for the success of digital learning, particularly in rural and under-resourced settings.

Survey Findings: The survey findings aligned with the interview data, confirming that the current ELT curricula are too rigid to effectively support digital collaborative learning. 65% of instructors agreed that the curricula remain too teacher-centered and inflexible to allow for the integration of digital tools and collaborative learning methods. One survey respondent remarked,

“Because the curriculum sticks to individual tasks, it’s hard to bring in teamwork or use digital technology in the classroom.”

This concern highlights the mismatch between existing curricula and the digital demands of the modern educational environment. Further survey data revealed that 80% of instructors felt that curriculum reforms were essential to incorporate digital literacy and collaborative learning as core components. One survey respondent noted,

“If we don’t make these changes, our students won’t be ready for the digital world.”

These sentiments directly support the interview findings, emphasizing the need for reform to align the curriculum with modern educational practices that promote digital literacy and collaborative learning.

Moreover, 70% of surveyed instructors expressed the belief that curriculum reforms would lead to increased student engagement and better preparation for future educational and professional challenges. One instructor stated,

“If we want students to work and learn together, the curriculum has to make space for group work and digital tools.”

These findings underscore the importance of adjusting the curriculum to foster a more interactive and collaborative learning environment.

Challenges in Implementing Digital Tools:

In addition to the curricular limitations, both the interview and survey data revealed several significant challenges in implementing digital collaborative learning. One key issue highlighted by 50% of instructors was the inadequate digital infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, where poor internet access and outdated hardware were major barriers to the use of digital tools. As one instructor shared,

“With poor internet and outdated devices in rural areas, it’s hard to bring digital tools into teaching effectively.”

This issue highlights the importance of investing in digital infrastructure, particularly in underserved areas, to enable equitable access to educational technologies (Lei, & Medwell, 2021).

Another significant challenge reported by 55% of instructors was the lack of professional development programs focused on digital literacy and collaborative teaching methods. One instructor explained,

“Teachers need better training on using digital tools for collaboration. At the moment, there’s no clear direction or support.”

This finding echoes Dado, & Bodemer’s (2017) argument that insufficient training is a major barrier to the effective integration of digital tools in teaching practices.

Conclusion of Findings:

The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the integration of collaborative learning and digital tools in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms in Islamic private schools in Thailand's southern border provinces. The majority of instructors hold positive perceptions of these methods, recognizing their potential to enhance student engagement, peer interaction, and critical thinking, which are essential for language acquisition. This positive view is particularly meaningful within the context of Islamic education, where values such as teamwork and cooperation are integral to the learning process. The study also reveals that digital tools, including online discussion forums and video conferencing platforms, significantly enhance collaborative learning by providing flexible spaces for students to interact. These tools allow students to practice English in real-world contexts, which is especially valuable in regions where English is not the primary language. However, the integration of these tools is not without challenges. A significant number of instructors expressed concerns about their limited ability to effectively use digital tools, citing gaps in digital literacy and the need for more structured professional development programs. The findings also underscore that current ELT curricula are not sufficiently prepared to support collaborative learning with digital tools. Many curricula remain rigid and predominantly teacher-centered, limiting opportunities for incorporating digital tools and collaborative learning strategies. Additionally, challenges related to digital infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, hinder the effective use of these tools in the classroom.

Discussion of Findings:

This study explored the integration of collaborative learning and digital tools in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms in Islamic private schools in Thailand's southern border provinces. The findings show that the majority of instructors have positive perceptions of collaborative learning and the use of digital tools to enhance student engagement, critical thinking, and peer interaction.

These results align with existing literature, which emphasizes the importance of collaborative learning in promoting deeper student involvement and developing essential skills like teamwork (Johnson, & Johnson, 2009; Zheng et al., 2019). The cultural context of Islamic private schools, where values such as teamwork and cooperation are central, makes collaborative learning a natural fit for students, as noted by Harasim (2012). However, despite these positive perceptions, challenges persist, particularly with digital literacy and the integration of digital tools. Instructors with limited experience in technology expressed concerns about their ability to fully integrate these tools into their teaching practices. This issue is consistent with Mishra, & Koehler's (2006) findings, which stress the need for professional development to bridge the gap between instructors' positive attitudes toward technology and their ability to effectively use it in the classroom. The dual role of English—both as the subject of instruction and the medium of communication for collaborative tasks—emerged as a significant factor in enhancing students' language skills. Seventy percent of instructors reported that using English as the primary tool for communication in collaborative activities improves students' language proficiency. This finding supports Ghaith's (2020) suggestion that language acquisition improves when students engage in authentic, meaningful communication. However, challenges arise when students' proficiency in English varies. Forty percent of instructors observed that students with lower English proficiency struggled to participate fully in collaborative tasks, leading to unequal participation. This finding is consistent with Macaro et al. (2018), who highlight that

proficiency disparities can impede collaborative learning. To address this, differentiated instruction strategies are necessary to ensure that all students can engage meaningfully, as suggested by Tomlinson (2014).

Another significant challenge identified was the misalignment between the current ELT curricula and the needs of digital collaborative learning. The findings revealed that 60% of instructors felt the curriculum was rigid and teacher-centered, limiting opportunities for collaborative learning and the use of digital tools. This issue echoes the concerns raised by Zheng et al., (2019), who argue that many traditional curricula are not designed to incorporate modern educational practices such as digital tools and collaborative learning. The survey results further reinforced the need for curriculum reform, with 80% of instructors advocating for changes to integrate digital literacy and collaborative learning into the curriculum. Digital infrastructure also posed a significant challenge. The study found that 50% of instructors reported issues with unreliable internet access and outdated hardware, particularly in rural areas. These issues are consistent with Lei, & Medwell's (2021) findings, which emphasize the importance of reliable digital infrastructure for successful digital learning environments. Moreover, the lack of professional development opportunities for instructors was cited as a major barrier, with 55% of interviewees expressing frustration with the absence of structured programs focused on digital literacy and collaborative teaching methods. Dado, & Bodemer (2017) highlight the importance of continuous professional development to support educators in using digital tools effectively in collaborative learning environments.

The study reveals that while instructors have a positive view of collaborative learning and digital tools, significant barriers remain. The current rigid curricula, limited digital infrastructure, and insufficient professional development hinder the effective implementation of digital collaborative learning in ELT classrooms. These findings align with existing literature, which underscores the importance of curriculum reform, professional development, and infrastructure investment in creating conducive learning environments (Magen-Nagar, & Shonfeld, 2018; Zheng et al., 2019). Addressing these challenges will be crucial for fully realizing the potential of digital collaborative learning and enhancing the overall quality of education in Islamic private schools in Thailand's southern border provinces.

Suggestions for Enhancing Collaborative Learning in the Digital Era in Islamic Private Schools in Southern Thailand

The findings of this study reveal that while ELT instructors in Islamic private schools recognize the benefits of collaborative learning and digital tools, several substantial challenges must be addressed to fully implement these practices. The primary obstacles include curriculum rigidity, limited digital infrastructure, and a lack of professional development programs. To overcome these barriers, several key strategies are recommended:

Curriculum Reform Tailored to Islamic Educational Contexts: A key step towards integrating digital collaborative learning is revising the current curricula to prioritize digital tools and collaborative learning as core components of ELT. Eighty-five percent of instructors emphasized the need for curricula that incorporate digital literacy alongside traditional language skills, while also respecting the cultural and religious values of Islamic education (Quadir et al., 2022). This curriculum reform should blend modern pedagogies with principles of teamwork and cooperation, which are central to Islamic education (Harasim, 2012).

Context-Specific Professional Development Programs: To support the integration of digital tools, 90% of instructors recommended the development of professional development programs specifically designed for Islamic private schools. These programs should focus on using platforms like Google Classroom and Microsoft

Teams to facilitate collaborative learning and address how to incorporate Islamic values into the digital learning environment (Magen-Nagar, & Shonfeld, 2018).

Investment in Digital Infrastructure for Rural Schools: The lack of reliable digital infrastructure is a major obstacle. Fifty percent of instructors reported poor internet connectivity and outdated hardware, which limits the effective use of digital tools. It is recommended that government agencies and private educational institutions prioritize investment in digital infrastructure, especially in rural areas, to support digital collaborative learning (Lei, & Medwell, 2021).

Differentiated Instruction to Support Diverse English Proficiency Levels: To address disparities in language proficiency, differentiated instruction strategies should be employed. Teachers can design tasks that accommodate varying proficiency levels, ensuring that all students can participate in collaborative activities, regardless of their English skills (Tomlinson, 2014).

Culturally Relevant Collaborative Tasks: Incorporating culturally relevant content into collaborative tasks can enhance engagement and make learning more meaningful for students. Tasks related to Islamic culture, history, or ethics would allow students to practice English while discussing topics relevant to their cultural identity (Ghaith, 2020).

Peer Support Networks for Educators: Given the limited access to formal professional development, peer support networks can help educators share resources and best practices for using digital tools effectively. These networks can serve as informal professional learning communities (PLCs) where teachers collaborate to overcome challenges (Dado, & Bodemer, 2017).

Institutional and Governmental Support for Technology Integration: Finally, institutional and governmental support is crucial. Seventy percent of instructors identified the need for policy reforms to promote digital tools in ELT and ensure that schools have the necessary resources to implement these changes (Dillenbourg et al., 2009). This includes funding for digital infrastructure and partnerships with technology providers to ensure equitable access.

By addressing these areas, Islamic private schools in southern Thailand can create more dynamic, culturally relevant, and effective learning environments, fully integrating digital collaborative learning in their classrooms.

Conclusion:

This study highlights the transformative potential of integrating collaborative learning and digital tools into English Language Teaching (ELT) within Islamic private schools in Thailand's southern border provinces. The findings underscore that a significant majority of English instructors view collaborative learning and digital tools as effective methods for enhancing student engagement, critical thinking, and peer interaction—key components of language acquisition. The results indicate that 85% of instructors recognize the value of collaborative learning in boosting student engagement, while 70% report that digital tools significantly increase student participation in group activities, providing real-world opportunities for practicing English in contexts where the language is not commonly spoken. Despite the positive perceptions, the study reveals several challenges, particularly related to the rigidity of existing ELT curricula and limited digital infrastructure. A majority of instructors reported that the current curricula are inflexible and predominantly teacher-centered, limiting the integration of collaborative methods and digital tools. This misalignment between traditional curricula

and modern teaching practices highlights the need for comprehensive curriculum reforms that incorporate digital literacy and collaborative learning as core components.

The study also found that varying levels of English proficiency among students often resulted in unequal participation during group activities, making differentiated instruction strategies essential. To ensure that all students, regardless of their proficiency levels, can engage meaningfully in collaborative tasks, instructors suggested tailoring group activities and offering additional support for students with lower proficiency. This reinforces the need for professional development programs that specifically address these instructional challenges, equipping instructors with the tools to effectively integrate digital tools and support diverse learners. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of improving digital infrastructure, especially in rural areas, to ensure equitable access to the tools necessary for successful digital collaborative learning. Instructors expressed frustration over the lack of adequate resources, particularly in rural areas, where poor internet access and outdated hardware hinder the effective use of digital tools. These challenges align with the literature, which stresses the critical role of reliable digital infrastructure in facilitating the use of technology in education.

While Islamic private schools in Thailand's southern border provinces have made significant strides in adopting collaborative learning and digital tools, there are substantial gaps that need to be addressed. The study calls for curriculum reforms, targeted professional development programs, and improvements in digital infrastructure to fully realize the potential of digital collaborative learning in ELT classrooms. These changes are crucial to creating dynamic and inclusive learning environments that better prepare students for the demands of the digital era. Addressing these gaps will enable educators to provide more meaningful, engaging, and effective learning experiences for students, empowering them to succeed in an increasingly interconnected world.

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