



INVESTIGATING COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT IN INDONESIAN UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM: BENEFITS AND CONCERNS

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ABSTRACT

Learning to research might become a challenge for undergraduate students since it needs navigating skills on how they look and relook the current trends in particular area globally. Although this study is not a new endeavor in ELT contexts, there remains lack of empirical evidence how it was experienced by undergraduate students in an Indonesian EFL context during a collaborative research project. In response to this, this study aims to explore how the students' learning experiences in conducting this collaborative project (e.g., researching and reporting the research project). Framed in exploratory case study the data is collected through a survey given to 107 student teachers and in-depth semi structured interview to four student teachers in an English education department which were then thematically analyzed. Finding and implications of the study are provided further in this paper.

Keywords: case study, collaborative research project, ELT context

INTRODUCTION

Student teachers should be empowered to develop a strong foundation for any research projects that will envision them in finishing their bachelor art thesis and improving professionalism as an English teacher candidate which require them to teach and to research. As beginner researchers, however, the challenges may encounter in conducting the project, such as framing and positioning research topic, analyzing data, and writing research report (Sanmugam & Rajanthram, 2014; Widodo, 2013). Additionally, since there are a number of efforts they need to do for conducting this research, this collaborative research project can be one of good experiences for them. For example, in relation to a teacher education context, this type of activities could be one of the ways to build and strengthen their early professional development because researching can encourage student teachers to enquire particular classroom phenomena to investigate. It can be the starting point for them to refine teaching and learning process when becoming the teacher educator in their future (Blumenreich & Falk, 2006; Christenson et al., 2002; Lysaker & Thompson, 2013; Moran, 2007).

In Indonesia, it has been common phenomena in an undergraduate program that all student teachers are required to write a bachelor thesis based on the research they conduct. The length of their writing is various from ten to fifteen thousand words, depending on the campus policy. This thesis will become a gate for them to achieve their bachelor degree. However, the author has witnessed that most of students faced challenges during writing their thesis and conducting research, such as, lack of research competences (e.g.,

analyzing data, interpreting data), supervising, and academic reading and writing. For this reason, this research aims to explore what they experienced when participating in the collaborative research project.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Collaborative Research Project in English Classroom

The conceptualization of project-based learning is to engage students in a collaborative investigation towards particular authentic phenomena provided by a teacher in a teaching and learning process (Blumfeld et. al, 2011). Grant (2002) also argues that project-based learning is one of instructional techniques positioning student centeredness. This student center learning could be created because it is in line with five essential points of project-based learning, such as engaging students to drive questions, to do situated inquiry, to do collaboration, to have technological learning, and artefacts (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2005). Additionally in terms of collaboration, project-based learning affords a number of opportunities for members of school community (e.g., teachers and students) to have collaborative works in relation to particular investigation. This investigative task encourages them to collaboratively inquire particular social problems and collegial support so as to achieve scientific understanding towards what has been investigated (Krajcik and Blumfeld, 2005). This collective understanding could create solutions or product depending on what issue or object they need to achieve (Smith & MacGregor, 1992, as cited in Mali, 2016).

Researchers around the world (Carney & Foss, 2008; Torres & Rodriguez, 2017; Widodo, 2016;) investigated the application of project-based learning in the area of ELT providing empirical insights differently. Widodo (2016), in particular, reported the application of collaborative digital storytelling (DST) project to young learners, 10 to 12 years old. Although most of pupils were engaged in DST project, they found this collaborative DST challenging due to multi-literacy and multimodal skills they need to possess. Research in Columbia by Torres and Rodriguez (2017) also examined three diversified English Projects (e.g., interview & oral presentation, survey, and interview oral report). This indicated that their English speaking competences have been improved. Similarly, the study by Carney and Foss (2008) also found that video-based project resulted positively for colleges students. In other words, the role of PBL in English classrooms played crucially in supporting their English competences. However, although PBL in English classrooms is not the latest issue, engaging university students in collaborative research project is still rarely examined. Thus, this present study aims to bridge the gap.

B. Sociocultural Theory in ELT

From sociocultural perspectives, cognition may not be individually constructed, but is influenced by people while engaging in different cultural-related activities (Robbins, 2005). Roddin (2005) also contended that human's thinking is particularly contextualized, scaffolded by others, and is facilitated culturally. In other words, sociocultural theory tended to be grounded in a conception which cannot separate individual with other social components (Lantof & Thorne, 2006), such as collaborative learning, collaborative poster presentation, and collaborative research project.

A number of studies adopted sociocultural perspective in relation to ELT (e.g., Lin & Maarof, 2013; Pahnwar, Ansari & Ansari, 2016; Shirvan, et al., 2016). The study

by Lin and Maarof (2013), for example, examined this theoretical foundation focusing on students' summary writing during collaborative writing. Based on this sociocultural orientation, the findings showed that the role of social interaction played pivotally because the collaborative learning promoted students to engage in learning. In this learning phase, more competent students could guide those with limited skill and worked together for finding solution towards their learning obstacles. Additionally, Pahnwar, Ansari and Ansari (2016) reported how sociocultural theory became the parameter to help developed language pedagogies. It resulted that this framework was potential to make betterment related to students' language skills and cognition. Since the present study is dealing with collaborative research project conducted by undergraduate students in English education department, it is also framed by this theoretical orientation because of involving individual and collegial cognitive development.

METHOD

A. Setting and Participants

The present study was situated in one of the universities based in West Java, Indonesia. This study involved 107 undergraduate students in English education department. Their ages are between 20-21 years old, and all of them took the research course so as to seek how they perceived both challenges and opportunities during the collaborative research project. Before the study commenced, the researcher made the appointment with all participants which aimed to inform them related to the consent form. This form was as an agreement stated by the participants that their participation was voluntary. They were asked to read very carefully about the form and sign off as the legal document of their research participation. To keep the confidentiality, all of their names were pseudonym.

B. Research Design

Informed by exploratory case study design, Yin (2003, cited in Hood, 2009, p. 70) argued, "An exploratory case study is used when little is known about the case being examined." Additionally, in this context all participants were engaged in collaborative research project in their research course, specifically qualitative research in ELT. Regarding diversified research competences, they could have different learning experience during conducting and reporting the project. Therefore, I decided to use exploratory case study to examine both their challenges and benefits perceived.

C. Data Collection and Analysis

In this present study, data were collected through survey and semi-structured interview. This survey was given to all participants so as to know the students' macro perspectives, both benefits and concerns, towards collaborative research project. Additionally, focus group semi-structured interview was conducted to four students who had fully engaged in this research project. These participants were recruited for the interview because they showed their good progress during conducting the project from the beginning till the end. The aim of the interview was also to deepen their experience of doing this collaborative research project, such as how they decide the research topic and what challenges they had when deciding the topic, formulating research questions, reading related literatures, collecting data and analyzing data. Besides, this was to

examine what benefits perceived from this project. Then, all data collected were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which included six stages: (1) familiarizing the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing the themes, (5) naming the themes, and (6) reporting the results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this present study was to examine student teachers experiences when they conducted the collaborative research project. Based on data analysis, there were two major findings, benefits and concerns, regarding this collaborative project, as portrayed in following sections.

A. Benefits of Collaborative Research Project

1. Strengthening Academic Literacy

The collaborative research project was primarily to build and develop student teachers' research competence since it is also necessary to be possessed by their candidature as professional educators. Besides it also provided them with a plenty of experiences on how to start conducting the research until reported it in public spaces or conferences. From the survey result, it can be seen that this project gave them positive benefits (see figure 1). This positive attributes encouraged majority of student teachers to gain more knowledge and experiences dealing with this project, such as building their motivation on academic reading, expanding diverse research designs, and changing their paradigms on research.

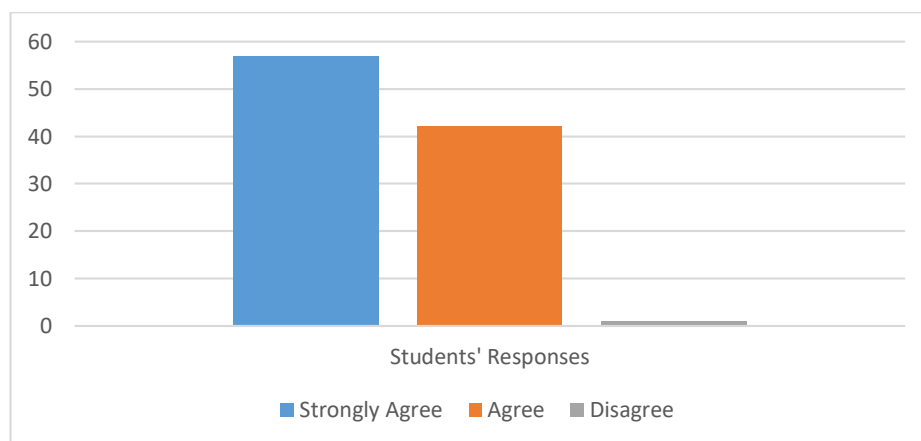


Figure 1. Responses to “It is beneficial to conduct collaborative research project as final project in Qualitative Research in ELT course” (n=107)

As previously mentioned that, this project widened their capacity towards issues in English language education. This could be earned because of their enhancement on academic reading. Before having this project, they considered research as complex processes because it is always related to proving hypothesis, statistical analysis, or observing which took very long processes. However, this academic reading's motivation helped them hone their navigating skills which were influential on their perspectives that research could be conducted in a number of ways. For example, the topic to investigate is not only related to examining

pedagogical theory they needed to implement in the class, but also related to students' learning experiences, document analysis, even teaching in a small group. From this experience, they tended to prefer have more qualitative project as their research because it provided them with the easy access, especially with participants' recruitment. This is supported from the interview result on how their research knowledge has been constructed and shaped through this collaborative research project in the following excerpts.

Excerpts 1

"Although I was shocked of facing that we had to conduct a collaborative research as first, I was happy when I could conduct it. It made me read many journals more than usual" (Participant 1).

"I have learned some different designs on research (e.g., narrative inquiry, action research, case studies). This project also forced me to read a lot because there are assignments promoting me to share what I read related to the topic I highlight. So, this experience helped me a lot to learn different issues in ELT" (Participant 2).

"I learned many topics on this project. I read many journals so that conducting research is not isolated in a classroom. This process helped me and my group to investigate a simple issue about public speaking anxiety in which we just once observed students having public speaking then interviewed him" (Participant 3).

"I learned different research designs, like action research, case study, reflective study, narrative inquiry. However, this project reduced my confusion about research because this project played as the real experience in which learning by doing is much better than learning theoretically" (Participant 4).

2. Encouraging to Involve in Professional Development Program

For the participants, participating in this collaborative research project also encouraged them to not merely finishing the project as a compulsory task, but it also made them to engage in professional activities, such as national ELT seminar and conference. All participants acknowledged that although participating in the ELT conference was their first experience, they felt honored because they were as presenters. Based on their experience, they previously only attended the conference or seminar as a participant. In other words, this project provided them a platform to disseminate their research project. Moreover, two of the participants showed their enthusiasm when participating in this national ELT conference. From the interview result (see excerpts 2), they showed their emotional engagement because both of them not only presented their research to the public, but they also got awarded as the best paper in that conference through the blinded review from the invited speakers. This evidence also showed that their research has been proven with a good quality of research which can be used for the good starting point when they would like to start having their bachelor research.

In addition, this project also gave the participants other great opportunity to engage in the other professional activity, becoming an invited speaker in one of

the universities in West Java that also accompanied their research mentor. This moment encouraged them to also share what they experienced with the research project they already conducted from navigating, reading, analyzing data, reporting and presenting their research. For them, this type of activities played crucially since they were a part of professional community. Therefore, sharing in this academic community is one of the important activities to build earlier professional development among English teacher candidate. The following is what they highlighted when interviewed.

Excerpts 2

“The most impressive moment in joining this research course and collaborative research project is when we could finish a qualitative research project for the first time. Moreover, we were invited to be the speaker of a workshop in Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang. I cannot forget the moment there because the audiences were not only university students, but also lecturers. Although challenging, but I felt amazed” (Participant 1).

“The moment which made me impressive was that when becoming the presenter in ELT conference. It was unforgettable for me, further, when our group was nominated to get the award from the committee. This motivated me personally to keep learning and doing better for the next event” (Participant 2).

“I am so hopeless of being one of the best papers since other groups also gave their best. The participants came from various universities with their innovative research topic. In addition, one of the reviewers is also the Professor from Malaysia, the reviewer in an international and reputed journal. This totally motivated me to write better and conduct more research in the future” (Participant 3).

“I cannot forget the moment when our group paper was accepted by ELT conference committee and we also did a presentation on our research project. Becoming a presenter in ELT conference for the first time is not that easy, so I personally felt proud of myself being this community” (Participant 4).

Based on these two primary findings regarding the benefits of collaborative research project, it can be interpreted that this activity provided student teachers a wide range of concrete experiences in relation to ELT research (Chan, 2012; Kolb, 1981, 1984). The series of stages in conducting research (e.g., framing research issue, developing and presenting research methodology, reporting research, and disseminating the result) helped them shape their research competence. This competence could be strengthened because of their improvement on their academic literacy. It can be seen when they navigated what to investigate, decided what to choose the research topic, and finalized their research project. Fung (2014) emphasized that reading plays an important role for knowledge construction. This experience built their new knowledge on research and encouraged them to consider that research as a part of their earlier professional development. From sociocultural perspective, this collaborative

research project provided each of group members to engage in a particular task in which an individual cannot be separated with other social components (Lantof & Thorne, 2006). Therefore, knowledge construction dealing with research components might not be shaped personally, but could be potentially got influenced by other people while they were engaged in diversified cultural-related activities (Robbins, 2005).

B. Concerns of Collaborative Research Project

1. Academic Writing

This collaborative research project not only encouraged student teachers to conduct the research, but also reported it into a journal article. This type of journal writing was a big concern for them as it had complicated phases (Burke & Cummins, 2010). This concern has been acknowledged by all participants when interviewed. Participant 1 and 2, for example contended that they faced a challenge on how to construct a decent abstract. Although they knew the structure of it, they had to navigate a number of different journals to see and analyze how the good abstract is well written academically and coherently.

Other two participants also expressed what they experienced regarding their concerns in academic writing. They felt shocked when first time they proposed their report to the lecturer as their mentor. Participant 3, for instance, highlighted that there was only one good paragraph (out of 5) in the introduction section. This indicated that writing was not that easy. They also shared that they did not position themselves as reader, but as a writer only. It means the process of proof reading or peer feedback can help them refine their writing. Based on this problem majority of the participants were asked to revise their papers many times. As evidenced their interview result, here are what they expressed.

Excerpts 3

“However, writing the abstract is not as easy as conducting the research topic. We had to read a lot of reputed journals about CDA since it was our topic...related to abstract writing, our group revised it twice” (Participant 1).

“Firstly, writing introduction was the most difficult part. We need to find various words in order not to make it monotonous, so we need to read many journals to see and analyze how scholars write their introduction. In this case we revised our paper over and over again” (Participant 2).

“Welcome to the hard part in making the abstract. My friends and I tried to look for sources in the research corpus to make the abstract, but when we finished it and consulted to the lecturer, it was a bad abstract and we got many revisions. It made me stressful” (Participant 3).

“The challenges we faced were that on how to put words into good sentences in an academic style. We felt confused although we read many journals. It took a long process for my group members and I to make this research report into a good journal article” (Participant 4).

2. Data Analysis Processing

One of *phases* in conducting research is doing data analysis. This phase will determine how the research is interpreted theoretically and empirically. Based on what has been got from the interview, all participants were facing serious concerns in relation to data analysis processing. For example, both participants (1 and 2) said that before going further on analyzing the data they already had, it was necessary for them to understand the theory they adopted which become the tool for analyzing the data. This was complex because they also had to contextualize the theory into their research context. Additionally, the theory used by them was related to critical discourse analysis which was not easy for undergraduate students.

Another concern related to data analysis was also experienced by participant 3 and 4, but they had slightly different. They felt it was very complicated for them on how to start analyzing the data since this was their first time in conducting the research. For example, participant 3 also highlighted that the confusion began when getting the interview data. He did not even know what to do with data and how to interpret it theoretically and empirically. Although he tried to read the relevant journal on his research, his lack on critical reading also became the challenge so that it was influential towards the process of data analysis. These phenomena were based on the interview result as seen in the following excerpt.

Excerpts 4

“Since our group design is related to critical discourse analysis, analyzing data using Fairclough’s three dimensional framework was challenging. This was because we had lack experience on doing it. Understanding this theory for analysis was not that easy...” (Participant 1).

“Analyzing data was frustrating. We do not know how to interpret the data in order to make readers understand. We need more efforts to revise, to read, and to reflect” (Participant 2).

“The Hardest level in doing the collaborative research project was analyzing the data. We also got many revision dealing with data analysis. It was stressful and sometimes I felt like I wanna give up because there are also other assignments which made me personally confused” (Participant 3).

“what was challenging for our group members was that related to data analysis. Firstly, we did not know what to do after data were collected. In addition, what tools of analysis we had to use was also another concern we had. It took a long process for us to understand this issue” (Participant 4)”

The second major findings on this study were related to how student teachers faced challenges in doing collaborative research project. This could occur because perception and experience led people’s view and experience the reality (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2002). In other words, this personal concern may vary due to diversity of personal commitment, cognition, and experience, especially when doing the research project collaboratively. Related to academic

writing concerns, Fernsten and Reda (2011, p. 181) “writers experience conflict as they attempt to negotiate traditional academic discourses. Struggling writers, especially those whose home discourses differ significantly from those of the academy...” From this conception, it has a clarity that as majority of student teachers were still beginners in academic writing, personal and collegial negotiation to understand academic discourses took in along period. Therefore, this project can be mediation to help them develop and understand the complexity of their learning journey, particularly in negotiating academic writing because writing is not as an easy activity to complete right after the research has been conducted (Highman as cited in Wallwork, 2016).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this present study provides an empirical insight that collaborative research project could give mixed contributions to student teachers in English education department. Both benefits and concerns were related to personal and collegial factors which influenced their process of doing the research. However, this study could expand socio-cultural point of view applied in collaborative research project which engaged student teachers to have intensively interact among members of the group. This phase encouraged them to develop their understanding about research and reporting it into a journal article. Based on this study, the teachers may provide students with this collaborative research project as a platform to hone their social competence as well as problem solving skills which were influential for the career as a qualified educator.

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