

# **Student Collaboration in English for Academic Purposes - Theory, Practitioner Perceptions and Reality**

*Averil Bolster & Peter Levrai*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Introduction**

Student collaboration is a feature of degree level studies and collaboration itself can be a stated learning outcome of degree programmes as an important employability competence. Much work has been done to define and understand collaboration, with a clear distinction being drawn between collaboration and cooperation. The concern of this paper is how the theoretical conception of collaboration is understood by practitioners of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and whether the theoretical distinctions between collaboration and cooperation fit the needs and realities of the EAP classroom. A survey of 66 EAP practitioners in diverse contexts shows that there is a continuum of views about what is considered 'collaboration', which often differs from definitions in the literature. The survey also highlighted that a range of collaborative assignments are used across institutions, both in terms of mode and the role they play in assessment. However, something which is greatly needed is a shared understanding of what collaboration is (and isn't) in EAP. This paper proposes a working definition of collaborative assignments in EAP, drawing from both the research literature and practitioner perspectives, which can help inform future assignment design and assessment approaches.

### **1.2 The Role of English for Academic Purposes**

English for Academic Purposes courses play an important role in students' enculturation into higher level studies at universities and there is great variation across EAP programmes. EAP typically features early in a student's university career, be that in a pre-sessional course, meaning courses delivered before students formally enrol on their university degree programmes, or

as part of a Foundation course, which students take in their first year of study. EAP may also feature later in their studies, delivered in-sessionally, i.e. running alongside or embedded into students' degree programmes. EAP programmes also differ depending on the type of institution they are in. These different settings encompass universities in native English-speaking (NES) environments or those operating in non-native English-speaking (NNES) environments, either in the case of branch campuses of an NES university based offshore (e.g. the University of Nottingham has branch campuses in Malaysia and China) or universities based in NNES contexts but which offer some courses in English, such as the University of Turku in Finland.

The focus of EAP is English language and skills development. A distinction can be drawn between English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP), with the former targeting the development of the common language and skills students need to succeed in tertiary level studies, regardless of their field of study (de Chazal 2014). ESAP is more targeted towards working within a specific discipline, with a focus on the relevant genres and lexis particular to that subject e.g. teaching medical students how to complete lab reports or law students write legal cases, with the relevant vocabulary development and genre appropriate language structures.

In various contexts, however, the fundamental role of EAP programmes remains, to a certain extent, the same. As defined by Gillett (2017: para.1), EAP refers to 'the language and associated practices that people need in order to undertake study or work in English-medium higher education'. This echoes Hyland's (2014: 1) definition of EAP as teaching English "with the aim of assisting learners' study or research". As much as preparing students for *what* they are going to study, EAP helps support students in developing skills and literacies to deal with *how* they are going to study. An illustration of this is the use of a process-writing approach in EAP. In the process-writing approach, the means by which a text is produced is considered alongside the final text itself. A multi-draft approach is adopted, through which students become aware of the strategies that writers use to refine texts. As noted by Barnard & Campbell (2005), the process-writing approach is supported by Sociocultural Theory (SCT), and writing is not viewed as the act of an individual but as one that exists in a social sphere. Consequently, the writing benefits from the interplay between writer and readers in the recursive process of developing a text, moving through the stages of brainstorming, outlining, drafting, reviewing, editing and final proofreading. This approach raises students' awareness of the skills and competencies they need to develop an essay.

The aim of EAP is distinct from general English language courses in that it has a broader scope, going beyond language improvement and into developing study skills. These skills may range from research strategies to argumentation to, despite the potential contradiction, supporting students in their development of autonomous and self-directed learning. The need for study skills in EAP courses is emphasised by Alexander, Argent and Spencer (2008), who discuss the role of EAP courses in helping students enter an academic community, and de Chazal (2014), who describes the need for EAP to equip students with standard academic skills and awareness of broad academic conventions.

Consequently, EAP has to be aware of and respond to evolving skills and competencies required of university students. Apart from academic skills, EAP professionals need to consider the drive in the wider field of education towards encouraging a broad spectrum of '21st century skills' (Battelle for Kids 2019) which encompass four elements:

- I. Life and career skills
- II. Key subjects – 3R's & 21<sup>st</sup> Century Themes
- III. Information, media and technology skills and
- IV. Learning and innovation skills.

The final element of learning and innovation skills is better known by the term 'the 4Cs', which are the competencies students need to tackle complex challenges (Soffel 2016). These 'Cs' are creativity, critical thinking, communication and, most importantly for the purposes of this paper, collaboration. As a result of the growing emphasis on the 4Cs, collaboration has become a stated learning outcome of many higher education institutes and collaborative assignments are now a feature at undergraduate (Plastow, Spiliotopoulou & Prior 2010) and post-graduate (Gammie & Matson 2007) level across diverse degree programmes from social psychology (Johnston & Miles 2004) to law (Berry 2010). Use of collaboration in educational settings prepares learners for employment, as recognised by Storch (2019: 40) who highlights 'workplace writing' as one of the main factors for the increased interest in collaborative writing research in the last 25 years.

An EAP course is typically one of the first exposures a student has to academic discourse and culture, which means EAP has a role in socialising students into the academic discourse community. As argued by Duff (2010), academic discourse socialisation is a socially situated process to help students become members of a discourse community, learning its norms and tropes. This could also be a driver for the use of collaboration as, through working with others on an academic assignment, a student is not

only gaining content knowledge and associated academic and soft skills but is also building their capacity to work in their academic community in the future.

### **1.3. The growing prominence of collaboration and its theoretical framework**

The increased use of collaboration in education is evident by the growing number of articles written about the topic across an array of disciplinary journals. Talib and Cheung's (2017) review paper presented an overview of collaborative writing for a ten-year period (2006 to 2016) and provided data from 68 articles from a variety of educational contexts, although predominantly based on English language speaking undergraduates. In the same year, the *Journal of Second Language Writing* produced a special issue dedicated to computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies and linked them to collaborative writing. Li and Storch (2017) discussed the affordances of CMC for supporting collaborative writing and enabling synchronous and asynchronous co-construction of texts and the evolving multimodality of writing, encompassing students moving through different technologies during the development of their writing. In light of these affordances, Elola and Oskoz (2017) discussed the emerging literacies students need to master in the realm of CMC, particularly in relation to incorporating collaborative tools, such as wikis or Google Docs into learning. In Godwin-Jones' (2018: 1) 10th anniversary update of his state-of-the-art article about online writing and technologies, collaboration (which was absent in the original) now features heavily due to 'a significant rise in interest in collaborative writing'.

As with process-writing, collaboration can be framed within Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky 1978). SCT is a psychological theory but has become more widely accepted in education circles, including second language acquisition. Key to SCT is the concept that knowledge is built through social interaction. Perhaps Vygotsky's major contribution to education is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). He defines the ZPD (as cited in Talib and Cheung 2017: 50) as, 'the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers.' The people with whom the learner has a social interaction are seen as 'more knowledgeable others' (MKO) and they could be an adult, an expert, a peer or, in more recent times, even a computer program. This recognition of differing expertise leads into the concept of the "collaborative scaffold" (Ohta 1995) where members of

a group lend their respective strengths to a collective effort. By working together, they are able to support and assist each other, developing an expertise greater than that which they would have achieved individually, with different group members taking on the role of MKO depending on their areas of strength and expertise. The idea of groups being able to achieve more than individuals is supported through findings that in written assignments groups have better task fulfilment, with writing that is both more complex and accurate (Fernandez Dobao 2012; Mulligan and Garofalo 2011; Storch 2005; Talib and Cheung 2017) and overall, better quality texts (Shehadeh 2011; Wigglesworth and Storch 2009).

Assigning learners to work in groups does not necessarily mean that collaboration will automatically take place (Hathorn and Ingram 2002). In the research literature, considerable work has been done to define collaboration and draw a distinction between it and cooperation. Cooperation and collaboration share a key trait, in that both involve groups of people working together towards a common goal. Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, the means of reaching the common goal differs. Kozar (2010) neatly summarises the literature to identify the key differences between cooperation and collaboration, differences also recognised by Hathorn and Ingram (2002) and Paulus (2005), and summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Features of cooperation and collaboration

Features of Cooperation	Features of Collaboration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• distinct division of labour</li> <li>• individuals working independently towards the common goal</li> <li>• individuals may have responsibility for a specialised task</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• shared creation and shared responsibility for the whole task</li> <li>• difficulty in identifying or separating individual contributions</li> <li>• interdependence between group members</li> </ul>

This distinction between cooperation and collaboration is also recognised by Storch (2019: 40) when discussing second language writing, as she defines collaborative writing as “an activity that requires the co-authors to be involved in all stages of the writing process, sharing the responsibility for and the ownership of the entire text produced”. This is different from a cooperative writing activity, where individuals may have a particular responsibility for a section of text or particular sub-tasks, such as proof-reading or referencing, or students engaging in peer feedback.

While there is a theoretical framework supporting the use of collaboration, in practice it is not without its tensions and can be received differently



by students. Where Levrai and Bolster (2018) and Scotland (2014) found students view collaborative work assignments favourably, one of the students in Strauss' (2001: 55) study suggested they would 'rather vomit up a live hedgehog' than work collaboratively, emblematic of negative attitudes towards collaboration echoed in other studies (Berry 2007; Li & Cambell 2006; Strauss & U 2007). Issues in collaborative assignments can be due to 'social loafing', referring to when an individual does not work as hard in a group as they would individually, or the potentially more problematic 'freeloading', which refers to when an individual who contributes little to the group effort receives the same rewards (Strijbos 2016). These phenomena contribute to one of the areas of tension around collaboration, namely that of assessment, due to perceived unequal contribution by group members. The assessment of collaborative assignments is recognised as a complex issue (Berry 2010; Strauss & U 2007; Strijbos 2016) to which solutions are still lacking. It has even been questioned whether collaboration should be assessed, with Nouri, Akerfeldt, Fors, and Selander (2017) considering collaboration a way of learning rather than a skill to be directly assessed itself. However, as Swan, Shen and Hiltz (2006) argue, collaboration must be assessed in a collaborative assignment if it is an intended learning outcome, a point echoed by Williams (2017), who stresses the role of assessing the process of collaboration alongside the product, even while acknowledging the assessment of collaboration is messy.

## **2. METHODS**

### **2.1 Data Collection**

To better understand the role of collaboration in EAP programmes, and practitioner understanding of collaboration, a questionnaire was distributed as a Google Form through the BALEAP and EATAW mailing lists in May 2018, available for three weeks. BALEAP was formerly known as the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes and EATAW is the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing, with the membership often working in the field of EAP. The questionnaire comprised multiple choice, scale and short answer questions. The questions aimed to build a profile of EAP provision, gathering practitioners' perceptions of collaboration, identifying what kind of collaborative assignments students are required to do and also investigating the assessment of collaboration. Open question comments were categorised and codified to enable quantitative interpretation.

## **2.2 Participants & Contexts**

There was a total of 66 responses, with participants coming from 63 different institutions in 27 countries. Given the nature of the mailing lists, the majority of responses (62%) came from Europe. Although a slight majority of the institutions (53%) were in NNES language environments, the language of instruction in 77% of the institutions was English. The EAP programmes in question differed considerably in size, with a 12.2% having a cohort of under 100 students and 27.3% having an annual cohort of over 1,000 students. There was also considerable variation in class size, ranging from less than 12 to over 30, with the largest proportion of institutions (36.4%) having a class size of 16-20. The institutions offered a range of EAP programmes with 71% offering in-session support, 56% offering a foundation year and 52% running pre-session programmes. Provision also included short courses, workshops and information sessions, as well as EAP courses integrated into content studies.

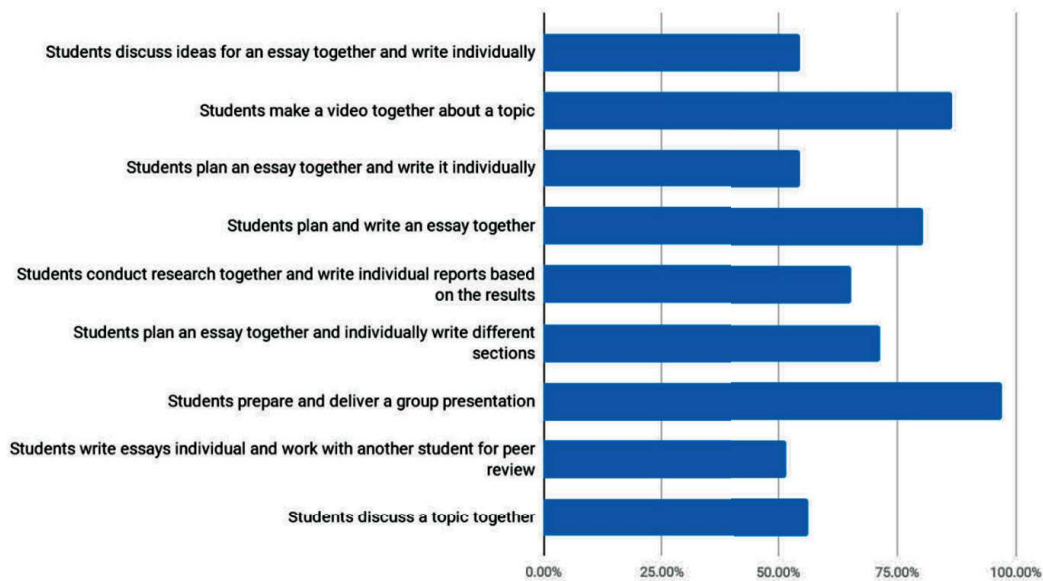
## **3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

### **3.1 – Practitioner understanding of collaboration**

The first questions were designed to see how practitioners perceive collaboration in the EAP context. At this stage, no definition of collaboration (or cooperation) was provided so as to elicit the respondents' own perceptions. Participants were asked to discuss what the term 'student collaboration' meant in their context. While two out of the 66 respondents conflated collaboration with academic dishonesty or plagiarism, most respondents had a more positive perspective. The majority of comments (57%) saw student collaboration as a classroom or virtual classroom-based phenomenon, with students discussing things together or engaging in any kind of team or group activity in class. Over a third of comments (37%) extended this into more formal project work and group assignments, with students working together to produce a piece of work, be that written or oral (e.g. a group presentation). There was also notable reference (17% of comments) identifying student collaboration as activities involving peer feedback or peer tutoring.

Participants were then asked if they would classify various activities as collaborative, with the results shown below (Figure 1).

## Classifying Collaborative Activities



**Figure 1.** Classifying collaborative activities.

An open question provided scope for participants to add other suggestions for activities they consider collaborative and these included students researching a topic together and presenting the findings, organising a field trip or conference or simply discussing ideas in class.

From the results, it is clear that practitioner perspectives of collaboration are at odds with the theoretical one. From the theoretical perspective, students planning and writing an essay together or preparing and delivering a presentation together would constitute collaboration, having the characteristics of shared responsibility, interdependence and shared ownership. Students planning an essay together and writing individual sections is characteristic of cooperation, in terms of having clearly defined individual responsibilities within a group task. The same could be true of the students making a video together, if they allocated particular roles to individuals. The other tasks are more loosely defined group tasks, where the students may be working together but they are not producing a joint artefact and have an individual responsibility for their own work.

The responses of this survey suggest some practitioners have a more fluid conception of collaboration than the literature, potentially covering any situation where students are in contact with each other, be that in informal class discussions or working closely on producing an artefact together, e.g.



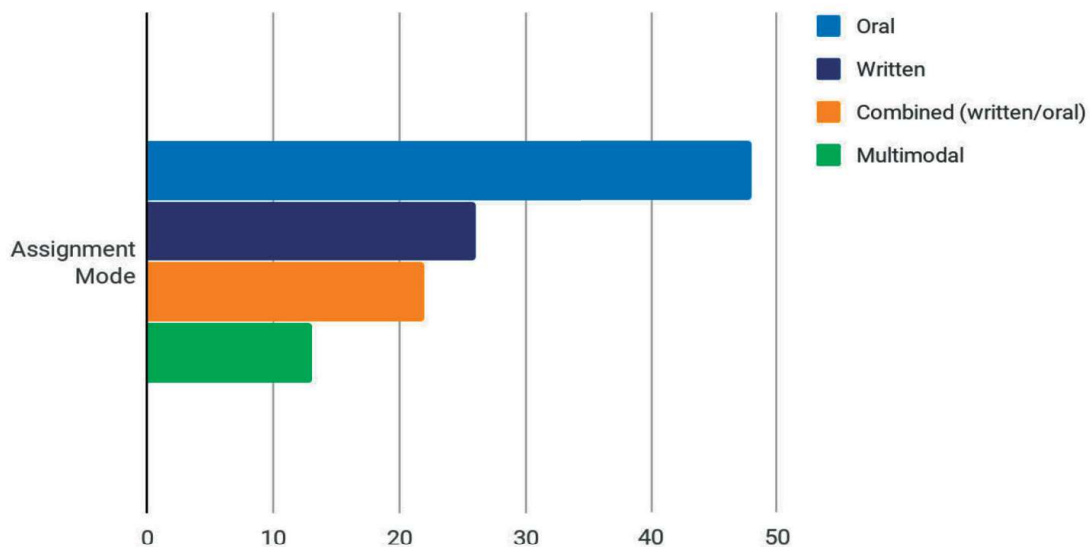
an essay, presentation, or video. The broad nature of the understanding of the term is problematic. As Wilson, Goodman and Cronin (2007: 1031) recognise when discussing the definition of group learning, "agreement on the definition of a construct is a prerequisite to effectively testing ideas about it". Similarly, practitioners and researchers need a shared understanding of what is meant by collaboration. If different teachers conceptualise and interpret collaboration in different ways, it is difficult to identify and act upon best practice. So too might it result in students having very different experiences and expectations of what "collaboration" involves, which could contribute to some of the tensions surrounding it.

One feature of EAP that may problematise the theoretical concept of collaborative assignments, particularly written assignments, is the previously mentioned process approach to writing which can be taken in EAP. Writing as an extended (possibly semester-long) process contrasts with the shorter writing tasks which tend to feature in the research of collaborative writing. In the literature, one of the areas of interest in collaborative writing is the occurrence of language related episodes (LREs), which provide opportunity for language learning (Storch 2019). An LRE is an instance where students need to jointly decide on a language choice (e.g. lexical item, grammatical structure), which is why students are expected to work closely together, coming to agreement on every aspect of the text. It may be unrealistic, however, on an extended EAP academic assignment, for students to fulfil the process-writing task in a purely collaborative way, discussing and negotiating every aspect of an essay, potentially down to every individual word choice. At times on an EAP writing assignment students may be working more cooperatively or, indeed, individually e.g. when researching and reading about a topic. Nonetheless, certain key features of collaboration from the researcher perspective should be common in the practitioner understanding of the term, namely, equal contribution, shared responsibility, shared ownership, interdependence and no clear means of identifying individual contributions in the final product. Levrai and Bolster (2018; 2017) suggest that a larger collaborative assignment, such as a process essay, could be supported by individual assignments (e.g. annotated bibliographies of sources or project reflections), allowing for differentiation between group members. Consequently, while there is shared ownership of the main artefact (the essay) there is also scope for assessment of the individual, which may help mitigate the issues of social loafing and freeloading.

### 3.2 - The role of collaborative assignments in EAP

In the next stage of the survey, a definition of collaborative assignments was provided. This definition limited collaborative assignments to ones where students work in groups to produce a joint piece of work for which they share joint responsibility. Respondents were then asked how many collaborative assignments or projects students needed to complete on a course in their institution. Given the complexity of EAP provision in terms of EAP centres running different programmes, there is no simple picture of how prevalent collaborative assignments are overall. Some institutions employ collaborative assignments in some programmes but not others, or the usage differs from year-to-year or course-to-course. However, only 16.7% of respondents said there were no collaborative assignments on their EAP programmes. Most commonly there were one (21.2%) or two (15.2%) collaborative assignments, with some programmes (7.6%) having more than five. This wide use of collaborative assignments highlights the important role they have in EAP programmes and why a clear understanding of their features is needed. Having an agreed upon practitioner perception of collaborative work is vital, not only for teachers who facilitate collaborative assignments, but also for students who carry them out with their peers. As a result of having a consensus about what collaboration entails, the main stakeholders would have clearer expectations of the collaborative process.

#### Mode of Collaborative Assignments



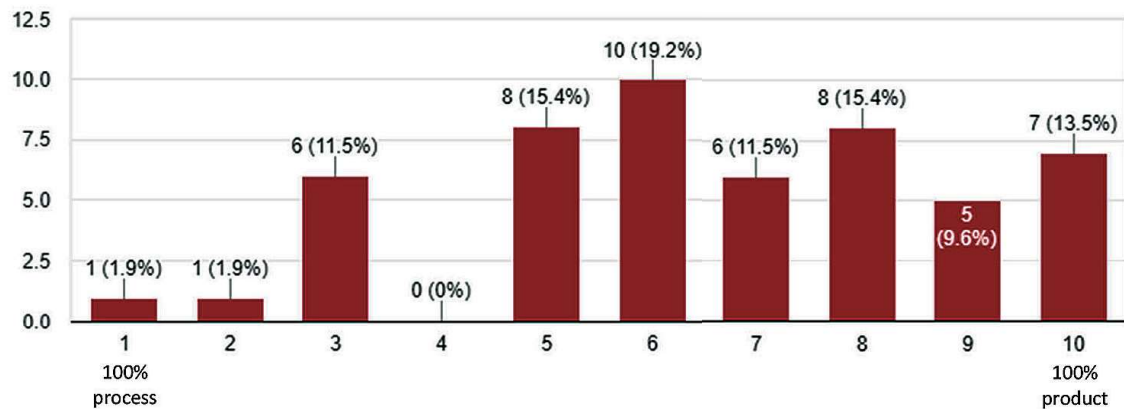
**Figure 2.** The mode of collaborative assignments

According to the survey, the types of collaborative assignments/projects differed in mode, with collaborative oral assignments (e.g. group presentations) being most common (see Figure 2). The prevalence of collaborative oral assignments could be in part due to the superficial ease of assessing oral tasks in the group format, as there is a clear opportunity to assess the contribution and speaking competence of each participant. Grading rubrics for group presentations we have used in the past in different institutions have awarded a group grade broadly based on the presentation content, task achievement and visual aids; and an individual grade, determined by the presentation skills and delivery of each speaker. While this may address some of the tensions alluded to earlier regarding grading collaborative assessments, there is a concern that such an approach to grading collaborative oral presentations is taking a more cooperative view of the task, in terms of each speaker having a clear responsibility for their part of the presentation. This focus on the product neglects the process of developing the presentation, which could potentially be the work of one student, with the others simply voicing the parts they have been given. Such an issue highlights the need for a clear conception of collaborative assignments, whatever the mode. This clarity would aid in developing principled assessment which, in a collaborative assignment, requires consideration of the process.

The majority of collaborative assignments in the survey had both a summative and formative component (61.8%) while in 20% of situations, assessment was purely formative and in 18.2% of cases it was purely summative. The focus of assessment also varied considerably, with greater or lesser focus on the process or the final product. As can be seen in Figure 3 (where 1 indicates 100% assessment is based on the process and 10 indicates 100% assessment is based on the product), there is a tendency for assessment to focus more on product than process, but in the majority of collaborative assignments some weight is given the assessment of the process. Within institutions, however, the weighting of process/product can differ depending on the programme (pre-sessional or in-sessional), the institutional context (home or branch campus), the year of study, and in some cases, the individual teacher.

### Is the focus of assessment of collaborative assignments more on the process or the end-product?

52 responses



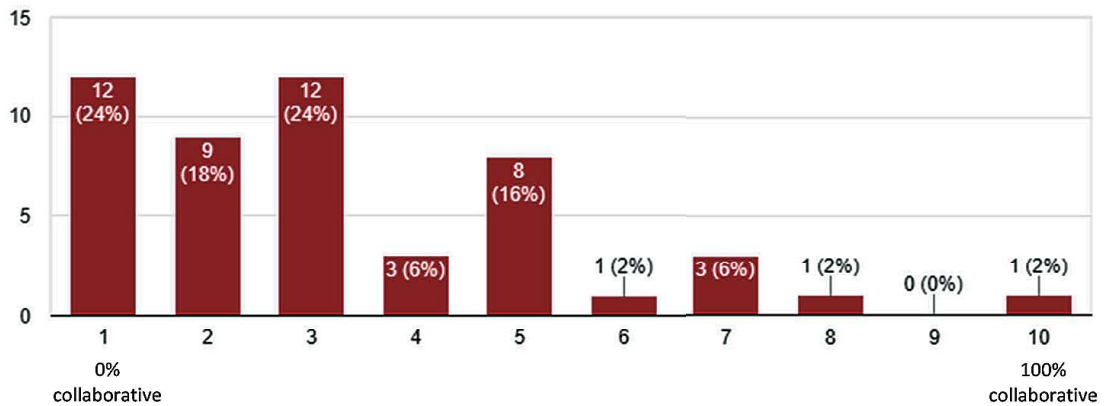
**Figure 3.** – Assessing process or product

The variation in weighting could be explained by the wide interpretation of collaboration amongst practitioners but, in light of the literature, a more principled approach should be encouraged. While there is no definitive guide to the assessment of collaborative work, the concept that students share responsibility and ownership of the final product suggests that the grade awarded to that product should be shared equally. With that being so, the process by which the product was developed should also be assessed. As argued in Levrai and Bolster (2018), technology now gives us greater insight than previously into the collaborative process and mechanisms can be put in place to monitor the contribution of individuals to the collaborative task, such as monitoring the changes made by different students in a shared document.

The final survey question considered the weighting of collaborative assignments to students' final grades. Responses varied considerably between teachers, programmes, courses and contexts. Figure 4 shows the percentage of final grades awarded via collaborative assignments (with 1 meaning 0% is awarded via collaborative work and 10 meaning 100% is awarded via collaborative work).

**What percentage of students' final EAP course grade comes from collaborative assignments?**

50 responses



**Figure 4.** The contribution of collaborative assignments to final grades

Although collaborative assignments clearly carry less weight than individual assignments, they are a contributing factor to final course grades in three-quarters of cases surveyed and could help determine if a student passes or fails a course or is awarded a pass with merit or distinction. Given the impact collaboration could have on students' academic success it essential it is implemented, scaffolded and assessed appropriately.

**4. CONCLUSION**

There has been an increase in research into collaboration (especially in language classrooms) since the turn of the 21st century (Storch 2019; Godwin-Jones 2018 and Talib & Cheung 2017). This research has been conducted across a range of language learning environments, including in higher education. Within higher education, EAP plays an important role in preparing learners for their studies at university and must ensure the skills taught are ones they need. Collaboration is a feature of university degree programmes and can also be one of the stated learning outcomes of a course or, indeed, degree programme itself. As such, collaboration is something EAP programmes need to prepare students for. The aim of this paper was to determine the role of collaborative assignments in EAP and shed some light on whether researchers and EAP practitioners have a shared understanding of the nature of collaboration and its defining features. The responses



from practitioners in over 60 institutions around the world suggest that collaborative assignments are a widespread feature of EAP programmes and could have an impact on students' final grades, as well as wider learning outcomes. However, there is little consistency as to the relative weight of collaborative assignments towards students' final grades, or the extent to which that grade is determined by the process or product of collaboration.

There is also a considerable gap between the researcher and practitioner perceptions of the concept of collaboration. Researchers tend to have a tightly focussed interpretation of collaboration while practitioners take a much wider view. This gap needs to be narrowed to allow for constructive research into, and discussion of, collaborative assignments. The theoretical understanding of collaboration, when it comes to assignments in EAP, needs to be broadened from the research perspective, acknowledging that there will likely be some instances of cooperation in the completion of tasks. It may also be necessary to revise the idea of 'equal contribution' to 'equitable contribution'. Students would not necessarily have to be doing the same work but could make equitable contributions so that no one student is doing more, or less, than is fair. This would remain in line with collaboration being a learning outcome for such an assignment, as identifying and exploiting the strengths of team members is an important aspect of collaboration and is reflective of life within and beyond university.

While the theoretical perception could be widened, the practitioner perception of collaboration could be much more focussed. Shared ownership and responsibility of collaborative assignments and the indivisibility of the final artefact are features of collaboration that EAP practitioners should recognise and adopt. The indivisibility is key, distinguishing collaboration from cooperation. Rather than students operating independently on their own 'part', which could result in a what might be described as a Frankenstein's Monster assignment of disjointed elements, a collaborative assignment requires them to be engaged throughout the process. In line with SCT, learning is a social process and we learn from working with others, sometimes operating as the MKO and at other times learning from another's expertise. As such, the following definition for a collaborative assignment in EAP is proposed.

A collaborative assignment is one where learners work together, making equitable contributions towards the development of an indivisible artefact for which they share responsibility and ownership. During the development of the artefact, learners may work synchronously or asynchronously, face-to-face or online, but there is interdependence between group members, drawing on all their strengths.

It is hoped that this definition can narrow the gap between theory and practice when it comes to perspectives of collaboration in the field of EAP. Given that collaborative assignments are, and should be, a feature of EAP programmes, this definition could facilitate the further research that needs to be done to determine how collaborative assignments can best be designed, implemented, supported, and assessed in a principled manner.

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