

From Graduation to Professional Practice: EFL Students' Self-Reported Collaboration Competence in Indonesian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Collaboration competence has become an essential attribute in higher education, particularly in preparing graduates for increasingly complex and team-oriented professional environments. However, the extent to which collaborative learning in university settings aligns with workplace demands remains insufficiently understood, especially in the context within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesia. This study aims to examine how collaboration competence is perceived at the point of graduation and how it is subsequently experienced in professional contexts among Indonesian EFL graduates. Adopting a mixed-method design, the study combines quantitative data from a tracer study questionnaire involving 295 alumni (graduates of 2023–2025) and qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with three participants representing each cohort. Quantitative findings reveal a consistent shift in perception, with collaboration competence rated predominantly as “high” at graduation and “very high” in workplace contexts. Qualitative findings further indicate that collaboration competence develops over time, moving from passive participation toward more active, agentic, and sometimes leadership-oriented engagement. The study also identifies key challenges, including unequal participation and communication difficulties, as well as the importance of structure, accountability, and technology-mediated collaboration. Overall, the findings suggest that collaboration competence is not a fixed outcome of higher education but a context-dependent and evolving practice shaped by workplace experiences. This study contributes to the need for higher education to design more structured and authentic collaborative learning environments that better reflect workplace realities.

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1. Introduction

Collaboration has become a fundamental competence in contemporary professional workplaces, where tasks are increasingly performed through team-based structures across disciplines. Employers consistently emphasize the importance of graduates' ability to work effectively with others and contribute to collective problem-solving (Andrews-Todd & Forsyth, 2020; Yadav et al., 2025). To achieve world class university, Indonesian Universities have implemented collaborative learning approaches as part of their pedagogical practices, especially in the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Collaboration in EFL contexts in higher education entails a layered complexity extending beyond typical teamwork (Normawati et al., 2023). Students are required not just to engage in collaborative activities such as negotiating roles and co-constructing knowledge, but also to operate through a non-native language which may limit their confidence (Wagino et al., 2023; Yunus & Latief, 2023a). This dual demand often influences participation patterns, in which linguistic proficiency can shape the distribution of roles and the extent of individual contributions within a group. Hence, collaboration in EFL settings is not merely a matter of interpersonal coordination but also a process mediated by language competence, which may either facilitate or constrain meaningful engagement.

After the graduation, alumni transition into varied professional settings where they actively engage in and observe the dynamics of workplace collaboration. Through this experience, they develop a more nuanced understanding of how collaboration operates in real-world contexts, often reassessing and, to some extent, recalibrating the knowledge and skills they acquired during their university studies. This reflective comparison between prior learning and actual workplace demands positions alumni as critical evaluators of the relevance and adequacy of higher education preparation. Their experiences, therefore, constitute a valuable source of feedback for universities and academic departments, particularly in determining the extent to which collaborative competencies are effectively cultivated and aligned with the expectations of contemporary professional settings.

In Indonesian higher education context, collaborative learning has been widely progressively integrated as an essential pedagogical approach to prepare students for the demands of professional life. This emphasis is further reinforced by national policy initiatives, particularly the "Kampus Berdampak" promoted by the Kementerian Pendidikan Tinggi, Sains, dan Teknologi Indonesia, which underscores the importance of equipping students with collaboration skill to ensure meaningful contributions beyond the university setting (Fitriana et al., 2025). In response, universities have made considerable efforts to integrate project-based learning and interactive classroom practices aimed at boosting students' ability to work in collaboration. These initiatives reflect a strong institutional commitment to enhancing graduate quality which align educational practices with the evolving needs of the workforce.

Despite these positive developments, the extent to which collaborative learning effectively supports graduates' readiness for workplace collaboration remains an area that requires further exploration. While students are routinely involved in collaborative activities during their studies, there is still limited empirical evidence that captures how these experiences translate into competencies that are applicable and sustainable in professional settings. In particular, there is a need to better understand the level of collaboration competence that graduates perceive they have developed at the point of graduation. At the same time, insights into the nature and expectations of collaboration in Indonesian professional contexts remain

relatively underexplored. Workplaces may require forms of collaboration that involve complex communication and contextual decision-making that differ from those experienced in academic environments. Therefore, a more comprehensive understanding is needed to explore how graduates' competencies align with workplace expectations.

From those gaps, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing development of Indonesian higher education by providing empirical insights into graduates' collaboration competence across two critical stages: at the point of graduation and within professional contexts. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how graduates perceive their collaboration competence upon completing their university education and how this competence is subsequently enacted and experienced in the workplace.

Expanding on the topics introduced in the above sections, this research aims to develop a more holistic view of the concept of collaboration competence, by examining the graduates' perception of collaboration competence throughout the process of transitioning from university studies to employment. Hence, not only are the graduates viewed as former students, but also as reflective practitioners, who can contribute to further improving educational practices. Particularly, this study investigates graduates' perceptions of collaboration competence at graduation stage, as well as experiences of practicing and developing collaboration competence in professional settings.

Literature Review

Collaboration Competence in Higher Education

Collaboration competence has increasingly been recognized as a key attribute that higher education seeks to develop, particularly in response to the growing demands of contemporary professional environments. In some disciplines, graduates are expected not only to demonstrate individual expertise but also to work effectively with others in achieving shared goals. In this regard, collaboration competence is often understood as a complex and multidimensional construct, encompassing a range of abilities such as interpersonal communication and collective problem-solving (Anchunda & Kaewurai, 2025; Maxwell, 2023). It also involves the capacity to manage differences, adapt to group dynamics, and take shared responsibility within a team.

From a learning perspective, collaboration competence plays a meaningful role in shaping how students engage with knowledge and with one another. Through collaborative activities, students are given space to exchange ideas and co-construct understanding in ways that may not emerge through individual learning alone (Haataja et al., 2022; Nakata et al., 2025). This process often encourages deeper engagement, as students are required to articulate their thinking, listen to others, and respond thoughtfully within a group context (Yu et al., 2025). In many cases, such interactions contribute not only to cognitive development but also to the cultivation of social awareness and a sense of accountability towards peers.

Collaboration in higher education is most commonly facilitated through group work, which has become a familiar feature in many university classrooms. While group work is intended to provide authentic opportunities for students to practice collaboration, its implementation is not always straightforward. Differences in participation, varying levels of commitment, and challenges in communication can influence how collaboration unfolds in practice (Ceballos et al., 2025; Qu & Cross, 2024; Saccardi & Masthoff, 2025). As a result, collaboration competence should not be viewed merely as an individual skill that students either possess or lack, but rather as a situated practice that develops through interaction, context, and experience. This perspective highlights the importance of examining how collaboration is actually experienced by students, particularly in relation to how it prepares them for the expectations they will encounter beyond the university setting.

Collaboration in EFL Contexts

Collaboration within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts presents a distinctive set of conditions that shape how students engage in group work. Unlike settings where

communication occurs in a first language, EFL learners are required to navigate collaborative processes through a language that they are still developing (Artunc & Hart, 2020; Hırçın-Çoban & Çimenli, 2023). This adds an additional layer to collaboration, as students must simultaneously manage both the content of the task and the linguistic resources needed to express their ideas. In this sense, communication in a second language is not merely a medium of interaction but becomes an integral part of the collaborative process itself.

The use of English as a working language in group activities often influences how students participate and position themselves within the group. Students with higher levels of language proficiency may take on more active or dominant roles, while others may adopt more passive positions due to limited confidence or difficulties in expressing their thoughts clearly (Kitjaroonchai & Loo, 2023; Wei & Cao, 2024). This uneven participation can affect the overall dynamics of collaboration, potentially limiting the extent to which all group members are able to contribute meaningfully. At the same time, the need to negotiate meaning in a second language requires additional effort, as students must ensure that their intended messages are accurately understood by others.

Graduate Competence and Workplace Expectations

The transition from university to the workplace often brings new perspectives on what it means to be competent, particularly in relation to collaboration. In professional environments, collaboration is not only expected but is often embedded in daily practices, where individuals are required to work across roles, disciplines, and sometimes even cultural boundaries (Crampsey et al., 2023; Fayard & Mayer, 2023). Workplace collaboration tends to involve a combination of clear communication, adaptability, initiative, and the ability to respond to dynamic situations. Unlike structured academic tasks, collaboration in the workplace is frequently less predictable, requiring individuals to navigate ambiguity, manage responsibilities, and contribute proactively to shared objectives.

In this context, collaboration competence is closely linked to how individuals engage with real-world challenges. Employees are expected to participate actively in discussions, align their contributions with team goals, and demonstrate accountability for collective outcomes. The ability to negotiate ideas, handle disagreements constructively, and maintain professional relationships becomes particularly important (Yadav et al., 2025). These expectations suggest that collaboration in the workplace extends beyond task completion, involving a more nuanced and context-sensitive form of interaction.

However, a number of studies have pointed to a perceived gap between the competencies developed during university education and those required in professional settings. While higher education provides valuable opportunities for students to engage in group work, the nature of these experiences may not always fully reflect the complexity of workplace collaboration (Crampsey et al., 2023). For instance, academic collaboration is often bounded by assessment structures, predefined roles, and limited timeframes, whereas workplace collaboration demands greater flexibility, sustained engagement, and a higher degree of personal initiative.

Tracer Study and Alumni Perspective

In recent years, tracer studies have gained increasing attention as a valuable approach for understanding the relevance of higher education in relation to workplace demands. By focusing on graduates' post-university experiences, tracer studies provide insights into how knowledge and skills acquired during university are carried into and applied within professional contexts. Rather than relying solely on institutional assumptions or curriculum design intentions, this approach allows higher education to be informed by the lived realities of its graduates.

Alumni, in this regard, occupy a unique and important position. Having experienced both academic and professional environments, they are able to reflect on their transition from university to the workplace with a more comprehensive perspective (Yunus, 2021; Yunus & Latief, 2023). Their reflections often reveal not only what competencies were developed during

their studies but also how these competencies are enacted or even challenged in real-world situations. This dual perspective makes alumni a particularly valuable source of data for examining the alignment between educational preparation and workplace expectations. Accordingly, this perspective informs the methodological orientation of the study, which emphasizes graduates' perceptions and experiences as primary sources of data. Through this lens, the research aims to generate contextually grounded insights that can contribute to a more responsive and evidence-based understanding of collaboration competence in Indonesian higher education.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to address the research questions (Baškarada & Koronios, 2018; Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 1999a). The quantitative component is used to capture general patterns of graduates' perceived collaboration competence, particularly at the point of graduation and in professional contexts. Meanwhile, the qualitative component allows for a deeper exploration of how graduates make sense of their experiences, including how they describe the development and transformation of their collaboration competence over time. By combining these two approaches, the study seeks to balance breadth and depth, providing a more holistic understanding of collaboration competence that cannot be achieved through a single method alone.

The participants of this study consist of English Department alumni in one of Indonesian public universities who graduated between 2023 and 2025. For the quantitative phase, a total of 295 English-major alumni participated by completing the questionnaire. This group represents a range of post-graduation experiences, allowing the study to capture diverse perspectives on collaboration competence across different professional contexts. For the qualitative phase, three participants were selected for semi-structured interviews, with one representative from each cohort year. This selection was intended to provide a more focused and reflective account of graduates' experiences, enabling the study to explore individual trajectories of competence development from university to workplace.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study incorporates two main instruments to support the data collection process, corresponding to its mixed-method design. For the quantitative component, a Likert-scale questionnaire is utilized to capture graduates' perceptions of their collaboration competence (Joshi et al., 2015). The items are designed to allow participants to indicate their level of agreement based on their experiences at the point of graduation as well as in their current professional contexts. For the qualitative component, an interview guide is developed to facilitate semi-structured interviews. The guide includes open-ended questions that encourage participants to reflect on their experiences of collaboration, including how they engaged in group work during their studies and how these experiences relate to their current workplace practices (Bryman, 2016). While the guide provides a general structure, it also allows flexibility for participants to elaborate on issues they consider significant.

The analysis of data follows the mixed-method design of the study. Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire is analyzed using descriptive statistics, particularly frequency and percentage, to identify general patterns in graduates' perceived collaboration competence (Baškarada & Koronios, 2018; Creswell, 1999b; Timans et al., 2019). This analysis provides an overview of how competence is distributed across different contexts. For the qualitative data, thematic analysis is employed to examine the interview transcripts. This process involves identifying recurring themes and patterns that emerge from participants' narratives, with particular attention to how they describe the development and transformation of their

collaboration competence. Through this approach, the study seeks to capture the depth and complexity of graduates’ experiences.

3. Findings

Cross-Cohort Comparison: Patterns Across 2023–2025

A comparison across the three cohorts (2023, 2024, and 2025) reveals a consistent and meaningful pattern in how collaboration competence is perceived between graduation and workplace contexts. Across all cohorts, there is a clear shift from “high” and “moderate” categories at the point of graduation toward a stronger concentration in the “very high” category in the workplace. This pattern suggests that graduates’ understanding of collaboration competence evolves significantly once they enter professional environments.

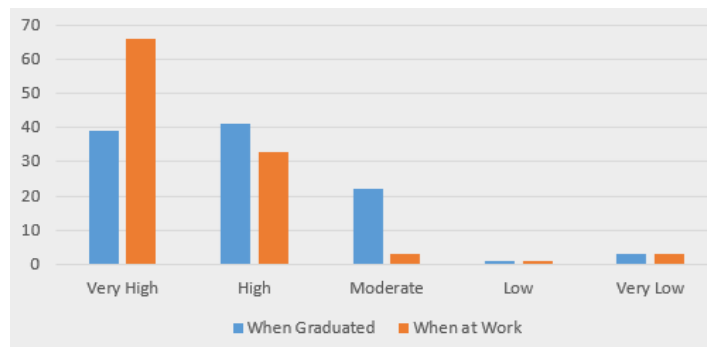


Figure 1. English Department Students’ Views on Collaboration Skill Graduated in 2023

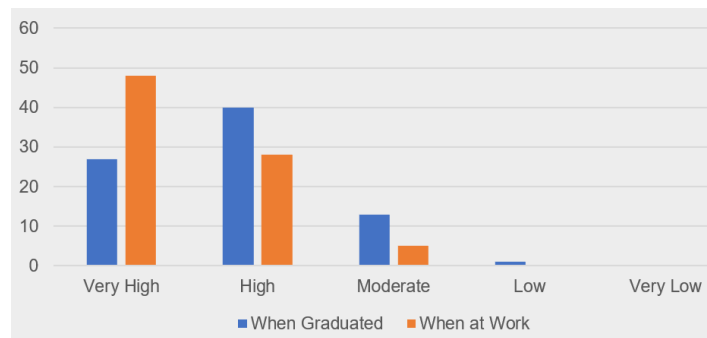


Figure 2. English Department Students’ Views on Collaboration Skill Graduated in 2024

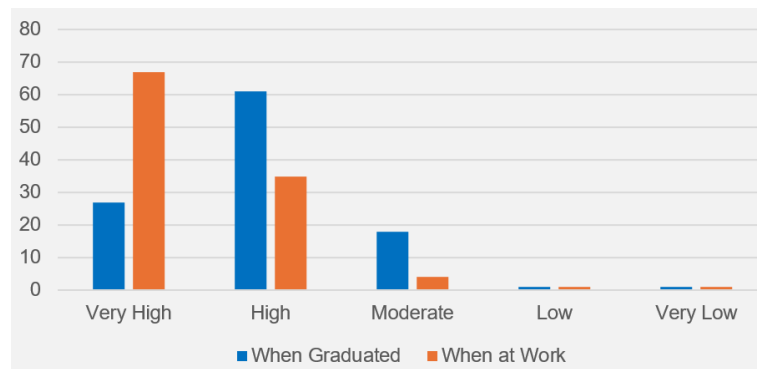


Figure 3. English Department Students’ Views on Collaboration Skill Graduated in 2025

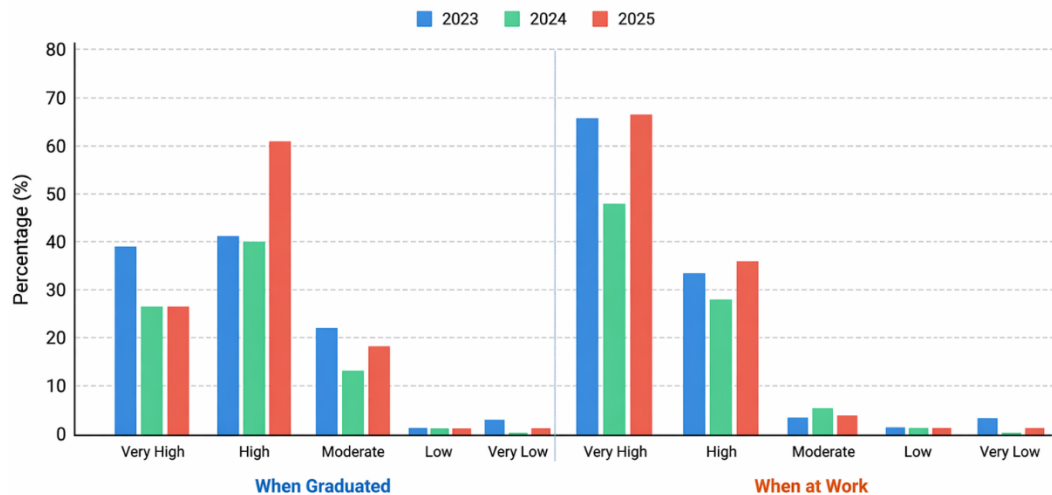


Figure 4. Merged Graph of English Department Students' Views on Collaboration Skill Graduated from 2023 to 2025

At the point of graduation, respondents across all cohorts tend to cluster around the “high” category, indicating a general sense of preparedness. For instance, the 2023 cohort shows a relatively balanced distribution between “very high” (39) and “high” (41), while the 2024 and 2025 cohorts demonstrate an even stronger concentration in the “high” category (40 and 61 respectively). This indicates that graduates consistently perceive themselves as adequately equipped with collaboration skills upon completing their studies.

However, once in the workplace, a notable transformation occurs. In all three cohorts, the “very high” category becomes the most dominant. The increase is particularly striking in the 2025 cohort, where responses in this category rise from 27 at graduation to 67 in the workplace. Similar patterns are observed in 2023 (39 to 66) and 2024 (27 to 48). At the same time, the “moderate” category declines sharply across all cohorts, suggesting that workplace experiences lead to more decisive and elevated evaluations of collaboration competence. This consistent shift across cohorts points to a shared experience among graduates: collaboration in professional settings is perceived as more demanding, structured, and consequential than in academic contexts. While university-based group work may provide initial exposure, workplace collaboration appears to require a higher level of engagement, including initiative, accountability, and the ability to navigate complex interpersonal and organizational dynamics.

Interestingly, the stability of responses in the “low” and “very low” categories across all cohorts indicates that collaboration is generally not perceived as a weak area. Instead, the findings suggest a recalibration of standards rather than a deficiency. Graduates do not necessarily feel unprepared; rather, they come to recognize that effective collaboration in the workplace operates at a higher level than previously understood. The cross-cohort comparison highlights a robust and consistent pattern: higher education provides a foundational level of collaboration competence, but workplace experiences play a crucial role in redefining and elevating graduates' perceptions of what it means to collaborate effectively. This pattern underscores the importance of aligning university learning experiences more closely with the realities of professional collaboration.

Qualitative Findings: Alumni Perspectives on Collaboration

To complement the quantitative findings, this study also draws on qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews with three alumni, each representing one cohort (2023, 2024, and 2025). Through these guiding questions, the interviews aimed to capture not

only what graduates experienced, but also how they made sense of those experiences. This allows the study to move beyond numerical patterns and provide a more nuanced understanding of collaboration as a lived and evolving practice.

Flexible Learning Orientation and Developmental Trajectory

Across all participants, collaboration was not viewed as a fixed preference but as part of a flexible learning strategy. While individual learning was often preferred for focus and self-regulation, collaborative learning was consistently valued for enabling interaction, discussion, and exposure to diverse perspectives. This indicates that learners actively make decisions about how they engage with learning tasks, demonstrating an emerging sense of agency. Rather than passively following instructional design, participants described adjusting their approach depending on the context, suggesting that collaboration competence is closely linked to students' ability to navigate and manage their own learning processes.

A clear developmental pattern is evident across participants, moving from initial passivity toward more active and, in some cases, leadership-oriented engagement. Early experiences of low confidence and limited participation gradually evolved into greater involvement in discussions, increased willingness to share ideas, and stronger responsibility in group work. In more advanced stages, participants demonstrated the ability to take initiative, organize tasks, and even lead group processes. This progression highlights that collaboration competence is not static, but develops over time through repeated exposure, practice, and interaction with peers.

Persistent Challenges in Participation and the Importance of Accountability

Despite overall positive experiences, all participants reported similar challenges in collaboration, particularly related to unequal participation and communication difficulties. The presence of passive members, uneven workload distribution, and delays in task completion were consistently identified as barriers to effective collaboration. In EFL contexts, these challenges may be further influenced by differences in confidence and language proficiency, which can shape how actively students contribute. However, participants also demonstrated adaptive strategies, such as negotiation, reminders, and open discussion, indicating that managing these challenges is an integral part of developing collaboration competence.

A strong theme emerging across participants is the need for clearer structure in collaborative learning. Effective collaboration was often associated with well-defined roles, balanced task distribution, and a shared sense of responsibility. Conversely, the absence of these elements frequently led to inefficiencies and dissatisfaction. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of accountability, both at the group and individual levels. Suggestions such as assigning specific roles, monitoring participation, and incorporating individual assessment within group work reflect a desire for more structured and fair collaborative practices.

Technology-Mediated Collaboration and Preparation for Workplace Realities

Another important theme is the integration of technology in supporting collaboration. Participants described using various digital tools, such as Google Docs, Zoom, Google Meet, and interactive platforms, to facilitate communication, coordination, and task completion. These experiences indicate that collaboration in higher education is increasingly mediated by technology, allowing for more flexible and continuous interaction beyond the classroom. At the same time, this also suggests a closer alignment with workplace practices, where digital collaboration tools are commonly used.

Across all participants, collaboration was consistently perceived as an essential competence for future professional contexts. Participants recognized that workplace tasks are rarely completed individually and require the ability to work effectively with others, adapt to different personalities, and contribute to shared goals. However, their reflections also suggest that while university experiences provide an important foundation, they may not fully capture the complexity and demands of workplace collaboration. This aligns with the quantitative

findings, where graduates reassess their competence after entering professional environments.

4. Discussion

Reframing Collaboration Competence: From Perceived Readiness to Situated Practice

One of the most consistent findings across cohorts is the shift in how collaboration competence is understood before and after entering the workplace. At the point of graduation, most participants perceived themselves as having a “high” level of competence. However, once they transitioned into professional environments, this perception shifted significantly toward “very high,” suggesting that workplace collaboration is experienced as more demanding and complex.

This finding resonates with the view that competence is context-dependent and socially constructed rather than fixed (Hırçın-Çoban & Çimenli, 2023; Yadav et al., 2025). From this perspective, collaboration competence develops through participation in communities of practice, where individuals continuously adapt to new expectations and norms. Similarly, graduate capabilities are often redefined through workplace experience rather than fully formed at graduation (Fayard & Mayer, 2023). Hence, collaboration competence should be understood not as an endpoint of university learning, but as an evolving practice shaped by real-world engagement.

Collaboration in EFL Contexts: Beyond Language to Participation and Confidence

The findings also highlight that collaboration in EFL contexts involves more than linguistic ability. While communication in a second language is often assumed to be the main barrier, participants’ experiences suggest that confidence, willingness to participate, and group dynamics play equally significant roles.

This aligns with the argument that language learning is inherently social and interactional (Artunc & Hart, 2020), where participation is shaped not only by linguistic competence but also by learners’ sense of agency and identity. In addition, Gao (2010) emphasized that learner autonomy and agency are critical in determining how actively students engage in learning processes, including collaborative settings. In this sense, the transition from passive to active participation observed in this study reflects not only linguistic development but also the growth of confidence and self-positioning within group interactions.

The Emergence of Student Agency in Collaborative Learning

A central contribution of this study lies in highlighting the role of student agency in the development of collaboration competence. Participants demonstrated how they actively shaped their collaborative experiences, by taking initiative, negotiating roles, managing challenges, and adapting to group dynamics.

This finding is closely aligned with the concept of agency as the capacity to act purposefully and make meaningful choices in learning (Gao, 2010; Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021). In educational contexts, agency is increasingly seen as a key factor in how students engage with and benefit from collaborative learning environments (Mercer, 2012). Rather than being passive recipients of instructional design, students in this study demonstrated agentic behavior by actively influencing the direction and quality of collaboration. This suggests that effective collaboration is not only a matter of skill acquisition, but also of students’ willingness and ability to take ownership of their learning processes.

Technology as a Bridge between Academic and Professional Collaboration

The integration of digital tools in collaborative learning also emerges as a significant finding. Participants reported using platforms such as Google Docs, Zoom, and other tools to support communication and coordination.

This aligns with the growing recognition that digital technologies are reshaping how collaboration takes place in both educational and professional contexts (Mustofa et al., 2025). Technology-mediated collaboration enables more flexible, asynchronous, and distributed forms

of interaction, which are increasingly common in modern workplaces. However, the effectiveness of collaborative learning depends not only on tools but also on how they are integrated into pedagogical practices. This suggests that technology should be seen as an enabler rather than a substitute for well-designed collaboration.

Implications for Indonesian Higher Education

Taken together, these findings offer several implications for higher education in Indonesia. First, while collaborative learning is already widely implemented, there is a need to better align it with the complexities of workplace collaboration. This includes designing tasks that go beyond participation and require initiative, adaptability, and responsibility.

Second, the development of collaboration competence should be understood as an agentic and developmental process, where students gradually move from passive participation to active contribution. Supporting this process requires not only opportunities for collaboration but also guidance in how to engage effectively.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of integrating alumni perspectives into curriculum evaluation. As suggested by Hajihassankhansary & Gilanlioglu (2025), feedback from graduates can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of teaching practices and their relevance to professional contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined how collaboration competence is perceived at the point of graduation and how it is subsequently experienced in professional contexts among EFL graduates in Indonesian higher education. By combining quantitative and qualitative findings, the study reveals a consistent pattern: while graduates tend to perceive themselves as adequately prepared for collaboration at graduation, their understanding of collaboration becomes more complex and demanding once they enter the workplace. The findings suggest that collaboration competence should not be viewed as a fixed outcome of university education, but rather as a developmental and context-dependent process. Experiences in professional environments play a crucial role in reshaping graduates' perceptions, highlighting the need for higher education to better align collaborative learning practices with real-world demands. In this regard, the study also underscores the importance of student agency, as graduates demonstrate increasing levels of initiative and adaptability in their collaborative engagement over time.

In addition, the study identifies several key factors that influence the effectiveness of collaboration in higher education, including the need for active participation and the integration of technology to support interaction. These findings point to the importance of designing collaborative learning not only as a pedagogical activity, but also as a meaningful preparation for professional practice. From a broader perspective, this study contributes to the growing body of research on collaboration competence by offering empirical insights from the Indonesian EFL context and by foregrounding alumni perspectives as a valuable source of evidence. It highlights the potential of tracer-based approaches in bridging the gap between university learning and workplace expectations.

However, this study is not without limitations. The qualitative component is based on a small number of participants, which may not fully represent the diversity of alumni experiences. Future research may involve a larger sample and explore additional factors, such as disciplinary differences or the role of emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, in shaping collaborative practices.

6. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this research or in the preparation of this scientific article.

7. Author Contributions

H.Y. and N.P.W. contributed to the conception of the research and the collection of data. Both authors actively participated in the development of the theoretical framework, research methodology, data organization and analysis, discussion of the findings, and the approval of the final version of the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the paper. The overall percentage of contributions to the conceptualization, drafting, and revision of this manuscript is as follows: H.Y. (65%) and N.P.W. (35%).

8. Data Availability Statement

The authors declare that the data supporting the results of this study will be made available by the corresponding author, H. Y., upon reasonable request.

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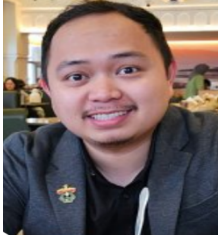

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