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COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN ESP CLASSES – AN EXPLORATION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' OPINIONS

Abstract: *The research aims to investigate the opinions of students on different facets of collaborative learning based on their experience with teamwork in English classes at the university. The results indicate that students find teamwork most beneficial when it comes to translation tasks. The main stated advantages of teamwork refer to more efficient accomplishing of tasks, developing teamwork skills and interacting with colleagues. The most often mentioned disadvantages include the unequal contribution of team members, frequent disagreement between them and a possible lack of motivation and interest, all of which may result in the lower achievement of the team as a whole.*

Introduction

Collaborative learning (CL) is commonly regarded as an "umbrella term" for a variety of activities in classes aimed at involving two or more students to take part in learning activities (Smith and MacGregor 1992). Usually, this concept is used to denote the activities performed by a pair/group of students who should jointly accomplish a task, solve a problem or create a product (Laal and Laal 2012). Applying collaborative learning within the educational system can have multiple beneficial effects later on – primarily, students get accustomed to working in a team, sharing their knowledge, listening to somebody else's ideas and acknowledging other opinions, and, secondly, they will be able to function as a part of the team in their workplace, which

is especially relevant, since working with others is considered to be "a core interpersonal skill required for employment in the twenty-first century" (Ernest, Heiser and Murphy 2013: 39). Due to its advantages, some authors consider collaborative learning to be "a leading concept in education" currently (van der Linden et al. 2000: 37).

Although CL figures as an important segment in educating students and providing them with the necessary teamwork skills, our own teaching experience indicates that the ability of students to collaborate in class and perform course-related activities as part of the team may often be taken for granted. Hence, it is relevant to explore students' experiences with this form of learning during ESP classes in the Serbian context so as to be able to offer useful guidelines for further improvement of their CL skills and techniques.

The research aims to investigate the opinions of university students on different facets of collaborative learning in ESP classes, based on their experience with doing language tasks in pairs and preparing and delivering an oral presentation in English in a four- or five-member team. Further, our aim is to explore the relationship between students' knowledge of English and the benefits they may gain from teamwork in ESP classes, which could have implications for team composition and functioning. The sample consisted of students from the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, University of Belgrade. The respondents filled in the questionnaire designed for the purposes of the study in the second semester of the academic year 2019/20. Data were processed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Before we proceed with the presentation of research results, we will provide a brief overview of previous studies on CL. The third section describes the methodology employed in the study. The findings are provided in the fourth section, and the concluding remarks are given in the final section of the paper.

Collaborative learning: definition and previous studies

Collaborative learning has many facets, which has yielded a number of somewhat different definitions of this concept, featuring some common elements, such as doing tasks in a team and acquiring knowledge through this type of work (e.g., Dillenbourg 1999; Laal and Laal 2012; Smith and MacGregor 1992)[1]. It is frequently argued that the notion of collaborative learning stems

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[1] The concept of collaborative learning is closely related to and sometimes overlaps with the concepts of cooperative learning and problem-solving learning. Essentially, all three forms of learning are helpful in fostering the development of "content knowledge

from the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky 1978), where interaction is of crucial importance for learning. The Vygotskian view of CL entails that "tasks are completed by groups of learners working together, there are opportunities for interaction, peer scaffolding, negotiation of meaning and the co-construction of language knowledge" (Ernest et al. 2013: 38).

In the paper, we rely on the definition of collaborative learning as "a collaborative activity of two or more learners who are working on achieving collective goals through the exchange of knowledge, learning and reaching a consensus" (Sumtsova et al. 2018: 163). Three main concepts involved in this process include "learning in teams, peer assessment and working in small groups" (Sumtsova et al. 2018: 161). In addition, CL has a goal of "getting students to take substantive responsibility for working together", as well as enabling them "to build knowledge together" (Davidson and Major 2014: 22); through achieving a common goal, students "construct knowledge through their interactions with each other" (Davidson and Major 2014: 23).

In order for collaborative learning to be effective, it is necessary to increase the probability of occurrence of different types of interactions among participants (Dillenbourg 1999). The ways in which teachers can raise the effectiveness of CL in class include careful designing of the situation with respect to the group size and the criteria for the selection of group members, specifying interaction rules, as well as regulating interactions among team members if necessary (Dillenbourg 1999: 5-6). The teacher thus assumes the role of a "facilitator" who monitors whether all members of the group take part in the interaction and may intervene to make group work more productive (Dillenbourg 1999: 5-6). There are certain skills that students need to possess as well, such as "team working and negotiation skills, group decision making and task management" (MacDonald 2003: 378); the groups also need to be cohesive and develop mutual trust (MacDonald 2003).

Previous studies have underlined various reported benefits of the use of CL techniques in classes, be it face-to-face or virtual collaboration (e.g., Faja 2013; Sumtsova et al. 2018). For instance, students involved in virtual collaborative teams reported that discussions on the course content conducted with their team members and teachers helped them in understanding the subject matter better, as well as that they highly valued this kind of experience at the tertiary level of education (Goold, Augar and Farmer 2006: 487-489). Students who felt more connected with their team members and interacted with

and related skills, even though there are differences in methodology" (Davidson and Major 2014: 8).

them better also thought they learned more from the collaborative learning task (Faja 2013: 48). Nevertheless, studies also pointed to downsides, particularly referring to uneven distribution of workload among team members, lack of participation of all members or doing team activities in the last minute (Goold et al. 2006). Students may feel their progress in learning is lower because of possible differences in team members' abilities (Rogat, Linnenbrink-Garcia and DiDonato 2013: 248). Further, students' motivation may decrease when they "recognize that group work requires more personal responsibility and ownership in comparison with independent learning" (Rogat et al. 2013: 248).

CL may be specifically beneficial in foreign language learning since it "enables the use of various patterns of interaction, promotes discussion, opinion exchange" (Sumtsova et al. 2018: 160) and also has the added benefit of preparing students for their future professional tasks (Sumtsova et al. 2018). A vast body of research has focused on the development of the skill of collaborative writing in L2 contexts and in the sphere of language for specific purposes since it is a commonplace task encountered in the workplace and demands different skills suitable to the workplace context (e.g., Bremner 2010; Couture and Rymer 1989; Storch 2013). There were several studies in Serbia that focused on virtual collaborative learning in English teaching (e.g., Radić-Bojanić 2012; Ljubojević 2016). Radić-Bojanić (2012) studied in detail the possibilities of the *Writeboard* platform which can be successfully implemented by two or more students for preparing projects or presentations. The research by Ljubojević (2016) showed that applying collaborative e-learning and assessment tools on the *Moodle* platform within the learning process can aid in the development of academic writing skills. Moreover, the students exposed to CL activities using the wiki, forum, blog and glossary and those who edited and assessed their peer work achieved better results in the final exam than those who did not.

Research methodology

Research background. Prior to the survey, students performed classroom-based small group activities (Matthews et al. 1995), such as solving grammar and vocabulary tasks, writing essays and translating during ESP classes at the university in the first year of studies. Further, they had the task of preparing and delivering a presentation that described one of the assigned branches of engineering as part of a four- or five-member team. They were free to choose the members of their team and to organise their work as they wished within a

five-week period assigned for task completion. All these activities involved "an exchange of views, discussion, mutual commenting and revision" (Sumtsova et al. 2018: 163) and thus can be subsumed under the notion of collaborative learning.

Questionnaire. For the purposes of the study, an extensive questionnaire was constructed and administered to respondents. The questionnaire had 17 questions in total (some of the questions included a set of statements or multiple sub-questions). The majority of questions were close-ended, and the participants answered by providing their answers on a five-point Likert scale or circling one of the offered answers. The initial questions referred to demographic data (age, gender), type of secondary school attended (grammar/ vocational school), the stage of education when students started learning English (one question with four options offered), self-assessment of the proficiency in English on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – poor, 5 – excellent) and self-assessment of the proficiency in individual skills such as writing, translation, conversation, text comprehension and listening comprehension (a 5-point scale; 1 – poor, 5 – excellent). A further set of questions was related to collaborative learning, asking the respondents about their experience with teamwork during the previous stages of education and at the university level of education when it comes to courses other than English, about their usual role in teamwork, preferences regarding the mode of work involved in English language tasks at the university (working alone, working in pairs, working in small groups), their assessment of the benefits of teamwork in ESP classes in terms of finding the correct solution faster, accomplishing tasks faster, seeing the problem from multiple viewpoints, developing teamwork skills and being more motivated in accomplishing the tasks on a 5-point scale (1 – completely disagrees, 5 – completely agrees); assessment of the beneficiality of teamwork in doing different types of tasks in ESP classes (grammar, vocabulary, translation, essay writing) on a 5-point scale (1 – disagrees, 5 – completely agrees), assessment of the extent to which they liked teamwork within the presentation group (1 – not at all, 5 – a lot); assessment of different teamwork facets in their presentation team (a 5-point scale; 1 – poor, 5 – excellent). Finally, students were given two open-ended questions in which they were asked to list up to three benefits and up to three downsides of teamwork during ESP university classes.

Procedure. Voluntarily and anonymously, students completed a pen-and-paper questionnaire during regular classes of the English language course at the faculty in the second semester of the academic year 2019/20.

Data processing. Descriptive statistics was used to describe the basic features of data in the study. Relationships between relevant variables were

analysed by correlation analysis and analysis of variance (ANOVA). The IBM SPSS 20 was used for quantitative analysis. The open-ended questions were coded by means of content analysis; the obtained answers were classified into inductively created categories, defined by content similarity.

Sample. The total number of students who participated in the survey was N=111 (male – 68.5 %, female – 31.5%). Their mean age was 19 (M = 19.3, SD = 0.74), and more than one half completed grammar school (64%). The majority of respondents (89.1%) started learning English in the first four grades of primary school or kindergarten. More than half of the students in total assessed their knowledge of English as very good (37.8%) or excellent (26.1%). The highest-rated English language skills according to the respondents' self-assessment are listening skills (with 94% of respondents assessing their own level of listening competence as very good or excellent) and text comprehension skills (93% of students assessed their skills as very good and excellent in this field). The level of translation skills was also assessed as fairly high (with 73.8% of respondents saying they were excellent or very good). Out of all skills, writing and conversation skills were assessed as developed to the lowest extent, with 62.1% and 60.3% of students, respectively, who estimated their level as very good or excellent.

Research results

In this section, we present the results of the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the obtained data. First of all, it may be argued that a majority of students are familiar with the concept of teamwork in classes since a large number of them had ample opportunities to collaborate in class during the previous stages of education, both in the English language classes (66.7%) and in other courses (89.2%). Still, only around one half of them (49.5%) had some teamwork experience at the faculty prior to working in groups in ESP university classes.

If allowed to choose in which way they would perform the ESP class activities, the majority of respondents said they preferred working in pairs (43.2%); still, a slightly smaller percentage of students (39.6%) answered that they liked working in small groups, while only 17.2% preferred to work on their own (Chart 1). Further analysis indicates that the respondents' self-assessed knowledge of English is related to teamwork preferences[1]. Namely, a higher assessment of English knowledge

1 Previous studies explored the preferences of high-performing students towards

is accompanied by a more prominent preference for working alone (F [2, 108] = 10.67, p <. 01). Put differently, students with the lowest self-assessed knowledge are the ones who most prefer working in groups.
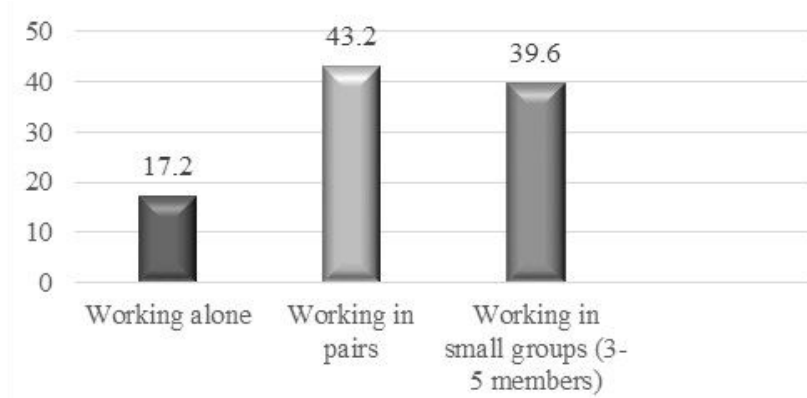
Chart 1: The preferred mode of work in ESP classes (in %)

When involved in teamwork activities in ESP classes, approximately one half of students (49.5%) play the role of a team leader, while 47.7% follow the instructions of other team members; a small number of students (2.8%) responded that they were not much involved in team activities.

Students were also asked to assess how helpful teamwork in ESP classes was with respect to different aspects (Chart 2)[1]. The majority of respondents stated that this form of work was most helpful in observing the problem from multiple viewpoints (82.9%) and finding the solution to the task easier (77.5%). A somewhat lower number agreed that doing tasks in groups was very helpful in developing teamwork skills and accomplishing tasks faster (73.9% and 72% respectively), while the lowest (albeit still high) number of students completely agreed that ESP teamwork enhanced their motivation for doing tasks.

Similar to the preference for working in groups, the self-assessed level of knowledge of English is significantly related to the evaluation of teamwork helpfulness. Those who assessed their knowledge of English as higher expressed

working alone vs. working with others and concluded that this depended on the context and the nature of the task (e.g., Kanevsky, Lo and Marghelis 2021; Walker and Shore 2015).

1 In five-option questions on the agreement, the answers were recoded into three options (1, 2 – disagrees, 3 – somewhat agrees, 4, 5 – completely agrees) for easier comparison.

lower agreement with the statements that teamwork was helpful in finding the solution easier ($r = -.38$, $p < .01$), accomplishing tasks faster ($r = -.24$, $p < .01$), observing the problem from multiple viewpoints ($r = -.11$, $p < .01$), building teamwork skills ($r = -.20$, $p < .01$) and being more motivated for tasks ($r = -.27$, $p < .01$). These findings can be interpreted as an indication that the least knowledgeable students benefited most from teamwork.
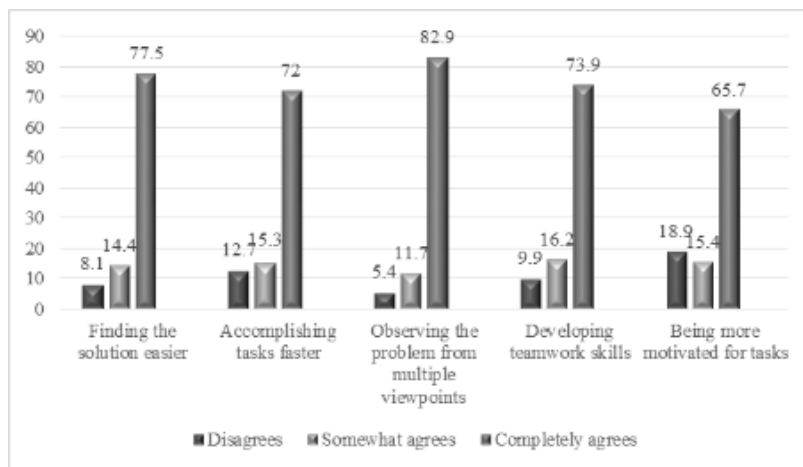

Chart 2: The assessment of teamwork helpfulness in doing tasks in ESP university classes (in %)

Regarding teamwork in doing different types of tasks in ESP classes, students find working in teams most beneficial when it comes to translation tasks and writing essays (Chart 3). These may be considered the types of exercises where different viewpoints might be useful generally speaking; additionally, it may be argued that students feel less proficient or competent in translation and writing and think that it is useful for their knowledge to be supplemented by someone else's. Students also find teamwork beneficial in doing vocabulary and grammar tasks, but to a lower extent.

Still, the analysis again indicates that teamwork in completing different language tasks seems to be more beneficial for students with lower levels of self-assessed knowledge of English. Working in teams was evaluated as less beneficial when it comes to all kinds of tasks, i.e., grammar tasks ($r = -.34$, $p < .01$), vocabulary tasks ($r = -.51$, $p < .01$), translation ($r = -.43$, $p < .01$) and essay writing ($r = -.44$, $p < .01$) by more knowledgeable students.
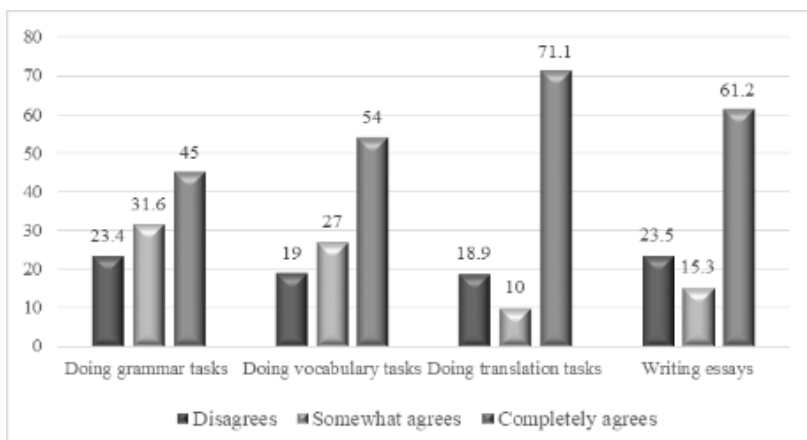
Chart 3: The assessment of teamwork beneficiality in doing different types of tasks in ESP classes (in %)

Students' satisfaction with collaboration on the specific project task of preparing and delivering a presentation in English was fairly high. The majority positively rated the experience of working in this specific team, either giving it the mark 4 (50.5%) or the maximum mark of 5 (22.5%). The remainder, around one third of them (27%), graded the experience from 1 to 3.

Further, students were asked to assess the level of presence of different facets of teamwork in their own team, which accomplished this task (Chart 4)[1].

1 In five-option questions on rating the presence of different teamwork facets, the answers were recoded into three options (1, 2 – low, 3 – moderate, 4, 5 – high) for easier comparison.
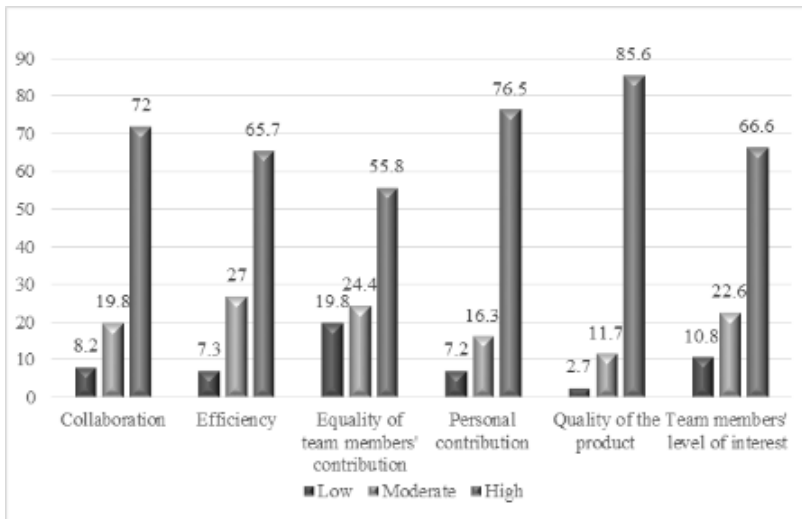
Chart 4: Assessment of the presence of different teamwork facets in the respondents' team tasked with the oral presentation in the ESP class (in %)

The highest-rated was the quality of the ensuing product (85.6% assessed it as high), followed by a personal contribution to task completion (76.5%) and the level of collaboration within the team (72%). Team members' level of interest and team efficiency were rated somewhat lower (66.6% and 65.7%, respectively). The lowest rated aspect was the equality of team members' contribution to the final product (only 55.8% assessed it as high). However, unlike previous evaluations, the self-assessed knowledge of English was not significantly related to the evaluation of teamwork facets in the team tasked with the presentation project.

Students were also asked to list up to three benefits and up to three downsides of teamwork based on their experience with this type of work during ESP university classes and presentation preparation, specifically. These results were analysed qualitatively. Not all students provided all three answers. A total of 266 answers were given as positive aspects and 138 as negative aspects.

The most frequently stated positive aspects of teamwork in ESP university classes were the following: doing tasks faster and more efficiently (14.3% of all the answers pertaining to good sides), developing teamwork skills (13.9%), getting to know fellow students better through interaction and socialising (13.1%), easier achievement of the task when part of a team (10.9%) and mutual help/support/cooperation (9%). Plenty of students (8.6%) pointed out that there was a specific positive atmosphere surrounding teamwork (e.g., "a more

pleasant atmosphere", "a more interesting atmosphere", "we develop mutual trust in teams"), and some of them specifically listed having fun as a good side (3.8%). It was also frequently mentioned that there was a higher level of interest and a higher level of motivation when part of a team (8.6%).

Working together is beneficial since it involves multiple viewpoints on the problem and exchange of opinions (8.3%). According to students, it may also be easier since it entails a division of the task, labour and responsibility (8.3%). A number of students also stated that they enhanced their language skills through collaboration with their team members (e.g. "understanding the text better", "expanding our vocabulary") (6.8%). Some of the students pointed out that they usually obtained a better grade when working within a group (3%).

The most frequently stated downsides of ESP teamwork include the unequal contribution of team members (18.8% of all the answers pertaining to bad sides), different opinions or disagreement of team members (15.9%) and the lack of motivation of some team members (14.5%), such as their physical absence from team meetings, lack of interest in working on the topic, lack of effort in accomplishing their designated tasks within the team, and the lack of team discipline and irresponsible actions of individual team members. These are the issues surrounding teamwork that have been raised in previous studies as well (e.g., Radić-Bojanić 2012).

A somewhat lower number of students (9.4%) reported difficulties in organizing team meetings face-to-face (e.g., being unable to find the time and place suitable to all team members), as well as the poor organisation of the team in general (8.7%), poor cooperation (3.6%) and poor communication among team members (2.2%). These should be specifically taken into account since it may be an indication of the fact that students did not choose a team leader who would coordinate task activities and delegate duties. Students also stated downsides related to the lower efficiency of accomplishing the task when working as part of a team (e.g., "everything is done in the last minute", "some of the members do not meet the deadlines") (5.8%) and longer accomplishment of the task ("more time is needed since there are more members involved", "too many team members to agree on various points") (4.3%), as well as dependence on other team members in accomplishing the task (e.g. "the whole group could suffer because of one irresponsible team member" (2.2%)). According to students, certain personal features of team members, such as arrogance or stubbornness, also have a negative effect on the achievement of the team (5.8%).

It is interesting to note that some students mentioned as a downside the observed insufficient knowledge of English of certain team members

or inequality of the level of knowledge among team members (3.6%), which served as an obstacle in achieving the desired result. Some students reported they had stage fright since they had delivered the presentation as part of the team and this carried added responsibility for team performance (5.2%).

Based on the analysis of open-ended questions, it may be inferred that students were generally pleased with their experience with teamwork on a project, while reporting the negative issues involving team members' irresponsible behaviour and lack of commitment.

Concluding remarks

The aim of the study was to obtain an insight into the opinions of engineering students on collaborative learning in ESP classes. The results indicate that students have already had experience with working in teams in classes at previous levels of education. When it comes to university education, they prefer working in pairs slightly more when solving tasks in ESP classes to working in teams. Respondents assess various teamwork aspects as very beneficial and find teamwork most helpful with respect to translation tasks and writing essays. Based on the findings, it may be argued that the majority of students has a positive attitude towards this form of work and perceives possible gains. The main advantages of teamwork in ESP classes include more efficient task accomplishment, developing teamwork skills and interacting with colleagues; working in teams increases students' interest in and motivation for the task and it is easier since both the task-related activities and responsibility are shared. Some of the students mentioned specific benefits of CL referring to the enhancement of their knowledge in English through joint activities. The most often mentioned disadvantages refer to unequal contribution of team members, frequent disagreement between them and a lack of motivation and interest of some team members, all of which often result in the lower achievement of the team as a whole. Further, the team's product may be influenced by insufficient proficiency in English of some team members.

Still, the findings indicate that there are differences among students in the acceptance of and possible gains from teamwork. Those students who assessed their level of knowledge higher were more inclined towards working alone. They also downgraded the beneficiality of all the given aspects of teamwork (such as finding the solution easier, observing the problem from multiple perspectives etc.) and thought that teamwork was less beneficial regarding all kinds of ESP linguistic tasks. Hence, these students may see teamwork

as less productive and constructive and may feel exploited by other team members. Therefore, their attention should be drawn to the fact that, besides expanding student knowledge of English, ESP team activities also serve to practice teamwork skills in general.

Based on research results, we can discuss several implications related to teamwork activities in ESP tertiary classes. For CL to be as effective as possible, students need to communicate and interact with peers (Sumtsova et al. 2018: 164). In order for communication to be enhanced, students should be advised to choose a team leader who would have sufficient authority to delegate tasks and deal with irresponsible behaviour of team members in the proper way. Considering the reported problems in motivating team members to participate in tasks equally and do them on time, the teacher should pay more attention to the role of a facilitator of teamwork and devote more time to progress checks and interaction monitoring. As suggested in the literature, the teacher should be aware that tensions may arise during group work and be willing to offer practical advice in case of conflicts (Ernest et al. 2013: 48). Ultimately, the teacher may intervene in another way by giving individual grades for the contribution of each individual in the team (Wang 2007). Still, students need to be told that the problems they encounter in teamwork might serve as a valuable lesson. Although these problems usually hamper the performance of the team, they may also "provide further opportunities for students to practice their negotiation and conflict resolution skills" (Goold et al. 2006: 487).

Bearing in mind the reported difficulties in organizing team meetings, and drawing on the experience with the use of online teaching at all levels of education caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, online collaboration between team members should be considered to a greater extent. There are various studies which have shown that virtual collaboration via different platforms or social media is helpful in increasing student performance and self-confidence (e.g., Voorn and Kommers 2013). In this case, we can recommend several applications (e.g., *Viber*, *WhatsApp*, *Telegram*) and platforms (e.g., *Slack*, *Trello*, *Google Docs*) which offer a suitable environment for messaging, file transferring, project monitoring and assigning tasks.

Limitations of the study lie in the fact that we had a relatively small sample of students of one faculty and the questions referred to a small set of activities performed during classes in pairs or class projects. Future studies should further investigate students' attitudes towards implementing different pair/team activities within the learning process (e.g., peer review, project-based activities such as a collaborative writing task, suited to the demands of

the future workplace) and the ways of applying collaborative learning within ESP university classes via virtual collaboration.

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**Kolaborativno učenje na časovima engleskog jezika
za posebne namene – mišljenja studenata**

Rezime

Cilj rada je da se ispita mišljenje studenata o različitim aspektima kolaborativnog učenja na časovima engleskog jezika za posebne namene na osnovu njihovog iskustva u izradi jezičkih zadataka u parovima i pravljenju usmene prezentacije u četvoročlanom ili petočlanom timu. Dodatno, bavimo se vezom između procene sopstvenog znanja engleskog jezika koju su davali ispitanici i koristi koje oni mogu imati od timskog rada na časovima engleskog jezika na univerzitetu. Uzorak su činili studenti Mašinskog fakulteta Univerziteta u Beogradu, koji su u drugom semestru školske 2019/20. godine popunili upitnik napravljen za potrebe istraživanja. Rezultati pokazuju da studenti na časovima engleskog jezika najviše vole da rade u paru i smatraju da je najveća korist od timskog rada u rešavanju zadataka prevođenja i pisanja eseja. Međutim, oni ispitanici koji procenjuju da poseduju viši nivo znanja engleskog jezika skloniji su da odaberu da rade samostalno. Glavne navedene prednosti timskog rada na časovima engleskog jezika na fakultetu odnose se na efikasnije izvršavanje zadataka, razvijanje veština timskog rada i interakciju sa kolegama. Najčešće pomenuti nedostaci jesu nejednak doprinos članova tima, često neslaganje i nedostatak motivacije i interesovanja kod nekih od njih, što može da dovede do nižeg postignuća tima u celini.