



## STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ACTIVE LEARNING IN INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE

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### **Abstract:**

There is a growing interest in active learning as a shift from traditional lecturing to improving student-centred learning in English. However, in the Vietnamese context of teaching and learning at tertiary levels, little research has examined students' perceptions of active learning in approaching Introduction to Literature. This study is therefore aimed to look into this area of interest. Participants in this study were 94 students from junior and seniors majoring in high-quality programs at a university in the Mekong Delta. Data were collected from questionnaires. The findings show that students had positive perceptions of active learning in studying this course. Implications for teaching and learning this course are made.

**Keywords:** active learning, English studies, high-quality program, literature

### **1. Introduction**

The idea that culture and language, particularly English have their roles in helping students to approach and communicate information with other peers is addressed (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2021; Shaules, 2019). Specifically, Introduction to Literature is one of the subjects that provide students with an opportunity to unpack culture, through literary works. However, it is challenging for students of English as a foreign language to learn Literature in English. When studying English, students have to do more than acquire or use English because English learning is likely to enrich individual lives (Shaules, 2019). One way to enhance English use in literary works necessitates students to become more active participants in their learning process.

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Several studies on active learning have been conducted; however, research on students' perceptions of active learning in approaching the subject Literary Introduction is limited.

This study is therefore aimed to examine students' perceptions of active learning and understanding of how it can be integrated into Introduction to Literature, a prerequisite course in high-quality program of English Studies, School of Foreign Languages, at a university in the Mekong Delta. The research questions were, "What are students' perceptions of active learning?" and "What are students' views of how active learning is practiced in Introduction to Literature classes?"

## 2. Literature Review

The following section reviews the literature on active learning, literature, and related studies relevant to this study.

### 2.1 Active Learning

There are several views of active learning in the literature. Active learning is defined as a learning mode in which students are actively involved in the learning process (Bonwell and Eison, 1991). In other words, these authors contend that students have to think about what they are doing instead of passive listening. In a report from the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), the authors discuss a variety of methodologies for promoting active learning. It was found that students are asked to read, write, discuss, and be engaged in dealing with problems. This process relates to the three learning domains referred to as knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSA). This taxonomy of learning behaviours can be thought of as the major objectives or targets. This view suggests that students must engage in higher-order thinking tasks such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

#### 2.1.1 Nature of Active Learning

Active learning is referred to as learning through play, technology-based learning, activity-based learning, group work, and project-based learning. Active learning is the opposite of [passive learning](#); it is [learner-centred](#), and requires more than just listening; the active participation of each and every student is a necessary aspect of active learning. Students must be doing things and simultaneously think about the work done.

According to Nguyen (2020), active learning refers to the notion of what students are engaging in doing activities and thinking about what they are doing ([Bonwell & Eison, 1991](#), as cited by Nguyen, 2020). Their view entails the vital role of higher-order thinking processes (e.g. analysis, synthesis and evaluation) as highlighted in Bloom's ([1956](#)) taxonomy. In this concept, Bloom describes a high level of thinking when students are more involved in learning and then reflection on this. And the highest levels of thinking process, in the range 80-90%, what is called "active" when students read, listen or see, exchange, react as they approached the course content through problem-solving exercises, information small groups, simulation, case studies, role-playing, and other

activities. Active learning is viewed as an interactive process in which students construct and utilize knowledge in critical and meaningful ways (Nguyen, 2020).

In Vietnam, in the era of integration and development, English has become a highly applicable language in daily life and work, especially for students. Currently, the construction of high-quality study programs with a combination of English and specialized knowledge blocks has become popular in the training programs of universities and colleges. To clearly show the need for combining English in specialized subjects, the authors Nguyen and Nguyen (2017) conducted a survey for 150 students of civil engineering and engineering. The results show that students and lecturers had similar opinions about the need to develop specialized English classes in an appropriate way to help students grasp important knowledge.

Research by Dinh and his colleagues (2011) suggests that students actively use 2 hours of self-study effectively by having a good study schedule and looking up information on the Internet. When asked what they need to do to be able to effectively use two hours of self-study, 39% of 1200 students at a university in the Mekong Delta said that they must increase their time doing exercises and reading textbooks before going to class. 32% of students thought that taking part-time jobs such as tutoring, marketing, and the like would help them accumulate professional knowledge and practical experience.

According to Doan and Nguyen (2013), the rate of students' knowledge acquisition and active learning increases when using multi-sensory skills in learning, exchanging ideas and opinions. Research by Pham (2014) at Tra Vinh University showed students' perception of positivity is self-study. Self-study is self-exploration and research to enrich the knowledge learned in class. Self-study is about making a detailed plan for learning and implementing that plan. Self-study is a process of hard scientific labour that requires self-discipline, positivity and willpower of learners.

Trinh (2019) claimed that active learning is classified as group discussion, thematic report, problem-based teaching, role-playing, and project teaching. These aspects play an important role in improving students' critical thinking ability because they are thought to create opportunities for both the teacher and students to debate and learn from each other in a positive and active learning environment. Along with the global integration, students are required to be capable of English language while communicating and working with other peers. As a matter of fact, the role of English and its use for communication purposes has now become the standard. However, not all countries are successful in applying English teaching methods with regard to culture values.

## **2.2 Introduction to Literature**

Introduction to Literature is a new subject, which was recently added to the teaching program under the permission of the School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University. The purpose of this inclusion is to allow English Studies students, high-quality program specifically, to have an opportunity to research English-speaking countries' culture through Literature.

The textbook, *An Introduction to Literature* (Truong–School of Education), is divided into 4 chapters, with Literary Devices and Literary Theories as the first chapter and followed by Fiction, Non-Fiction and Poems. This order was to ensure that students would learn about Basic Literature, identify the authors' implications, as well as analyse the literary devices that were used in the literary works. Students are asked to learn basic writing, artistic techniques, and literacy theories that acquaint them with some of the major critical literary approaches. These approaches are expected to help students build up their own interpretations and critical thinking about the text presented to them (The textbook was for internal circulation only).

### 3. Methodology

The study was carried out at a university in the Mekong Delta, Can Tho, Vietnam. The purpose of this study was to examine students' perceptions of active learning and how they applied this learning mode to the Introduction to Literature course. Participants in this study were 94 students (third-year and four-year students) in the high-quality program of English majors, School of Foreign Languages. Their age ranges from 20 to 22 years. The rationale for this participant selection was that these students were thought to become aware of active learning and the course content.

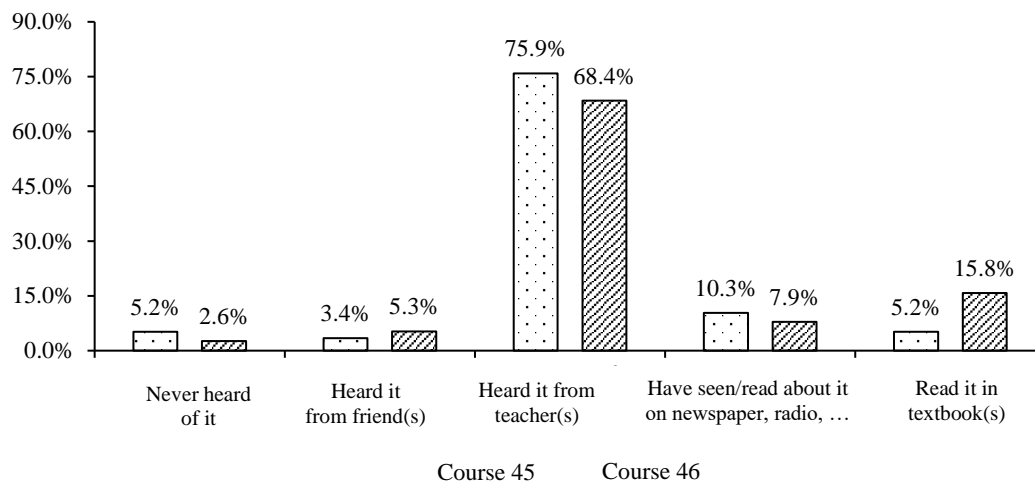
The data collected in this study included questionnaires and interviews; however, this paper was mainly drawn from the questionnaire. The thirty-five items questionnaire was organized into two parts. The first part of the questionnaire is related to the background information of the participants (name, gender, major, student's code, email, phone number) and focuses on exploring students' understanding of active learning. The second part asked students to present their views on the use of active learning in the Introduction to Literature course.

### 4. Findings

The following section reports on the findings of the study regarding students' perceptions of active learning in approaching the Introduction to literature course, as shown in Figure 1.

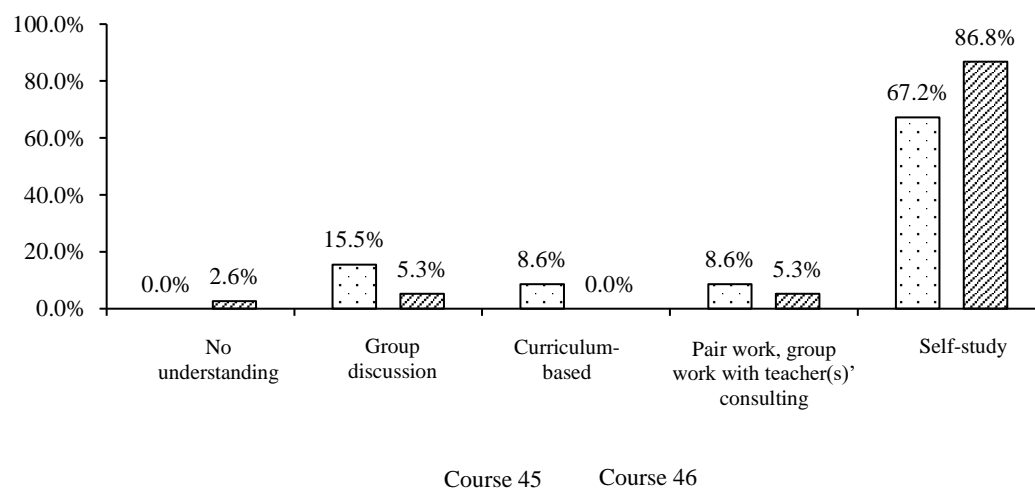
#### 4.1 Students' Perception of Active Learning

Figure 1 shows that 75.9% of the fourth-year students (course 45) and 68.4% of the third-year students (course 46) indicated that they knew the term 'active learning'. This term is known through the presentation of the lecturer and from the lecture of the modules. In addition, 10.3% of 4<sup>th</sup> year students and 7.9% 3<sup>rd</sup> year students knew through newspapers, radio, referenced documents and books. Some claimed that they knew this learning mode through exchanges with friends while others have never heard or known the term. Thus, the result shows that most of the students had access to active learning.



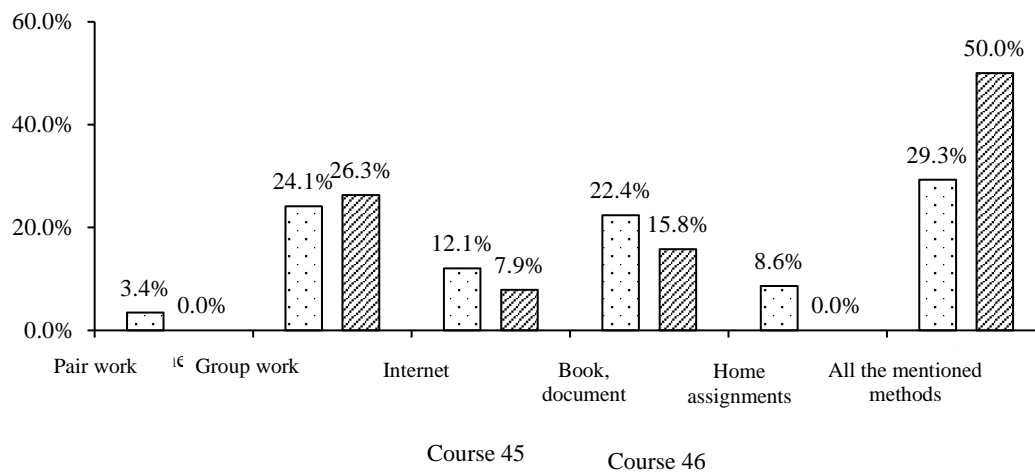
**Figure 1:** Student Perceptions of the Term “Active Learning”

#### 4.2 Students' Awareness of Active Learning



**Figure 2:** Awareness of Active Learning Forms

Figure 2 shows that 67.2%-86.8% of the respondents thought that active learning is associated with the notion that students learned by themselves at home, learned and searched for other information outside the class hours. This result is consistent with a study in Tra Vinh University where most students perceived positively active learning as self-study. This was because active learning could help them to expand their knowledge, promote independence, creativity, forging practice thinking ability (Pham, 2014). 5.3%-15.5% of respondents claimed that active learning is known as the use of thinking skills and group discussion. According to Doan and Nguyen (2013), the rate of students' knowledge acquisition and active learning increases when multi-sensory is applied to learning, exchanging ideas, and interacting highly, between students and students and between students and teachers. Only a small group of students were not aware of the term active learning in their learning process.

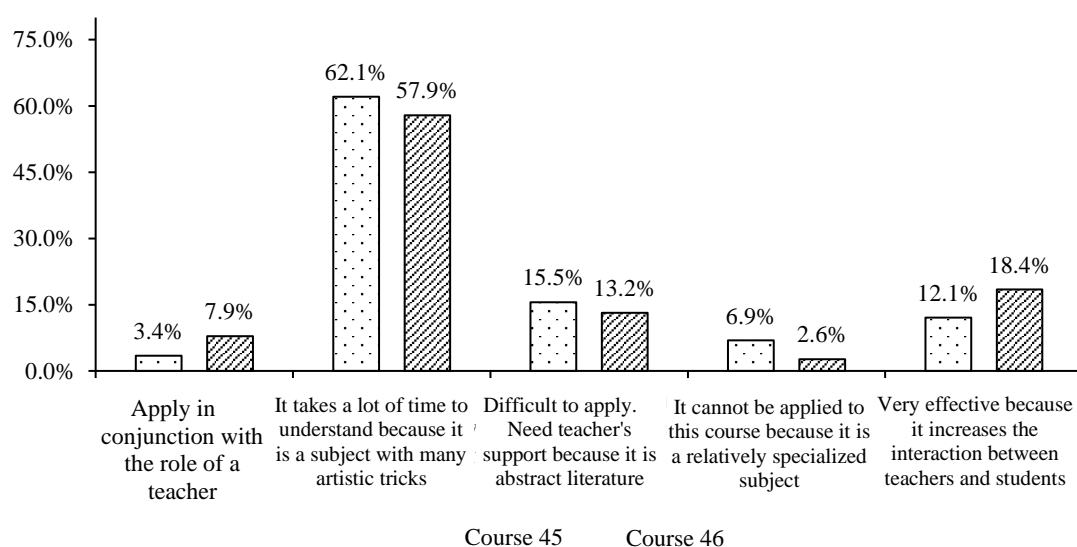


**Figure 3: Use of Active Learning**

The findings show that the majority of students believe that all learning methods are applied by students depending on their learning conditions and according to their study requirements, course requirements (29.3%-50%). Group learning is also quite popular (24.1%-26.3%). Self-reading, looking up documents is also a form that students apply a lot. Dinh et al. (2011) said that active learning uses 2 hours of self-study effectively by having a good study schedule, and looking up information online. Indeed, it is necessary to increase the time to do homework and read the textbook before going to class. Some students think that finding lesson information on the internet, doing homework on their own, or studying in pairs are active learning methods that they used.

### 4.3 Students' Perception of Active Learning in Introduction to Literature

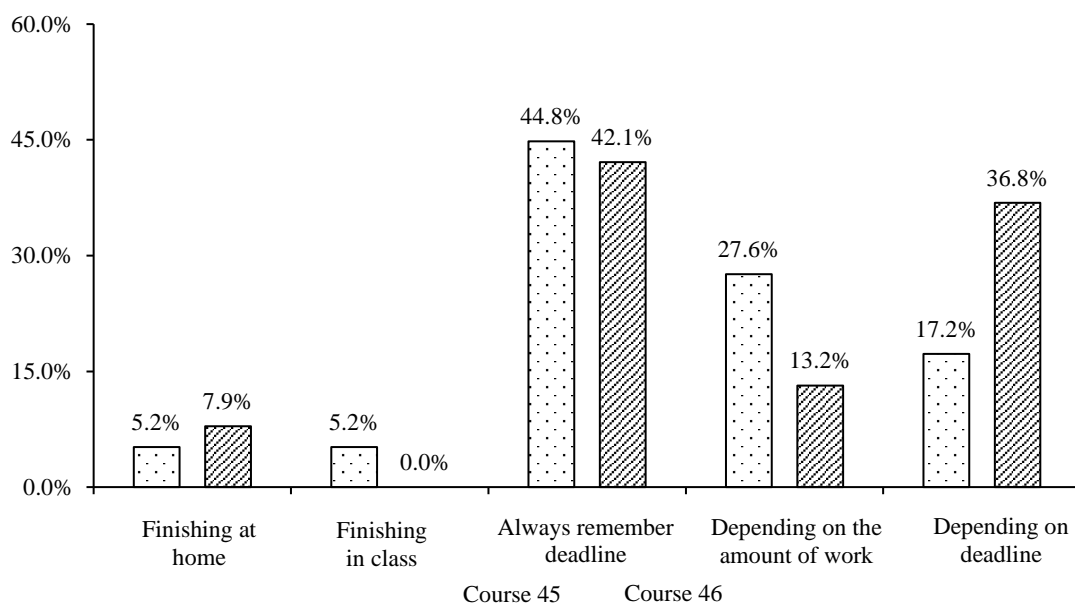
Perceiving the necessity and usefulness of active learning in Introduction to Literature



**Figure 4: Necessity and Usefulness of Active Learning in Literature**

Regarding the need and usefulness in applying active learning to the module Introduction to Literature, 57.9%- 62.1% of the fourth-year students and third-year students thought that it was necessary to invest much time. Self-study time is necessary because this is a course with many art tricks. Students thought that it was difficult to apply active learning in their learning of this course and that they needed support because the course was considered as abstract (13.2% - 15.5%). Other students said that they could apply active learning very effectively because this type of learning could increase the interaction between teachers and students (12.1% - 18.4%.) A few remaining thoughts that applying active learning in the course contents was in accordance with the teacher's role.

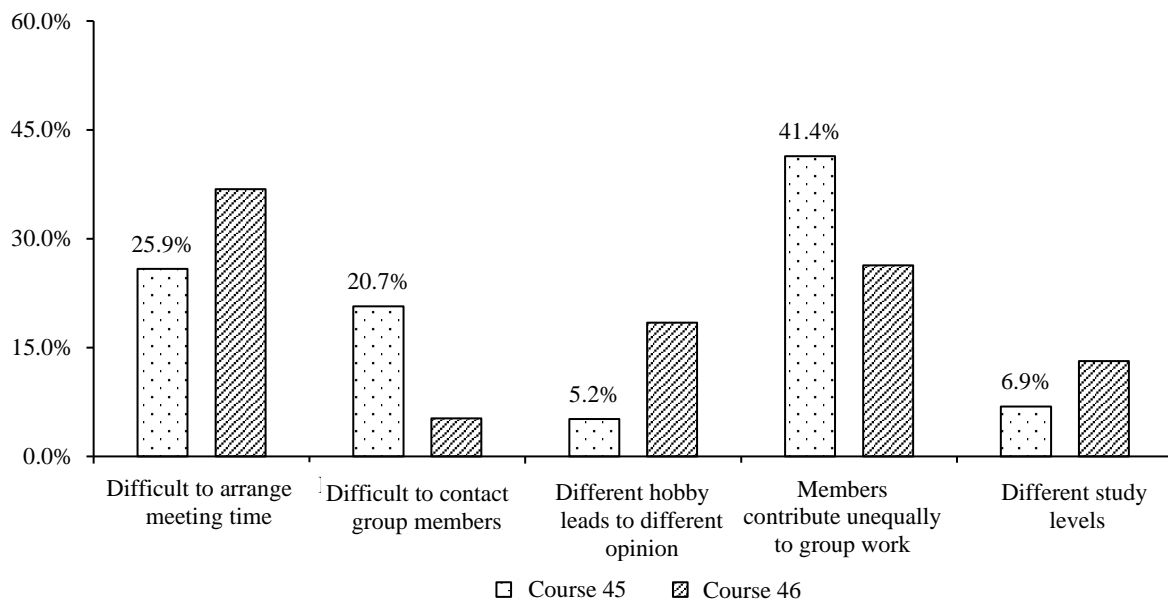
#### 4.4 Perceptions of Active Learning Regarding Assignment Completion



**Figure 5:** Students' Views of Active Learning-related Assignments

In order to complete the exercises in the Introduction to Literature module and other modules before the deadline, 42.1% to 44.8% of the third-year and fourth-year students said that they always remembered the progress and deadline to complete the assignment. Meanwhile, 13.2% and 27.6% of students prioritized the volume of assignments and the time to complete the assigned work. In stark contrast to the above results, only a few students completed the assignment right after they went home and a few students completed it right in class.

#### 4.6 Challenges in Group Study



**Figure 6:** Challenges in Group Study

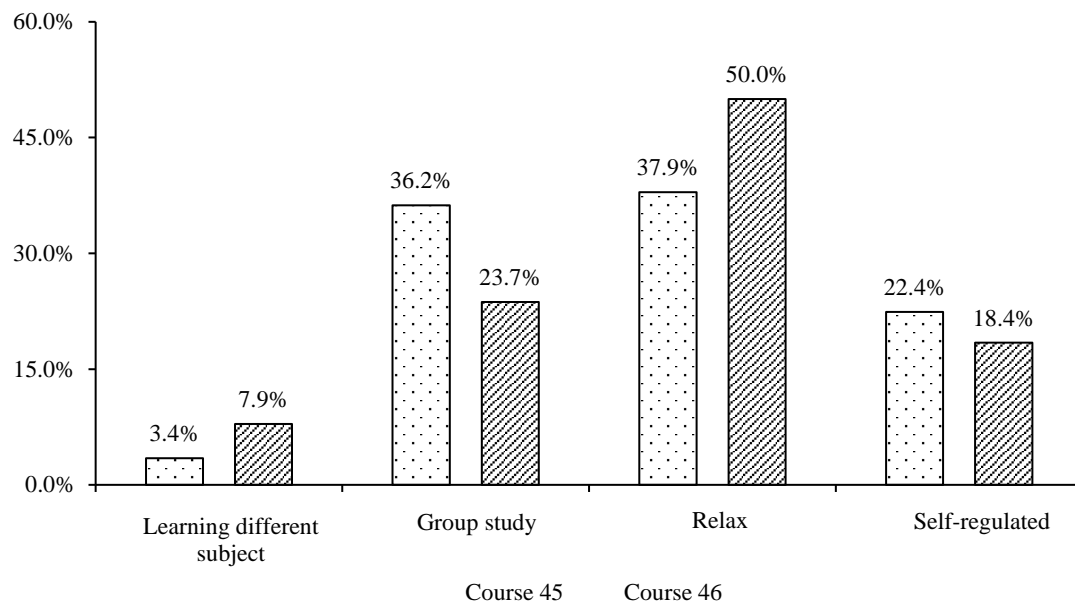
In several learning modules, it was found that the teacher often divided students into groups and assigned them assignments. However, some students did not actively participate in group work, due to different learning motivations, different interests, individual efforts and unequal qualifications. There are difficulties for the third and fourth-year students when working in groups (26.3% - 41.4%), showing inequalities in active participation in group activities and students being motion in time. The difficulty in contacting and gathering group members was the cause of many obstacles for students.

With regard to the Introduction to Literature module, group study was found problematic as compared to other courses. Thus, similar to a study by Le (2011), the effectiveness of group activities was not high because of the fact that most of the group activities were thought to be still formal, focusing on the end products to submit to the teacher.

#### 4.7 Student's Measures to no Interest to Learn

When asked if students were interested in studying the Introduction to Literature, they said they were not interested in learning the course (Introduction to Literature). Up to 37.9%-50% of students used the measure of pause to go for entertainment during the day. Only 3.4-7.9% of students changed to another course that they liked. However, group study was the way preferred by many students when they felt bored 23.7% - 36.2%. 18.4%-22.4% of students found they self-regulated their learning to deal with the course.





**Figure 7:** Students' measures

## 5. Conclusion

The findings show that most of the students in English Studies conceptualized the meaning of the term 'active learning'. The majority of students thought that active learning could involve students in spending more time at home, or searching for information in the library outside their class hours. It was found that students could use their thinking skills and discuss with the group at the same time. However, few students were not yet aware of active learning. The findings from this current study provide teachers and students of English with insights into the benefits and meaning of active learning so as to tailor their practices.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### About the Authors

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