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Using Google Docs to Enhance Collaborative Writing and Peer Feedback Practice of Libyan EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to enhance students' collaborative writing and peer-feedback practice by implementing Google Docs. This application is considered one of the appropriate tools to enhance collaborative writing. "Google Docs" is proven to give the opportunities for the students to review others' works wherever and whenever they want in or outside the class. The application was used with 10 Libyan students studying at the English department, Sebha University. The study was based on a small study-scale through the experience of online writing and discussions using the online platform 'Google Docs'. Students were also interviewed to discover their experience and responds using Google Docs. The findings of this study showed an improvement in students' writing after applying collaborative learning using "Google docs". It was concluded that this application can be a beneficial tool that enhances writing through effective feedback and collaborative environment.

Keywords: *Google Docs, Collaborative Writing, Peer Feedback, Libyan Students, EFL*

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1. Introduction

In foreign language learning context, EFL learners find it tedious to learn the four skills in general whether EAP (English for Academic Purposes) or as ESP (English for Specific Purposes). Compared to other skills, writing is considered heavy and arduous to most EFL learners. In this productive skill, students are expected to write error free sentences, communicate with others through written discourse. Learners will be able to introduce numerous types of texts such as narrative and descriptive through using different vocabulary and repertoire which is very challenging to them. In this case, they are asked to master punctuation, sentence structure, anaphora, cataphora, cohesion and coherence to come up with a good piece of work easily understood. Besides that, learners go through different processes to produce a fruitful piece of work. Kröll (2001) in this regard, highlights the importance of writing skill and asserts that writing is the most difficult one to get success when compared with other subjects in English language learning. SriRahayu (2016) explains such a difficulty and points out that it is not easy to teach writing as it

requires many aspects such as critical thinking, creativity, identifying and organizing ideas as well as the appropriate grammatical structure. To help students get rid of this difficulty, numerous studies were conducted to promote the idea of using technology and using different online platforms in and outside classroom to estimate students' work together and improve their writing skills.

Alwasilah (2001) proposes that writing collaboratively is considered as an alternative way to help students improve their writing skills. A number of online platforms were introduced to serve education. In the present study, Google Docs is chosen as a tool to help peers to interact in order to write, edit, share, and comment on each other's work and accomplish the written tasks collaboratively in the time and space given.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Google Docs and Writing Collaboratively

These days, a number of studies are using technology to promote learning process as Facebook (Marza & Hafizh, 2013), blog (Wahyu, 2010), or web (Asri, 2011; Togatorop, 2015). These studies,



unfortunately, encountered learning individually and haven't engaged students to work collaboratively through applications as Google Docs to promote collaborative writing atmosphere.

One of the Google features used as a media for learning and teaching collaborative writing is Google Docs (Metilia & Fitrawati, 2018). Google Docs is a Web 2.0 application that allows users to easily create, share and edit documents, spreadsheets, presentations, and forms online (Perron Sellers, 2011; Thompson, 2008). It enhances collaborative writing, editing, and automatically saving their work to the server. Dharmawan et al (2015) mention several benefits of using Google Docs application in learning activity. Those benefits are Google Docs is 1) more effective efficient and practical, 2) students and teacher can interact online at any time, 3) can monitor students even outside classroom, 4) learning materials can be discussed easily, 5) can finish the assignment in time, 6) easily to monitor students when working together in real time. Zheng, et al., (2015) add that using Google Docs facilitates learners' ability to give Suggestions, leave comments in the documents margins and enable students to conveniently interact more quickly than if they use any other word- processing program or writing on a piece of paper.

2.2 Peer Feedback and Collaborative Writing

Peer-review also named peer-feedback, peer-response, or peer-editing in language teaching (Liu & Hansen in Kustati & Suhardi, 2014). In this paper, these terms are going to be used interchangeably. Peer-review technique is the most important part of writing process because it makes use of drafting process and revision by paying attention to the writing process that consists of four elements those are planning, drafting, editing, and final revision (Brown, 2001). Kustati & Suhardi (2014) state that peer review technique is a technique which can make students work collaboratively in learning writing by working together with their partners to share ideas and suggestions of their work. Nasution & Siregar (2013) point that peer feedback also make students feel enjoy and be active in learning writing.

To shed light on the significance of peer editing in writing, Lagana (1972) highlights the importance of peer-editing in writing. Peer-editing is a process that peers edit each other's writing over teacher editing

for writing tasks. Peer-editing enables the learners to complete more writing tasks through receiving more feedback from their peers, and progress at their own pace in acquiring the writing skills.

In a traditional classroom, unequal opportunities might take place among learners which is totally avoided among learners. Chen (2016) shows that some problems such as unequal participation among the peers, which are common in traditional face-to-face peer writing groups, become less influential in computer-mediated interactions. Therefore, editing writing through collaboration among learners could be facilitated through Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, wikis, and Google Docs (Bloch, 2008; Lamy & Hampel, 2007; Yang, 2010).

The impact of online peer feedback on students' writing progress is seen in both synchronous and asynchronous learning. Peer feedback can be used as a writing assessment in college. Mutwarasibo (2016) investigates how undergraduate students at the National University of Rwanda experienced peer assessment of group writing as one way to improve the quality of their learning. Positive results demonstrate that some students who were unfamiliar with peer assessment viewed it as a learning opportunity. Despite the fact that most students did not appear to associate it with the academic environment, they valued it for their future vocation. Tai et al (2015) indicated that the teacher's feedback is important and reflects positively on their performance, because writing errors and weaknesses can be accurately identified and provide alternative ways to express some phrases.

Wakabayashi (2013) highlights that learners through peer feedback can be engaged easily in critical evaluation of peer text for the purpose of exchanging help for revision. Learners become more autonomous writers and eventually they can learn more about writing and revision by reading other's drafts critically and their awareness of what makes writing successful and effective can be enhanced (Maarof et al., 2011).

To summarize the advantages of peer feedback in second language (L2) classrooms, Liu and Hansen (2002) state that peer feedback do not only provide opportunities for ESL students to practice English in a meaningful context, but also increases an awareness of audience needs by creating a collaborative drafting process..

3. Methodology

The overall aim of this study is to explore how Libyan EFL learners can be assisted to work collaboratively using Google Docs. It is also aimed to identify what sort of feedback was provided by the peers during the collaborative writing process. The participants of the study were 10 students in the English department at Zaweeleh College of education in Sebha University. Their ages were between 19 to 23 years. The students participated in online class for two weeks as a collaborative writing activity. This task more specifically aims to determine to what extent using Google Docs will reflect on students' performance in terms of writing collaboratively. All the participants were asked to work together to complete a given task and type of feedback provided. The corrections were given when necessary. The study was conducted online due to the difficulties in accessing the participants in the class since all colleges in that period of time were temporarily closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. During the activity, instructions by the teacher were given in a form of comments on Google Docs. During the collaboration activity and peer editing, screenshots were captured by the instructor to authenticate the collaboration process during the task completion. Simultaneously, these screenshots represents the comments as well as the corrections provided by the instructor to assist the students during the activity. For the students to open and use Google Docs application here are the steps they followed: The students must:

1. Pen Gmail account (preferably an academic mail)
2. Accept the invitation in the email (the invitation was already sent by the instructor via email).
3. Pen Google
4. Hoose 'Google docs' from Google applications
5. Pen the document that you are invited to.
6. Follow the instructions and start typing. (See Appendix 1).

At this point, the moment the students received and accepted the invitation, directly they joined the document. The document was seen by the instructor as well as the students. Besides that, comments and corrections were traced most of the time of the day. Each student' icon and editions appeared on the text with a different color so the instructor could examine their work clearly. (See appendix 2).

The method used in this paper was based on a descriptive qualitative method to describe the suitability and acceptability of using Google Docs in collaborative writing and the role of feedback practice to EFL students.

Unstructured interview was used later as a second data collection method. It was carried out with the same 10 participants via Whatsapp application. The participants were asked to reflect on the following points:

1. Students' perceptions on using Google Docs in writing collaboratively.
2. Problems encountered by participants throughout this experience

The interview was transcribed and analyzed to obtain the students' reflections regarding using Google Docs in writing collaboratively.

Regarding feedback analysis, the researcher adopted a framework from Widarsih and Suherdi (2019) to be used in this study in order to figure out the types of feedback given by the students (see Table 1). Additionally, a writing rubric developed by Weigle (2002) was used as a guideline for the students to provide feedback for their peers (See Table 2).

Table 1: Types of Students' Feedback

Type of feedback	Definitions
Direct Feedback	
Insertion	Insertion is inserting the correct word in a text or sentence that is considered incomplete.
Substitution	Substitution is replacing a wrong word with a correct word
Deletion	It is a technique of giving feedback that removes a wrong word in the text
Reformulation	reformulation is rewriting the wrong part of the text and giving it suggestions to write it in the correct form
Indirect Feedback	
Coded	Coded feedback is a kind of giving feedback with the code.
Uncoded	In uncoded feedback, the students only mark the wrong sentences without giving the code.
Commentary	It shows someone's expression of opinions towards the text being corrected.
Instruction	It shows someone's instruction of what the writers should do to revise their writing.

Source: Widarsih & Suherdi, 2019)

Table 2: Writing Rubric

Writing Aspect	Criteria
Content	The content is knowledgeable, substantive, thorough, development of topic sentence, relevant to assigned topic.
Organization	It deals with the fluent expression, ideas clearly stated/supported, succinct, well-organized, logical sequencing, cohesive
Vocabulary	It shows sophisticated range, effective word/idiom choice and usage, word from mastery, appropriate register
Language Use	It uses effective complex constructions, few errors of agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions
Mechanics	It demonstrates mastery of conventions, few errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing.

(Source: Weigle, 2002)

4. Findings and Discussion

In this study, the participants were given a named task to work collaboratively using Google Docs application. During working on the collaborative writing activities, data were collected and analyzed after task completion. Data analysis was based on the students' performance and progress while peer editing on 'Google docs'.



The performance and progress of the students were identified by how they used 'Google docs', their acceptance and collaboration to accomplish the activity.

4.1 Results from the Experience

4.1.1 Students' Writing Skills Improvement Using Google Docs

Using Google Docs paved students' path in terms of writing skills. At the beginning of using this application, students find it difficult to deal with the application options because they never experienced using it before. By the time, students get to discover and learn the basics of this application and enjoy working on it with peers under the guidance of the instructor. Using Google Docs enhanced sharing and organizing their ideas, and also helped students to overcome their fear of making mistakes while generating sentences in cohesive and coherent text. Students showed great progress regarding using the correct vocabulary, punctuations and grammar because the teacher and students can give corrections and comments whenever necessary. This review and correction activity enhanced their understanding of using the appropriate words and structure in the paragraph or text. The goal beyond this is that students' low writing skills will learn and improve especially in writing descriptive texts. This task helps students in terms of spelling the words correctly and using the correct structures, capitalization and punctuations.

Ebadi & Rahimi (2017) indicated similar results in their study. They found that the use of Google Docs in collaborative writing activity provides the learners with the opportunities to read, review, comment, and edit each other's work. During the writing process, the students have opportunities to learn about four areas of academic writing such as task achievement, lexicon, coherence and cohesion, and grammatical accuracy. Similarly, involving university students, Alharbi (2019) also found that using Google support students to improve their writing skills through collaborative writing. Metilia and Fitrawati's (2018) conducted research in the Indonesian context and revealed that Google Docs allows students to work and interact with other students to develop their writing skills. In a study by Jacobs et al (1998) nearly 93% of their EFL students in Hong Kong and Taiwan said they would like to receive peer feedback as one kind of feedback.

To sum up, it was revealed from the experience of this study that using Google Docs as a collaborative learning activity significantly improves the students' writing skill.

4.1.2 Peer Feedback Using Google Docs

This section shows the results of analyzing types and occurrences of students' peer feedback throughout the writing task (See Table 3).

Table 3: The Occurrence of Students' Feedback

Types of Feedback	Students' Group		Total	%
	Group A	Group B		
Direct Feedback				
Insertion	-	3	3	20%
Substitution	3	1	4	27%
Deletion	-	2	2	13%
Reformulation	4	2	6	40%
Indirect Feedback				
Coded	-	-	-	-
Uncoded	-	-	-	-
Commentary	-	-	-	-
Instruction	-	-	-	-
Total	7	8	15	100%

The majority of the students (40%) offered their feedback in a form of 'reformulation' where they rewrote the wrong part of the text and gave suggestions to write it in the correct form. For example, one of the students in Group A reformulated the sentence 'I job teacher' into 'I am a teacher'. Fewer students (13%) provided their feedback in a form of deletion.

Deletion is a technique of giving feedback that removes a wrong word in the text. For example a student in group B deleted 'is' in 'my husband is name' and changed it into 'My husband's name'.

Table 4: The Occurrence of Students' Feedback on Writing Aspect

Writing Aspect	Students Group		Total	%
	Group A	Group B		
Content				
Organization	-	-	-	-
Vocabulary				
Language Use	2	2	4	24%
Mechanics				
	6	7	13	26%
Total	8	9	17	100%

Table 4 represented the occurrences of students' feedback regarding specific writing aspects. It was quite obvious that mechanics (26%) are the highest aspect that students' feedback focused on. Then it was followed by language use (24%). Regardless the mechanics aspect, students' feedback was focused on grammatical errors such as spelling, the use of pronouns and genitive. The spelling errors include 'life' instead of 'live' as in 'I life with my family'. As for language use, students identified some mistakes related to the use of subject pronoun instead of possessive pronoun as

well as the missing linking verb. For example 'I hobbies playing tennis and dancing' instead of 'my hobbies are.....'. More interestingly, the students showed great interest in tracing the instructor's comments, corrections and suggestions about their work.

The usefulness and feasibility of peer feedback to ESL teachers and students have been explored in other studies as the one by Thokwane (2011). The participants of her study note that peer feedback is advantageous to their academic writing skills because it assists them to figure out their writing weaknesses, which they cannot do it by themselves. It creates a community of learners that helps them clarify phrases and written concepts in their essays; it is an effective method to share their ideas with their readers, and it can help them with their grammar mistake. Lin et al (2001) highlight the idea of specific and critical feedback. They argue that specific peer feedback and critical peer feedback may greatly facilitate the improvement in students' writing skill. In addition, in their quasi-experimental study comparing three methods for teaching student writing, Plutsky and Wilson (2004) argue that peer feedback helped students become proficient writers. More importantly, most students view peer feedback as effective as the instructors.

Al-Olimat and AbuSeileek (2015) also conduct one controlled group and three experimental groups of Grade 10 EFL students using computer-mediated corrective feedback modes such as teachers' feedback (students who received feedback only from the teacher-students' feedback (students who provided and received feedback from their peers), and both (students who received and provided feedback from both teachers and peers). The findings of their study showed that computer-mediated corrective feedback provides an excellent opportunity for teaching writing skills. In a study by Guenette, (2007), the students showed different results and provided low feedback in terms of other writing aspects in the writing the descriptive texts. This might be due to low proficiency level or being hesitant to criticize other students' work.

Jones et al. (2006) compared online peer interactions with those in the traditional face-to-face mode and found the former generated more feedback on global concerns of content and the writing process whereas the latter focused more on local textual issues of grammar, style, and word choice. However, compared to this idea, other

researchers found that peer e-feedback using Microsoft Word or other special programs designed for responding to writing actually generated more concrete and revision-oriented comments than traditional oral or paper-based feedback (Hewett, 2000; Liu & Sadler, 2003).

The results showed that Google docs can offer several features to EL students that can help them to generate more ideas, organize the structure of the text and construct the sentence collaboratively online.

4.2 Results of the Interview

4.2.1 Students' Perceptions about Using Google Docs

Surprisingly, from the interview answers, it was clearly seen that all the students were very enthusiastic to deal with this platform, though the vast majority of them experienced this technology for first time. However, they were not afraid of making mistakes as there was no face to face interaction. They believed that Google docs helped them in terms of using the correct vocabulary, grammar and explore and organize their ideas while writing.

In a study by Zhou et al (2012), at the University of Georgia, 35 undergraduate students enrolled and were asked to complete writing assignments outside of class time in randomly small assigned groups. Before participating in the study, mostly students were unfamiliar with Google Docs (with only 19% having used it before), 93% of the students surveyed agreed that it was a helpful tool for completing group work, 85% felt their experience using Google Docs was either 'positive' or 'very positive,' and 50% commented that they would like to use Google Docs as a tool in the future (Zhou, et al., 2012). Chantoem and Rattanavich (2015) studied the use of web activities to high-school-aged Thai students of English. They concluded that online learning creates a more realistic atmosphere to students and that leads to a more realistic writing situation. When communicating online with their partners, they were capable to take risks and, during these activities, they highly admitted the assistance and guidance of their teacher. It was a golden opportunity to share their ideas and give corrections for each other and enrich their knowledge in terms of paragraph writing, especially for introvert students because they were afraid of making mistakes in front of their colleagues. Since their written works in the document is saved online, they can regularly revisit the



document and provide corrections where necessary. Susan (2012) similarly stated in her study that sharing documents and comments using Google Docs help the students to get feedback for peers, since the documents are saved online, so they can work on it at any time.

4.2.2 Challenges Encountered by the Participants throughout Using Google Docs

Actually, there are a number of challenges that were encountered by the students when conducting the task using Google Docs. The absence of good internet environment was the main obstacle while achieving the task. Low or no internet access results in a delay to fulfill the requirement of the given task on time. For a better collaboration, SriRahayu (2016) believes that a good network environment is the key factor because Google Docs was software based on internet connection. Besides that, some options were difficult to use like chatting, because they were beginners in using this platform and most of them use the application from their smartphones. Many students may also encounter negative perceptions in terms of task achieving as mentioned by Brodahl, et al., (2011). They argued that some students might write more than one idea or change others' work when conducting the task. Blau & Caspi (2009) also argued that the peers might make direct changes or suggestions to the document that might be approved or agreed by the instructor.

Overall, disagreements of this nature can be seen to be advantageous as it helps to raise some sort of discussions that help students come to an agreement or understand the nature of the error more clearly.

5. Conclusion

The findings of the study indicated that enhancing peer-review technique through collaborative learning by using Google Docs improved students' writing skills of descriptive texts. Now they become able to think critically when they review others' work and that reflect positively on their performance. Using Google Docs application and collaborative learning through peer-review can improve students' writing ability so that they can apply that in other fields of study. Thus this study recommends the use of Google Docs for students to work collaboratively, especially when they meetings face-to-face are restricted.

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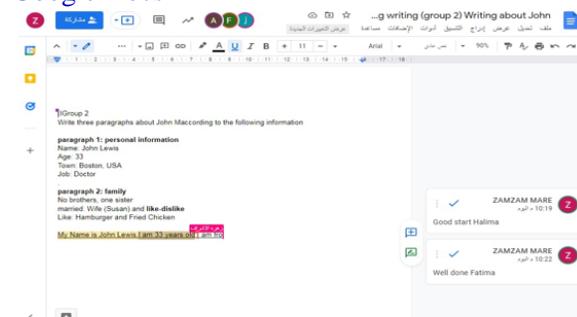
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Appendices

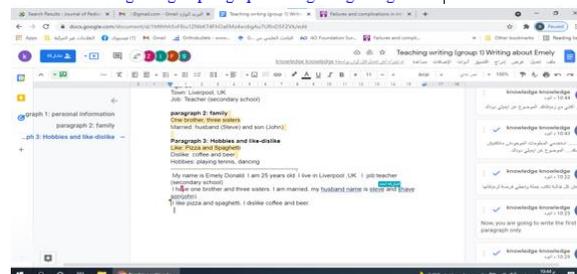
Appendix 1: Pictures show the steps of opening a document in 'Google Docs' application



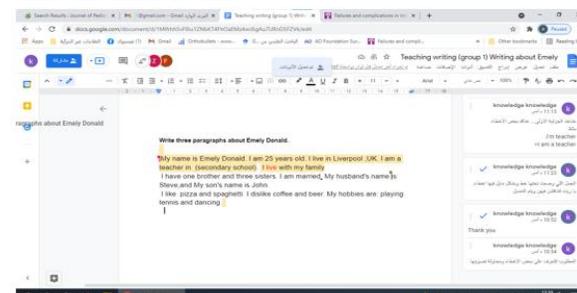
Appendix 2: Screenshots of the given task using Google Docs



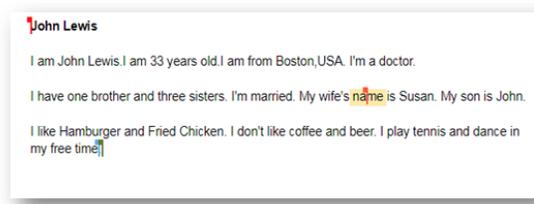
Picture 1: the beginning of paragraph writing using Google Docs



Picture 2: More Sentences are Added



Picture 3: the Students offer corrections and feedback



Picture 4: the final draft provided by students by using collaborative writing in Google docs