

Google Docs For Collaborative Essay Writing Practices During Covid-19 University Restrictions: EFL Students' Perceptions

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Abstrak

Karena pandemic COVID-19 dan kebijakan pemerintah untuk melaksanakan pembelajaran daring, mahasiswa merasa mendapatkan tantangan baru dalam perkuliahan termasuk dalam mata kuliah Essay Writing. Kurangnya interaksi secara tatap muka dan keterbatasan pembelajaran daring membuat perkuliahan Essay Writing tidak maksimal dilakukan untuk praktek menulis. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk melihat persepsi mahasiswa terkait penggunaan Google Docs dalam perkuliahan Essay Writing yang telah dilakukan dosen. Data dikumpulkan dari tiga belas mahasiswa yang mengambil mata kuliah Essay Writing melalui penyebaran angket dan wawancara semi terstruktur. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa memiliki persepsi positif terhadap penggunaan Google Docs untuk praktek menulis esai kolaborasi. Di samping itu, Google Docs juga membantu menciptakan lingkungan pembelajaran yang kolaboratif karena platform ini mendukung interaksi dosen dengan mahasiswa, begitupun mahasiswa dengan mahasiswa. Penggunaan Google Docs juga memberikan manfaat pada ketersediaan umpan balik dari dosen kepada mahasiswa serta mereka dengan mudah dapat melihat materi kuliah pada platform tersebut.

Kata kunci: Google dokumen, menulis, esai.

Abstract

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's policy to conduct online learning, EFL university students feel the challenge of dealing with the online learning process, including the Essay Writing Course. The lack of face-to-face interaction and limited online classes during the course makes it difficult for them to have maximum practices in essay writing. This study attempts to generate the perceptions of students in the course of writing essays to build a collaborative online learning environment using Google Docs. Data were collected from thirteen EFL university students taking an Essay Writing course through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The research found that students had a positive attitude towards the use of Google Docs for or collaborative essay writing practice. In addition, Google Docs helps create a collaborative learning environment as it supports interactions between lecturers-to-students and students-to-students and benefits from the availability of written feedbacks from lecturers and easy access to course materials.

Keywords: Google Docs, Writing, Essay

1. Introduction

The spread of the COVID 19 virus has significantly changed the mode of education in Indonesia. At the university level, for example, all lecture activities are replaced by online instructions. Students and lecturers no longer come to campus to do face-to-face learning, both of them interact on online learning in their respective homes. It creates a challenge for both lecturers and students (Aboagye et al., 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020). For lecturers, this online lecture activity requires lecturers to be able to make the best use of technology as a medium for interacting with students online. Lecturers must also be able to use an effective learning

application and be able to guide students during online learning through this application (Hamid et al., 2020; Giatman et al., 2020; Pete & Soko, 2020) . Besides, lecturers must also be ready and able to apply various interesting learning strategies which of course will not be the same as face-to-face learning modes. In line with this, Susilowati (2020) in her research also found that choosing suitable technological devices, systems, and applications used during the online class, packaging of material to deliver online learning and using effective method and strategy suitable to online learning are mostly some of the challenges faced by the lecturers.

On the other side, students also face a challenge in online learning. They must be able to prepare themselves to be more able to learn independently, to operate the use of technology well, and also to have financial readiness as a supporting tool in their online learning. Recent studies have shown the challenges that students face during online learning during this pandemic. Akhter (2021) states that limited experience in technology, a bad experience with online learning, unmotivated feeling to follow during the course, lack of personal cognizance, insufficient support during the course, and technical issues are the common obstacles that every student faces during online learning. Meanwhile, many students suffer a form of digital inequality whereby they lack access to connections and devices to learn remotely (Afrin, 2020; Deepika, 2020; Simamora et al., 2020). Finally, a lack of proper interaction and contact with students and instructors make them hard to get in touch with the materials during the online course (Adnan & Anwar, 2020).

The challenges previously mentioned are also faced by the English Department students of Universitas Mahaputra Muhammad Yamin. The decision of university restriction during the COVID 19 outbreak has changed their learning process significantly into online learning. The students face online experience in learning all subjects, including Essay Writing. For the Essay writing course, the class begins with the online lecture sessions using Zoom. The students are invited to join Zoom and receiving essay writing theories on that platform. The students are also given a chance to participate actively by questioning parts of essay writing that they do not understand. For further explanation and discussion, the lecture also uses WhatsApp group for having deep discussion about classroom activities and assignments that will be done by the students. Meanwhile, the students can access the essay writing materials and can submit written assignments using Google Classroom.

Having this online learning situation is still not enough for improving students' skill in writing a good essay. During the learning process, most of them complained that they have a lack of guidance and writing practice activity in creating an essay. Online Essay Writing class has a very limited time and it is not sufficient to provide space for them to get guidance and feedback on their writing. Based on these students' complaints, the lecturer added another e-platform as a support for students in doing collaborative essay writing practice. In this case, Google Docs is used to facilitate students in writing projects and collaborate with their groups in developing essays. Moreover, the lecturer also continues to provide guidance and feedback on the students' writings using this platform. As a result, the students can produce good writing quality because they are helped by peer feedback and peer editing through this platform. As stated by Jeong (2016) peer feedback or peer-editing in English writing instruction has become one of the most powerful classroom techniques, which enable student empowered learning.

Generally, Google Docs is a web-based collaborative writing platform that facilitates and encourages students to submit writing and to do writing activity collaboratively. Utilizing this platform, the students from the same learning community can submit their writing with the

group members, work collaboratively to share and revise the ideas for their writing, and discuss common issues related to their writing Jeong (2016). During this pandemic situation, Using Google Docs is a good medium for students to create online documents and edit them online while they are collaborating with other students (Brodahl et al., 2011; Abrams, 2019).

There are plentiful research convey on the use of Google Docs for the collaborative writing activity. Most of the research results show a positive view in explaining the effectiveness of Google Docs as a medium for a collaborative writing activity. Ambrose and Palpanathan (2017), in their research finding, revealed that most of the students have a positive perspective on the use of Google Docs as a tool for learning writing. It is because Google Docs have built collaborative writing situations that allow interactions between teacher to students and students – to a student in written feedback (Khalil, 2018). Besides, collaborative writing activity done in Google Docs can improve students' weaknesses in writing skills such as inappropriate vocabulary, poor organization, and content, as well as supporting students to help each other without limited time and place (Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014).

Previous studies above showed the effectiveness of Google Docs for collaborative writing. However, further study is needed to show the benefits of Google Docs as appropriate tools for online collaborative writing during COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, this study aims to discover EFL University students' perception of using Google Docs as a medium for a collaborative writing activity. The results might present an insight into students' feelings and attitudes on Google Docs application to help them facing essay writing practice effectively and improve their essay writing quality.

2. Method

The participants of this research were 13 students taking essay writing course in the third semester of 2020 at English Department Universitas Mahaputra Muhammad Yamin Solok. Essay writing was one of the compulsory courses taken by the second year of English department students. The course had three credits and had the three-hour classroom instruction per week for a 16 week duration. As a part of e-platform in teaching essay writing because of COVID-19 outbreak, the students were guided to use Google Docs as a medium for writing practice. To do that, they were asked to create essay in Google Docs, and collaborate with other students to revise and edit the essay. Once students wrote their writings on the Google Docs, they could receive feedback from peer-editing as well as from lecturer-editing.

To get the data of this research, a questionnaire was distributed at the end of the course. It aimed to find out students' perceptions on the use of Google Docs to enhance students' essay writing ability. The questionnaire used the five Likert-scale question items which consist the choices from number 1 to number 5, which signified the range of scales from least agreeable to best agreeable. The five Likert-scale question items of the survey were automatically analyzed by statistics produced by Google form. The questionnaire consisted of 10 statements divided into the following three parts: (1) the feature of Google Docs, (2) the usage of Google Classroom, and (3) the affective aspect of Google Docs. Lastly, the semi-structured interview consisted of 2 questions were administered to find out students' opinion on the use of Google Docs for collaborative essay writing practice.

3. Results And Discussion

In the following section, the findings of the study are presented. The findings are separated into two sections as the questionnaire was circulated and a semi-structured interview was completed. The first section discusses the findings of the questionnaire and the second section summarizes the findings of the interview.

Students' Perception

The main objective of the questionnaire was to examine students' perceptions towards using Google Docs for collaborative essay writing practice. The questionnaire was given to the students after they completed the Essay Writing course. The students' perception on using Google Docs in Essay Writing activity was divided into three categories; its feature, usage, and effective aspect. Each of the result from these categories will be explained in the tables below.

Table 1. Students' response on the features of Google Docs

No	Statement	Response				
		Strongly agree (SA)	Agree (A)	Undecided (U)	Disagree (D)	Strongly disagree (SD)
1	The tool is easy to access and use	76.9% (10)	23.07% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
2	The prompting feature in Google Docs (spelling, word count, dictionary, all changes save in drive, revision history) helps me easily to write my essay	92.3% (12)	7.69% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
3	The tool facilitates me in doing collaborative work within the group	69.23% (9)	30.76% (4)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)

Table 1 shows the numbers of students' response related to the features of Google Docs for their writing practice activity. It can be seen from the table that 10 students (76.9%) 'strongly agree', 3 students (23.07%) 'agree' with the first statement in stating that Google Docs is easy to access and use. Similarly in the second statement, 12 students (92.3%) 'strongly agree' with the prompting feature on Google Docs to help them writing essay easily, while 1 student (7.69) chose 'agree' for this statement. For the third statement, 9 students (69.23%) 'strongly agree' with the tool in facilitating them to do collaborative work within the group; the remaining students (30.76%) 'agree'.

Table 2. Students' response on the usage of Google Docs

No	Statement	Response				
		Strongly agree (SA)	Agree (A)	Undecided (U)	Disagree (D)	Strongly disagree (SD)
4	Using Google Docs in the essay writing class turn me from staying on writing task	84.61% (11)	15.38% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)

No	Statement	Response				
		Strongly agree (SA)	Agree (A)	Undecided (U)	Disagree (D)	Strongly disagree (SD)
5	Feedback given during the practice given via Google Docs enhance my knowledge in writing an essay	92.3% 12	7.69% 1	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
6	Doing collaboration within the group in the Google Docs can solve the problems in writing process	84.61% (11)	15.38% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)

Table 2 shows the numbers of students' response related on the usage of Google Docs for their writing activity. It consists of three statements and they are labeled as statement number 4, 5 and 6. For the statement number 4, almost all the students (84.61%) 'strongly agree' that Google Docs restrict them from being stuck on doing writing assignment. Moreover, the majority of students (92.3%) 'strongly agree' that feedback given during the practice via Google Docs enhance their knowledge in writing a paragraph. Finally, for the last statement, 11 students (84.61%) revealed positive view about the collaborative work done in Google Docs could solve the problems in writing process.

Table 3. Students' response on the affective aspects of Google Docs

No	Statement	Response				
		Strongly agree (SA)	Agree (A)	Undecided (U)	Disagree (D)	Strongly disagree (SD)
7	Using Google Docs in doing essay writing practice is fun and interactive	76.9% (10)	23.07% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
8	I enjoy working and collaborating on group to write an essay using Google Docs	69.23% (9)	30.76% (4)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
9	The prompting in Google docs raise my confidence in writing	69.23% (9)	30.76% (4)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
10	The tool encourages me to collaborate with the students in the group	84.61% (11)	15.38% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)

Statement number 7 until 10 in the table 3 concern with the students' feeling in using Google Docs for their writing practice. As for the seventh statement, 10 students (76.9%) 'strongly agree' that utilizing Google Docs for essay writing practice is fun and interactive. Moreover, 9 students (69.23%) 'strongly agree' that they enjoy working and collaborating in creating an essay using Google Docs. In addition, most of the students (69.23%) considered that Google Docs raise their confidence in writing. Finally, the majority of students (84.61) accepted that Google Docs encourage them to collaborate effectively in writing essay project.

Results of Interview

To further justify and understand the student's perception of the use of Google Docs for collaborative essay writing practice, interviews were conducted with 6 students (chosen among those who scored the highest grade points). The first question was related to the opinion of the students on the collaborative writing activities of the essay writing course via Google Docs. All students agreed that collaborative writing platforms via Google docs could help them improve their writing skills. By having collaborative writing activities on the platform, students could receive instant feedback from both the lecturer and their peers. They also said they enjoyed the experience of exchanging online feedback on their essay writings through Google Docs. From collaborative work done through Google Docs, students experience deep discussion of how to organize their thoughts and ideas before writing, learn new vocabulary from reading comments from others in their group, reduce spelling errors through spell-checking, and find it easier for students to complete their essays after collaborating with Google Docs. Some examples from the students' perspectives can be seen below.

Google Docs encourage me to experience the practice of essay writing easily. It builds my confidence by cooperating with my friends to produce suggestions and thoughts before the actual composition. If there are errors in spelling and grammar, we can also exchange comments to include corrections.

Google Docs is easy to access and use. By providing online peer-feedback activities, this tool facilitates me. I was able to share my opinions easily with classmates and it was also very easy to exchange quick responses with classmates or the lecturer.

The features of this tool have been very effective in gaining my writing skills. I could check my spelling and grammar errors directly, edit my essay organization without worrying about the content, and, of course, collaboration helps a lot in producing my essay. Apart from that, I could read my friend's essay writing, and other students in my class could read my essays.

For the second question, with regard to creating a collaborative environment during the online class, all students showed a favorable opinion that Google Docs offer a strong forum for community discussion and teamwork in essay writing practice. They agreed that Google Docs enable them to have a collaborative practice of writing essays in which lecturers and students communicate and chat with each other. Misunderstandings could be clarified by the lecturer and the students learn from their errors. Some of the students responds can be described in the following.

I can experience the collaborative practice of writing essays on the platform. I do not only just writing my essay, but I also could get feedback from my friends and lecturer. So, I can better understand the grammatical concepts, because the lecturer specifically showcases my errors in writing, and gives me a complete explanation of why the error has been made and how it can be corrected. My friends sometimes help me to suggest ideas to be written for my topic, too.

During the limited practice in writing via online class, Google Docs provide a good space for me to experience essay writing practice. On the platform, I can exchange comments and ideas related to my works with my friends. I also can see my writing progress from the feedback given by the lecturer. Sometimes, I also can detect my own mistakes in spelling, grammar, and punctuation from the suggestions given directly on the platform. It drives me to a real situation in the writing process

I can get much interaction with my friends in discussing our essay. This platform helps me much in facing a real environment in writing practice activity. I can brainstorm the ideas together with my friends, share our works, and give feedback to each other. Meanwhile, the lecturer's comments in our work also build our writing quality effectively.

From the findings above, it showed that the students positively perceived the use of Google Docs in the collaborative writing of essays. It could be because the collaboration method has encouraged them to learn more and contribute more effectively to this platform. The platform offered the possibility of reading, reviewing, and correcting the essay written by other members. With constructive feedback they receive from the other students, they can learn about their writing problems such as inappropriate use of the language, misspellings, wrong mechanics, incomprehensive text, and illogical organizations. Meanwhile, comments from peers can lead to meaningful revisions for them in both ideas and organizations. Collaborative revisions can therefore improve language defects, such as vocabulary, organization, and content. The results were shown to be compatible with the previous research performed by Lin et al. (2001) and Yim et al. (2017), which found that detailed peer feedback and critical peer feedback would make it much easier for students to develop their writing abilities. Moreover, peer feedback involves learners in critical peer text evaluation in order to exchange help for revision and, as a consequence, it leads learners to eventually become more autonomous writers (Wakabayashi, 2013; Maarof et al., 2011).

In addition, the unlimited lecturer feedback during the writing practice via Google Docs also play important role in guiding them to write essay properly. Having limited time of writing class during the pandemic situation has been resolved by gaining online interaction between the lecturer and the students via this platform. Besides having interactions with their peers, mostly students gain benefits also from the feedback given by the lecturer. It is in line with Jeong (2016) who states that the students could get instant feedback from both the instructor and their peers. Because of that this tool is beneficial in providing feedback and supporting a collaborative approach to learning (Khalil, 2018; Lawrence, 2016)

The implications of the findings of this study support the fact that Google Docs is a useful tool that makes the online learning environment possible. Students can gain knowledge in a relaxing atmosphere where they can make informed judgments on whether mistakes should be corrected and learn how to accept comments from others. In the meantime, it is clear that Google Docs encourages students to help each other in writing without the time and place restrictions. The tool helps students who have writing willingness work more efficiently on written assignments, and they were comfortable when their texts were edited or deleted. The findings of this study have confirmed the effectiveness of the study collaborative writing activities using Google Docs will benefit from their writing (Zhou et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2012)

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, using Google Docs with the aid of technological platforms for collaborative essay writing practice can pave the way for students to improve their writing abilities. Similarly, during class discussions, they have endless chances to convert their passive knowledge of the theory of essay writing into active use. By using Google Docs as an alternative approach to meeting the need for more online writing practice, students were able to learn collaboratively and

take written feedback from lecturers into consideration to develop their writing skills. Moreover, because of their manageability and convenience, the majority of the students enjoyed using such a tool. It is therefore safe to say that lecturers can now be familiar with the effects of using this platform as a medium of online writing practice, as this study demonstrates the positive influence of online learning tools when teaching essay writing to EFL university students collaboratively.

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