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Using Google Docs for Collaborative Writing Feedback With International Students

Giving effective writing feedback can be a challenge for any English instructor. Teaching students how to provide peer feedback can be problematic as well. Both these challenges may seem even more apparent when teaching online during a pandemic. Using Google Docs for collaborative writing feedback is one effective method for addressing both these concerns in a university-based Intensive English Program (IEP). This critical perspective examines how to scaffold collaborative writing feedback remotely using free and widely available platform Google Docs and looks at future use, post-pandemic. In particular, it will share how the authors used Google Docs to track feedback and corrections from instructors to students, set up interactive writing exercises in synchronous courses, and engage in peer-to-peer editing during a pandemic.

Keywords: collaborative writing, Google Docs, remote learning, pandemic pedagogy, academic writing feedback, international students, ESL

Everyone, to some extent, has been upended by the pandemic. This upheaval felt particularly violent to us, the authors, as English instructors at an Intensive English Program (IEP) on a major university campus. Before COVID-19, online classes or hybrid classes were commonplace but often not considered the ideal modality for learning and teaching in a university-based IEP. However, for many, instruction changed to online or virtual overnight at the start of the pandemic. Suddenly, English language instructors had to reevaluate traditional lessons, learn new technology, and generally transform their language pedagogy.

Teaching online is a significant paradigm shift and involves different skills, including changing pedagogy and interactions (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). For most, the experience was challenging. However, as Kessler et al. stress, "the co-evolution of technology, pedagogy, and the nexus of the two create opportunities for wholly new writing environments and experiences" (2012, p. 106). Simply put, for many of us, the challenge of teaching remotely in the pandemic led to improved modalities of teaching writing. For these two instructors, this meant harnessing the power of the free and widely available platform Google Docs for implementing collaborative writing and giving feedback.

Since the 1990s, Google has impacted the world in some form or another. It has even become a verb. However, instructors may not be fully aware of how Google Docs can help students give and receive collaborative writing feedback in a synchronous or asynchronous course. Google Docs transforms the virtual learning experience for both the students and instructors.

For collaborative writing feedback, instructors and students work together simultaneously to correct errors and transform writing. Teachers and students can engage in collaborative writing feedback in real time in a classroom, but with many classes online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers must merge technology and pedagogy. Teachers need readily accessible tools, and learners need instruction on how to use technology and collaborate virtually.

Almost three decades ago, Lam & Pennington predicted that collaborative writing could benefit from future technologies because they could allow more timely feedback and revision and a faster response time, potentially increasing motivation and creativity (1995). Luckily, that future is here now in the form of Google Docs, where instructors can easily facilitate peer collaboration and feedback in writing classes. Google Docs brings the in-person experience to a virtual environment through collaboration.

As Vygotsky (1978) famously espoused, learning comes from collaboration. Working together to grow and change is the very foundation of a student-centered classroom. For students learning a second language, collaboration in pairs, in small groups, or even across the whole class becomes even more important. In one room, the diversity and classroom expectations vary. However, one constant remains true: learning a new language is difficult, learning how to write in that second language even harder.

Giving effective writing feedback can be a challenge for any English language instructor. Teaching students how to give peer feedback can be problematic as well. Both of these challenges may seem even more apparent when teaching online. As Neomy Storch summarizes, some students fear they have nothing to offer fellow learners, and others distrust feedback from peers, viewing it less valuable (2019). Google Docs can be used to provide scaffolding that makes online learning student-centered and collaborative writing feedback effective.

Why Use Google Docs for Collaborative Learning

Google Docs is a technology-enhanced learning tool that allows learners to engage in the writing process effectively. Prior to the pandemic, English language instructors worldwide took advantage of its benefits in classrooms. However, everyday use was not widely implemented or acknowledged as a powerful classroom writing tool. Teaching online during the pandemic made Google Docs necessary and crucial for learning. Its importance cannot be understated. For some, it became the foundation for pandemic pedagogy when teaching writing online, especially in a synchronous course.

Google Docs transformed a standard tool that most people use to create everyday documents into an interactive learning platform for powerful collaborative learning. It allowed instructors to engage learners, demand accountability, and provide immediate feedback. In a single shared page in real-time, instructors could simultaneously watch all students write, peer-review, and critically think. Students each had a task and became accountable for the results.

Students learning online during a pandemic can more readily avoid contributing or multi-task on non-classroom-related activities but implementing a Google Doc for classroom writing and feedback ensured students stayed on track. As a result, Google Docs further developed as a pandemic pedagogy and became essential for language acquisition and collaborative learning.

Teaching academic writing is a complex task, and various schools of thought accomplish this outcome differently. One method is the collaborative approach. The collaborative approach is based on social constructionism and fosters collaborative learning through creating community and working together (Chang & Simpson, 1997; Nunan, 1992). Thus, the instructor becomes a facilitator, and students "collaborate" to create meaningful learning experiences through pair and group work.

Collaborative writing utilizes these principles by turning the writing process into a dialogue or conversation rather than an isolated activity completed independently. As a result, students work together in all stages of the writing process to problem-solve, critically think, and give and receive feedback. Research shows that collaborative writing has numerous benefits for the language learner, fosters community, and promotes accountability (Savova & Donato, 1991; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996).

Using Google Docs for collaborative learning utilizes these principles and encourages them in a virtual environment. Instead of uploading and downloading documents, instructors and students can create, share, and access a writing task immediately (Kessler et al., 2012). The Google Doc becomes a communication tool for the "class community" to interact and collaborate.

Meaningful interaction between learners encourages language acquisition (Vygotsky, 1986; Woo & Reeves, 2007). Google Docs accomplishes this by creating a robust dialogue between learners on an easy-to-use writing tool. Learners can interact by offering suggestions, correcting writing, asking questions, and engaging in an academic dialogue towards writing improvement (Semeraro & Moore, 2016; Zhou et al., 2012). Google Docs facilitates student-to-student, student-to-teacher, and teacher to class-wide interactions. It becomes the center point for promoting positive learning.

Studies Using Google Docs in The Classroom

In the past decade, some smaller studies have been published on the applications of Google Docs in EFL and ESL writing, including its uses in practices such as peer feedback and collaborative writing. These studies have highlighted the utility of Google Docs in facilitating writing instruction, feedback, editing, drafting, and tracking the history of changes to written texts (Alharbi, 2019; Ebadi & Rahimi, 2017; Semeraro & Moore, 2016; Woodard & Babcock, 2014). Furthermore, students' positive views of Google Docs supported its use in pedagogical practices in writing (Alharbi, 2019).

A small study published in the *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology* showed that students who engaged in collaborative writing via Google Docs had higher scores than those working together face-to-face (Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014). Another study at Ohio University (Kessler et al., 2012) looked at second-language learners' effectiveness and perception of collaborative writing in web-based projects. The researchers found that nonnative English speakers could work together successfully and viewed collaborative writing as effective. In addition, the results showed that working together stressed meaning over form, yet grammatical accuracy occurred.

A further study (Togatrof, 2015) analyzed the effectiveness of cloud-based learning using Google Docs. It revealed that peer-editing activities provided meaningful feedback and boosted student interaction and critical thinking skills. An additional study showed that students found Google Docs more enjoyable to use compared to Microsoft Word. Furthermore, it reported that students wrote more extensive essays and worked on collaborative writing more efficiently, finishing more quickly when using Google Docs compared to Microsoft Word (Apple et al., 2011).

Finally, with collaborative writing, success can often be dependent on getting the students' "buy-in" or enjoyment of the process. Brodahl et al. (2011) found that students reported positive experiences with collaborative writing when using digital tools such as Google Docs.

Implementing Collaborative Learning With Google Docs Online

Depending on the learning outcome they desire, teachers can use Google Docs online for many different writing feedback applications. A primary way instructors can use Google Docs when teaching a remote

course is for tracking feedback and corrections from instructors to students. Learners submit writing on Google Docs, and the instructor adds a comment or links to other resources for the students to process and later use to edit their writing. The input from the teacher is typed and not handwritten, making it easier for students to read. In addition, links to online resources can expand on the suggestions. All of these advantages lighten the pedagogical load for the instructor and enhance the overall student experience when learning online.

Students can accept and make those changes or respond with questions. The teacher can provide comments during a live class, or students can view their comments independently from any location. Saving is automatic, and document history is kept for review if needed. Thus, the process is faster for the instructor and more accessible to the learner despite the physical distance.

In addition to teacher-to-student feedback, Google Docs can be used to facilitate peer-to-peer editing, bringing the students closer together in a remote classroom. For example, teachers can assign students specific tasks to complete during their peer review by answering questions on the Google Doc such as does the writing have a clear thesis statement, or what is compelling about the writing?

Peer editing can also involve more detailed feedback requiring highlighting, offering corrections, and discussing what worked and what could be improved. Because Google Docs can be shared with editing permissions, a peer can make comments, suggestions, or changes directly on their partner's writing assignment. The instructor can prompt specific types of feedback depending on what they have taught or would like students to focus their attention on. For example, students can be instructed to highlight their peer's thesis statement or underline specific grammatical forms.

Scaffolding is an essential element of learning (Wood et al., 1976). Hannafin and Land (1997) stated, "Scaffolding . . . is not limited solely to student-student and teacher-student interactions. Rather, technology-enhanced environments often provide the conceptual scaffolding and means to promote personal and individual reflection" (p. 194). One way for instructors to scaffold students' learning in the area of writing when teaching online is by providing writing templates and sentence frames. With Google Docs, teachers can create and share editable writing templates simply.

Instructors can quickly hand out materials in a classroom, but physical distribution is not as simple online. However, sharing Google Docs online is easy and fast becoming the norm. Instructors can give students access to a document by sharing a hyperlink in a chat box or inserting a link on a learning management system (LMS). Google Docs has sharing features that include viewing, editing, and commenting functionalities. Instructors can even change the hyperlink code so that students must make a copy of the document before using it.

Google Docs can also be used for online student writing portfolios to establish personal connections when classrooms are forced to go remote. The instructor can create a document for each student to use as their portfolio. Each writing assignment goes onto the Google Doc, and the instructor or fellow student can view and make comments on the writing. In addition, instructors can add model answers after a student has completed the work to enhance learning further. Using a model, in turn, makes giving feedback faster for the instructor and lightens the amount of time spent. The student now has their writing parallel with the model answer to compare and contrast. This makes it simpler for them to comprehend what they are writing towards and how their writing compares.

Google Docs also transforms the online learning environment by allowing instructors to view the writing as it is happening. Live writing can occur even when students are in different places or breakout

rooms. The instructor can be right there with students, collaborating toward the final goal of producing a well-crafted piece of writing. In an in-person classroom setting, instructors can have students write answers on the board, but available space limits the amount of writing and number of students participating.

When writing online on a Google Doc, all students (regardless of the class size) can write simultaneously. This benefit results in increased writing output and writing fluency. In addition, instructors can now give feedback to all students in a short amount of time. Thus, not one learner is lost in a large classroom setting online.

Another vital benefit is that Google Docs can be used for games or competitions. For example, students can be put on teams to write the best thesis statement or correct sentences on Google Docs. The instructor can review each one "live" as a class and award successful attempts. Competitions encourage classroom interaction by giving students the opportunity to learn and collaborate through interactive games, and while this may seem more accessible when teaching in-person, Google Docs offers the same interactive ability online. Sometimes instructors view learning in-person and online as two different modalities, but while differences exist, in the end, the premise is the same—engage learners and true learning will occur.

Google Docs provides the means for learners to receive customized feedback on both grammar and content immediately. Immediacy is essential when learning because the task is fresh and students can understand how to improve more easily. On-the-spot correction is also beneficial for the instructor, providing them with an option to give immediate feedback quickly to a large class. Even if the instructor chooses the more traditional route of providing essay feedback later, giving feedback in a Google Doc can be used to provide quick and precise feedback more easily. Instructors can highlight text and type short notes, and students do not have to worry about understanding the instructor's handwriting. Also, the amount of feedback an instructor can provide increases with a Google Doc due to quick typing and ample page space. Not only do students appreciate this additional feedback, but instructors also feel good providing it—and it results in enhanced online learning.

Learners can also engage in collaborative research essays. Instead of submitting work they write individually, language learners can write one research essay together. Using Google Docs, students can write one essay from beginning to end in a virtual learning environment.

Classes can also review entire essays together. The instructor can share their screen and ask for peer edits. Writers benefit from the teacher's insight and student comments at once, making the feedback more effective. Other students benefit from seeing a peer's writing and learn from the process. Teachers can rotate the essay being reviewed, so each student receives intense feedback from the entire class at least once.

Google Docs also directly provides editing tips for grammar changes, and students can learn from these as well. While collaborating, students are also learning how to use a valuable online tool that is quickly replacing Microsoft Word. Online writing instruction during a pandemic using this tool not only improved students' writing skills and provided them with the other skills necessary for future success but also made teaching virtually more effortless for instructors. Thus, Google Docs is a time-saving tool brought to the forefront in pandemic pedagogy that is here to stay.

Challenges of Using Google Docs Online

Research shows that collaboration using Google Docs is effective and enjoyed by international students (Alharbi, 2019; Apple et al., 2011; Brodahl et al., 2011; Kessler et al., 2012; Togatorop, 2015). However, language learners may nevertheless face some challenges. . Some learners may require instruction on how to use Google Docs. While it is similar to Microsoft Word, the web-based platform may be new to some students and need some explanation.

In addition to the "tech challenges" that may occur, students may not value collaboration or peer feedback. Working together in any format poses challenges, stemming from everything from communication styles to skill level. It will be helpful for the instructor to explicitly discuss the benefits of peer feedback with their students and for activities to be carefully scaffolded to help ensure all students can participate at their individual levels.

International students also tend to view the instructor as the authority figure and prefer comments from an expert over those from peers. Of course, the instructor needs to give quality feedback, but peer feedback is valuable, too. The "expert" is there to confirm, elaborate on, or correct the peer feedback. Peer feedback is another way for the learner to receive feedback and grow as a writer consciously.

Solutions for Challenges of Using Google Docs

Taking the time to educate students on using Google Docs effectively at the beginning of the course helps mitigate the initial challenges of collaborating with cloud-based applications. Google Docs' simplicity makes it easy to learn. The instructor can demonstrate how to make comments, edit a writing template, and share writing.

Overcoming the tech challenges is usually easy, but showing international students how to work together cohesively can be more difficult. One solution is discussing how to collaborate effectively by giving detailed and constructive feedback. Giving examples of helpful and unhelpful comments is a way to model the quality of work expected.

One solution to overcoming bias towards peer feedback is emphasizing that another set of eyes is always helpful. Teachers can stress how each writer has specific skills and a unique perspective to offer. Writing is a process, and each person has their own. While taught linearly, writing is not sequential, and students come to it from multiple viewpoints. Learning from each other is valuable, necessary, and transformative.

Also, once students become accustomed to giving and receiving feedback online via Google Docs, the benefits become apparent. The quickness and depth of the feedback enhance learning online and provide clear information on improving writing skills. Students and instructors alike can appreciate the improved quality and immediacy.

Where Do We Go From Here?

While the pandemic will never be forgotten, it will come to an end. Pandemic pedagogy may seem like a concept thrust upon language teachers out of a sense of urgency and need. However, we believe the continued use of cloud-based learning environments such as Google Docs for writing collaboration is here to stay.

Google Docs is a transformative learning tool for ongoing writing collaboration and provides an effective dialogue between peers as well as between teachers and students. It enhances the learning experience, lightens the pedagogical load, and helps provide writers with valuable feedback. Giving and receiving feedback is simple, the feedback is easy to understand, and these interactions foster a transformative writing community. Google Docs helps collaboration occur in-person and online, both synchronously and asynchronously, and, for this reason, we argue that it is a tool whose utility will outlast the pandemic.

Authors

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