

## USE OF GOOGLE DOCUMENTS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH ONLINE TO ENHANCE WRITING SKILL: A CASE STUDY AT THE ACADEMY OF JOURNALISM AND COMMUNICATION

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### ABSTRACT

According to Richards and Renandya (2002), writing is considered as the most difficult skill for second language learners to a master of putting together strings of grammatically of correct sentences. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has made the transition from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning, which created considerable challenges for both teachers and students.

Due to the evolution of technology, there have been many useful tools such as computer-based activities and word processing used to assist students to write high-quality essays. Thus, the researchers decided to use Google Docs as one of the tools for teaching writing. The authors carried out a case study to analyze the effectiveness of using Google Docs in writing skill, and also bring out the difficulties faced by using it. Besides, this study aims to investigate the students' attitudes after using Google Docs for their online course. The participants in this study were 30 first-year English non-majored students in their writing lessons in the Academy of Journalism and Communication who engaged in an English online course for two months during the pandemic. Two sets of questionnaires and the analysis of writing samples combined with semi-structured interviews were conducted to determine the improvements in the students' writing skill and their positive attitude after the course.

**Keywords:** writing skill; technology; Google Docs; online learning

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. Rationale

Nowadays, people have witnessed many significant improvements in the advancement of science and technology in many fields of life such as economics, social issues, and education. Because of these technological advancements, many education changes have been applied in education institutions, including high schools and colleges. There are many beneficial tools such as office software and computer-based tasks, which have been developed to support learners in studying English more successfully.

Due to the outbreak of the Covid-19, learners in Vietnam could not attend the face – to – face lessons. Teachers and students at the Academy of Journalism and Communication faced the same problem. Hence, teaching and learning over the Internet fulfills educational requirements. That was the reason why the university decided to shift from offline lessons to online classes.

According to Richards and Renandya (2002), writing is considered a difficult language skill due to the fact that it requires special attention during the writing process. Swanson et al. (2003) said that it is necessary for a writer to understand the writing process and hone his or her abilities properly and efficiently. Besides, writers use written language as a means of communication to show their thoughts, and emotions to another person. Hence, writing plays an essential role in language teaching and learning. Many ESL students, on the other hand, struggled to acquire English, especially writing abilities. According to Richards and Renandya (2002), writing is the most challenging skill for ESL learners to master because it requires a lot of grammar rules. Moreover, Schwartz (1991) stated that writers have some obstacles when they write because they have little information about the writing process and they also have some difficulties in thinking of topics and ideas. Another common challenge is the lack of planning and strategy to create and develop written texts.

After being evaluated, Google Docs was chosen by the authors as the tool for the writing course due to its availability as a free software application. Additionally, Google Docs is believed to promote learners' engagement in real-time mode. Therefore, language lecturers and students may collaborate to obtain the intended output of their written work despite its geographic location at a special time without meeting in person.

Based on the difficulties that the researchers encountered, a case study was carried out during the second term of the 2020 – 2021 school year. The writing course lasted two months during the outbreak of Covid -19.

### **1.2. Research objectives**

With the goals of efficiently implementing the online writing course and assisting lecturers in interacting and supporting their students, as well as boosting their motivation in learning writing skills, this case study was conducted to:

- Examine the importance of using Google Docs to enhance student's writing abilities
- Investigate their students' opinions towards the use of Google Docs in writing lessons

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review consists of three main parts. First, the authors wanted to give some definitions of Google Docs. The second part is the way to define writing skill. Besides, the final part summarizes some studies related to Google Docs and their findings.

### **2.1. Google Docs**

Google Docs, a tool created by Google, has been used for a variety of online learning activities, including collaborative writing in recent years. It is the software designed for people who are familiar with a word processor such as Open Office Writer or Microsoft Word. Thomspson (2008) mentioned that Google Docs help users create, modify, and save documents on the Internet easily. Google Docs is a completely free online word processor that anybody with a Google account may use to create a collaborative activity. This tool provides standard editing functionality and really excels in

real-time collaborative authoring.

There are some useful features of Google Docs. First, multiple users may simultaneously share, open, and edit documents. The revision history in Google Docs allows you to examine the whole documents at any time in the past. Besides, they can view all the changes which have been made while other collaborators make revisions. To make other editors view the sections that have been altered, the edits are shown in different colors. Moreover, a sidebar chat option enables users to communicate about modifications. These features are very popular with teachers and learners because they can have immediate feedback by giving comments and editing where necessary. According to Sharp (2009), the feature of collaborative editing enables a group of individuals to edit a document collaboratively while seeing the changes made by others in real-time. This unique feature elevates Google Docs to a strong tool for group work activities in writing classes.

## **2.2. Writing skill**

Tangpermpoon (2008) stated that writing is regarded as the most challenging skill for language learners since it requires a certain degree of second language previous knowledge about the rhetorical structure, acceptable language use, and the vocabulary with which writers want to communicate with their viewers. If students lack the ability to communicate effectively in writing, they will struggle to interact with their teachers or classmates. As can be seen, the majority of communication is done in writing such as reports, emails, proposals, or memos. Hence, to teach writing skills to undergraduates, teachers should develop the strengths of the product-based writing strategy for use as part of the integrated approach because the rhetorical patterns in this approach will assist students with a certain amount of second language background knowledge to write effectively.

Recently, an increasing number of learners at all English levels have been recognized as lacking in writing proficiency. According to the study carried out by Alter (2001), there were one-third of the students had inadequate writing skills and most students had obstacles with writing English.

## **2.3. Previous studies**

Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2014) aimed to explore the usage of Google documents by observing the experimental group and the control group. One group finished their writing by using Google Docs, while the other group did not. They compared each individual's result when they were asked to do a writing assignment. After the researchers completed this study, they found out that the experimental groups had better writing performances than their counterparts did. Shared the same view with the two mentioned researchers, Rahayu (2016) also concluded that the non – English majored participants in the study gained many benefits from learning writing skills by using Google Docs as a collaborative writing tool. First, it could increase their interest in learning how to write in English. Second, these students could improve many social skills and reduce their stress on finishing writing assignments alone. Last but not least, using Google Docs could boost their confidence in mastering writing skills in specific, and the English language in general.

Moreover, it can be inferred from Depari's study (2017), the use of Google Documents helped students in grade 8 at SMPN 15 Kota Bengkulu improve the quality of their descriptive text. By analyzing the writing test and observing their writing activities in class, the researcher stated that the increase in their writing scores was determined by the average score in cycle 1 (about 7) and the score climbed to nearly 8 in their final result. Besides, the results of this research revealed that applying Google Docs in collaborative writing activities could help students master their learning.

As previously stated, numerous studies on applying Google Documents to boost student's writing skill have been done. However, the previous research might be different from this current study because its goals were to assess the improvement of the students who enrolled in an online writing class with the use of Google Docs and their opinions in their context.

#### **2.4. Research questions**

For the reasons stated above, the following two research questions are posed:

1. To what extent, can the use of Google documents help to improve the first-year non-English majored students' writing performance at the Academy of Journalism and Communication (AJC)?

2. What are the students' attitudes towards using Google documents?

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Research setting**

All the lecturers and students at the Academy of Journalism and Communication could not study face to face due to the complicated situation of Covid-19. Consequently, the case study focused on investigating lecturing and studying at home and in other locations with an Internet connection. This research was carried out in one general English class at AJC.

English is an important subject at the university because students must study English for Specific Purposes when they finish their general English course, and it is compulsory to pass the English Outcome test to meet the requirements of the Program outcome standard. Hence, students are very motivated and dedicated to their studies.

#### **3.2. Participants**

In the second term of 2020 – 2021, the researchers carried out a case study at the Academy of Journalism and Communication with 30 first – year non – English majors. The participants, who are from many majors such as Journalism, Broadcasting, or Ho Chi Minh ideology. Their English proficiency according to CEFR ranges from A2 to B1. In the second term, the participants in this research had to complete a two-month English course.

#### **1.3. Research methods**

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to make the case study's findings more accurate and reliable. To begin, pre-writing and post-writing tests were created to assess students' levels before and after the online course, which used Google Docs. Bell and Campbell (1996) mentioned that if researchers want to assess the success of a new program, pre-test and post-test should be used. In the first week of

the online course, the participants were asked to write a descriptive paragraph about the person they love the most in their family, and before they finished the course, they were assigned to write a descriptive paragraph about the person they admire. The duration of both writing tests was 30 minutes. During the course, the students were asked to brainstorm ideas, write their first drafts and have peer check by using Google Docs before handing in the final versions to the teachers.

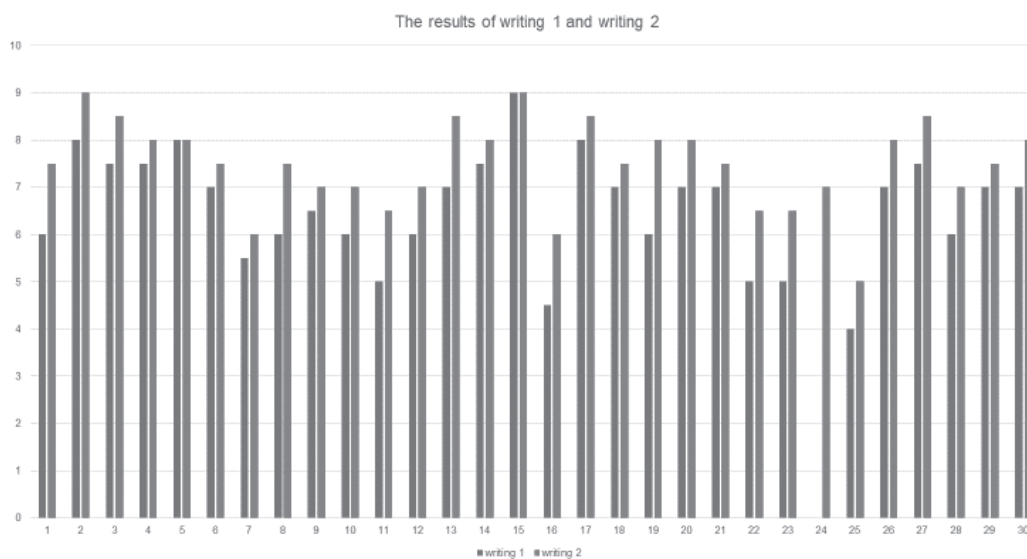
Pre-and post-survey questionnaires were used to collect data, which was modified from Ambrose, R.M., and Palpanathan, S. (2017). The two surveys generally employed a Likert rating scale for their questions. Their responses were gathered to have a better understanding of students' opinions before and after Google Docs was used in their writing lessons. The questionnaires were delivered to students after the first lesson and the final one. The two questionnaires were designed in Google forms, so students could do them online, and they had from 10 to 15 minutes to complete them.

In terms of the interviews, semi-structured interviews were used before the course finished getting more detailed feedback from the students on their impressions when they used Google Docs to master writing skills. Due to time constraints, only five students were chosen randomly to have a short interview. The researchers used Zoom to question each student and tried to make these interviewees feel open when sharing their thoughts spontaneously. In the first week, the teachers asked their students' opinions and checked whether they want to participate in the interviews after the course finished, and all the students were willing to join.

#### **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

After the data from three instruments, including the questionnaires, students' pre-and post-writing tests, and semi-structured interviews, were collected, they were analyzed carefully with quantitative and qualitative methods.

##### **4.1. Pre-test and post-test analysis**



**Figure 1. The pre – and post – writing test**

The bar chart above illustrated the results of two tests with 30 students. The researchers used the Vstep writing criteria to evaluate the students' writing performance. The writing paragraph was clearly intended for students whose level was between B1 and B2, and the researchers only used Vstep writing criteria to assess the students' marks. Particularly, writing 1 was done with pen and paper while writing 2 was done on Google Docs. As can be seen in the chart, there was a clearer picture of the number of the given grade point differences obtained by students, which ranged from 4 (level B1 low) to 9 (level C1 low). The results indicated that the majority of students who took the post-test improved their grades, but there was no pre-test of No24. During their course, they had opportunities to brainstorm ideas or use peer check due to Google Docs. Therefore, it was easy to understand for the better results in their post test. There were 23 students who achieved between 6 and 9 points in writing 1, compared to 30 students who got the same range of points. Generally, the differences between the results of writing 1 and writing 2 were only about one mark, and students received a high score from the first and then gained slightly higher marks for the second. Interestingly, the No25 received the lowest mark, at 4, for writing with pen and paper, but then his mark turned 5, for the test on Google Docs. Although his level remained at B1, he made a considerable improvement in his writing performance in his spelling and basic grammar as well. Additionally, four students gained more than 1.5 marks from B1 level to B2 level, were No 11, No 16, No22, and No23, respectively. It means that they possessed the in-depth knowledge of producing written work without the support of Google documents.

In summary, the finding showed that more than 90% of students obtained higher grades when they wrote on Google Docs. (27 students/29 students, with the exception of one student who had not yet been assigned his first writing test.). As a result, students benefited greatly from the tool's use in terms of improving the quality of their writing.

#### 4.2. Questionnaire analysis

The second instrument which the researchers used to collect the data is the survey questionnaire.

**Table 1: The awareness of students towards using Google documents in learning Writing skills (in percentage) (pre-writing questionnaires)**

	Statement	Yes	No
1	You enjoy Google Docs during English lesson.	86,7% (26)	13,3% (4)
2	Using Google documents in learning and teaching writing can enhance the interaction between the teacher and the student.	97% (29)	3% (1)
3	You would like your teacher to use Google Documents more often in writing lessons.	86,7% (26)	13,3% (4)
4	Writing essays on Google documents can make me become an independent learner.	86,7% (26)	13,3% (4)
5	Google documents is a powerful tool to work in groups in writing lessons.	93% (28)	7% (2)
6	Using Google documents in writing can help you with your spelling.	86,7% (24)	13,3% (6)
7	Using Google documents in writing can help you with your grammar	86,7% (24)	13,3% (6)
8	Using Google documents in writing lessons can help you brainstorm the topic you want to write about.	76,7% (23)	23,3% (7)
9	Working with google documents is a time-saving and useful.	97% (29)	3% (1)
10	You tend to be relaxed when you are writing on Google documents.	73,3% (22)	26,7% (8)
11	Thanks to Google documents, you tend to write essays more than on papers.	93% (28)	7% (2)
12	The quality of Google documents can be relied on.	90% (27)	10% (3)
13	Using Google documents in writing lessons may distract you from staying on task.	53,3% (16)	46,7% (14)



According to the findings from Table 1, it can be seen that the majority of students had a favorable attitude toward the use of Google Docs in English lessons, with over 86 percent agreeing that they enjoyed using the tool. While the percentage of students who believed that using Google documents in teaching and learning writing lessons would improve teacher-student interaction and thought Google documents was really useful and time-saving was highest, stood at 97%, the figure for participants who expected their teachers to use the tool more frequently in the same skill was slightly lower, at 86.7 percent. Similarly, the number of students thought that writing essays on Google Docs would increase their independence. In addition, 28 students considered the tool an effective way of collaborative writing tasks. The same number of students agreed that they could produce their written work more efficiently using Google Docs than with pen and paper. Positively, the findings showed that the same proportion of students, 86.7 percent, supposed the features in the tool assisted them in improving their spelling and grammar. By contrast, 76.7% thought that Google documents supported them in brainstorming the given topic. In terms of the reliability of Google Docs, only 22 participants supposed that they tended to feel relaxed to produce their writing tasks on the tool. In contrast, the figure for students who had believed in the quality of Google Docs usage was 27 (90%). However, it was unexpected that 53.3% of students agreed that using the tool could cause them to lose focus on their tasks.

**Table 2: The effectiveness of using Google documents in the teaching process for students (in percentage) (post-writing questionnaires)**

	Statement	yes	no
1	Using Google documents in writing lessons is interesting.	93% (28)	7% (2)
2	You feel you've learnt more writing in English in the classes that used Google documents than others.	93% (28)	7% (2)
3	You can get more individual attention from the teacher in writing lesson on Google documents	90% 27	10% 3
4	You can think of more ideas for your writing when you use Google documents.	86,7% 26	13,3% 4
5	Using Google documents can make you focus on what you're writing about.	86,7% 26	13,3% 4
6	Using Google documents help you less worried about writing because you can make changes easily.	86,7% 24	13,3% 6
7	The tools in Google documents helped you a lot in writing essays.	97% 29	3% 1
8	You are more careful about grammar when using Google documents.	90% 27	10% 3
9	You focus on spelling when using google documents	90% 27	10% 3
10	You can write longer essays on Google docs	86,7% 26	13,3% 4

Table 2 showed that 93% of students expressed a strong interest in learning how to write on Google Docs. Likewise, they better understood the English writing class compared to what they learned in a traditional classroom. While the number of participants who thought they could receive more personal attention from the teachers was 90%, the figure for those believing they could generate more ideas to write when using Google Docs was slightly lower, at 86.7%. A similar proportion of students agreed that producing the written work on Google documents enabled them to concentrate on their planned topics and increased their comfort when completing their writing assignments due to its effectiveness. Surprisingly, the vast majority of them supposed the features of Google

Docs encouraged them to write more essays, at 97%. Moreover, 27 out of 30 students thought they were more cautious of the grammar and spelling when applying the powerful tool. 86.7% of participants agreed that Google documents supported producing the longer written work.

### **4.3. Interviews**

Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams to investigate further and understand students' awareness and attitude toward the use of Google Docs in writing classes. The interview consists of four questions. Five students in the class were randomly interviewed by the researchers. They asked their students to create free information and guarantee its accuracy in their native language. In semi-structured interviews, they discussed their attitudes toward using and practicing writing with Google Docs. Significantly, the students appreciate the feedback provided via Google Docs. For the first question, they all agreed that they possessed all of the necessary formatting tools of a word processing application, including the ability to alter fonts, text size and color. As a result, from the first impression, it was quite convenient and simple to use. Additionally, four of them stated that it was entirely free for all users and eliminated the risk of losing all data due to a system error due to the fact that it was stored online and automatically saved every few seconds.

By contrast, the remaining student found the features somewhat difficult to use and frequently relied on the tool's automatic functions to check his grammar or spelling; however, it was still an effective method of staying safe. Additionally, it may enhance collaboration effectiveness and integrate a variety of useful free applications for improving writing skills, such as mind mapping. Unfortunately, three of them stated that some interesting apps were available, but they would require a significant financial investment from the users. It was not sophisticated to use Google Docs to compose essays on laptops or mobile devices for the third question. The editing-traceable feature of the tool also allowed users to highlight different parts of their written work, which was helpful when revising their work.

Nonetheless, three of them claimed difficulty in utilizing Google Docs due to an unstable internet connection. This poor quality was one of the most common reasons why the tool works very slowly on the smart devices or even the users might not be able to open their file. They supposed that using Google Docs was one of the most important benefits to having an opportunity to give access to it to their teachers. Thanks to the benefit, the teacher would be able to make necessary corrections to their written task or provide helpful feedback concerning the final question. As a result, students were able to quickly identify and track the changes made by their teachers, which in turn encouraged them to write more and improve their writing skills.

### **4.4. Discussion**

With this study, the researchers sought to determine whether Google documents were effective in improving the writing performance of first-year non-English majors in their first year of college. The findings revealed that the vast majority of students enjoyed using Google Docs in their writing lessons. Learners have undoubtedly benefited from



the powerful tool, which has provided a wide range of benefits. The authors also used three data collection instruments in an attempt to improve the validity of their research. These included a pre-and post-writing test, pre-and post-questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that when students wrote their assignments on Google Docs, they either maintained their grades or improved upon them significantly. This was evident in the questionnaires and interviews conducted by participants, as well as in their responses. There was even a significant difference in their perceptions of the usefulness of the Google Docs as compared to the written tasks that they actually finished in class. They became more independent in writing more extended essays when some grammatical mistakes or spelling can be checked.

Furthermore, they did not feel stressed about their writing products because they were able to make any necessary changes quickly and easily. More importantly, they were able to receive feedback from teachers and make changes to their assignments if necessary, to improve their performance. Students' relationships with teachers, as well as their interaction with their classmates, improved significantly when they completed writing assignments on Google Docs as opposed to when they completed writing assignments on paper in traditional classes. Despite the fact that they are familiar with the feature, some students are experiencing difficulties as a result of a slow internet connection and a formatting problem. Those obstacles, on the other hand, may appear to be insignificant. According to the results of the survey, Google documents appear to be important in assisting and motivating participants to engage in writing activities.

## **5. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this current study was to investigate the use of Google documents in teaching and learning English in order to assist in improving the first-year non-English major students' level at AJC as well as their attitudes toward the use of Google Docs in the classroom. The findings indicate that Google Docs is a beneficial tool for improving students' writing skills and encouraging them to produce more written work. With the exception of a poor internet connection and formatting issues, the authors hoped that university students would have a firm grasp of the material and be well-prepared to write the essays effectively and comfortably. Due to time constraints, a lack of resources, and the researchers' abilities, downsides are inevitable.

Moreover, readers may not be able to generalize from the same sample size to other contexts. As a result, it cannot be assumed that all of the findings are applicable to every student, and further research should be conducted on a variety of learners from a variety of fields, as well as the addition of additional items and statements that are given to the participants.

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