Abstract

While the concept of collaborative writing has been around for a while, the tools for doing it have changed considerably. Google Docs, a free web-based version of Microsoft Word, allows collaborative writing with the ease of accessibility from anywhere, and allowing multiple authors to edit the document in real time. According to Limbu and Markauskaite (2015), collaborative writing tools such as Google Docs enable learners to participate in, and to form, communities that engage in purposeful communication. Research shows that by incorporating Google Docs into the academic curriculum, non-native speakers can improve their collaborative learning skills, which in turn can improve their writing skills (Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014; Wang, 2016; Widodo, 2013; Yang, 2010).

Keywords: Web 2.0, online collaboration, Google Docs, writing abilities, collaborative writing

Collaborative learning and collaborative writing

Collaborative writing comes from the concept of collaborative learning, where learners work together to learn something or solve a problem. Collaborative learning originated from Lev Vygotsky's concept of learning called zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1997). Vygotsky's definition of zone of proximal development suggest that communication and interaction promoted better learning than independent work. Social interactions allow cognitive development which in turn leads to better learning (Vygotsky, 1986). In collaborative learning activities, more capable peers are able to assist less able peers (Fong, 2012). The beautiful thing about a collaborative web is that it blurs the boundaries between the author and reader, as readers can readers add to the work. People from different parts of the world can connect with each other and collaboratively create knowledge (Dunn et. al, 2011).

The principles of collaborative learning are based on the theories of Dewey (2009), Vygotsky (1980), Benjamin Bloom (1956), whose work focused on how students’ learning process has led educators to develop more student focused learning environments that put students at the center of instruction (Nor et. al, 2014). This principle is the foundation of collaborative learning. The literature review has mentioned various advantages of collaborative writing. Collaboration among students is an interesting alternative in terms of creating helpful and active learning environments (Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014). Google docs is a popular collaborative writing tool which is part of a free, web-based software office suite offered by Google within its Google Drive service. The suite allows users to create and edit documents online while collaborating with other users in real-time. It allows for a quick and comfortable information flow between group members.

The ability to share and edit documents between group members makes collaboration much easier (Chiu, Wang, Popescu, Li & Lau, 2014, p.150). Google Docs allows students to share a draft via email or Google Docs, where they can instantly edit and provide this in turn saves them from completely rewriting their drafts (Curtis, 2013). Google Docs also expunges issues of geographical boundaries, making it easier to work from any location in the world. The comments in Google Docs also encourage students to reply to their teachers and peers’ comments, thus increasing their motivation (Al-Chibani, 2016). This sharing of experiences in an asymmetric manner until creation of the final product, works to keep the motivation levels of students’ high (Mitnik, Recabarren, Nussbaum, & Soto, 2009; Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014).
Collaborative writing among non-native English speakers

One of the earlier studies regarding the use of Google Docs among a non-native English speaking group was done by Yang in 2010. The study explored how Google Docs can be used to facilitate collaborative writing in a second language classroom. Another similar study was done by Chao and Lo in 2011, where they proposed a Wiki-based five-stage computer mediated collaborative writing approach to the writing process for English as a foreign language (EFL) learner. The five stages were: collaborative planning, partitioned drafting, peer-revising, peer-editing, and individual publishing was blended with on-campus English composition course (Chao & Lao, 2011). Fong’s (2012) study of collaborative writing in mixed proficiency groups in an EFL class also showed positive impact on students learning.

Kessler, Bikowski and Boggs (2012) explored collaborative practices as being increasingly advocated in second language classrooms largely in response to the collaborative potential of Web 2.0 technologies. Another study by Sofia (2012) explored how non-native English speaking students showed a higher level of interest in learning English and computer skills at the same time. In 2015, Khatib and Meihami did a study on how practicing in pairs improved the overall quality of learners writing, without impacting the fluency of written texts. Another study in 2015 by Rostampour, Behjat and Arvane reported that individualistic writing did not have significant impact on the improvement of EFL learners' writing skill, while collaborative writing had significant impacts on the improvement of EFL learners' writing skill. Additionally, a study of Palestinian English Majors by Farrah (2011) showed that extrovert students favored collaborative activities and also found them to enhance their English language skills (Farrah, 2011).

A Google Docs study by Liu & Lan (2016) studied the difference in motivation, vocabulary gain and perceptions on using Google Docs between individual and collaborative learning at a tertiary level. Thus, Google Docs has shown tremendous pedagogical potential among non-native English speaking communities, where students have found Google Docs to have predominantly positive impact on their learning.

Effects of Collaborative Writing

Some previous studies have shown that writing processes and perceptions of Google Docs suggests that learners support each other in terms of linguistic knowledge and strategy use leading to a positive perception of collaboration in the web-based environment (Kessler, Bikowski, & Boggs, 2012). Another study has indicated that students using Google Docs had a better performance than the face-to-face group; which can be attributed to three main reasons: the collaboration method, special features of Google Docs which motivated students to learn more efficiently, and more contribution to work (Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014). According to a study by Limbu and Markauskaite (2015), Google Docs enabled learners to participate in, and to form; communities that engaged in purposeful communication; however they also noted that these tools cannot, by themselves, bring about useful learning.

There are several factors that influence the success and failure of collaborative writing such as teacher competence in teaching writing and managing the process of writing, the writing classroom context, the nature of the school curriculum and class syllabus, and individual student differences (e.g., a student proficiency level in language and writing or motivation to write collaboratively) (Widodo, 2013). While collaborative writing has been around for a long time, online collaborative writing is still fairly new, especially among non-native speaking communities. So, it is important to dedicate enough time for the students to gain familiarity with tools such as Google Docs in order for them to use the tool to its full potential (Chu & Kennedy, 2011).

Therefore, it is important that further studies be conducted to understand the long-term impacts of collaborative tools such as Google Docs on non-native English speaking students' writing skills. While a review of the literature shows that collaborative writing among non-native speaking communities is well supported, yet, more research is needed on the studies in this area especially on how technology is impacting the process of collaborative learning among university students. Additionally, there is also need for research on the perceptions of learners partaking in collaborative writing. Finally, it is evident that if properly utilized, Google Docs can improve English writing skills of non-native English speakers (Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014; Wang, 2016; Widodo, 2013; Yang, 2010).

“English achievement is important to be taken into consideration because research has verified that success in English classes helps students in their future studies and future academic life” (Al Chibani, 2014, p.334).
References


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