



## EFL Teacher's Challenges in Utilizing Web-based Collaborative Writing Activities Using Google Docs Platform

Titin Purwaningtyas; Joko Nurkamto; Diah Kristina

Sebelas Maret University, Indonesia

<http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v10i3.4424>

---

### **Abstract**

This study focused on the EFL teacher's challenges when experiencing a web-based collaborative writing environment using technology, namely Google Docs. The writing activity was difficult, especially when it came to individual assignments. Conducting collaborative work in writing using web 2.00 tool technology was considered the best option for training students in teamwork and collaboration. However, the teacher faced some problems that affected the students, and the learning process was ineffective. The participant in this qualitative research was an EFL teacher at an Indonesian vocational high school. The data was based on a semi-structured interview obtained through Zoom meetings. The interview revealed the instructor's viewpoints, including the drawbacks of utilizing Google Docs for web-based collaborative writing situations. The study showed that the instructor suffered for two reasons; students' personal and technical problems. The students' personal problems including students' lack of collaboration with their teammates and unpreparedness to learn. Meanwhile, technical errors involve unstable internet connectivity, incompatible devices, and error program. Therefore, the teacher prerequisite to be well-prepared input materials and technical skills training for students' readiness to join online collaborative writing using technology. The number of challenges in this study might be valuable as a consideration for educators before preparing the students to work collaboratively to teach writing skills to minimize ineffective teaching and learning process.

**Keywords:** *Challenges; Collaborative Writing (CW); Google Docs; Teacher's Perceptions; Web-Based Technology; Writing Skill*

### **Introduction**

A variety of web-based writing tools have recently emerged, and these tools are gaining popularity as venues for student writing in both traditional and digital classroom settings. Obviously, the advantages of the technological tools are to be incorporated into pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning, particularly in the context of collaborative writing. Therefore, web-based collaborative writing, can be utilized to help English language learners by providing them with additional possibilities to practice English writing in a more interesting setting (Vorobel & Kim, 2017). By definition, collaborative writing involves two or more students working together on a single piece of writing from start to finish, with each group sharing equal authorship and responsibility (Dobao & Blum, 2013; Storch, 2019). This

activity put the essence of togetherness, teamwork, and shared-knowledge from more knowledgeable person to lower ones. As sociocultural theory reinforced the importance of interaction as the parameter of students' learning goals through scaffolding. The interaction is not only can be conducted by face-to-face but also through online ways, especially in the context of technology enhance teaching and learning methods.

Among the many technologies that have emerged over the past few decades, Google Docs stands out as a widely used learning tool that supports the implementation of a learner-centered approach in a collaborative learning environment (Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014). The increased use of technology including Google Docs, has revolutionized teachers' methods of instruction both within and outside the classroom. This web tool facilitates and broadens the variety of writing styles. According to Widyastanti (2019), Google Docs is a web-based digital software that enables educators to encourage collaborative writing by providing students with powerful tools that boost their ability to collaborate on a single piece of writing. The users are required to have a Gmail account in order to use the online application that allows them to create documents similar to Microsoft Word. Users can invite others to collaborate on a project by providing editing and revision rights after creating an account.

In addition, this platform facilitates the teacher's capacity to easily monitor and comment on student writing. This technology allows an innovative technique for teachers to facilitate the teaching and learning process. Google Docs may be accessed from any computer or mobile device and is a very effective, versatile, and user-friendly technological tool for enhancing education (Abrams, 2019). Therefore, under the condition when someone could not open the application on laptops, they do not put worries as it could be accessed through smartphones. This platform is accessible which could be accessed without concerning distance and time. At any time and place, students and their partners including the teacher can work together to design, revise, and discuss the project. Teachers can use collaborative writing, which is a subset of collaborative learning, as a means of training students to collaborate in pairs or small groups to produce a written product through sustained dialogue and shared decision-making (Fen Yeh, 2021; Fernández Dobao, 2012). Khalil (2018) claims that students and professors can converse while revising documents, which facilitates teamwork and clarifies any ambiguities. With control edits, teachers are able to analyze, amend, and comment on student work, while students are able to observe changes to their documents as they are made.

Technology-facilitated group writing in the classroom has reaped benefits for everyone involved. Researchers have looked at how teachers and students can benefit from Google Docs' collaborative writing features, but no one has looked into how the teacher struggles and efforts faced while conducting web-based collaborative writing environment. Conducting web-based collaborative writing is not always successful for the teacher. According to a literature analysis conducted by Krishnan et al., (2018) it is difficult to monitor who is actively participating in online collaborative writing activities conducted in a face-to-face setting when using Google Docs. Too many pupils in a group might make it difficult to complete written assignments, as described by Brodahl & Hansen (2014). Problems can be both technical, like when students lose internet connection or can't log in, and interpersonal, as when they have trouble keeping track of revisions to their manuscripts or coming to terms with the results of their writing project (Taghizadeh & Basirat, 2019; Zheng et al., 2021). It is in line with Al Shabibi (2018) who revealed on his study that the obstacles of conducting web-based collaborative writing for the teacher related to unpreparedness' students to work on online group work and technical problems including unable internet connectivity, fundraising, and incompatible devices. Leeuwen & Janssen (2019) added that the teachers in conducting web-based collaborative environment served as a main figure without taking over control the entire time of students' opportunities to learn by themselves.

Teachers and students have profited from digitally enhanced collaborative writing in the educational setting. Despite the fact that the students are not simultaneously work collaboratively and others problems were frequently occurred made the collaborative work did not run in harmony.

Therefore, this study tried to fulfill this gap by examining the problems that the EFL teacher faced of using web-based collaborative writing. This research could be the references for educators before adopting web-based tools to support their teaching materials, especially in splitting students' in group writing situation.

### ***Research Methodology***

The researchers conducted a qualitative case study to obtain additional in-depth data on the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The participant of this study was an EFL high school teacher in Indonesia. Since she participated in a teacher training program offered by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemdikbud) for six months, starting on August 2022. As a result, she could not attend to teach face-to-face learning. Therefore, she performed online learning for her pupils using web-based tool Google Docs to facilitate online interaction in writing sessions. Here, she asked the pupils to work in peers to compile a descriptive text. The students were asked to discuss with the members of the same group over Google Docs while composing the written project.

The researchers employed a qualitative case study to acquire more in-depth data on the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The goal of this qualitative study was to reveal the experiencing of some challenges commonly happened when conducting web-based collaborative activities and how to deal with the issues. The participant of this study was an EFL high school teacher in Indonesia. She was being the participant of a teacher training program held by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemdikbud) on last 2022. As a result, she could not attend to teach face-to-face learning. Therefore, she conducted online learning for her students using web-based technology including Google Docs to facilitate online interaction in writing classes. Here, she asked the students to work collaboratively. Each group consisted of two or three students to write a descriptive text. The students were asked to discuss with the members of the same group through Google Docs while composing the written project.

To start with, a semi-structured interviews was used to collect data on the EFL teacher's problems when experiencing the web-based collaborative situation. To keep track of what the teacher said throughout the online interview, the researcher used Zoom recording and took notes on the most pertinent aspects. After an interview, the researchers converted the audio recording into texts. The responses were divided into several them as the basis for an analysis of the data based on the concept of thematic analysis proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006).

### ***Findings***

This study investigated the perspectives of an EFL teacher when experiencing of using web-based application Google Docs to assist online collaborative writing instruction. The conclusions of this study contain an overview of the challenges that the teacher faced while conducting web-based collaborative activities using Google Docs. The researcher classified the challenges into two categories; students' personal issues and technical issues.

#### **Students' Personal Issues**

##### ***a. Less Collaboration***

When students were creating a collaborative text, the majority of the problems that arose were related to the students' ability to work together. There were moments when the pupils did not collaborate well with their teams. As the teacher expressed her irritated feeling because some students in her classes were unwilling to work together with the other students in their groups on completing writing assignments. The teacher said:

*“Few students texted me to change their partners in groups as they dislike it. They seemed to be awkward on be in one team with someone who was not closed to them in daily life or the reason of their peers were not too more knowledgeable than them”*

The teacher stated few students were effortless to finish the task because they did feel comfortable with their members of groups. The reason such as feeling awkward with unfamiliar friends to be in the same group affected them hard to start the discussion and felt isolated. As the members of the group were selected by the teacher, further, they also rejected their peers with the problems of level of proficiency. The teacher asserted that the students were not satisfied if they were paired with someone who is lower proficiency than them. Therefore, the tendency of low collaboration among the same members was higher.

In another occasion, the other factor influenced less collaboration was the unfair job division. This condition affected a student who was passive, and the other student was dominant. Unfair job division also put burden on one of members of the group. Teacher commented:

*“I purposely selected and divided the lower and high competency students in one team was to teach team how to build a good teamwork and they can learn each other. Unfortunately, dominant student was more choose to do the task group by herself, meanwhile her peers relied on her”*

The teacher insisted that students with high competency commonly hard work with other friends and supposed to do the task alone without any interfering from others. In some cases, there was a member of a group who was passive with low intelligence put burden and depend on other’s dominant teammates in a group. On the other hand, the dominant students with more knowledgeable did not give the opportunity to the lower teammates to contribute in accomplishing the task.

#### *b. Not Seriously Taking Online Course*

Another problem that frequently occurred in students’ work when they were utilizing web-based collaborative writing was that some students took ready-made texts from internet websites and pasted them on their worksheets. They seemed to be not serious in learning. The teacher convinced that this was a problem while conducting online programs. When they were at home, they search on the internet the topic of the materials and claimed it to be their products. Although the teacher had prepared the input materials on how to write an essays and technical procedures to operate Google Docs, in fact mostly of them prefer instantly way to independently making texts based on their creativity. The teacher commented:

*“I was disappointed to see that most of groups were copying all texts from internets without any modification. It was truly the negative impact of technology’s development, everything can be found on Google”*

Along with the digitalization era and the ease of accessing the internet affected the students were lazy and had no interest to seriously learn. The students did not give the online programs the attention as there was fast way to fulfill their assignments. They did the task only for supplementary tools, not as necessary needs. Basically, the appearance of internet and technology was to support and enrich the students’ insight instead of making them addicted and being lazy to instantly transfer and copy the data from it.

## **Technical Issues**

### *a. Poor Internet Connectivity*

The first disadvantage of using Google Docs was that it could only be accessed when the internet was active and the connection was stable. Before accessing Google Docs, we must therefore activate Wifi or connect the mobile device's internet. The instructor asserted that the internet connection at her students’

homes and at school varied in quality. This issue prevented students and the teacher from accessing and collaborating on Google Docs.

*“The most serious problem when accessing Google docs was poor internet connection. If one of collaborators was offline because of poor internet access or had no internet connection, others’ collaborators could not update the new version of the document’s revision. It took several minutes to bring back the signals” (Teacher)*

According to what was stated by the teacher before, if two people were working together and one of them went offline because they did not have internet connectivity, the other people could not view and read each other's work. In doing so, the newest revision or change could be detected. Due to the terrible internet connection, she wasted a great deal of time trying to log into the Google Docs’ worksheet to prepare for checking students’ essays. The teacher added that poor connection or signals also affected her students could not read her feedback towards students’ work on Google Doc’s chat and comment feature.

#### *b. Incompatible Devices*

Google Docs could be utilized and accessed through several devices for instance computers, tablets, mobile phones, etc. Anyone who was under situation was not able to use laptops could use the cellphones as it was portable. However, using mobile phones to access Google Docs resulted in an increase in the amount of RAM available on the device. They were required to download it with a specific capacity in order to save it. Those users who lacked the necessary support hardware and did not have sufficient RAM were unable to make efficient use of this application. Therefore, in order to free up space in the memory of the mobile devices, they need to remove another application.

*“This application (Google Docs) took 32 megabytes of memory capacity. To those who had low RAM on their smartphones would affect the application could not run well. It might distract cellphones’ performances” (Teacher)*

The teacher further confirmed that not all her students had supported smartphones, therefore they need to delete other application to download Google Docs to make it performed well as open the document on laptops.

#### *c. Errors’ Application*

During the web-based collaboration activities, it was discovered that the application program had some deficiencies. In numerous instances, students and teachers did not accept the "link access" to access the same Google Doc’s worksheet. The teacher stated that she advised the group leaders to create the document on Google Docs and invite other collaborators including the teacher so that they could access and collaborate on the project. In some cases, students and the teacher’s accounts were not notified of invites received by email. The teacher said:

*“I did not get any notification on my email as well another students when I asked them to invite another writers on Google Docs. Therefore I could not open their document because of limited access”*

The problems with the application happened might be the reasons of security settings and privacy. To get overcome with this problem, the teacher instructed the students to send the invitation link to Email or WhatsApps application to others collaborators including the teacher.

## **Discussion**

Whether in the context of asynchronous or synchronous, utilizing Google Docs as a web-based to support teaching writing for students' group work is only sometimes successful. Referring to the data

taken from the interview, the teacher experienced some problems when applying collaborative writing activities using web tool technology, Google Docs.

To start with, the common problems came from the students' issues. The problems from students related to low collaboration and having no attention to online courses utterly. As Al Shabibi (2018) mentioned in his study, teachers' problems commonly encounter students' issues in online collaborative writing, such as students' lack of collaboration with their teammates and instantly taking the task data from the internet. Since the teacher randomly selected the group work members, some students might be paired with unfamiliar friends in their daily lives. Consequently, the students were demotivated to work with their teammates and hard to build social engagement. Dealing with this, the teacher found that some groups were passive and did not show progress in completing the task. It is in line with Amalia et al., (2021), who have found that just a minority of students can complete writing assignments successfully, and the rest groups did not seem interested in accomplishing the writing task with their partners.

Meanwhile, the teacher identified that the result of students' writing tasks was not originally done by themselves but copied from Google. The bad impact of the swift digitalization era was "click the keywords you want to look for, " and Google will show you many options for your answer in a second. This situation leads people, especially students, to be effortless and lazy to get knowledge independently. Besides, the teacher also faced technical issues which affected the learning process ineffectively. The technical issues encountered by the teacher were related to poor-internet connection, fundraising (energy cost, data cost, and electronic device maintenance expenses (Brodahl & Hansen, 2014); Irshad, 2021); Kim, 2020) Taghizadeh & Basirat, 2019); Zheng et al., 2021). The application required the availability of the internet. If they did not have a stable internet connection, both teacher and students were not able to open or write the text in Google Docs. In addition, the problem of internet connectivity occurred since the teacher and some students live in rural areas that have limited signals. Despite having access to the world wide web, Efriana (2021) noted that despite the fact that students have access to the internet, they still need help connecting to the network due to where they live. It caused their cellular networks to be inadequate to access online applications at home.

Further, a number of difficulties related to internet issues hinder the collaborators from updating and reading the latest revision of their papers. These technical issues negatively influenced the teacher to respond and provide corrections to students' written projects as soon as possible and vice versa. Moreover, Google Docs can be accessed via computers and smartphones. Most students frequently used Google Docs via smartphone as they did not have laptops required to download and install the application. However, their smartphones' specification was only sometimes supported. Low specification with insufficient RAM affected the installation failure. They needed to provide enough memory space to use this application. Educators need to provide adequate thought to overcome this trend in technology-enhanced collaborative writing by monitoring students' work in groups and providing sufficient technological skills training.

### ***Conclusion and Implication***

This study revealed a number of challenges encountered by the EFL teacher while utilizing the web-based tool technology-enhanced collaborative using Google Docs. Utilizing technology to support online learning did not guarantee to meet success. The teacher frequently faced some barriers, such as the students' personal and technical issues, that effectively hindered learning. Based on the teacher's perspectives, the students' personal issues concerned with students lack collaboration with their teammates in which they could not build good communication, and there is a tendency for one member to be more passive or dominant in a group. The teacher also found several students who did not pay attention to online learning since they searched, copied, and pasted the whole writing task from Google. Then, problems of technical issues were found, such as inconsistent internet access, errors in the

application, and incompatible devices negatively affecting one of the collaborators if a group could not renew and update the latest change document. Therefore, the teacher was strongly motivated to prepare the input materials before asking students to produce the written document and sufficient technical training in operating Google Docs before deciding to utilize the web-based collaborative writing environment to support teaching and learning practice. Besides, this study pursued the role of the teacher to be more active in giving feedback and help to students' difficulties in collaborative work, including technical problems. A limited number of participants was the limitation of this current study. Future researchers need to involve more teachers and students in their studies to get more deep data. This study might be valuable and give insights for EFL teachers, particularly before adopting the technology to support their work, especially in teaching writing.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this work.

### References

- Abrams, Z. I. (2019). Collaborative writing and text quality in Google Docs. *Language Learning and Technology, 23*(2), 22–42.
- Al Shabibi, Y. (2018). *Teacher 's Role in A Collaborative Writing Environment Using Wiki*. University of Exeter.
- Amalia, H., Abdullah, F., & Fatimah, A. S. (2021). Teaching writing to junior high school students: A focus on challenges and solutions. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 17*(2), 794–810. <https://doi.org/10.17263/jlls.904066>.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology; in Qualitative Research in Psychology. *Uwe Bristol, 3*(2), 77–101. <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/11735>.
- Brodahl, C., & Hansen, N. K. (2014). *Education Students ' Use of Collaborative Writing Tools in Collectively Reflective Essay Papers. 13*, 91–120.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Dobao, A. F., & Blum, A. (2013). Collaborative writing in pairs and small groups: Learners' attitudes and perceptions. *System, 41*(2), 365–378. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2013.02.002>.
- Efriana, L. (2021). Problems of Online Learning during Covid-19 Pandemic in EFL Classroom and the Solution. *JELITA: Journal of English Language Teaching and Literature, 2*(1), 2721–1916.
- Fen Yeh, S. (2021). Collaborative Writing on Google Docs: Taiwanese Students' Participation, Behaviors, and Writing Trajectories with Real-work Online Tasks. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies, 12*(3), 73. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.12n.3.p.73>.
- Fernández Dobao, A. (2012). Collaborative writing tasks in the L2 classroom: Comparing group, pair, and individual work. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 21*(1), 40–58. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2011.12.002>.
- Irshad, M. (2021). Challenges Encountered During Synchronous Online Collaborative Writing via Google Docs. *International Journal of Web-Based Learning and Teaching Technologies, 17*(6), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.4018/ijwltt.287554>.

- Khalil, Z. M. (2018). EFL Students' Perceptions towards Using Google Docs and Google Classroom as Online Collaborative Tools in Learning Grammar. *Applied Linguistics Research Journal*, 2(2), 33–48. <https://doi.org/10.14744/alrj.2018.47955>.
- Kim, J. (2020). Learning and Teaching Online During Covid-19: Experiences of Student Teachers in an Early Childhood Education Practicum. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 52(2), 145–158. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-020-00272-6>.
- Krishnan, J., Cusimano, A., Wang, D., & Yim, S. (2018). Writing Together: Online Synchronous Collaboration in Middle School. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 62(2), 163–173. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.871>.
- Leeuwen, A. Van, & Janssen, J. (2019). *A Systematic Review of Teacher Guidance During Collaborative Learning in Primary and Secondary Education Running head: TEACHER GUIDANCE OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING A Systematic Review of Teacher Guidance During Collaborative Learning in Primary and Seconda. February*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.02.001>.
- Storch, N. (2019). Collaborative writing. *Language Teaching*, 52(1), 40–59. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444818000320>.
- Suwantarathip, O., & Wichadee, S. (2014). The effects of collaborative writing activity using Google docs on students' writing abilities. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 13(2), 148–156.
- Taghizadeh, M., & Basirat, M. (2019). *EFL Instructors' Perceptions of Computer-Mediated Communication in Language Classes. December*.
- Vorobel, O., & Kim, D. (2017). Adolescent ELLs' collaborative writing practices in face-to-face and online contexts: From perceptions to action. *System*, 65, 78–89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2017.01.008>.
- Widyastanti, M. (2019). Using Google Docs On Collaborative Writing Activity In SMPN 1 Driyorejo - Gresik. In *Uin Sunan Ampel Surabaya*.
- Zheng, Y., Yu, S., & Lee, I. (2021). Implementing Collaborative Writing in Chinese EFL Classrooms: Voices From Tertiary Teachers. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12(June), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.631561>.

## Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).