

The application of Google Docs in Teaching Essay Writing for English Major Students at the National Economics University

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Abstract: *Essay writing has been a big challenge for English students due to their formality, complexity and the boring nature of the subject. Hence, this paper presents a technological tool – Google Docs in teaching essay writing for a group of 27 business students of Intermediate level at the National Economics University (NEU). The results show that Google Docs helps students improve their identification of various parts in an essay, build up the cooperative atmosphere in class as well as develop their critical thinking skills. It also helps teachers avoid the untidy or messy writing papers with different erasers, correction or deletion.*

Keywords: *Technological tools; teaching writing; essay writing*

1. Introduction

The Information Age is widely recognized by swift technological developments which have become irreplaceable in all fields of life. The teaching-learning process stands at the center of this development and plays a significant role from which puts forward other areas. Consequently, there is a need for an education system to keep in pace with the enhancements to make use of the technological innovations. With the aim to turn such development into reality, modern technological innovation should be sensibly carried out (Aqeel, 2003).

Brown (2001) indicated that writing is originally a thinking process when a writer creates a final written product after going through the thinking process. Currently, the process approach has been commonly acknowledged, and has been widely applied, although many researchers are still cynical about its effectiveness. It is said that despite the availability of an amount of research into the writing process, there is still not a complete perception of how learners carry out a writing task or how they learn to write. Teachers are required to find out more balanced and varied teaching approaches that inspire students, and finally strengthen their language abilities.

Particularly, at the National Economics University, English learners work with different levels of writing skills from sentence building to paragraph and essay writing to serve academic purposes. With the aim of preparing updated and attractive lesson plans, educational technology should be flexibly applied in teaching writing at all levels. Thus, this research

introduces a new tool in writing and illustrates some figures of a sample class with the practical application into writing sessions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Teaching writing

As indicated by Chastain (1988), “writing is a basic communication skill and a unique asset in the process of learning a second language.” In any case, since the presentation of audio lingual strategy, writing has been considered less significant and has been viewed as the least helpful of the four communicative skills. However, researchers have considered the reliability of associating the macro skill of writing with different skills (Hinkel, 2006). By the same token, researchers distinguish between writing and composing, the former aiming to vivid presentation of spoken language and the latter mentioning to a long process of thinking, drafting, writing, and revising which requires specialized and detailed skills. As a result, writing teaching, the outcome of this compositional nature of writing, concentrates on helping learners with producing and organizing ideas, combining them into a text using rhetorical devices, and revising and editing the text for defining and interpreting (Brown, 2001).

2.2. Applying technology in teaching foreign languages

More recently, information and communication technology (ICT) in the form of e-learning and the Internet have presented additional benefits to the learning environment as they enable the integration of virtually unlimited multimedia learning materials

from external sources into the curriculum and make them available to students at any location in the world (distance education) where there is a computer, mobile phone or tablet device with Internet access (Alsunbul, 2002). The application of computer technologies in language instruction provides a student-centered learning environment. It enables course administrators and teachers to vary lesson presentation styles to motivate students of varying interests, provides learning opportunities outside the classroom (hence increasing learner interaction with the language), and is perceived to cater more for individual differences. According to Yaverbaum, Kulkarni and Wood (1997), integrating multimedia into the traditional learning environment not only enriches the styles of presentation, but also has the advantage of increasing language retention.

2.3 Google Docs

Google Docs is a web-based output application that lets both online and offline access. Without the requirement to download or install software on one specific machine, any device with the Internet connection could tap into the use of Google Docs. As a cloud-based application, Google Docs has a number of integral assistances over traditional productivity software. One of the main aids of Google Docs' cloud functionality is the fact that the user isn't held back with backing up or saving the document. Google Docs automatically saves individual document without the user having to swift it when changing. As a consequence, in the case of a black out, the document you were working on will automatically save itself and be there for your retrieval.

Another advantage of Google Docs is to allow numerous users access to the same file from basically anywhere because all of the revisions are saved to the cloud system. Moreover, users aren't responsible with trying to choose the most current file because the most recent version is automatically saved to its cloud. Google Docs is inherently designed for collaboration allowing several users to view and make changes at the same time. This type of online cooperation has gone through the way the world views the document management and has efficiently improved output.

The users are in complete control to see the work. When a document is created in Google Docs, the creator instantly becomes the owner. As the owner, one gains certain rights such as offer to cooperate and view the document, which means giving them the right to edit and export the file. The owner can also allow other partners to invite other users into the work. If one is only invited to view the document, they

are restricted to only look at the file and export it, not making edition.

3. Context

Class description

English major students in Faculty of Foreign Languages, National Economics University study writing skills in their first two years. They may have used computers but not been familiar with applying technology in studying. Students are interested in the application of new methods which are different from what they have experienced previously.

Intake	60
Number of students	27
English proficiency level	Intermediate
Micro-skill	Essay writing
Number of lessons per week	3
Number of research sessions	9
Contents	Problem solving essay, cause and effect essay, argumentative essay
Objectives	Provide students with fundamental understanding of the essay, and then supplying them with practice tasks in various kinds of essay

Google Docs application

The main type of writing to concentrate in the semester is an academic essay. Google Doc is used to help students visualize different parts in their paper. For example, the screenshot below illustrates that students has color-marked the claim in pink, the evidence in yellow, and the analysis in blue. Then, they are asked to work on peer edition. Students can type and work on one document at the same time.

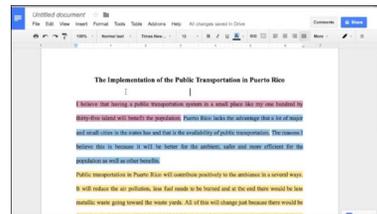


Figure 1. Color marking on Google Docs for writing papers



Figure 2. Students' writing and replying to comments simultaneously on Google Docs

4. Research methods

Semi-structured interview

After each week, a group of 4-5 students were selected for an interview about their performance and improvements (if any). They were asked to discuss questions about their current using Google Docs on writing essay and its efficiency. Then, they were deeply interviewed about the performance during their individual and group studying in the lesson.

Frequent questions are as follows:

1. How was your writing performance in Google Docs?
2. Is there any improvement when using this technological aid?
3. Does Google Docs contribute to your writing collaboration?

Documentary analysis (students' applied papers)

Students were required to submit their writing portfolio after 9 observed weeks. For each type of essay writing analysis, the author examined three versions of writing: the owner's first draft, the owner's highlighted version using Google Docs and edition, and the final version with peer collaboration using Google Docs.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1. Easily approached revision and well-structured writing text

It is quite common that students continuously write their paragraph or essay without examining the balance between parts. The writing can be imbalanced with the inadequate length of each part. Also, during their concentrated writing, writers may skip several main ideas or supporting details partly because of their merely looking back at the whole paragraph. 74% of the observed students (20 students) answered that this colorization helps learners to identify two important things in their paper: (1) all written parts of the paragraph or essay and (2) the balanced ratio of various parts. When students are in the very first step of practicing writing skills, they have a tendency to miss the explanatory or supporting ideas. As a consequence, the presented paper may be too short so that using this highlight tool is a good way to scan the text and add in any changes.

5.2. Collaborative improvements in writing skills

It is known as peer editing and feedbacks allows students to instantly share their ideas in terms of the topic given, a range of academic writing styles and structures. It also builds up the atmosphere of cooperation and interest in the class. 18 interviewed students no longer hesitate or feel scared of presenting their opinions due to their spoken proficiency. Additionally, Google Docs peer editing improves

students' responsibility by letting them play a similar role as the teacher when they are asked to spot their classmates' mistakes and help correct them. Students commonly take advantage of identifying their strengths and weaknesses not only in their own papers but also their peers'. The process of examining others' writing products encourages their editing skills and has them be aware of such criteria when they write. Moreover, students who read the papers with a critical view have developed their critical thinking skills and writing skills by means of access to diversified writing styles.

5.3 Teachers' benefits of marking

In terms of teachers, Google Docs application decreases the amount of their paperwork. Instead of collecting the first drafts of students and assigning them to others for peer evaluation, teachers only examine the documents after they have been edited by the students' peers. The time and contents of any edition are recorded automatically by Google Docs. Teachers then can give feedbacks on both the writing and the peer evaluation, which helps avoid the untidy or messy writing papers with different erasers, correction or deletion.

6. Further suggestions and conclusion

The great deal of available information to practitioners desiring to apply technology into their course in an organized way has significantly increased recently. Google Docs is expected to be an effective tool in improving the writing skills. Not only should it be applied with the level of paragraph and essay writing, Google Docs is suggested with those doing research papers. In such communicative and integrated learning environment, Vietnamese learners need to be active and develop the autonomy in studying. It is strongly advised that Google Docs in particular, and technological tools, in general would be exploited and applied more in National Economics University language learning.

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