



Google Docs as a Collaborative Writing Tool towards Learning English Writing

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore the perceptions of university students on incorporating Google Docs in collaborative writing while learning English writing. Also, determine whether writing fluency regarding the total number of words is higher in collaborative writing than in individual writing. The sample in this study was 33 students of the second level of English from a public university in Ecuador. This mixed method research handles qualitative and quantitative data. The instruments for data collection were focus group interviews, a questionnaire with closed questions and the essays made by the students. The quantitative approach consisted of an analysis of the measurement of the total number of words in both essays, individual and collaborative. The qualitative results of this study showed that the perceptions of the students towards collaborative writing were positive in the social, psychological and academic areas. In the same way, the quantitative results revealed that there are a greater number of words, clauses, and sentences in collaboratively written compositions. In general, English teachers should consider implementing collaborative writing with the help of technology in their English classes so that students benefit from all the advantages of collaborative writing and at the same time create a comfortable environment where students can improve their English writing by learning from their peers.

Keywords: fluency; perceptions; composition; measurement; collaborative; writing; peers.

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1. Introduction

Technology plays an important role especially in the process of learning English writing. Results from previous studies showed that collaborative writing gives many benefits to students and could help them to improve their writing skills as well as for improving their English language learning. However, the use of collaborative writing activities in the Second Language (L2) classroom is very limited [1].

The National English Curriculum Guideline (2012) mentioned that EFL university students should have achieved a B1 language proficiency level according to CEFR, which means that students will be able to use Basic English when they communicate. However, in most universities English as Foreign Language (EFL) find it difficult to write and generate ideas by themselves because students do not like writing in English for many reasons so it is important for English teachers to implement in their classes collaborative writing activities to motivate students to write more in an environment where everybody feels comfortable.

Furthermore, for many teachers, the evaluation of the students writing takes a long time. Therefore, measuring the writing fluency of the students' compositions using the method suggested by [2,3] is the best way to evaluate their writing.

The purpose of this study was to explore the student's perceptions towards the use of Google Docs in collaborative writing activities and verify that writing collaboratively produces more text than writing individually.

However it is important to mention that the results of this research can only reflect the perceptions of the students who were part of this study; therefore the results cannot be generalized constituting a limitation for the research. As for the constraints the target audience features were significant in the process because their English level as well as their computing knowledge were varied.

This study answered the following research questions.

- What are the EFL students' perceptions of integrating Google Docs in collaborative writing activities in the process of learning English writing?
- What is the effectiveness of using Google Docs in collaborative writing projects?
- Does Collaborative writing produce more text than individual writing tasks?

2. Methodology

At the beginning of the semester, a writing proficiency level test was administered. The writing proficiency level test was measured by counting the words produced by the students, as mentioned Larsen-Freeman, "subjects with a higher proficiency tended to write longer compositions" [2, pp. 444]. The participants included 33 students (22 males and 11 female students) attending the second level of English. The students had 30

minutes to write an essay task with the topic Why English is important in your chosen career? The students were assigned based on the results of the writing proficiency level test into two categories; students with more than 150-word production were allocated to the intermediary level group, whereas students with less than 150-word production to the novice level team. One student from each category was selected until it forms six groups of five and six students; this was done to create an equal writing proficiency level in each group. The groups were categorized as follows: Group A, six students, Group B five students, Group C six students, Group D five students, Group E five students, Group F six students. Half of the groups were selected to participate in the individual writing task, whereas, the other half were chosen to participate in the collaborative writing task. The groups switched the writing activity from collaborative to personal and vice versa every week and so on until completing the four weeks writing process. Students used Google Docs to write both collaboratively and individually. For both collaborative and individual writing tasks students had to write a short English composition about a particular topic given by the researcher. Students had limited writing time for each composition, thus, 30 minutes for brainstorming and planning, 30 minutes for writing a draft and 30 minutes for reviewing and revising. Additionally, students were allowed to use dictionaries. Both groups met three days per week for a month and spent two hours each day writing their assigned compositions. Once both writing process (collaborative and individual) were finished, all students were invited to attend a focus group interview and then a week later to complete a questionnaire survey. To measure the total number of words per test, we considered the method proposed by [2,3]. It was considered the length of production unit method suggested by Quintero and his colleagues [4]. To ensure validity and reliability of the data, the triangulation method was used to understand the different points of view of the students at the time of processing the data collected from the self-administered questionnaire and the focus group interviews. According to Cohen, Manion, & Morrison “Triangulation may be defined as the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour” [5, pp. 141]. Figure one shows the two phases of the methodology. Phase one analyzed qualitative data gathered from focus group interviews and from a survey questionnaire. Triangulation method was used to corroborate both results. Whereas in phase two, the quantitative data included measures of writing fluency regarding the total numbers of the words from both individual and collaborative essays.

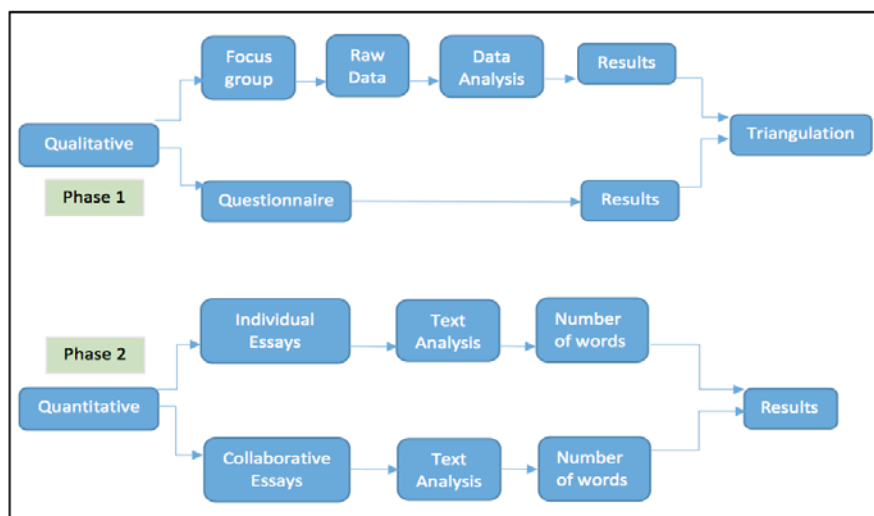


Figure 1: Phases of the methodology

3. Results and Discussions

In the first phase of the analysis, the study examined the students' perceptions of collaborative writing activities using Google Docs. For this purpose, the students responded to a Self-Administered Likert 5 point agree/disagree scale questionnaire and one week later the students attended to a focus group interview to allowed the researcher to obtained insights about the perceptions of the effectiveness of using Google Docs in collaborative writing activities.

Table 1: Students' perceptions of using Google Docs as a collaborative writing tool

Methods of Data Collection (N=33)	Benefits
Social Benefits of Collaborative Writing Using Google Docs	
Focus Group	All students felt that writing collaboratively in Google Docs helped them to socialize with other members of the group.
Questionnaire	A total of 90.9 % of students were agreed and strongly agreed that during the collaborative writing in Google Docs their interaction increased with other members. Outcomes. Taking into account the focus group findings and the high- percentage of conformity obtained in the questionnaire question 6, we can say that they both match up.
Psychological Benefits of Collaborative Writing using Google Docs	
Focus Group	The majority of students stressed that collaboration during the writing process enhanced their motivation to write.
Questionnaire	A total of 84.9% of students were agreed and strongly agreed that collaborative writing in Google Docs increased their motivation to write. Outcomes. Taking into account the focus group findings and the high- percentage of conformity obtained in the questionnaire question 5, we can say that they both match up.
Academic Benefits of Collaborative Writing Using Google Docs	
Focus Group	Students mentioned that they worked harder during the collaborative writing process so other members of the group can see their work.
Questionnaire	A total of 84.9% of students were agreed and strongly agreed that they tried harder during the collaborative writing process so other members of the group can see their work. Outcomes. Taking into account the focus group findings and the high- percentage of conformity obtained in the questionnaire question 1, we can say that they both match up.
The Writing Process	
Focus Group	Some students mentioned that the most difficult stage of the collaborative writing process was to write the draft and organize the ideas.
Questionnaire	A total of 69.7% of students were agreed and strongly agreed that during the collaborative writing in Google Docs organizing the ideas was the hardest part. Outcomes. Taking into account the focus group findings and the average percentage of conformity obtained in the questionnaire question 10, we can say that they both match up.
Learning from Peers	
Focus Group	The majority of students mentioned that writing as part of a group improved their knowledge because they learned from other members of the group.
Questionnaire	A total of 81.8% of students were agreed and strongly agreed that they liked suggestions from other members of the group to correct their composition during the collaborative writing process. Outcomes. Taking into account the focus group findings and the high- percentage of conformity obtained in the questionnaire question 2, we can say that they both match up.
Feelings about Peer Editing	
Focus Group	The majority of students mentioned that when other students corrected them with

	misspelled words they did not bother, on the contrary, they felt that they were learning more. However, some students did not like to be corrected.
Questionnaire	A total of 63.7% of students were agreed and strongly agreed that they felt comfortable when members of the group modified their composition during the collaborative writing activities. 24.3% of 33 students answered did not agree or disagree. 9.1% responded disagreed, and 3% answered totally disagree. Outcomes. Taking into account the focus group findings and a reasonable percentage of conformity obtained in the questionnaire, we can say that they both match up.
Communication and Coordination	Face to Face and Chat
Focus Group	Some students mentioned that they preferred to communicate face to face because the meaning of the writing was not clear enough in the chat. Some students liked communicating through the chat.
Questionnaire	A total of 69.7% of students were agreed and strongly agreed that liked communicating face to face with other members of the group during the collaborative writing in Google Docs. A total of 12.1% answered disagree and totally disagree. Outcomes. Taking into account the focus group findings and a reasonable percentage of conformity obtained in the questionnaire, question 8, we can say that they both match up.
Interaction Between Teacher and Students	
Focus Group	Students mentioned that during the collaborative writing they learned more by interacting with members of the group than from the teacher.
Questionnaire	A total of 75.8% of students were agreed and strongly agreed that they learned more by interacting with peers than from the teacher. Outcomes. Taking into account the focus group findings and a reasonable percentage of conformity obtained in the questionnaire, question 9, we can say that they both match up.
Benefits of Google Docs as a Collaborative Tool and Google Docs Usability	
Focus Group	Students mentioned that Google Docs as a collaborative writing tool helped them to share their ideas in an easy and efficient way with other members.
Questionnaire	A total of 81.9% of students were agreed and strongly agreed that Google docs helped them to share their ideas in an easy and efficient way with other members. Outcomes. Taking into account the focus group findings and the high percentage of conformity obtained in the questionnaire, question 7, we can say that they both match up,
Students perceptions towards collaborative and individual writing	
Focus Group	The majority of students felt more comfortable writing collaboratively in Google Docs. Other students felt overwhelmed by writing as part of a group because they felt afraid to make mistakes.
Questionnaire	A total of 75.8% of students were agreed and strongly agreed that they preferred to write collaboratively. However, 9.1% answered disagree. Outcomes. Taking into account the focus group findings and the reasonable percentage of conformity obtained in the questionnaire, question 3, we can say that they both match up.

As shown in Table 1, from an example of 33 students (N=33), results showed that all the students had positive benefits in all categories, in both in the questionnaire and in the focus group. Results from this study reaffirm what previous studies such as [6,7] have mentioned with regard collaborative writing playing a major role in student's motivation and learning.

In the second phase of the quantitative analysis this study quantified the compositions made by the students in both collaborative and individual writing where 33 students were divided into six groups from A to F.

The students' compositions were processed to measure the fluency regarding the amount of text produced in

each essay. These results from the essays helped to answer whether collaborative writing will produce more text than individual writing tasks.

Table 2: Length of Production All groups

Essays	No. of Words	S	C	T	MLS	MLT	MLC
Collaborative Produced Group A (N=6)							
MEAN	814.33	31.83	78.5	37	25.33	22.08	10.56
Individual Produced Group A (N=6)							
MEAN	228	8.5	25.83	10	30.61	24.94	9.80
Collaborative Produced Group B (N=6)							
MEAN	554.667	25.167	43.000	24.500	23.745	24.823	13.759
Individual Produced Group B (N=6)							
MEAN	256.167	17.167	28.167	16.667	19.058	17.927	9.018
Collaborative Produced Group C (N=6)							
MEAN	670.5	27.33	64.50	28.17	24.51	24.22	10.43
Individual Produced Group C (N=6)							
MEAN	290.83	13	33.17	13.67	22.88	22.49	9.95
Collaborative Produced Group D (N=6)							
MEAN	700.00	22.17	77.17	24.50	32.99	30.21	9.10
Individual Produced Group D (N=6)							
MEAN	201.83	8.17	19.00	10.33	31.96	19.86	10.75
Collaborative Produced Group E (N=6)							
MEAN	971.67	44.33	98.17	44.33	22.25	22.16	10.19
Individual Produced Group E (N=6)							
MEAN	194.33	8.17	15.33	8.17	34.15	30.23	12.90
Collaborative Produced Group F (N=6)							
MEAN	878.83	27.17	86.17	30	33.86	29.75	10.24
Individual Produced Group F (N=6)							
MEAN	270	8.83	23.50	9.67	33.73	30.68	11.41

Note. S = sentences, C= clauses, T= t-units, MLS= words per sentence, MLT= words per t-unit, MLC= words per clause, SD= Standard deviation, N= sample size (essays)

As shown in Table 2 the Mean values from collaboratively produced essays from all six groups were more fluent regarding the total number of the words, sentences, clauses and T-units. Students who worked as part of a collaborative group created longer essays than the students who wrote individually as they had more ideas through negotiation with members of the team as mentioned by [2,3].

4. Conclusions

Based on the results obtained in this study I could say that the majority of students prefer to write as part of a group rather than writing individually. Students felt supported by their peers, and for many shy students communicating with other members of the group through Google Docs gave them the opportunity to share their ideas in a comfortable way.

The students were satisfied with the effectiveness of Google Docs since the students wrote their compositions in a very easy way as Google Docs enabled those students to share their ideas quickly. At the same time, students could interact, socialize, and participate actively with other members of the group.

I can conclude that the students produced longer essays when writing collaboratively than when writing alone because they had more ideas through negotiation with members of the team as mentioned by [2], [3]. This study could serve as a base for other teachers of the institution where this research was carried out can continue by creating and responding to new questions related to collaborative writing as well as to extend the degree of syntactic complexity in the L2 English writing.

During the process of learning English, we know as teachers that one of the most difficult skills for the students is the writing in English.

Thus, it is important for teachers to introduce collaborative writing activities using technological tools such as Google Docs, which allows various students to write in a single document. Collaborative writing has many advantages because when working collaboratively, students can share their ideas, learn from other peers and work towards a common goal.

5. Recommendations

It is very tedious for a teacher to evaluate the writing of their students' compositions. Thus, the measurement of fluency regarding the total number of words is a method that would benefit the teacher and the student. The teacher could measure the proficiency of the students in a shorter time.

Teachers should implement collaborative writing activities in the L2 classrooms since students would benefit from all the advantages of writing collaboratively. Teachers should implement technology and collaborative writing applications through the Internet such as Google Docs, blogs to motivate students to write more in English.

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