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## ESL Learners' Perspectives On Online Collaborative Writing Activity (Google Docs)

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### Abstract

*The influences of technology in education has brought significant shifts to the teaching and learning process. There are abundance of teaching and learning styles and practices being explored to suit the needs of millennial learners. Learning English as a second language (ESL) in today's modern era becomes more stimulating with technology. The objective of this study is to investigate ESL learners' perspectives of their online collaborative English writing experience using Google Documents (Google Docs). It also explored their views on the overall individual ESL writing experience. The study used Google Docs as the joint work space for ESL learners to write collaboratively. A survey was conducted among 30 ESL learners in a public secondary school in Malaysia to explore their insights regarding their individual writing experience and collaborative writing experience with the use of digital application. The findings revealed that the learners show positivity and interest towards collaborative online writing through Google Docs. Based on the study, teachers and educators gain more insights from the perspectives of ESL learners on the area and it is recommended for more researches to also focus on teachers' perspectives of teaching ESL writing through digital-based tools.*

**Keyword:** digital-based, ESL, Google Docs, online collaborative writing

### Introduction

The world denotes English as a global language, being consistently used by people in most of the countries in the world. It has long become a communication medium and a lingua franca to communicate (Isnin et al. 2017) and convey messages to people from various cultural and

language backgrounds. Other than acting as the language of instructions, English is also widely used in non-verbal communication medium such as books and digital reading materials (Lee et al., 2019; Akbari, 2015; Wang, 2015). It makes the world interconnected (Liaw, 2016) and becomes significant as agreed by Srinivas (2019) that “people need a common language to communicate internally and English serves the purpose since it is the only language spoken all around the world” (p. 6). Thus, competency in English is important to ease communication (Woodrich & Fan, 2017; Solak & Bayar, 2015; Ware et al., 2012). In some countries, English is learnt as first language, second language or a foreign language, depending on its importance. In Malaysia, where English is commonly learned as a second language (ESL), it is compulsory for learners to master the language and grammatical skills attached to the target language (Mastan et al., 2017). One of the skills deemed difficult by ESL learners is writing since many find it hard to write in English for its complexity. It is considered complex as learners need to integrate various skills including linguistics skills, the constructive and systematic processes (Fareed et al., 2016; Solak & Bayar, 2015; Kessler, 2012). Hence, being able to write is an important aspect to reflect ESL learners’ success in learning English (Limbu & Markauskaite, 2015). It is agreed by Badi (2015) who state that “writing is important not only to master English language but also to be successful in learning other disciplines where English is the medium of instruction” (p. 65). It affects the overall progress on learners’ second language learning. Nonetheless, it should also focus on the process approach rather than the product approach to ensure learners practise writing in a less stressful environment (Badi, 2015; Akbari, 2015).

Writing used to be referred as an individual work. However, the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning has brought substantial changes to ESL writing activity. It showcases more learner-centred learning with ESL learners are given freedom to write as compared to the dictating teacher-centred method. According to Li & Zhu (2017), “collaborative writing has gained attention in second and foreign language learning contexts” (p. 38). The emergence of collaborative writing activity allows ESL learners to experience a more meaningful active writing process with peers and when the activity is digitally available, learners gain the opportunities to widen their writing skills online. Yunus and Salehi (2012) mention that “language learning has grown beyond the boundaries of the four classroom walls” (p. 87) while Andujar (2016) indicates that “mobile learning breaks temporal and spatial lines, placing educative resources at the service for students” (p. 63). Coping with the demands of information explosion and internet use (Liaw, 2016; Akbari, 2015), the accessibility to internet makes learners at ease and convenience to complete the school tasks (Chu et al., 2017; Jeong, 2016). Education is mobile and Internet is becoming more reliable (Subramaniam & Shah, 2014) with digital media providing options to support writing (Akbari, 2015; Ware, 2012). Similarly, it supports the online collaborative writing (OCW) activity through the use of digital online applications namely Web 2.0 tools. Lee et al. (2019) confirm “successful writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century further demands that students express their ideas digitally in Web 2.0 environments”. Blogs, Twitter, Instagram, Google Docs, Padlet and Whatsapp are the examples of Web 2.0 tools that can be exploited for online writing activity (Chu et al., 2017; Moonen, 2015; Said & Lee, 2014; Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014; Buckingham & Willet, 2013). A study by Jeong (2016) expresses that “web-based online learning and teaching platforms such as Google Docs or wikis can enhance communication, participation and collaboration in the language classrooms and help learners to participate in more meaningful and authentic learning” (p. 1). The benefits are apparent and evident to ESL learners’ writing and their perspectives pertaining the issue are

further analysed in this study. The practical implication of the study includes the need for writing in English to be a more interactive, easy, enjoyable and meaningful process for learners rather than solely for examination drilling purposes. Consequently, OCW is encouraged since it fits in the criteria of providing meaningful writing experiences for learners.

## **Literature Review**

### ***ESL Learners Writing Challenges***

English writing competency shapes ESL learners' ability toward mastering the language. Solak & Bayar (2015) affirm that "the teaching and improving four language skills are supposed to be the focus of attention rather than grammar-centered language teaching" (p. 106). In the second language writing context, ESL learners should learn to develop their writing activity and skills before emphasising the grammatical competency. It is important that English learning to be designed as practice-based instead of theory-based (Solak & Bayar, 2015; Badi, 2015) where ESL learners are able to practise using the language more extensively. They should not be burdened with theory and complexity of the language before getting the motivation and confidence to learn the second language. There are various views from researchers on teaching writing, arguing over whether the emphasis should be on the product or the process (Akbari, 2015; Badi, 2015). Additionally, writing for Malaysian ESL learners is formidable when the lessons mainly focus on the preparation for examination instead of the writing practice. Learners find it to be stressful from the synthesis of linguistics errors and in perfecting their writing. It is proven in a study by Mastan et al. (2017) which state "the exam-oriented focus of the Malaysian education system leaves most teachers with little choice but to prepare students for examinations" (p. 72) instead of the meaningful writing process.

ESL learners have faced several challenges in learning English due to its complexity and linguistics features. As stated by Mastan, Maarof & Embi (2017), "writing in one's first language, second and foreign language is a very challenging skill to master" (p. 71). They further add that it is due to the intricate and detailed cognitive processes involved in writing activity (Fareed et al., 2016; Solak & Bayar, 2015; Mastan et al., 2017). A study on Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners' writing by Fareed, Ashraf and Bilal (2016) reveal that the major problems faced by ESL learners are "insufficient language proficiency, anxiety, lack of ideas, reliance on L1 and weak structure organization" (p. 1). Other factors causing learners' writing challenges include cultural backgrounds, L1 interference, lack of critical and creative thinking, lack of confidence, low language competency (Woodrich & Fan, 2017; Isnin et al., 2017; Badi, 2015) and most importantly the demotivating English writing activity. These are challenging for ESL learners who are novice writers and these become the factors that also discourage their participation in writing activity. Therefore, appropriate materials and approaches should be explored and implemented in the ESL writing activity to suit learners' interest, level and needs (Ware et al., 2015; Solak & Bayar, 2015). Correspondingly, the advent of various 21<sup>st</sup> century-based writing activities using social media sites (Zheng et al., 2017; Subramaniam & Shah, 2014) is hoped to transform English writing to be a less challenging and terrifying experience for ESL learners (Mastan et al., 2017).

### ***ESL Online Collaborative Writing (OCW) Activity***

Collaborative writing allows learners to work with others in groups in completing a written task. A more recent online collaborative writing involved learners to write with others through using technology or digital tools (Chu et al., 2017; Eppard & Reddy, 2017; Zain, 2015; Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014) more actively. Generally, online collaborative writing (OCW) takes learning writing to a broader turn as technology tools are in used. The infusion of group works and technology maximises 21<sup>st</sup> century learning approach. Technology in education provides learners with meaningful and active learning experiences (Eppard & Reddy, 2017; Jeong, 2016; Eady & Lockyer, 2013), facilitating second language acquisition (SLA) (Chun 2016). The useful Internet services included in Web 2.0 tools application such as educational websites (Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014) support ESL learners writing activity in many ways including finding of information (Hanbidge et al., 2017) and discussion through collaborative platform (Lee et al., 2019; Abrams, 2019; Alkhataba et al., 2018). Learners have the upper hands to practise better writing when exchanging and developing ideas with others (Zheng et al., 2017; Moonen, 2015) as well as comparing input received (Andujar, 2016). Exposure to different engaging viewpoints and opinions allows ESL learners to widen their creativity, critical thinking (Lee et al., 2019; Limbu & Markauskaite, 2015) and understanding of the writing task. These affirm the important position of OCW to assist learners' writing activity for the better. For example, a study by Wang (2015) on learners' use of Wiki for OCW supports that "the learners used Wiki to express views and organise ideas" and they "achieved greater improvement than learners in the non-Wiki group" (p. 508). Correspondingly, it dictates the use of Web 2.0 tools in writing activity greatly facilitates ESL learners' written tasks.

Technology is used to conduct ESL lessons (Chun, 2016) and Google Docs is a part of computer-mediated collaborative writing tools (Abrams, 2019; Li & Zhu, 2017; Woodrich & Fan, 2017) as well as among the Web 2.0 tools which assists language learners' writing activity. Alkhataba et al. (2018) describe Google Docs as "a free web-based tool similar to an online version of Microsoft Word that offers collaborative features which can be used to facilitate online collaborative writing" (p. 438). It encourages sharing of ideas (Abrams 2019; Zhou et al. 2012), active collaborative learning process (Woodrich & Fan, 2017; Kwan & Yunus, 2015), effective communication (Rashid et al., 2019; Moonen, 2015) and critical thinking process through its learner-centered approach (Zheng et al., 2017). It is no doubt that learners write better through OCW activity than individually. They substantially learn to divide works, share expertise, showcase deeper understanding of content and develop new writing skills and attitudes to complete the writing task efficiently (Ebadi & Rahimi, 2017; Limbu & Markauskaite, 2015). By sharing knowledge and experiences, ESL learners are able to write more effectively (Srinivas, 2019; Limbu & Markauskaite, 2015). The benefits create a better learning experience for learners to write in English. Interestingly, OCW adds more fun to the normally boring writing activity (Woodrich & Fan, 2017; Kwan & Yunus, 2015). The editing, modifying, deleting and commenting features in Google Docs (Lee et al., 2019; Ebadi & Rahimi, 2017; Zhou et al., 2012; Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014; Adrian, 2016) are among the interactive and distinctive functions that give complete enjoyment to ESL learners when writing (Mulatu & Bezabih, 2018). However, Solak & Mayar (2015) reported "limitation of technological utilities" is another problems faced in the teaching and learning of ESL writing. It is noticeable that some Malaysian schools are not fully

equipped with computers or tablets for OCW lessons, thus teacher needs to make use of the available computer and personal computer as well as learners' own gadgets.

Learners are more motivated to write when there is a fun, easy, fast, informative and interactive platform available for the activity (Rashid et al., 2019; Ebadi & Rahimi, 2017; Adrian, 2016). Thus, making them less apprehensive to mistakes and sustaining their interests throughout. As ESL learners actively participate in the process, they undergo meaningful writing practices which stimulate deep and meaningful active learning (Chai & Kong, 2017; Kwan & Yunus, 2015; Wang, 2015). Learners become more independent (Mulatu & Bezabih, 2018) and responsible to their own second language learning process (Subramaniam & Shah, 2014). It creates even more enthusiasm when learners are able to access the writing task anywhere and anytime (Zheng et al., 2017; Andujar, 2016). Millennials ESL learners are attached to their gadgets and this situation should be used to its full advantage by having them to do online writing task. Wholly, the use of Google Docs signifies a less-threatening and natural learning environment (Subramaniam & Shah, 2014; Zhou et al., 2012) for learners to write and collaborate with others to complete the assigned task. Consecutively, learners' potential is optimised and their writing skills will considerably improve. It is supported by Li and Zhu (2017) that "collaboration leads to more accurate writing performance" (p. 39). Thus, this study is aimed to investigate ESL learners' perspectives on their individual writing experience and on the online collaborative writing experience through Google Docs.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

The participants were 30 secondary school learners who learn English as a second language (ESL). The study was conducted in a semi-urban school in Malaysia. **Table 1** reports on the participants' background information in general.

**Table 1: Participants' Background Information**

Number and Gender	12 males and 18 females
Age	17 years old
Nationality	30 Malaysian
English Competency Level	Intermediate – Low intermediate

### *Instruments*

The study employed a questionnaire design for a survey-based data collection to investigate ESL learners' perspectives of their online collaborative English writing experience using Google Documents (Google Docs). The questionnaire consists of 24 items with 20 items on a Likert scale agreement. The 5-point Likert scale such that indicated by the ESL learners whether they "Strongly Disagree", "Disagree", "Uncertain", "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" with the items.

The items were separated into three sections: background information, ESL learners' writing experience and ESL learners online collaborative writing experience. The survey items aimed to identify their English writing experiences in general and their OCW activity in-class and out-of-class. Based on feedback from the pilot test, modifications were made to avoid misinterpretations by the participants.



### Research Procedure

Firstly, the validity of the questionnaires was achieved through the pilot test which was conducted before the edited questionnaires were distributed to the ESL learners as the participants. It was employed in the class during their English lesson and accompanied by their subject teacher. The participants involved have been doing OCW in their ESL writing lessons from time to time. Thus, they are familiar with using Google Docs for writing activity. The participants did not have any challenges using Google Docs for their OCW and their responses were the reflections of their experiences and perspectives of the subject matter.

### Data Analysis

The accumulated data was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 22.0) through descriptive analysis of mean score. The mean score was interpreted in four categories of low, medium low, medium high and high (Alias Baba, 1997 in Raduan et al., 2016) as shown in **Table 2** below.

**Table 2: Interpretation of the Mean Score**

Level	Mean Score
Low	1.00 – 1.75
Medium Low	1.76 – 2.50
Medium High	2.51 – 3.25
High	3.26 – 4.50

(Alias Baba, 1997, as cited in Raduan et al., 2016)

### Results and Discussion

The findings of this study have been categorized into two major topics: ESL learner's writing experience and ESL learners' OCW experience. The findings in **Table 3** below addressed the research question for ESL learners' writing experience:

**Table 3: ESL Learners' Writing Experience**

Items	Mean	SD
I do not feel comfortable when doing an English writing	2.10	0.923
I do not know how to start my writing	2.60	1.037
I do not know how to develop ideas based on the writing question	2.50	0.900
I am unsure about the use of grammar in my English essay	3.70	0.794
I find that writing an English essay is a very frightening experience	2.63	1.033
My mind seems to go blank when I write an English essay alone	2.93	0.944
I feel confident with the use of grammar and vocabulary in my essay	3.27	0.944
I feel good handing in my English essay to my teacher	3.97	1.159

I find expressing ideas through writing in English alone is easy	2.83	0.986
I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in English	3.23	0.728

As demonstrated in **Table 3**, when asked if they felt uncomfortable writing in English, M=2.1 agreed and further concluded some learners “*did not know how to start*” (M=2.6) and “*develop ideas for the writing task*” (M=2.5) consecutively. The highest mean shows that as M=3.7 of learners were “*unsure about the use of grammar*”. It reflects their weakness and lack of confidence in English writing are due to the grammatical aspect of it. Many of the ESL learners (M=2.93) also agreed that their “*minds seemed to go blank when having to write individually*”. It dictated learner’s experience of writer’ block when they are assigned to write alone. In contrast, many of the learners agreed that they felt confident with their use of grammar and vocabulary (M=3.27) and to hand in their written work (M=3.97). It shows that the ESL learners were not completely demotivated to write in English but depending on the surrounding factors that assist their writing activity. When expressing ideas individually, some learners (M=2.83) did “*feel the ease to do it*” bringing the overall “*confidence in their ability to express ideas in English*” as a whole (M=3.23). The data collected explains that learners did not totally find it to burdening and difficult to do English writing individually but also did not show preference in doing it. ESL learners have varied views pertaining the matters in discussion.

In addressing the objective of this study, the findings in **Table 4** below demonstrates ESL learners’ online collaborative writing (OCW) experience:

**Table 4: ESL Learners’ Online Collaborative Writing (OCW) Experience**

Items	Mean	SD
I do not feel comfortable when doing an English writing using technology tool	2.03	0.928
I find it difficult to write in Google Docs at places other than the school	2.07	0.692
I do not feel comfortable when doing an English writing using Google Docs	2.00	0.743
I am shy to write in Google Docs when I know my group members will read it	2.33	1.184
I am not confident to share my ideas in Google Docs	2.50	0.974
I like writing in English in Google Docs	3.33	0.802
I do not mind my group members commenting on my English writing in Google Docs	3.73	0.828
I like to share my ideas with my friends in Google Docs	5.33	7.327
I find expressing ideas through writing in Google Docs with my group members is exciting	4.20	0.664
I find writing in English through Google Docs helps me to improve and enhance my knowledge	4.27	0.583

The data collection regarding ESL learners' OCW experience in writing activity in **Table 4** is closely related to the use of Google Docs. The lowest mean score is obtained for "*not feeling comfortable when writing using Google Docs*" (M=2.00) shares the opinion with "*not feeling comfortable when writing using technology tool*" (M=2.03). It indicates that learners felt comfortable when they were doing their English writing through Google Docs. They also felt easy to write in other places from the response on "*finding it difficult to write in Google Docs other than in school*" (M=2.07). Some learners did "*feel shy writing in Google Docs knowing others will read it*" (M=2.33), hence lacking in "*confidence to share their ideas*" (M=2.50). However, majority of them expressed their liking "*to write in English*" (M=3.33), "*group members commenting on the English writing*" (M=3.73) in Google Docs. The highest mean score is achieved for "*I like to share ideas with my friends in Google Docs*" (M=5.33) supports learners' positive perspectives toward the use of OCW through digital tool such as Google Docs. Apart from that, ESL learners find the use of Google Docs to be exciting in "*expressing ideas with group members*" (M=4.20) and is helpful when writing "*to improve and enhance knowledge*" (M=4.27).

The present study was designed to investigate ESL learners' perspectives on the use of online collaborative writing activity (OCW). The findings discussed the research questions on ESL learners' perspectives in learning writing as posed previously. It is revealed that ESL learners showed preferences in doing collaborative writing both physically in class and digitally via technology tools. They did not favor individual writing due to apprehensive, frightening, demotivating and the lacking in confidence that come with it. A study on OCW by Abrams (2019) shows that "collaboratively-oriented groups produced texts with more propositional content and better coherence than less-collaborative groups" (p. 22). Similarly, the findings suggest the learners find OCW to be a better opportunity to help improve in their English writing activity. It further proves that ESL learners are able to engage cognitively in the writing process (Andujar, 2016) when OCW is implemented in ESL lessons (Lee et al., 2019; Li & Zhu, 2017).

ESL learners gain the advantages from writing with others through OCW and they could apparently compare the process to when they were writing individually. It is true that working with others who share and give feedbacks aid learners' linguistic practices to convey meaning more accurately (Abrams, 2019; Ebadi & Rahimi, 2017; Andujar, 2016). They manage to develop their competency in sharing of ideas for the writing task (Wang 2015). It is essential to note that the use of effective writing strategy and activity assist both ESL and EFL learners to enhance their writing skills (Abrams, 2019; Rashid et al., 2019; Mastan et al., 2017). The responses are valuable to find out the elements of OCW preferred by the ESL learners such as collaborative, interactive sharing of ideas and viewpoints, decision-making and feedbacks (Li & Zhu, 2017; Ebadi & Rahimi, 2017). The findings suggest that OCW has helped learners to improve their overall writing activity due to the enjoyment and confidence they gained from the approach. The findings of the study are similar to the studies conducted by Woodrich and Fan (2017) which found that learners enjoyed working on Google Docs and contributed more to the writing process. Another similar study by Jeong (2016) has shown the findings that "learners demonstrated affirmative perceptions about the use of the cloud-based online writing tool and collaborative experience" (p. 1). Similarly, learners revealed positive attitudes about the use of Google Docs in encouraging classroom interaction in groups (Jeong, 2016). Wholly, it reflects learners positive perspectives to OCW in writing activity.



## Conclusion

To conclude, the study strengthens the idea that the use of Google Docs contributes to the development of ESL learners' writing activity. It draws positive perspectives and attitudes towards learning English writing. The increase in learners' collaboration in lessons reflects the meaningful writing activity where learners are actively and socially engaged in the process. The significant participation in sharing of ideas and viewpoints, comments and feedbacks among group members enables learners to write more effectively. It is suggested that the potential of Google Docs and other educational Web 2.0 tool to be analysed and further implemented in English lessons. This is because of the remarkable and high involvement of learners in the writing activity using Google Docs. Moreover, the study has yielded some insights on the benefits of OCW activity to make learners more comfortable and maximise their prospective in writing. Thus, the application of OCW should be taken into consideration when ESL writing activity is discussed. However, this study does not focus on the improve in learners' linguistic accuracy, therefore further studies are required in this area. It is also important for teachers to examine learners' perspectives of the approaches of ESL writing activity to identify their preferences and gaps in the writing activity used. Furthermore, it is recommended that more in-service training being organised for teachers to use technology and digital tools in English lessons for understanding and instilling recent knowledge in the area. The use of Google Docs as a digital tool for OCW appeals to ESL learners based on the positive and expressive perspectives stated. The study is useful as a reference for future researches to explore more meaningful ESL writing activities specifically on learners' academic writing skills and to explore teachers' roles as facilitators when implementing OCW. It can be generalised to the ESL learners' preferences in Malaysia; however, the small sample size is a limitation of this study.

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