Building Autonomy Through Collaborative Writing with Google Docs

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How can we help students improve their own writing? Change in student writing must be internally motivated. Students are most interested in each other. Students also need role models from their peers. They need to know that their classmates are having the same struggles that they are.

The writing process is a fundamental tool of academic writing. Using Google Docs can foster collaboration at both the organizational stage and the grammar correction stage of the writing process. Collaboration teaches students to be autonomous, lowers the burden on teachers, and also intrinsically motivates students.

This article will suggest ways to use Google Docs in the writing class that allow students to see examples from their peers in near-real time. However, if student collaboration is not clearly defined, guided, and properly scaffolded, use of Google Docs can easily confuse students. This article offers activities to guide student feedback on topic sentences and allow students to correct grammar errors together.

"I don't know. Just Google it." The introduction of the Internet into the classroom has forever changed education. Nowadays, with student use of smartphones in class, the Internet is more ubiquitous than ever. It provides a community and knowledge base that language teachers can hardly ignore. While it is best known as an Internet search engine, Google also recently created

productivity software called Google Docs. Even though Google Docs started in 2007 (Hamburger, 2013), the literature on Google Docs and its implications for the language classroom are surprisingly scarce. This may be because as Hyland (2008) claims, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) "is still largely distinguished more by its potential than by its performance" (p. 162). Google Docs is essentially a Web-based version of the Microsoft Word word processor (MS Word).

Especially for writing courses, Google Docs provides "a high degree of flexibility for content creation and sharing" (Firth & Mesureur, 2010, p. 4). The fact that student and teacher MS Word files can now be shared easily and securely online allows for a dramatic increase in student collaboration during the writing process. Technology continues to enter the classroom through computers, tablets, and smartphones. The current article encourages educators to try out Google Docs in their own contexts and offers a few ideas for using it to enhance typical writing classroom activities.

Why Google Docs?

As Hyland (2008) observes, traditional "word processors fail to make use of the advantages of connectivity that technology now provides" (p. 151). Levy and Stockwell (2006) recommend using word processing software in the writing classroom because it eases the process of generating and editing text. Brown (2010) recommends CALL in the classroom because it offers students a space to notice language forms, get immediate and personalized feedback, build computer skills, and have a private space to make mistakes. Google Docs allows instant feedback and collaboration on student-generated text when students are online at the same time. Google Docs can function in real-time, and it is faster and easier than having students email or exchange USB memory sticks. Also, the data is always online, so students will never lose it, and there is no need to install software. Students and teachers who are already used to MS Word will find writing in Google Docs to be very intuitive. The files you create are both secure and easy to share. As Franco (2010) notes, Google Docs is extremely helpful in providing the collaboration that is crucial to the writing process. Using Google

Docs in the writing classroom lets students determine their level of involvement while also allowing them to collaborate.

That being said, both students and teachers will need Google accounts in order to use Google Docs. The good news is that these days many universities provide their students with email addresses that are serviced by Google. This means that with their university email address, students already have access to the library of Google services. Sharing documents with students and having them work together is as easy as saying "check your email".

While you could have students work on Google Docs on their smartphones, students still write best on a computer with a large screen and a keyboard. A computer classroom is an ideal environment to have students use Google Docs. Students will of course be unsure of what to do at first, but with support from their teacher, students will get used to Google Docs quickly. Being in a computer classroom lets the teacher help out any students who may lag behind or have problems.

However, technology should not drive education. Rather, pedagogical principles should guide language learning and writing instruction. As Levy and Stockwell (2006) note, teachers must not be led by technology. Rather, teachers who use it in the classroom should have clear goals for their course, consider the backgrounds and goals of their students, and then use the appropriate technology for their classroom. The two example activities below attempt to improve performance in the writing classroom and add a more extensive collaboration element with Google Docs.

Writing Activities with Google Docs

1) Remaking the Grammar Drill

One quick and easy activity to start students out with is fixing erroneous sentences in a grammar drill. While many students may be confident in their spoken English, they may be less sure of the intricacies involved with punctuation errors, homophones, citing research sources, etc. In a Google Document, students can confer discreetly about errors while still interacting in a hands-on fashion. If the teacher puts the Google Document on a screen in front of the class on a projector

for everyone to see, the teacher can also provide verbal feedback as students are working. Here's how to get started:

Step 1: Make a MS Word Document of pre-made grammar errors or authentic errors from students.

Step 2: Upload it to http://docs.google.com. Use the teacher's email address and password to log in. Then drag and drop the file onto the browser window to upload it.

Step 3: In the school-sponsored Google email account (Gmail), create a list of the email addresses of students under "Contacts" (Figure 1). Click the button labeled "New Group" to get started (Figure 2). Name the list something like "Writing 3rd Hour".

Step 4: Show the Google Document to students on a projector *before* sharing it with them.

Step 5: Be *very clear* that students should write the corrected sentence *under* the numbered sentence. Perhaps demonstrate one sentence with the class before they touch their computers, and type an example correction under the erroneous sentence.

If this is not made clear, students may fix the existing sentence internally instead, thus negating the benefit of seeing the error that was corrected on the screen.

Step 6: Number the students off in pairs, and have them work together on questions. Be sure to have the first student write their corrected sentence under the original erroneous sentence, and have the second student write their corrected sentence under the first student's answer. It is also a good idea to have some extra sentences at the bottom for advanced students to work on in case they finish early. Once students have finished the first question, or once the teacher confirms that the answer is correct, students can be told to move on to the next question for their pair.

Step 7: Finally, share the Google Document by clicking on the blue "Share" button in the top right hand corner (Figure 3). Enter the name of the class email list made in Step 3, for example, "Writing 3rd Hour" in the text box labeled "people" (Figure 4). Choose from "can edit", "can comment" or "can view". For

most purposes, "can edit" usually works. Then push the blue "Send" button, and push the blue "Yes" button again to confirm.

Step 8: Have students check their email and click on the link in their email message to enter the document.

Step 9: Supervise and help students who may be having issues.

Step 10: Offer verbal feedback, hints and correction while students work on the exercises. Teachers can select and even fix certain areas of text on their screen or projector while offering individual or group feedback.

Start small with a short, manageable activity. At first this may seem like a lot of steps, but both teachers and students will quickly get used to using this tool for language learning. During the first attempt, it may be wise to show students how to copy and paste from the original erroneous sentence. Many students are surprised to learn that "control + C" allows them to copy and "control + V" means paste. If the students are spending too much time on the activity, copy and paste will of course rapidly improve their response time. Remember to start small by trying a short list of some pre-made grammar errors.

Alternatively, to make this grammar drill more learner-centered, after students have gotten used to correcting pre-made errors, have students input and peer-edit their own errors. This moves the grammar drill from what Levy and Stockwell (2006) call "grammar tutorial exercises" to "learner-centered grammar instruction". This kind of instruction develops learner autonomy.

Step 1: Have students exchange paper copies of their essays in small groups of three to five people for peer-editing.

Step 2: Designate each group with a letter, number, or catchy name.

Step 3: Have students underline or circle mistakes on their paper copy.

Step 4: Prepare a simple Google Document with headings for "Group A", "Group B", etc. and some numbers under each heading for numbered erroneous sentences (Figure 5).

Step 5: Share the Google Document with the students (see Step 7 from "Remaking the Grammar Drill" above).

Step 6: Have students enter the erroneous sentences they found into the Google Document shared under the heading for their small group on a numbered

list. The students have just created their own library of authentic errors!

Step 7: Then have students return their paper copies to the author.

Step 8: Have students type corrected sentences *under* the numbered sentences for their group just like they did in Activity 1. The teacher can offer verbal feedback on the correction of these errors and take questions from students.

Step 9: Have students check the underlined sentences on their printed draft and correct their errors for the next class.

Self-identifying errors and fixing them is a crucial writing skill. However, students are often critical of "errors" corrected by their peers. As Hyland (2008) observes, peer editing "is said to provide a means of both improving the writers' drafts and develop the readers' understandings of good writing...in a community of equals" (p. 198). Japanese EFL students particularly tend to crave authoritative feedback from their teachers. This is also supported by Hyland's (1998) research that teacher feedback is highly valued by students. This alternative grammar activity is learner-centered, and it allows students to develop their own peer-editing skills while at the same time allowing the teacher to give the feedback and correction that students desire.

2) Identifying Topic Sentences

Another idea for peer editing is to have students exchange paper drafts, underline the thesis statement, topic sentences, etc., and enter them into a Google Document. Again, have the students enter the topic sentences under headings for their group (Group A, Group B, etc.). Have the students rate the topic sentences with a scale by writing a 0, 1, 2, 3 after the sentence. For example, "1" means very clear, easy to understand, "2" means somewhat difficult to understand, "3" means very difficult to understand, and "0" means couldn't find a topic sentence (Figure 6). This gives students real authoritative input into the writing of other group members rather than just one-on-one peer response. Feedback from multiple group members also pressures the author to make necessary changes. Of course, the teacher can view the entire Google Document and give feedback to all groups as well. Finally, students can be asked to write clearer topic sentences under the original sentence. In this way, students can have authoritative input into their

peer's writing and end up writing something together that they never could have written on their own.

3) Build a Works Cited Reference List

If you have not already done so in previous class sessions, give students example books, newspaper articles, journal articles, etc. and show them how to cite research sources in APA, MLA, etc. At the end of a brainstorming class session, give students the homework of finding one to three research sources and citing them in APA, MLA, etc. Choose the number of sources based on the level of your students and their context. Have them print or copy their research sources, write them on a worksheet and bring them to class the following week.

When students come to class, check their worksheets, and then have them enter their research sources into one Google Document. Be sure to have students enter their research sources in alphabetical order. As a class, check that each source is cited properly. Ask the students what is wrong with each citation. Assign one student to correct each citation. If necessary, have them copy and paste a new version under the erroneous citation. Finally, when all the citations have been fixed, tell the students that they may use any of these resources to write their first draft. In this way, as a community, your class has created a better, more effective body of research than any student ever could have on their own.

Building Autonomy Through Collaboration

Group collaboration is critical in the writing classroom. As Brown (2010) notes, technology in the classroom is especially useful when having students work on collaborative projects or peer-editing. An example piece of writing written by the teacher is a high goal to attain. Reading the writing of other students (from their own class or previous years) provides students with a more attainable goal. Harmer (2007) recommends collaboration during the writing process because it greatly benefits everyone involved. In fact, he claims that students will broaden their research and "find themselves writing things they might not have come up with on their own" (p. 328). Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) suggest "near peer role modelling" as "one of the most powerful ways of teaching" (p. 128). They suggest that students need peers (physically present or not) who are "close to

the learners' social, professional and age level whom the learners may respect and admire" (p. 128). Through example essays from previous years, students can see how students before them have improved. Through collaboration in small groups on Google Docs, students can see that their current classmates are also working hard to become better writers.

Alm (2006) goes further, quoting self-determination theory to say that using technology like Google Docs fulfills students' motivational needs by giving them relatedness (a feeling of connection to other peers), competence (the feeling of being effective in interactions), and autonomy. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) define autonomy as allowing students to make choices, giving them positions of genuine authority and encouraging them to teach each other. By allowing students to identify and correct each other's grammar errors, we give them real positions of authority, and allow them to effectively teach each other.

Supporting Students

As teachers, it is our job to support and scaffold the learning of our students until they become at least semi-autonomous. As Hyland (2008) says, "computers do not replace teachers" (p. 148). Although students may appear to be savvy tech users when playing with their smartphones, it is irresponsible of the teacher to assume that youth is equivalent to mastery of technology, or that all of their students are already computer literate.

Stockwell and Levy (2001) showed that students with no prior experience in word processing generally create less text than other students. In spite of this fact, "writing teachers do not generally devote much time to these skills" (Hyland, 2008, p. 148). While most students will not initially be overly enthusiastic about using Google Docs, there is no need to cause them undue frustration.

It is especially important to effectively support students' first experience with Google Docs. If they initially see it as difficult or frustrating, they may give up on the task at hand and miss out on the greater benefits of collaboration. Even if students are adept computer users, they may not be able to understand and follow exactly what the teacher wants them to do in Google Docs. Teachers need to be very clear to their students about what is required, who needs to do it, how

it needs to be done, and what the desired outcome is (Chapelle, 2003). As Levy and Stockwell (2006) advised, students need to know that the teacher is available to feel safe when working with technology. While using Google Docs, it is the responsibility of the teacher to make clear the goals and desired outcomes. It is also the responsibility of the teacher to support and equip students as they strive to attain these outcomes.

Conclusion

Compared to a traditional word processor-based, one-on-one peer editing writing classroom, Google Docs allows students to gain input from multiple students and the teacher at the same time. The activities suggested in this article allow students to build autonomy by giving students a first step into collaborating and learning from others. They give multiple students a first and guided step into having real authoritative input into another student's writing. The writing community that can be built inside Google Docs gives students a glimpse at the value of working with their peer role models. It gives them a chance to see what their peers inside and outside of class are doing. In addition, it gives students a chance to feel connected and to relate to other students' writing.

Still, while the opportunity for student interaction and collaboration is high, nothing can replace real human interaction. The teacher still needs to define tasks and goals appropriate for their students, choose the correct technological tools for these goals, and offer continuous support to students throughout the writing process.

These writing activities with Google Docs will enable students to better identify their own errors, help their peers, and create something better than they could have ever created by themselves. Writing is never an individual process; even the best of writers have editors. However, hopefully through activities like these through Google Docs, we can guide our students onto a path where they can become more autonomous writers who are also willing to help their peers.

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