

## A REVIEW: ESL LEARNERS' CRITICAL THINKING AND ACTIVE LEARNING THROUGH COLLABORATIVE ONLINE WRITING ACTIVITY (GOOGLE DOCS)

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**Abstrak:** Kemenjadian Pembelajaran Abad ke-21 (PAK21) dan Revolusi Industri 4.0 (4IR) mempengaruhi perubahan di dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran dalam kelas di Malaysia. Kekerapan menggunakan pembelajaran berasaskan maya dan digital bagi subjek Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua (ESL) memperlihatkan kesan positif ke atas kompetensi dan kemahiran kolaboratif pelajar yang mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua. Penggunaan aplikasi maya dan digital yang menarik dalam penulisan karangan juga membantu penglibatan pelajar. Artikel ini, berdasarkan tinjauan literatur lepas, meneroka penggunaan aktiviti penulisan secara atas talian (Google Docs) ke atas pemikiran kritis dan pembelajaran aktif pelajar ESL. Penemuan menunjukkan penggunaan bermanfaat aktiviti menulis karangan dalam talian secara berkolaborasi untuk pengajaran dan pembelajaran menulis pelajar ESL. Kajian ini berguna sebagai rujukan untuk penyelidikan masa depan untuk memastikan lebih banyak cara penulisan ESL yang lebih menyeronokkan, menarik dan bermakna.

**Kata kunci:** ESL, Google Docs, pembelajaran aktif, pemikiran kritis, penulisan dalam talian kolaboratif

**Abstract:** The height of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning (PAK21) and 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution (4IR) affect the changes in the teaching and learning in Malaysian classrooms. The frequent use of virtual and digital-based learning in English as a Second Language (ESL) lessons shows positive effects on learners' English language competency and collaborative skills. The use of interesting virtual and digital applications in teaching writing also helps to engage learners better. The paper, based on reviews of past literature, explores the use of collaborative online writing activity (Google Docs) on ESL learners' critical thinking and active learning. The findings indicated the beneficial usage of collaborative online writing activity to teaching and learning writing for ESL learners. The study is useful as a reference for future researches to ensure many ESL writing activities to be more enjoyable, engaging and meaningful.

**Keywords:** active learning, collaborative online writing, critical thinking, ESL, Google Docs

## **Introduction**

Language is globally important to communicate and convey messages effectively highlighting English as a global communicative language that is significant in education. Srinivas (2019, p. 6) cites 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”. Therefore, English is learnt religiously in schools as a native, second or foreign language. It becomes an important subject and the medium of instructions in most schools and education sectors. However, learning English as a second language (ESL) is not easy for Malaysian learners living in a multiracial community. It is worrying that most Malaysian learners still face difficulties in being competent and fluent in the target language (Zainudin 2016) with problems in skills such as speaking and writing (Musa et al. 2012; Zain 2015). Thus, some learners show slow progress in mastering the language and linguistic skills especially in their writing as they find it difficult to use the target language with different characteristics compared to their first language. Fundamentally, due to its skills integration, linguistics skills, constructive and systematic processes, writing is considered complex (Kessler 2012; Mckensie and Tomskins 2010 in Zainudin 2016) and a very challenging skill to master (Mastan et al. 2017). It is an intricate cognitive and linguistics skills that needs practices (Jenkins et al. 2013; Srinivas 2019). Learning writing is crucial for language learners for them to produce essays (Maarof & Murat 2013) with past studies showing Malaysian ESL learners as moderate in English writing (Mastan et al. 2017). Writing activity has always been referred as an individual task but is difficult for some ESL learners to do it alone. It is a crucial task for teachers to implement interesting methods to teach writing that attract and motivate the ESL learners. Consequently, using the approach of collaborative writing tasks as an active learning process, learners will be able to learn better and be motivated to write. It also helps to improve learners’ collaborative, linguistic and critical thinking skills (Kwan & Yunus 2015) and overall active learning.

Yunus and Salehi (2012, p. 87) mention that “language learning has grown beyond the boundaries of the four classroom walls”. The advancement in technology allows teachers and learners to take collaborative writing activity to a wider scope with the infusion of online and digital-based activity. Moonen (2015, p. 8) supports “the opportunities for using technology to amend, annotate and share work through technology are substantial”. It provides supports to ESL learners to complete the written tasks and accomplish the collaborative as well as communicative objectives of the tasks (Said & Lee 2014). Various writing activities that can be done digitally and using the online platform to create more fun and meaningful learning process in ESL classrooms. The examples of digital and social media platform that can be used for writing tasks are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Google Documents (Google Docs) and Padlet (Suwantarathip & Wichadee 2014, Moonen 2015). These applications are part of Web 2.0 tools or web-based learning tools (Buckingham & Willet 2013; Said & Lee 2014) which should be exploited for its benefits in education. Collaborative online writing is a form of an active process involving few people working together with the use of technology tool (Suwantarathip & Wichadee 2014; Zain 2015). Technology plays a crucial role in education providing teachers and learners with meaningful learning experiences (Eady & Lockyer 2013). Today millennial generations are born and grew with technology (Adrian 2016) and they are more motivated to learn using technology as a medium. According to Suwantarathip & Wichadee (2014, p. 149), “the era of Web 2.0 application brings about many useful Internet services and programmes”. It plays a significant role to support mutual interaction (Woodrich & Fan 2017), provide collaborative platforms for communication and learning in educational context (Kessler 2012; Li & Zhu 2017; Alkhataba et al. 2018).

Among others, Google Docs as Web 2.0 tool acts as a learning tool to implement the learner-centered approach, sharing of ideas critically (Zhou et al. 2012; Suwantarathip & Wichadee 2014), out-of-class activities and active learning process in a collaborative writing environment (Zhou et al. 2012; Said & Lee 2014; Kwan & Yunus 2015; Eppard & Reddy 2017). Alkhataba et al. (2018, p. 438) describe Googled 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”. Thus, it is encouraging for teachers to apply this writing approach in ESL lessons to stimulate learners’ critical thinking and result in active learning. ESL learners can further develop their academic writing skills through frequent and effective communication (Said & Lee 2014; Moonen 2015) using Google Docs. It shows a continuous independent learning and writing processes in both formal and informal settings. Consequently, the use of Web 2.0 tool; Google Docs will significantly help learners to enhance their writing skills. This is because, Google Docs allows learners to edit, modify or delete contents during the writing process (Broin & Raftery 2011; Zhou et al. 2012; Suwantarathip & Wichadee 2014; Adrian 2016) making them experiencing less worries of mistakes. Largely, it becomes a meaningful alternative environment for language use and practice (Yunus & Salehi 2012). This paper reviews on the use of Google Docs for collaborative online writing activity on ESL learners’ critical thinking and active learning. The review responds to the problems being faced by Malaysian ESL learners in their writing activity with collaborative online writing as the solution to help learners. The benefits it has on their critical thinking skill and active learning process strengthen the importance of collaborative online writing activity in ESL classrooms.

## **Literature Review**

There have been various changes in the teaching and learning approaches after the introduction of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Yacob & Yunus 2019). CLT approach encourages activities that are learner-centred, meaningful, authentic (Yacob & Yunus 2019), spontaneous, critical and active which are reflected in collaborative online writing activity. When technology is involved, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) are the frameworks often associated with teaching writing (Said & Lee 2014) that take place in web-facilitated, partially or fully virtual social platforms (Alkhataba et al. 2018). A study by Mastan, Maarof and Embi (2017) has resulted that the teaching of writing needs to be more process-based instead of product-based. Thus, adhering to various communicative approaches, collaborative online writing process using digital or web-based platforms has numerous advantages (Kessler 2012; Li & Zhu 2017) in enhancing ESL learners’ critical thinking skills and active learning. However, past studies revealed an argument that some members might not cooperate and distant themselves from the group writing activity (Broin & Raftery 2011; Kessler 2012; Kwan & Yunus 2015). Teachers’ facilitation is hoped to assist non-cooperative learners to participate in the activity. A study by Broin and Raftery (2011) also shared the opinions that Google Docs has the disadvantages of learners’ inability to access to it due to lack internet connection at home and it can become a problem for teachers to monitor the progress at given times. However, the hiccups can be amended if enough time is given for the task to be done in the classroom (Woodrich & fan 2017). The abundance of positive outcomes from the use of shared, digital learning environments outweigh the limitations of using Google Docs in ESL lessons. This paper reviews on ESL learners’ critical thinking and active learning through the use of Google Docs for collaborative online writing activity. The two variables of critical thinking and active learning are the most mentioned benefits by past studies when collaborative online writing is discussed.

### **Collaborative Online Writing Activity To Stimulate Learners' Critical Thinking**

ESL learners work more effectively with others to produce a good essay as they are able to share knowledge, experiences and relate to what they have learned (Srinivas 2019) through group-writing (Arumugam et al. 2013). By collaborating, learners present critical thinking, evaluate and analyse the ideas for decision-making and to produce solutions (Zhu 2012; Limbu & Markauskaite 2015; Woodrich & Fan 2017). These are among the important aspects for learners to grasp in order to effectively complete writing tasks given. In general, both face-to-face and virtual writing activities hold valuable effects on learners' writing development. However, web-based writing injects more fun to the learning environment that is usually boring (Zain 2015; Kwan & Yunus 2015) which proves that learners' interests can be sustained throughout the process. Learners are able to find appropriate information on the internet while doing the task (Hanbidge et al. 2017), discuss and process the information critically with others (Limbu & Markauskaite 2015). Previous literature has identified reflective thinking to be one of the benefits of collaborative writing (Li & Zhu 2017; Woodrich & Fan 2017).

Collaborative online writing stimulates ESL learners' critical thinking to respond to the writing and related questions. They are able to practise this from the opportunities to share and exchange ideas within group members (Jafari & Ansari 2012; Moonen 2015). In local context, Malaysian ESL learners should equip themselves with the ability to process Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) questions (Yunus & Salehi 2012; Azley & Shah 2016) applied during learners' sense-making processes (Chai & Kong 2017). It trains them to be critical when dealing with volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA). This approach improves operating skills, develop critical and objective thinking of learners to content knowledge (Adrian 2016). Moreover, learners are further exposed to various and different viewpoints and manage to explore more ideas within the context (Jafari & Ansari 2012). They learn to share opinions and accept others' opinions during the discussions done on Google Docs or face-to-face. It helps to further boost their ability to think actively when collaborating with friends. As a result, learners improve writing with active participation in the activity (Yunus & Salehi 2012). Conclusively, the benefits regarding the use of collaborative online writing as a whole support ESL learners' critical thinking to enhance their ability in ESL writing.

### **Collaborative Online Writing Activity To Promote Active Learning**

The integration of Web 2.0 tool in teaching and learning writing aids learners' writing activity to be more productive and meaningful. It also reflects the elements of active learning approach (Kessler 2012; Chai & Kong 2017; Eppard & Reddy 2017) of which learners actively involve in the process to complete the tasks independently and collaboratively (Mulatu & Bezabih 2018). ESL learners demonstrate active participation when technology and collaborative approaches are used in lessons (Said & Lee 2014; Kwan & Yunus 2015). They show enthusiasm toward the writing process resulted in active learning when collaborative online writing is employed in comparison to individual traditional writing approach (Ghazali 2017; Mulatu & Bezabih 2018). Consequently, collaborative online writing activity with Google Docs is motivating since it is fun, easy, fast, informative and interactive (Adrian 2016; Woodrich & Fan 2017; Alkhataba et al. 2018). Due to these factors, it becomes the most suitable tool to facilitate digital writing activity that shows peer editing in a cooperative grouping method (Suwantarathip & Wichadee 2014; Ghazali 2017). It shares the values of active learning as learners cooperate and have access to the task anywhere and anytime as long as they have their functioning gadget and proper Internet connection, away from the traditional classroom setting (Adrian 2016; Eppard & Reddy 2017). Even without Internet, their editing will be saved offline and recovered once the connection is secured (Zhou et al. 2012). Hence, ESL learners can participate actively in the writing process as they share and edit others' ideas

(Moonen 2015). They are independent and making use of the freedom given to collaborate with others as well as to conduct their own learning (Said & Lee 2014). Somehow, they develop interests to write from the less-threatening language learning environment. Web 2.0 tools provide a more natural learning environment which learners feel comfortable and motivated to explore as well as accomplish task as compared to school setting (Zhou et al. 2012; Adrian 2016).

The collaborative online learning atmosphere helps learners to feel safe and less anxious in their own learning space (Kelly 2012; Woodrich & Fa 2017). It enables them to become more active to learn English writing. Directing own writing activity with peers offers comfort and security even though dealing with complex writing skills. They have more control over their own writing (Arumugam et al. 2013; Moonen 2015) rather than writing individually. These come under the umbrella of ESL learners' active learning process. It is essential to apply active learning pedagogy in the teaching and learning as it instils positive attitudes and optimistic views towards learning (Azley & Shah 2016). Apart from that, learners' potential are optimised effectively when everyone will contribute during the writing process. Correspondingly, Chai and Kong (2017) express that "teachers should build an environment encouraging students to construct understanding themselves". It broadens learners' creative capacity (Chai & Kong 2017). Likewise, in a collaborative setting, the supports and encouragements from others help ESL learners to build confidence to write (Arumugam et al. 2013). Such atmosphere makes learners to feel less apprehensive to engage in due to the active learning elements. Conclusively, learners' active development in writing through social interaction is pivotal to ensure the learning objectives are well-achieved. The written product as the result will allow teachers to identify and evaluate the improvement in writing. As supported by Suwantarathip & Wichadee (2014, p. 149), "Google Docs is an online suit of digital tools that provides teachers with some powerful features to help 21<sup>st</sup> century students develop writing skills".

## **Discussion**

The paper presents the objective to explore the teaching and learning of writing of ESL learners through Google Docs as a collaborative online writing platform. Other than the focus on developing and refining learners' critical thinking skills and active learning environment, there are other benefits deemed important on overall ESL learners writing skills. Learners lack of interest, motivation and competency can also be enhanced with the application of collaborative online writing due to its less threatening environment. When learners are writing together, they critically exchange opinions and save more time to produce the target piece of writing. ESL learners' writing skills is developed in accordance to the critical thinking and active learning processes. Gradually, they will further improve their skills. Nevertheless, clear instructions and guidelines must be employed to inform learners of what they should do and should achieve. Similarly, Yunus and Salehi (2012, p. 90) inform that "problems regarding time and self-disciplined need to be addressed". This will avoid misbehavior among ESL learners when the collaborative online writing activity is administered in lesson (Yunus et al. 2013). Although a study by Broin and Raftery (2011) discuss that some limitations include difficulty to assess individual contribution of each learner, it is vital to bear in mind that Google Docs is specifically use for group writing rather than individuals.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that collaborative online writing activity using Web 2.0 tools is highly-recommended for its' beneficial contributions to ESL learners' writing skills. Suggestions for further research can be conducted to compare the effects of collaborative writing between face-to-face and Google Docs methods on learners' written products. Nonetheless, learners' perspectives on the

use of collaborative online writing should be taken into account for application into the teaching and learning processes. Hence, active learning that enhance learners' critical thinking should be encouraged to prepare learners' for VUCA environment in future working world.

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