# Students' Attitudes Towards the Use of an Online Editing Program in an EAP Course

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Recently technology has affected almost every facet of writing from feedback and the review process to the productivity of students' output. Computer-mediated communication can facilitate both delayed and immediate written corrective feedback, enhancing motivation and providing learning opportunities for foreign language writing students. This paper will report on how 44 Japanese student participants reacted to using Google Docs as the sole writing program during a semester-long EAP course at a university in Japan. The synchronous and asynchronous features of Google Docs were used in collaborative writing activities and teacher and peer review processes. Responses to a 15-item questionnaire illustrate that overall students reacted positively towards the use of Google Docs. Based on the results of this action research, it is argued that technology can facilitate timely, continuous feedback that students receive, improve students' writing productivity, and revitalize the writing review process. In addition to presenting the results of this study, activities and teacher practices will be outlined.

Since the onset of computers and the Internet, writing has shifted from a solitary pen-and-paper activity to a more collaborative, interactive mode of communication. Computer-mediated communication such as email-exchanges, web-page authoring, and synchronous chat programs are beginning to change the nature of how writing is taught and learned (Brodahl, Hadjerrouit, & Hansen, 2011). Liu and Sadler (2003) investigated the effectiveness of technology in the revision process of two groups of students and found that the technology-enhanced peer review group made significantly more revisions than the traditional paper-based group. Firth and Mersureur (2010) report on how EFL departments at Japanese universities are using computer-mediated-learning to re-think homework submissions, submission of grades, self-assessments, peer-assessments and collaborative writing.

Relevant to this paper is the popularity of Google Docs, an online synchronous writing program, which has been shown to promote awareness of the revision process (Kim, 2010), increase learning opportunities through collaborative writing (Speath & Black, 2012) and identify the type of corrections students make during writing tasks (Kessler, Bikowski, & Boggs, 2012). It is the opinion of the author that web-based collaborative learning programs, such as Google Docs, may improve the teaching and learning experience in writing classrooms. The next

sections will describe the research setting of this study, some problems that were identified within the writing classroom, and how Google Docs was used as a classroom solution to these problems.

## CONTEXT
### EAP courses at a Japanese university
The research was carried out at a multicultural, bilingual university in Japan with a student population of over 6,000 students. Almost half of the student population is comprised of international students from 87 countries. As a result, domestic Japanese students benefit from being immersed in a uniquely multi-ethnic environment. It is a requirement for Japanese students at this university to take not only a minimum number of English-language courses, but also a select number of content-based courses in their chosen field delivered by English-speaking professors. Because of this requirement, the curriculum development of EAP courses is heavily informed by the skill-set required to perform successfully in these content-based classes. Specifically, students entering content-based classes are expected to participate in class discussions, conduct presentations, and write argumentative essays. In this sense, EAP courses are, in part, preparatory courses for students who continue to use academic English in their other university classes.

Intact intermediate-level English classes were chosen to participate in this study. Students at the intermediate level generally have a score between 420 and 460 on the TOEFL paper-based test. Intermediate English, as the class is known, is a four-skills course but there is particular emphasis on academic writing. In developing the writing component of the course, it was determined that opinion writing (i.e. argumentation) was one skill that professors found lacking in Japanese students. Therefore, one main objective for the Intermediate English course was to teach students how to express their opinions in writing in a well-structured, coherent way. Students were required to write a series of paragraphs and a persuasive essay at the conclusion of the course.

### Problems identified in teaching writing
In previous courses, a mixture of assessed and non-assessed writing was done in class and for homework. Non-assessed writing included pen-and-paper free writing and grammar-based writing activities. Assessed writing involved both a peer and teacher review process whereby students received feedback and edited their papers at several stages before submitting a final draft to the teacher for marking. Generally, assessed writing was completed individually using Microsoft Word. After a first draft was completed, students exchanged their papers with their classmates and feedback was given on structure, language, and content. Students then completed a second draft by making revisions based on their peers' feedback. Next, a hardcopy of the second draft was given to the teacher for review. The teacher provided a mixture of direct and indirect feedback by writing on the hardcopy and then returned the paper to the student. Finally, the student made revisions based on the teacher's feedback and prepared a final draft for submission. Three major problems were observed with this approach to teaching writing:

*Motivation*. Students did not put sufficient effort into completing the writing tasks. In particular, papers were hastily written before submission deadlines, free writing activities yielded little text, and students rarely made significant changes after receiving feedback.

*Collaboration*. In contrast to speaking and listening activities, writing was practiced and assignments were completed individually. Students never collaboratively produced writing as a group, and as a result, there were few opportunities to learn from each other.

*Revision process*. The peer review and teacher review process was not generating the kind of feedback required for students to improve their writing. The quality of feedback during the peer review varied and was difficult for the teacher to monitor. In addition, the teacher feedback was infrequent and often delayed by up to a week.

**Google Docs**

To address these problems, the teacher/researcher decided to implement Google Docs as the sole writing tool in the classroom. Google Docs is a free web-based collaborative writing program, bundled with the online file management application, Google Drive, and accessed via an individual's Google account. One of its unique features is that it allows for synchronous editing of documents by more than one user; that is, a document can be shared with users who can then simultaneously write and change content. It therefore allows the teacher to monitor writing and give real-time feedback to students. In addition, there is a chat function that can be used by the teacher or students to explain comments and make the revision process more interactive. Unlike other word processing programs, documents are saved automatically so there is no need to save to an external source such as a USB or hard drive.

The objective of this study is to implement Google Docs as the sole writing tool used in two EAP classes as a method to address the writing-related problems outlined above. Specifically, this study aims to investigate the following research question:

*What are students' attitudes towards using Google Docs in the writing classroom?*

**METHOD**

Two intact intermediate-level classes, consisting of 44 students and 1 teacher, participated in the study over one semester. During the first two weeks of the semester, several teacher-led activities were conducted with the purpose of exploring the functions of Google Docs with students. Over the next 12 weeks, Google Docs was used exclusively for in-class and out-of-class writing assignments. Specifically, activities using Google Docs can be categorized into three types: collaborative writing, peer review, and teacher review.

During the last week of the course, students were given a 15-item online questionnaire (Appendix A), which was designed to measure their attitudes toward using Google Docs. Questionnaire items were written both in English and Japanese. The first 11 items were in statement form in which students had to indicate the

degree to which they agreed on a 5-point Likert scale. The last remaining four items were open-ended.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Forty-three of 44 students participating in the study reported never having used Google Docs before.  Therefore, results reflect first-time users' impressions of the program.  The following section describes each type of Google Docs task implemented in class and uses relevant open-ended responses to show students' reactions to participating in each task.  The section concludes by showing a summary of the questionnaire results.

**Collaborative writing**

The main type of in-class writing task involves students editing the same document to collaboratively produce an argumentative essay.  The teacher splits the class into groups of five. Students in each group are assigned a writing role: introduction, body paragraph 1, body paragraph 2, counterargument, and conclusion. The teacher then shares a Google Document with students and assigns each group an essay topic.  Next, the teacher explains that the goal of the task is for each group to complete a 600-700-word essay in 30 minutes.  Students use the chat window to clarify their roles with each other and begin to write.  As students are writing, the teacher monitors each group's progress by scrolling up and down the document giving real-time feedback as students make linguistic and structural errors.  If needed, the teacher chats to students privately to provide extra support.  During the last five minutes of the task, when groups have almost finished their essays, the teacher instructs each student to look at the comments made by the teacher and revise their writing.  Figure 1 shows a screen capture of what the teacher would see during this activity.

**FIGURE 1**
**Collaborative writing task**
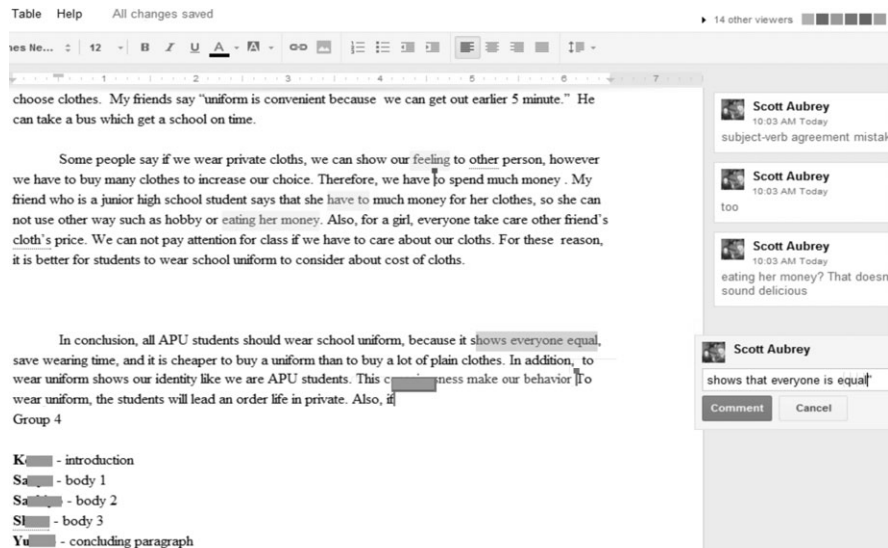


Comments on the open-ended portion of the questionnaire indicated that students found this kind of collaborative writing activity both motivating and a useful learning activity. One student commented that "watching other students write gave me useful ideas"; another student wrote "I could learn from the mistakes that other students made and the teacher corrected", which is evidence that students benefited from co-construction of the essay. The usefulness of real-time feedback during this task was repeatedly referenced: "I could get comments immediately from the teacher so it was good for my learning". Comments indicated that real-time feedback made possible by the synchronous editing feature of Google Docs excited the students and pushed them to attend immediately to their mistakes.

**Peer review**

After students had written the first draft of their essay, Google Docs was used to facilitate an in-class peer review process. Each student shared their essay with the teacher and another student in the class. The peer-reviewer was given 25 minutes to read the essay and comment on the structure, content and language. During the last 10 minutes of the review, the author was instructed to look at any comments made and revise their errors by looking at the words or sentences that were highlighted and commented on. During this time, the teacher monitored the quality of the peer-reviewers' comments and gave advice to the peer-reviewer using the chat function. If needed, the teacher also commented on the essay. Figure 2 shows a screen capture from the teacher's computer screen during the peer review.

**FIGURE 2**
**Peer review task**
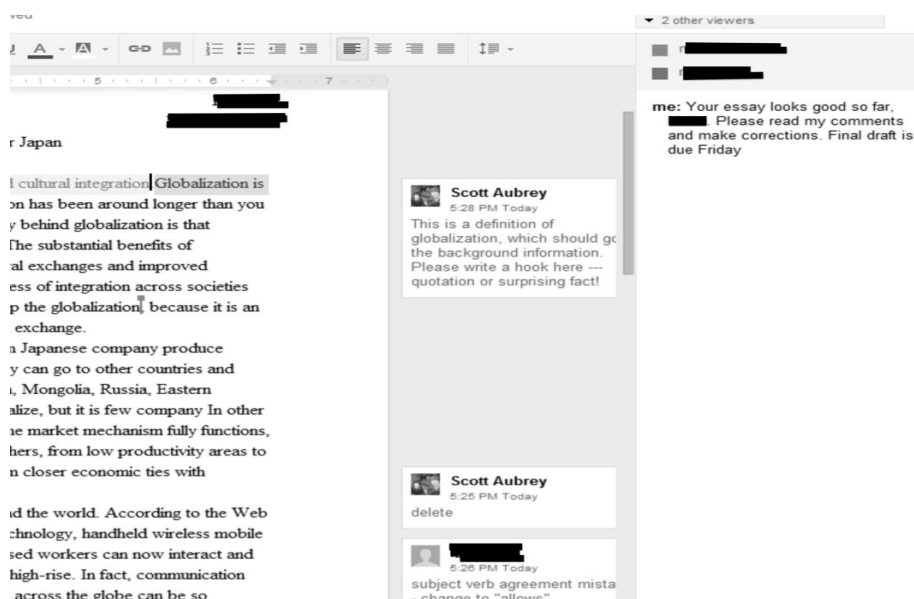


Questionnaire responses indicate that this was a valuable learning activity not only for the author, who is given feedback, but also for those conducting the peer-review. One student commented, "The teacher told me how to give good feedback". This comment and other similar comments illustrate that through teacher involvement in the peer review process, students are able to learn how to give better quality feedback. However, there were also some comments that shed light on the minimal value authors gave to student-generated feedback, as one student author explained: "I like the feedback from classmates but they are not experts. I can only trust my teacher will give good comments (sic)." As can be seen in the teacher review process, teacher comments tend to be much more valued by authors.

**Teacher review**

Students overwhelmingly indicated that participation in the teacher review process, whether synchronous or asynchronous, was most motivating and beneficial to their writing. The teacher review was the final phase of essay writing before student writers submitted their final draft for grading. The teacher informed students they had a week to revise their essay based on teacher feedback. During this week, students shared their essay with the teacher. The teacher then provided asynchronous feedback to students after class by highlighting and commenting on content and linguistic and structural errors. Figure 3 shows a screen capture of how the teacher gave feedback.

**FIGURE 3**
**Teacher feedback**
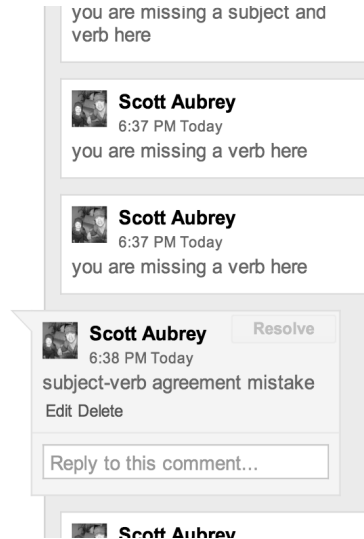


Once the teacher makes a comment in the document, Google Docs automatically sends an email to the student's email account, which notifies the student that a comment has been written. After the student attends to the error, the student clicks on the "resolve" button in the comment box. This removes the highlight from the text and sends an email notifying the teacher that the error has been revised. The teacher then reviews the revision and makes additional comments if necessary. This process continues for a week until the student submits the final draft of the essay. Figure 4 shows a screen capture of a "resolved" error as seen in the teacher's email account after a student has made a revision.

**FIGURE 4**
**"Resolving" errors in the review process**
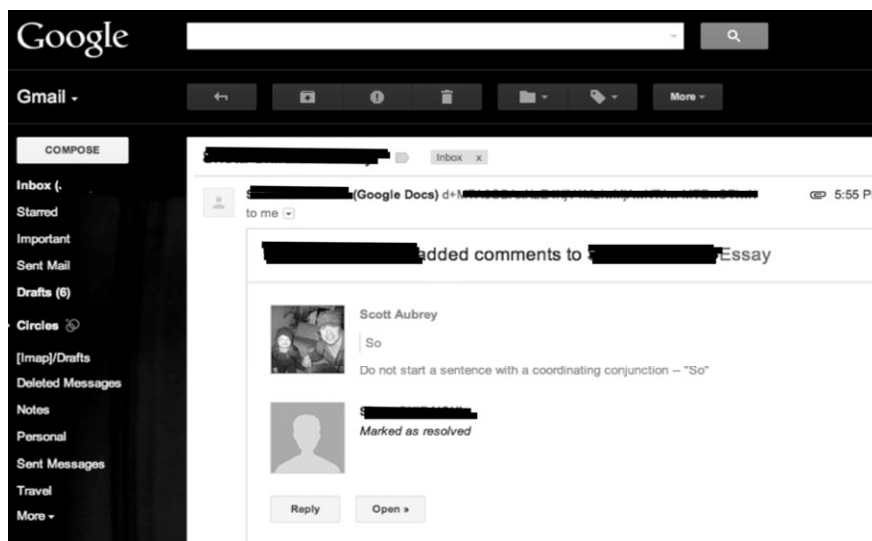


Students reported that the teacher review process was convenient, encouraged them to attend to their errors immediately, and caused them to significantly revise their first draft. Several comments alluded to the efficient and timely manner of the feedback provided by the teacher through Google Docs: "The teacher could check my essay without printing paper and I could see his comments right away". "Saved me time", "Quickly", "Immediately", and "Right away" were phases contained throughout students' questionnaire responses. One student eloquently hinted at the teacher review process being changed from a discrete, one-time opportunity for the teacher to comment to a more continuous dialogue between teacher and student: "The teacher didn't just check my essay once. He commented then I revised. Then he did it again. It was like I was having a conversation. This helped me a lot."

**Summary of results**

Overall, students reacted positively to the use of Google Docs in the classroom. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the responses from the 11 statement-like items on the questionnaire:

**TABLE 1**
**Summary of students' attitudes toward Google Docs (11 items)**

| Untrue | Somewhat Untrue | Neutral | Somewhat True | True |
|--------|-----------------|---------|---------------|------|
| 1% | 2% | 12% | 28% | 57% |

Despite the positive attitudes overall to the use of Google Docs, 18% of students indicated that there were some features of Google Docs that they did not like. Negative comments were mainly focused on the learning curve associated with a new technology, such as "in the beginning, I didn't know how to use it" and "I was confused at the start but it was good in the end". One student commented on the fact that Google Docs wasn't included with their university email, so it was inconvenient to make a new email account. Another student commented that, "I don't have Internet at home, so I couldn't do my homework", indicating that there are serious drawbacks if students do not have easy access to the Internet.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper offers some insights into how Google Docs can be used successfully in the writing classroom to solve motivation, collaboration and revision problems. Participants overwhelmingly have shown that they have positive attitudes towards using Google Docs in a variety of activities, especially when it comes to teacher feedback. As with the use of any technology in the classroom, how students react will greatly depend on how teachers use the technology. In this case, the teacher spent a great deal of time outside of class commenting on students' writing and generating a dialogue via Google Docs during the teacher review stage; this invariably affected how students oriented themselves to this writing program. When using a new technology like Google Docs, it is essential that teachers spend a significant amount of time adequately training students on how to use the different features before implementing the types of activities used here. Furthermore, rather than expecting Google Docs alone to magically solve all the problems involved in the teaching of writing, teachers need to examine how the synchronous and asynchronous editing features of Google Docs can compliment the goals and objectives of their writing courses and design writing tasks accordingly.

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**APPENDIX A: Questionnaire**

***Likert-scale Question Items:***
1. Because we used *Google Docs* in our class, the writing classes were more interesting.
2. I would rather use *Google Docs* for writing than MS Word.
3. Using *Google Docs* was convenient and saved me time.
4. I think the activities we did using *Google Docs* were interesting.
5. I think more professors should use *Google Docs* in their courses.
6. I plan to continue to use *Google Docs* after this semester.
7. I have become a better writer because we used *Google Docs* in the classroom.
8. I would recommend *Google Docs* to my friends who are students.
9. I like how my teacher can comment on my *Google Docs* document at any time.
10. I like the feature of sharing a *Google Docs* document with my teacher.
11. I liked how other students could comment on my *Google Docs* document.

***Open Question Items:***
1. What was your favorite Google Docs activity?
2. Was there anything about Google Docs that you didn't like? If 'yes', please describe what you didn't like about Google Docs.
3. Before this semester, had you ever used Google Docs? If yes, how did you use Google Docs?
4. If you have any other opinions about Google Docs, please write them below.