Investigation of using 'Google docs' for teaching writing: an alternative way for teaching writing out-of-class

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الملخص:

تسعى العديد من البلدان في الوقت الحاضر بما في ذلك ليبيا إلى الاستعانة بالتقنيات المعاصرة لخدمة مجال التعليم. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقديم أحد التطبيقات التعليمية عبر الإنترنت لتدريس مادة الكتابة خارج نطاق الفصل الدراسي في المجال الجامعي. قد يكون من الصعب على مدرسي اللغة الانجليزية تدريس العديد من الموضوعات في مادة الكتابة عبر الإنترنت مثل تنظيم الأفكار وعلامات الترقيم والحروف الكبيرة والنحو والهجاء. وبالتالي تهدف هذه الدراسة تحديدا لاقتراح استخدام تطبيق "محرر المستندات" كأداة فعالة يمكن ان يستخدمها معلمي الإنجليزية لتدريس العديد من الموضوعات في مادة الكتابة بكفاءة. يعتبر تطبيق المستندات الذي تقدمه شركه جوجل من اكتر التطبيقات شيوعا في مجال التعليم. حيث يسمح "محرر مستندات جوجل" للمعلمين بإنشاء نصوص يمكن تعديلها بواسطة جميع الطلاب ويكون المعلم قادرًا على تصحيح ومراجعة عمل الطلاب في أي وقت. استند هذا البحث إلى تجربة بسيطة عبر استخدام هذا التطبيق مع (10) من الطلاب الدارسين في تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة سبها وتم بعد ذلك إجراء مقابلات معهم عبر الإنترنت لمعرفة ردود أفعالهم ومدى التقدم بعد استخدام هذا التطبيق. تشير النتائج إلى أن "مستندات جوجل" يمكن أن تكون طريقة بديلة لتدريس الكتابة خارج نطاق الفصل الدراسي.

الكلمات الدالة: التقنيات المعاصرة، مستندات جوجل، الكتابة، خارج نطاق الفصل، التعليم التعاوني

Abstract:

Nowadays, many countries, including Libya, are seeking to employ technology to serve education. This study aims to present one of the educational online applications to teach writing out-of-class for the university domain. For EL teachers, many topics in the subject of writing can be difficult to present through internet such as the organization of ideas, punctuation, capitalization, grammar and spelling. Thus, this study aims specifically to suggest using "Google document" or "Google Docs" as an effective tool for EL teachers to teach many topics in writing efficiently. "Google Docs" is one of the most widely used applications provided by "Google" in the world of education. "Google Docs" allows teachers to create texts which can be edited by all the students and the

teacher can correct and review the students' work at any time. This research was based on a small-scale study of using this application with (10) students studying in the English language specialization at Sebha University. After that, students were interviewed online to know their attitudes and progress after using this application. The results indicate that "Google Docs" can be an alternative way for teaching writing out of class.

1. Introduction:

Writing is known as a basic skill to be introduced in the English language classroom. Scott and Mouza (2007) argue that writing is undeniably central in all classes and for all students at any age. University Students who study English should be skilled in writing because most of their subjects require writing assignments or making presentation slides in English as a task or as a part of their final exams.

Although writing is important, it is also considered to be one of the most difficult subjects because it requires teaching many topics, giving clear instructions and making direct corrections to the students while they write. Similarly, Kroll (2001) asserts the significance of writing skill and highlights that writing is the most difficult one to get success when compared with other subjects in English language learning. SriRahayu (2016) clarifies this difficulty in his study and argues that teaching writing is not easy because it requires teaching creativity, critical thinking, organizing idea and identifying the appropriate grammatical structure to the students. In the writing class, the teacher may find difficulty to help students to develop their ideas and to maintain interest and stimulation while writing.

Writing is normally thought in the class in which the teacher gives a topic with instructions and the students write. But, in the time of Corona, teachers of writing as other teachers are required to teach their curricula out of class via the internet. Now, the problem is that many teachers find it challenging to choose the appropriate online educational program to teach writing efficiently. According to Oxnevad (2013), as cited in SriRahayu (2016) 'the concept of teaching writing skill is shifting and teachers are faced with adapting their teaching practice to integrate new technologies while redefining writing and learning for 21st century' (p. 228). At the present time, online educational technology can be a solution to overcome this problem and can provide an alternative way of teaching writing out of class.

Online education has played an impressive rule for teaching English in and out of the classroom. Many latest studies prove that the use of current technology is successful to improve students' writing skill and help them to write collaboratively. For instance, Marza & Hafizh (2013) argues that recent technology like Facebook or Microsoft word program can influence the writing skill of students positively. Recent technologies can help teachers give more effective writing instructions and help students improve their writing skill.

Google provides many programs which are proved to be useful for teaching English. This study suggests 'Google docs' application as an alternative way to teach writing effectively and collaboratively. Google Docs is one of the recent and successful educational techniques for teaching writing. Sholihaha & Setyandaria (2018) believe that 'Google Docs' can very useful and efficient in EL teaching because it saves time and can be used at any time, not only in the class but also out of class. By using 'Google docs' as a tool for teaching writing, students will enjoy, collaborate and be more involved in the learning process. Besides, most of the activities in the writing classroom can be performed through Google Docs: drafting, revising, peer editing, collaborating and providing feedback. Students can work through the

same draft and the teacher can check-in and provide immediate feedback at any point while the process of writing.

Based on the above, this study aims at suggesting 'Google Docs' as an alternative teaching method to teach writing to English department students out of class.

2. Literature review:

2.1. Writing and technology

In the digital age, using online applications for teaching writing becomes widespread and recommended by many scholars and educators. Using technology can help in engaging students, providing collaborative activities and stimulating students which cannot be found easily inside the class. Many researchers as Bromely (2005), Lee & O'Rourke (2006), Halsey (2007), Martin (2008) believe that educational technology has a positive impact on the way and quality of the students' writing which leads to encourage students to become better writers and readers. According to Graham & Perin (2006), the use of technology to support writing instruction is definitely essential as this supports teachers to make a good generation of writers. Bass & Rosenzweig (1999) and Wenger (1998) also note the importance of using technology in the writing classrooms for students to compare their writing works easily with their classmates regardless of location. Warschauer (2010) in his study believes that recent educational technologies can support teachers to teach writing more efficiently. Similarly, Nicolini (2007) asserts using technology for teaching writing process out of classroom as this helps teachers to get out of the way and let students write different styles of texts.

As known by most educationalists, motivation plays a great role in the learning process. Motivation can be higher if technology is used for teaching writing as Blankenship & Margarella, (2014) argues, 'technology can be utilized as an effective means of motivating students to compose and construct variety of texts' (p.151). Halsey (2007) recognizes that technology might not be the best choice for all students, but notes that their enthusiasm will be higher when they know that there is a motive behind their writing and posting their works on the internet. The students' motivation and responsibility will keep increasing when they understand that there are real readers who will see their writing works.

The students can create activities in online learning communities, share information, practice critical thinking and improve meaning negotiation. Through these online communities, students can make group discussions which enhance knowledge construction (Zhu, 2012). Similarly, Kinzer (2010) finds that technology helps students to create different styles of writing, provides new sources of data (e.g., the Internet, search engines, blogs, and texting) and allows sharing, editing, and collaboration among writers, teachers, and students. However, writing activities through online applications or websites are shown to be extremely encouraging and offer variety of experiences and choices for students during the writing practice.

2.2. Writing and Google docs

Google Docs, a free online application, is becoming a promising and suitable tool for enhancing writing practice. Generally, Setyandaria (2018) defines 'Google Docs' as 'a free web-based service and storage of documents, spreadsheets, presentations and forms from Google' (p. 102). SriRahayu (2016) gives a wider definition to 'Google docs' concerning collaborative writing. He argues that 'Google Docs is a free online word-processor that is available to anyone with Gmail account to create a collaboration activity to enhance collaborative writing' (p. 227). He further argues, 'Google docs is easy, fast and well-suited for facilitating online writing workshop that combines peer editing with cooperative grouping and small group fine-tuned writing instruction' (p. 229). Google Docs is free and it is designed particularly for schools, universities and public organizations, and does not need downloading new software or buying hardware (Oishi, 2007). 'Google docs' is an easy used application by Gmail in which the users can create documents online. These documents

can be edited and shared by more than one user at any time. Using 'Google docs' is similar to Microsoft tools but the difference is that 'Google docs' is online and the documents are stored automatically in Google drive. According to Setyandaria (2018), the data loss in 'Google docs' application is not possible because the documents are automatically stored through the browser in Google drive. This can be a great advantage because the user does not have to worry about losing the data as it will be stored if the user' computer is damaged or exposed to viruses.

Recently, many academics and educators have begun to explore the educational advantages of Google Docs for teaching writing out of class. Arrowsmith (2013) mentions many advantages of using this application out of class as; increased durability, increased accessibility, better organization and increased interactivity and understanding in browser dictionary. He further mentions many advantages of using 'Google docs' for teachers as; efficient class preparation, creation of lesson plan and simplify tracking assessment and homework. A study by Setyandaria (2018) reports that collaborative learning via using Google Docs is advantageous as it can be done not only inside the classroom but also at home at any time. According to Brodahl & Hansen (2014)and Suwantarathip & Wichadee (2014), Google document is especially helpful when collaborating with a peer outside of class time. According to Arrowsmith (2013), Google docs could be even more beneficial than normal teaching to students as they could later find the lesson with notes and that encourage them to interact more with the material. Teaching writing inside the classroom has some problems. One of the main problems is the use of the traditional blackboard or whiteboard. Any written work is hard to retrieve once the board is cleaned. Moreover, in the traditional classroom, the lesson could be hard to understand if a student is absent. Using Google Docs can solve these problems as students can retrieve their writing works at any time. The student can find the whole lesson and understand it through following the students' and the teacher's comments, corrections and feedback.

'Google docs' also provides standard editing functionality and really excels in real-time collaborative authoring. Gralla (2010) believes that 'Google Docs' is a convenient tool among newly developed online applications for teaching writing collaboratively. Collaborative writing means writing any kind of texts in which students help each other in groups. Students can share any ideas and support each other to write any piece of work. The teacher is able to give immediate feedback by leaving comments and editing where and when it was necessary (SriRahayu 2016). The feedback which is given by the teacher will remain in the document so students will be able to see and learn from the work of other groups from the feedback given to them.

'Google docs' application has another feature; students can add comments next to any sentence if they want to discuss any point. There is no limit to the number of comments. One of the advantages of using comments is that teachers and students can see many details such as who is contributing, when they contribute, the time and the date. The commenter's name will appear also next to each comment. The teacher and the students can edit a document all together and any changes will appear individually with different color for each user. These changes can be removed once marked as resolved and can be retained as a full revision history is kept and previous versions can be returned very easily. Chinnery (2008) says that Google Docs is a creative tool because the teacher can design many learning activities differently and creatively. For example, a teacher intentionally can post a text with some mistakes for learners to correct. A teacher can also start a story and each learner contributes to complete it and this supports creativity as well as fantasy. However, Google docs can be a useful and promising tool in many teaching areas as writing, reading or follow-up project in general.

3. Research Methodology:

The study aims to investigate the possibility of using 'Google Docs' application for teaching writing and the students' perceptions of using this application. This study is based on a descriptive qualitative method to describe the acceptability and suitability of using Google Docs as collaborative technique for teaching writing to EFL students.

Firstly, a simple experiment was carried with (10) English department students of Sebha University aged between 22 and 27 years. Students joined in online writing classes for four weeks as an outside classroom activity. This experience specifically aims to determine the effectiveness and the challenges of using Google Docs as a tool for teaching writing. All students were asked to collaborate to finish the task and the corrections were given when necessary. In this study, four lessons were given; one lesson per week and each lesson contain one basic task. For example, the first lesson was 'Introducing yourself' so the main task for the group will be 'write a paragraph about introducing yourself'. The primary data was collected from the students' tasks in Google Docs. The student's collaboration was observed in terms of using the features of 'Google Docs' for completing the tasks. Some of the collaboration activities were captured in screenshots by the teacher to record the collaboration which happened during the group work while completing the tasks. These screenshots showed also the process of correction and feedback given by the instructors to guide the students while accomplishing the activity.

Here are the steps of opening and using Google docs.
- The teacher must
    1. open 'Google '
    2. go to Google applications
    3. click on 'Google docs'
    4. Create a new document.
    5. name the document (the document's name must be clear for students so that they can easily find it later)
    6. share the document with the students as follows;
        - click share
        - insert the Gmail accounts of students
        - click 'send' (it is an invitation to students)
        - click the option (can edit) so all students can edit the document.
- The students must
    1. Open the Gmail account
    2. open Google
    3. choose 'Google docs' from Google applications
    4. enter email and password
    5. open the document (the students will find the teacher's document because an invitation was sent to their emails)
    6. Start typing in the document and follow the instructions. Appendix (1) contains the steps with pictures to clarify opening a document in 'Google docs'.

Now, all the students can join the document when they receive an invitation. Once students accept the invitation, they join the document. Whenever there's more than one person in a document at the same time, the Chat function is available. The teacher and students can see each other typing and each of them can make comments or corrections and anyone can reply immediately or at any time in the day. Each student' icon and editions on the text will appear with different color so the teacher can see their work clearly. (See appendix 2)

Secondly, an interview was carried with (10) participants who joined the online learning experience earlier. The researchers made unstructured interview through Whatsapp after the students finish the experience. The reason behind making the interview through Whatsapp application not face to face is that students were on holiday due to the disease spread (Corona Virus) and this also the cause of the small number of participants. However, the students were asked about the following:

- The degree of their interest and motivation during working on Google docs.
- The benefits and drawbacks of this application according to their point of view.

The interview was transcribed and analyzed to gain more information about the students' opinions in using Google docs for collaborative writing.

4. Results and discussion:

The data were collected during working on the collaborative writing activities and these data were analyzed after finishing the online lessons. The data analyses were based on the students' performance and progress while collaborative writing activities on 'Google docs'. The students' performance and progress were identified by how they used 'Google docs', their acceptance and collaboration to complete the activities.

4.1.The students' writing progress through Google Docs

At the beginning, many students taught that this application would be difficult and they will not be able to complete the tasks. Surprisingly, when they started working in it, it was noticed that they began to perform well as they felt the sense of discovery and enjoyment. All students started to discover the functions of this application together with little help from the instructors. Their enthusiastic increased when they begin to discover that they have the chance to edit the document with each other and their work is saved. They used the chat option which helped them to discuss ideas and negotiate meaning to edit the texts. Lately, they finished all the tasks with great passion.

Generally, it was found that 'Google Docs' allowed students to do the same tasks successfully with only little restrictions which can be found sometimes in normal classrooms. In the classroom, the teacher may not find the time to complete the lesson in one or two classes. Some students need to spend more time editing and revising their work and the teacher had to correct their writing works many times. Google docs give a solution to this problem as the teacher can highlight specific errors for one time for all the students and that will save time. As cited in Hariadi et al. (2016), Sudarmaningtyas (2016) studies this topic on a larger scale, examining 1153 student users and 70 instructors at the Institute of Business and Informatics Stikom Surabaya in Indonesia. The researchers used to the students. By the end of the study, 79% of students agreed that they felt comfortable using Google Docs and 82% of the instructors said it helped their teaching process. Similarly, Zheng, Lawrence, Warschauer, and Lin (2015) in their study, find that Google docs can help teachers to save time rather than teaching with paper documents. They believe that teachers need a way to motivate their students to write and see the errors or problems in their writing and care about changing them and new technologies offer a way to do just that.

Moreover, it was found that the students' writing skill improves noticeably through the experience of collaborative writing in Google Docs. They are improved in terms of sharing and organizing their ideas. Online writing helped students to be innovative and creative. Using 'Google docs' also helped students to overcome their fear of making mistakes while exploring their ideas. Students showed great progress regarding using the correct vocabulary, punctuations and grammar because the teacher and students can give corrections and comment whenever necessary. This review and correction activity enhanced their understanding of using the appropriate words and structure in the paragraph or text. A study by SriRahayu (2016) shows many advantages of using this tool as Google Docs can help to

share ideas for the course of the matter by commenting and revising postings, saving the time and improving knowledge.

However, it is noticed that 'Google Docs' offers a particularly rich and helpful element to teach writing. The teacher can easily review the steps that students took in order to better assess the choices these writers made in drafting the paper. The teacher can quickly view the revision history of the document and have the lesson kept for next classes. Arrowsmith (2013), in his study, asserts this as he finds that Google Docs aided teachers with repeat lessons, as there would already be a record of the work for later classes, which could be improved further. Though, this study shows more remarkable educational benefits among non-native English-speaking communities, where students have found 'Google Docs' to have positive influence on their learning performance.

4.2. Results of the interview

4.2.1. The students' interest and motivation through Google Docs

From the interview, students expressed their experience and agreed that they were highly motivated during writing on 'Google Docs'. The experience of writing through 'Google docs' seemed to be fascinating for all the students. Students believed that using Google Docs helped them to be more confident and responsible because they were not afraid of making mistakes. This application showed their real abilities and encouraged them to share their knowledge with others. Students were happy about the supportive environment which happened through online collaborative writing. Similar study by Sandolo (2010), finds that having tools such as 'Google docs' helps to inspire students to become more involved in writing assignments and rises both motor and cognitive skills.

4.2.2. benefits of Google docs (according to the students' point of view)

The students' answers were categorized into positive and negative perceptions. In terms of positive perceptions, the students mentioned many benefits of collaborative learning by using Google docs. They are summarized as follows:

- 'Google docs' is easy to use.
- 'Google docs' enhances collaborative writing
- Google Docs has the chat option which helps students to share their comments and ideas with other student.
- Google Docs also has the explore function which offers related content for the document. Students can insert images and use web pages that are related to the topic.
- "Attracting the changes" is also a useful option so that the students can see their progress while writing and can learn from the changes they made.
- Google Docs help students to review their work or others' works at any time.
- Google Docs makes the students appreciate each other's opinions and ideas.
- Google Docs enhances confidence and enriches motivation.
- 'Google docs' helps the students to overcome their worries of making mistakes.
- 'Google docs' saves time because they can learn a topic in a short time
- 'Google docs' offers more interaction and ease of feedback.

In terms of negative perceptions, some students mentioned that they faced some technical problems such as the bad internet connectivity. Another problem was the daily absence of electricity. The teacher tried to put some solution as giving one whole week for one task so students can open the document at any time. The student are expected more attention from the university to repair the connectivity access or giving free access of internet. Having free or low-cost internet will help students to work actively on any educational application and that surely will enhance their learning in general. These conditions were strengthen by the previews studies which find that lack of good internet connectivity is the main cause of online teaching failure. SriRahayu (2016) for example, has similar opinion as he believes

that a good network environment is the key factor for a better collaboration because Google Docs was software with internet connection based.

The results and discussions suggest that Google Docs can be great technique for collaboration. The majority of students rated their acceptable and gives positive responnses towards Google Docs, and most of the students were willing to use Google Docs for their future academic activities.

5. Conclusion:

In Corona time, the situation requires teachers to adopt the suitable online applications for teaching their subjects. To continue the learning process, teachers are supposed to introduce their lessons online and students receive these lessons at home. That is why the researchers suggested 'Google docs' for teachers to specifically teach writing to English Department students. 'Google Docs' is considered to be a new technique for teaching writing. In this study and through the recent studies, 'Google Docs' is proved to be an effective and practical way for teaching writing out of class for EL Students. However, the teachers must not jump into using 'Google docs' without planning. Many researchers such as David et al (2008) assures that teachers must model how to integrate technology and what are the steps or tasks of every lesson. When using technology like Google docs', the teacher must encourage student, encourage cooperation among students, encourage active learning, give immediate comments, give specific time on each task, and respect various abilities and ways of learning. Generally, the study has shown promising results and possibilities as to how EL teachers will use Google Docs for teaching writing. Despite the study gaps, this present study is considered to be the first of its kind because there is no scientific work on the recent performed subject in Libya.

Finally, it is important to mention that this application is not a substitute for a comprehensive writing curriculum inside the classroom; but can be useful as a supportive way or as an alternative method when needed in some situations like spreading diseases or wars.

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Appendix 1

Pictures show the steps of opening and sharing a document in 'Google docs' application.

Step 1: Open Google website and click the icon (it is marked by a circle) to open Google applications
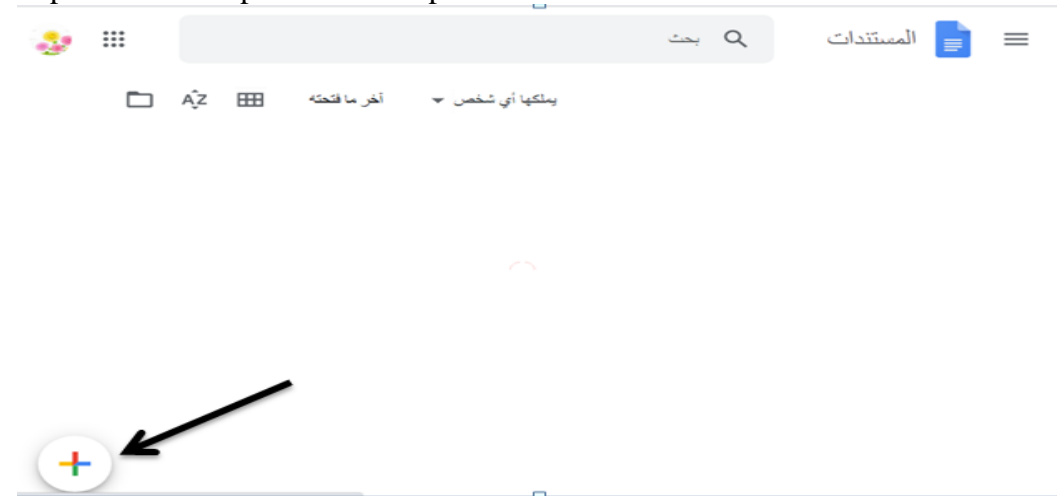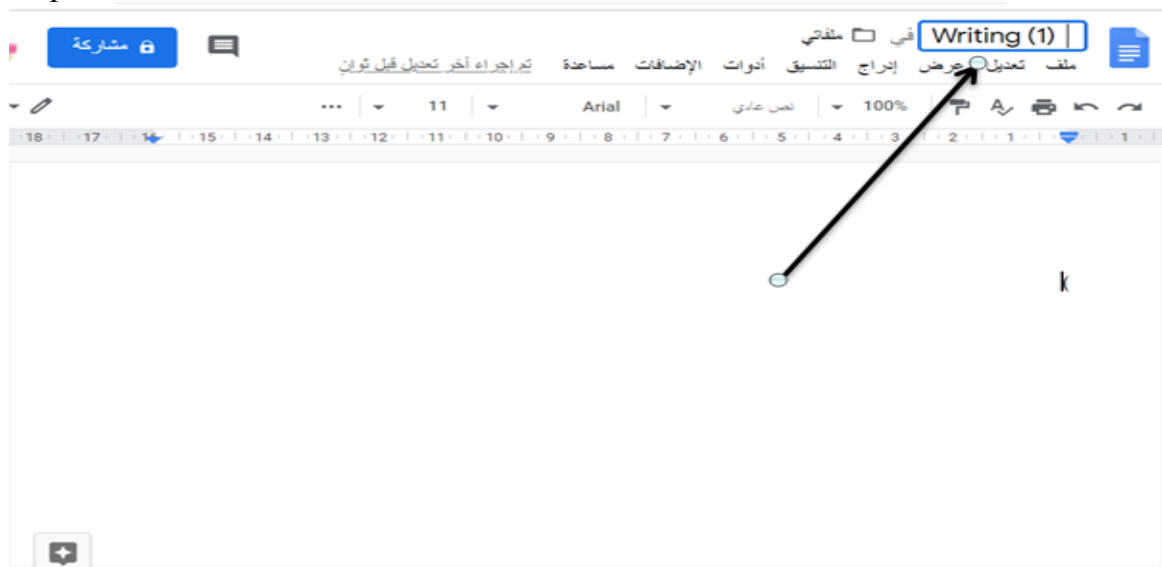

Step 2: click 'Docs' or 'google docs'

Step 3: click the option 'add' to open a new document
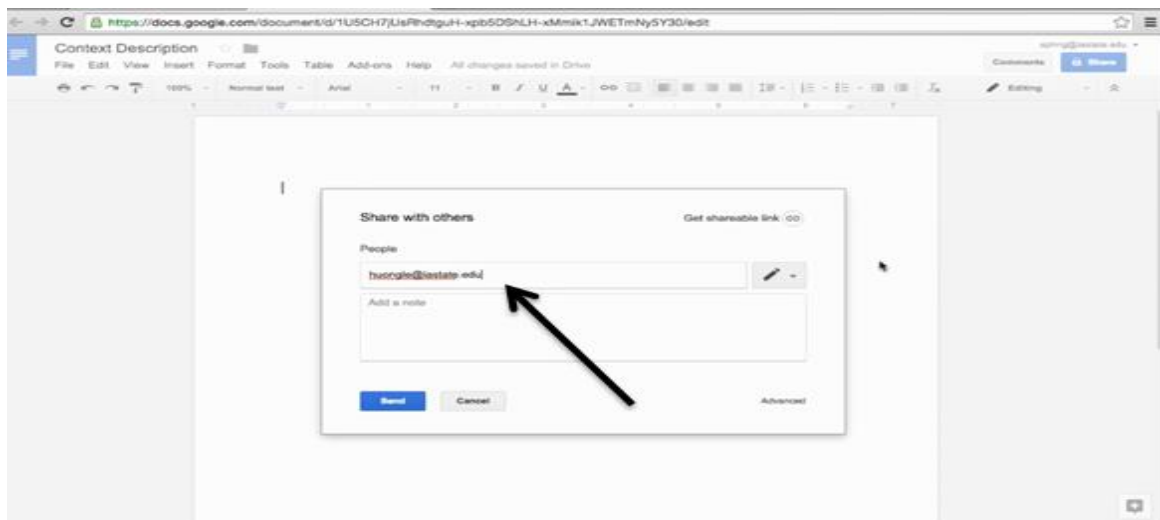

Step 4: name the document

Step 5: click the option (Share)

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Step 6: Type student's email
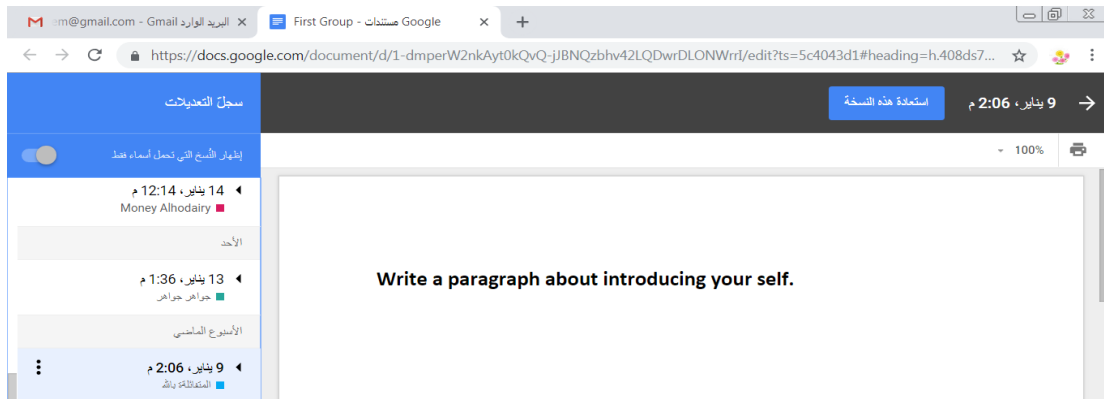


Step 7: Choose (Can edit) and click send

Appendix 2
The following pictures are screen shots for one example of doing a task in Google docs.
Picture 1: the teacher puts the task

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Picture 2: The first student begins to write (the program gives the students different colors while they write).
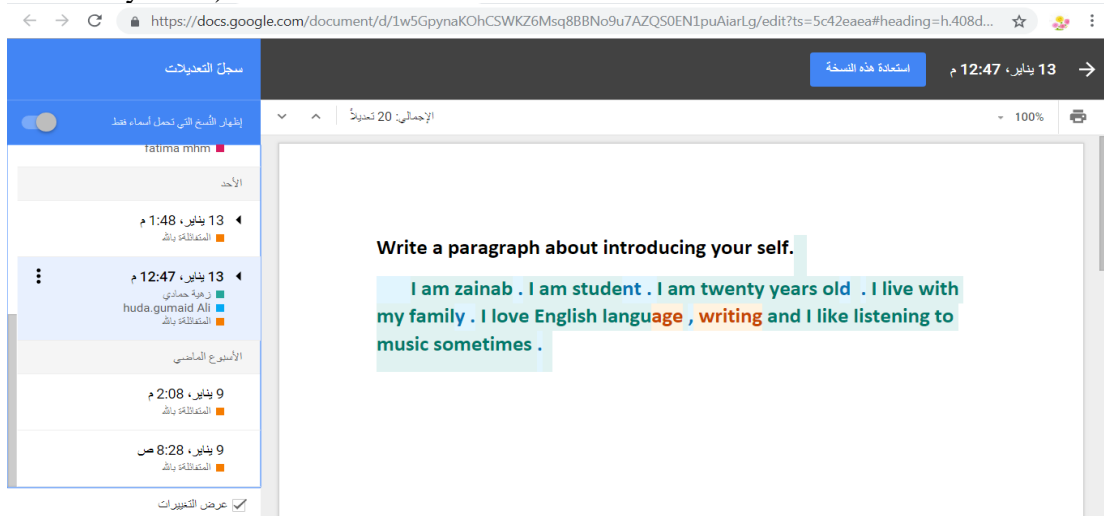
Picture 3: Some corrections in spelling are given. They also add a topic for text.
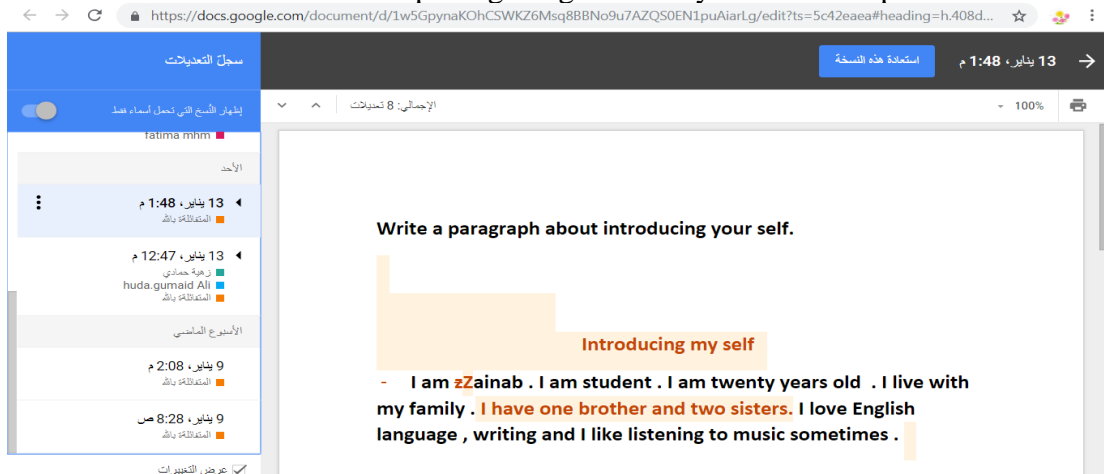

Picture 4: More sentences and ideas are added

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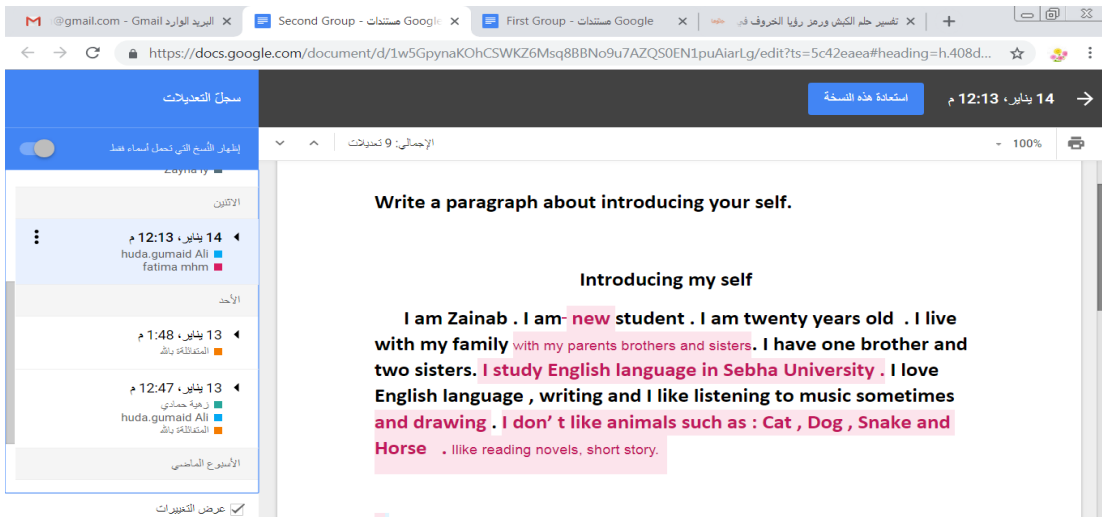
Picture 5: the students correct the mistakes of each other

Picture 6: the teacher corrects some mistakes and gives comments in the chat option

Picture 7: The students submitted the final draft (waiting the teacher's feedback)

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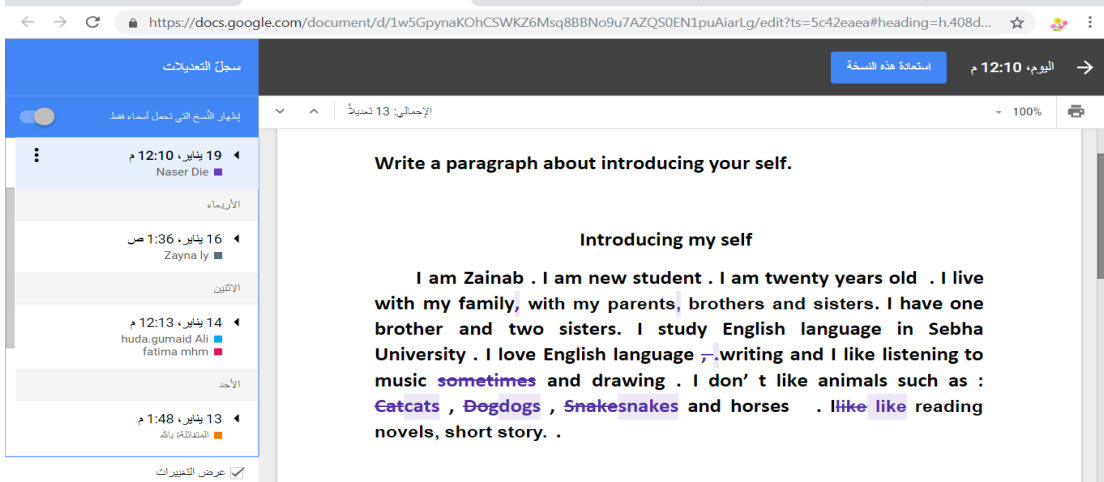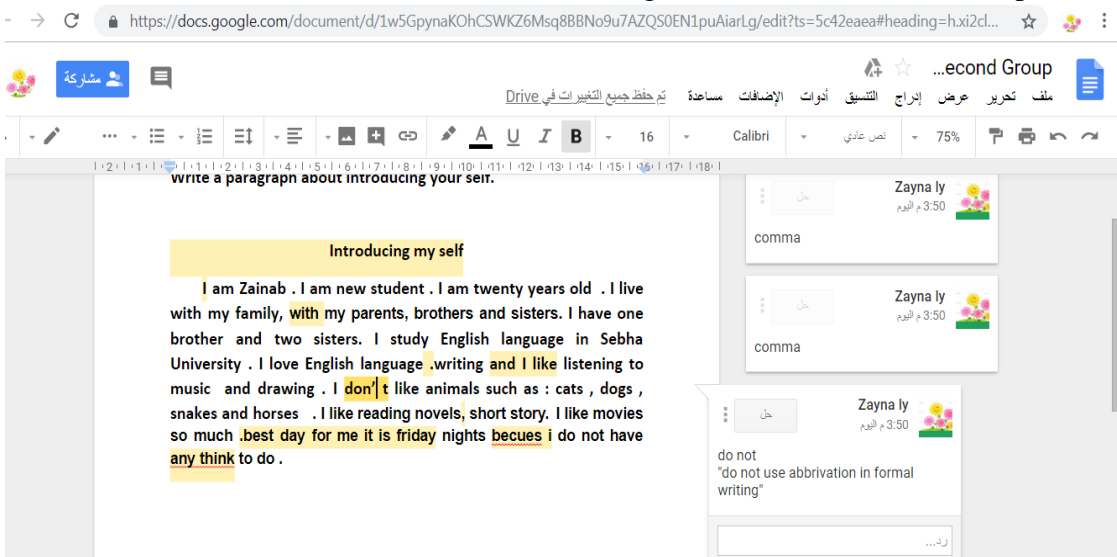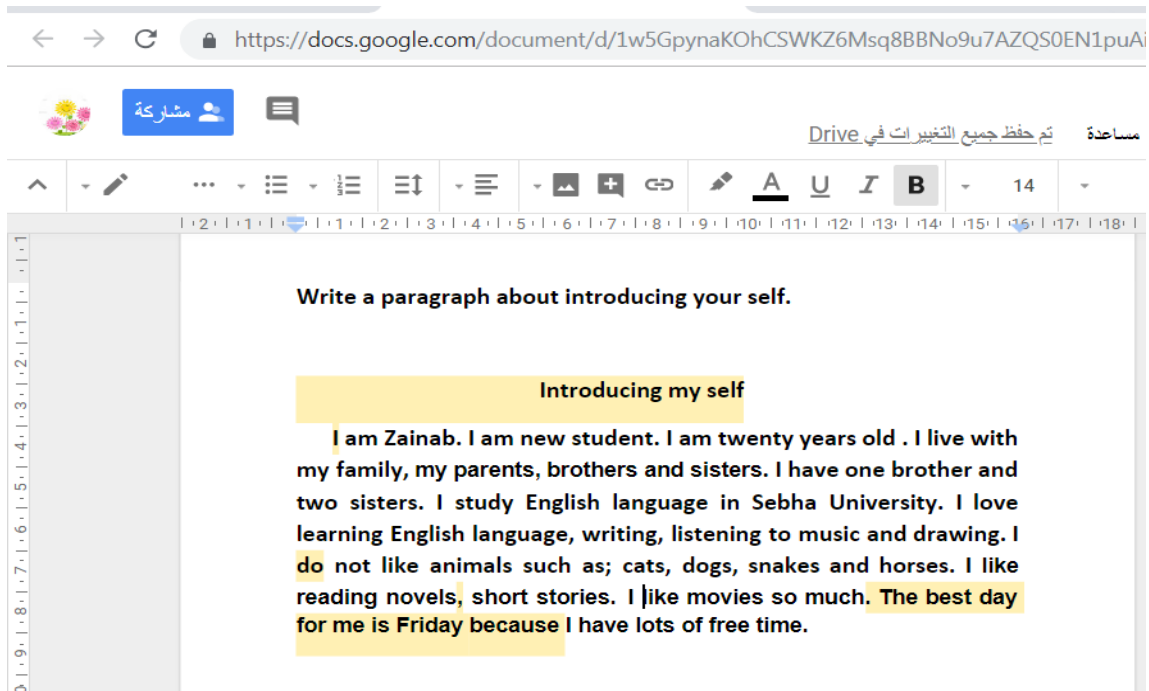

Write a paragraph about introducing your self.

Introducing my self

I am Zainab. I am new student. I am twenty years old . I live with my family, my parents, brothers and sisters. I have one brother and two sisters. I study English language in Sebha University. I love learning English language, writing, listening to music and drawing. I do not like animals such as; cats, dogs, snakes and horses. I like reading novels, short stories. I like movies so much. **The best day for me is Friday because** I have lots of free time.

Picture 8: The final draft (After the teacher's feedback)

Write a paragraph about introducing your self.

Introducing my self

I am Zainab. I am a new student. I am twenty years old . I live with my family; my parents, brothers and sisters. I have two brothers and two sisters. I study English language in Sebha University. I love learning English language, writing, listening to music and drawing. I do not like animals such as; cats, dogs, snakes and horses. I like reading novels and short stories. I like movies so much. **The best day for me is Friday because** I have lots of free time.

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