

# **S**tudents' Perceptions towards Teacher Feedback on Google Docs

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## **Abstract**

*This study aims to investigate how students perceive teacher feedback on Google Docs. The data was collected from one of the language study skill courses for graduate students taught by one of the instructors in the Department of Language Studies at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. The six participants of the study, the first-year graduate students of the MA Programme of English for Professional and International Communication, were required to write four short writing tasks as assignments. Two out of the four of the students' short writing tasks with teacher feedback on Google Docs were analyzed. The stimulated recall interviews were used to ask the participants about the perceptions towards using Google Docs to give feedback by the teacher. The results show that every participant understood the teacher feedback on Google Docs. They also had positive attitudes towards using Google Docs in giving feedback. Reasons of their satisfaction were also reported. However, the participants also revealed the problems of using Google Docs in giving feedback. Discussion and implications of using Google Doc in teaching and learning were provided in the final part.*

**Keywords:** *teacher feedback, technology, Google Docs, students' perceptions*

## **1. Introduction**

Nowadays, technology has been playing an important role in language teaching and learning. In education, technology is commonly defined as a technical device or tool used to enhance instructions (Okjie et al., 2014). It has been developed to support the need for teaching and learning process. The new devices (such as computers, digital devices, and media technology) can provide the two dominant senses which are vision and hearing to the students in order to help them to explore linguistic inputs naturally (Linfors, 1987). Apart from that, the hypermedia (e.g. World Wide Web/ www.) becomes the more powerful tool for language learning in order to search for useful information (e.g. grammar, vocabulary,

or reading texts), or practice exercises (e.g. online grammar quizzes). Similarly to writing field, in current years, the programs such as automated writing evaluation (online words, online dictionaries, grammar checkers, etc.), word processors, and even the hypermedia (web 2.0) have become the powerful tools for supporting writing (Kajder, 2003). The students are suggested to use those programs to support their own learning in different purposes.

In the past, giving feedback by writing on the students' assignments was the most effective way for every teacher in the teaching writing field. However, in this 21st century, there are varieties of technological tools for teaching writing. With these kinds of tools, the process of teaching and learning becomes more convenient for both teachers and students. For example, the teachers can use Track Change, one of the programs in Microsoft Office, to give feedback to students. Moreover, technology in teaching writing and learning has been developed in terms of functions, not only giving feedback but also communicating and sharing the information online.

Google Docs is one of the educational edition applications created by Google. It is a free online program that allows users to create documents, spreadsheets and presentations online and share them with others for collaboration. Google Docs offers word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, and forms (Google, 2010). In learning and teaching, Google Docs allows teachers and students to share their works to each other, collaborate on assignments, and save documents online for access at school or at home anytime. In addition, teachers can communicate with their students via Google Docs and provide feedback to their projects, assignment, presentation, etc. (Boswell, 2010).

In terms of teaching writing, Google Docs provides the opportunities for teachers and students to work on free communication and collaboration solution of writing. The teacher can give feedback by using a great tool for editing in order to help the students develop their own writing. Moreover, the teacher and students can do online chat, or share the writing tasks to each other through tablets, smart phones, in addition to computers. In order to move forward from the traditional methods of providing feedback on the paper-based format, using Google Docs as an edition tool for writing may be one of the effective alternatives.

## **2. Literature review**

### ***2.1 Giving feedback***

In teaching writing, feedback is generally regarded as essential for writing development (Biber et al, 2011; Peterson, 2010; Hattie & Timberley, 2007). The feedback process is important for students in order to help them improve writing skills (Lee, 2008; Elftorp, 2007; Hattie & Timberley, 2007). There are many researchers who have differently defined the meaning of teacher feedback. Scott and Dinham (2005) mention that feedback is as any form of response by a teacher to a student's performance. Teachers can provide feedback

on student writing to support students' writing development (Peterson, 2010). Similarly, Mahfoodh (2011) supports that written feedback of the teachers is clearly crucial to students' growth as writers, and it is one of the most fundamental components of ESL/EFL writing-centred classrooms because it is considered to be the best way for communication with each student on a one-to-one basis. Therefore, teacher written feedback is both helpful and delightful (Ferris, 2003; Goldstein, 2004; Lee & Schallert, 2008). In addition, teacher written feedback can help student to be aware of the reader's expectations as a good writer (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994). There are many ways to give feedback on student writing. For example, the teacher could give students feedback on writing assignments, to a student as a person or through online collaboration. However, the best approach for any particular teacher depends on the purpose of the feedback, the amount of time available, and communication style.

Feedback can take different forms depending on teacher's preferences, students' proficiency levels, types of writing tasks, and the stages of writing process (Hyland, 2003). It has been seen as necessary in developing the writing skill and enhancing students' motivation. Hyland and Hyland (2006) noted that feedback has been divided into formative and summative feedback. Summative feedback serves the function of evaluating the writing as a product by assessing how well a student accomplishes a task. The goal of formative feedback is to help the student in developing his/her writing skill by giving comments and suggestions. Now, some researchers are trying to investigate the teachers who use technology to give feedback to the students. For example, Merry and Orsmond (2007) consider the effectiveness and feasibility of providing feedback on academic work to students by using mp3 audio files. Similarly, Cavanaugh and Song (2014) examined students' and teachers' perceptions of audio feedback and written feedback for student papers in online composition classes since students' perceptions seem to be one important aspect which the teachers have to take into consideration. It is "the processes of determining the meaning of what are sensed" (Klazky, 1984). In other words, it is "a belief or an opinion that one has as a result of realizing or noticing something" (Collins Cobulid, English Language Dictionary, 1996, p. 1064).

According to Lee (2008), she says that "[a]s the teachers give feedback on the students writing, it is crucial that the students' responses to the feedback are fed back to teachers as a heuristic to help them develop reflective and effective feedback practices". Therefore, there were some studies conducted in this area to investigate the perceptions of students towards teacher feedback. For example, Ferris (1995) surveyed L2 students' perceptions to teachers' feedback. She reported that L2 students valued the feedback they had received on their errors in writing. The students paid more attention to teachers' feedback, and they found that their teachers' feedback was useful in order to help them to improve their writing. Similarly, Rowe (2011) explored students' perceptions towards the feedback and

how they valued it. The results showed that the students took the teacher feedback into account since a teacher responded to them individually. In addition, in Diab's research (2005), they explored the students' attitudes and expectation towards teacher feedback on students' writing. The results showed that the students seemed to expect the beneficial written feedback from the teachers. Moreover, Lee (2008) investigated the reactions of secondary school students in Hong Kong. She found that the secondary school students in Hong Kong wanted their teachers to give more written comments.

## ***2.2 Technology and feedback giving***

Nowadays, technology plays such an important role in education in language learning and teaching. In terms of writing skill, according to Prabhu (2010), she claims that the use of technological tools such as blogs, podcasts, wikis, and comics-creating software could enhance students' writing and thinking skills in all grade levels as well as across all participants. Surfing websites and using provided tools are popular activities which the 21st century learners and teachers prefer to do. Among those tools and applications, Google is one of the leading companies, which creates a new way of updating the writing process, namely Google Docs. It is a part of Google Apps Education Edition that supports effective writing with free online tools for creating, collaborating, revising, and publishing tools to improve the writing process for students and teachers (Google, 2010). Google Docs also supports the teachers to provide comment and written feedback to students' online writing tasks. It can be seen that, using technology to support teaching in writing is undeniably important nowadays (Graham & Perin, 2006). Thus, Google Docs might be the tool which teachers may take into consideration when teaching writing.

In the recent years, Google provides Google Apps Education Edition which encourages teachers to use technology in teaching. It is a free suite of hosted communication and collaboration applications designed for schools and universities such as Google Docs, Google Video and etc. As the researchers mentioned earlier, Google Docs is a part of Google Apps Education Edition that supports effective writing process. Google claims that it provides an easy way for teachers and students to work together on projects, reports to collect and share information in a secure online environment. Thus, Google Docs may be regarded as an effective tool to provide feedback to students.

As discussed in the earlier parts that recently technology has played its role in language learning and teaching; thus, there are some researchers who have tried to investigate the teachers who use technology to give feedback to the students. Amirabadi and Motallebzadeh (2011) investigated whether the implementation of e-collaboration and e-tutoring will have any effects on students' writing proficiency. The results showed that e-collaboration/e-partnering could improve learners writing skill if integrated into the EFL curriculum designed for the pre-intermediate level. Similarly in Hedin's research (2012), he tried to examine the students' attitudes towards peer feedback on Google Docs. The results

indicate that most students liked using Google Docs for peer feedback, and they thought the feedback they have got was useful.

With the evidence from several studies above, it can be seen that Google Docs is different from the traditional ways of providing and receiving feedback because it is an innovative tool with distinctive features which could replace the common tools like pens and paper. Therefore, it might be interesting to explore the students' perception and attitudes towards teacher feedback on Google Docs.

### **3. Purpose of the study**

This study was conducted to investigate the participants' perceptions and attitudes based on the following research questions:

*What do the graduate students think about the use of Google Docs in giving feedback?  
What are their attitudes towards the use of Google Docs?*

### **4. Research methodology**

#### ***4.1 Participants***

The participants of this study were six first - year graduate students of the MA Programme of English for Professional and International Communication (EPC) at KMUTT. They took one of the language study skills courses in order to improve their academic writing ability. In addition, all students were quite familiar with written assignments, and written feedback given by the teachers. The course that they were taking was taught by one of the instructors of the programme. He used Google Docs as a tool to check and provide feedback for the students. The students were required to write about four pieces of written work (300-400 words each).

#### ***4.2 Research instruments***

In this study, the main research instrument is the stimulated recall interviews. Two out of four of the students' writing tasks with teacher feedback via Google Docs were used as a prompt when the researchers interviewed the participants. The instrument was used to answer the two research questions above.

The interview conducted in Thai was held after the teacher returned the writing tasks which were the first draft and the second draft with feedback to the students via Google Docs. The questions for the interview were constructed within three areas: a) understanding of the feedback, b) value (in terms of usefulness) of the feedback, and c) attitudes towards the feedback. The interview was audio-recorded by an MP3 recorder. Then, the data from the interview was transcribed. After that, the transcription was classified and grouped based on three main areas to answer the two research questions.

Lists of main questions:

- Do you understand all feedback or comments that the teacher provided on Google Docs? If yes, how? If no, why not?
- Is the teacher's using Google Docs to provide the feedback useful for you? If yes, how? If no, why not?
- Do you like the feedback on Google Docs? If yes, how? If no, why not?
- Are there anything else you want to talk about the teacher feedback on Google Docs?

### 4.3 Research procedures

This study was categorized into four stages as follows:

Stages	Procedures
1. Preparation	1. The questions for interview were prepared by the researchers.
	2. The interview questions were piloted by one of the second - year graduate students of the MA Programme of English for Language Teaching.
	3. The interview questions were edited for interviewing the participants by the researchers.
2. Orientation	1. A twenty-minute-orientation was conducted to meet the participants in order to introduce the research and what they need to do for data collection. The participants were asked to send the first and second writing tasks with the teacher feedback via Google Docs to the researchers.
3. Data collection	1. After the participants received the first writing task with feedback from the teacher via Google Docs, they were reminded to send their tasks to the researchers.
	2. After the participants received the second writing task with feedback from the teacher via Google Docs, they were reminded again to send their task to the researchers.
	3. The researchers made an appointment with each participant for the interview.
4. Stimulated recall interview	1. The interview was conducted after the participants finished the first and second tasks. The interview was conducted in L1 in order to encourage the participants to express their perceptions conveniently.

### 4.4 Data analysis

The participants' interviews were transcribed and grouped based on three themes i.e. understanding of the feedback on Google Docs, values (usefulness) of feedback on Google Docs, and attitudes towards the feedback on Google Docs. While grouping, the

researchers also cross-checked with their written work particularly on the part that the participants referred to.

## 5. Findings

In this section, the findings are divided into two main parts. In terms of perceptions towards feedback, the researchers have explored whether the participants understood the feedback provided by the teacher on Google Docs. Apart from that, they also mentioned about the usefulness of using Google Docs and their attitudes towards this tool.

### 5.1. Understanding

From the interview, the results revealed that every participant understood the feedback provided by the teacher on Google Docs. The participants also explained more about the reasons of their understanding as seen from Table 1.

**Table 1** The reasons of understanding the uses in Google Docs

Technical function use		S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	%
Group 1: Comments	1. Highlighting with comments	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	83.3
Group 2: Suggesting	1. Deleting	-	✓	✓	-	-	-	33.3
	2. Adding	-	✓	-	-	-	-	16.6
	3. Replacing	-	-	✓	-	-	-	16.6
Group 3: Editing	1. Text colors	-	-	-	-	✓	-	16.6

From Table 1, the teacher used several functions in order to help the participants to understand the feedback. They were categorized into three groups which were 1) comments, 2) editing, and 3) suggesting. In each group, there were sub-technical functions. For the first group (comments), most of the participants (83.3%) understood the feedback by noticing from what the teacher highlighted with the comments. This could help them to follow and understand which parts should be edited as seen clearly from the Extract 1.

*Extract 1:*

*I understood because there were comments highlighted to make me know what should be edited or added.*

*(Subject 1)*

For the second group (suggesting), two participants (33.3%) could easily see which parts to be discarded from the function of deleting. Moreover, the functions of adding (16.6%) and replacing (16.6%) could help them see the information that they should add or replace. Extract 2 below shows the example of how the participant understood the use of technical function in Google Docs.

*Extract 2:*

*I understood that the teacher's deleting was for telling me that my contents shouldn't be like this.*

*(Subject 3)*

In the third function (editing), using text colors (16.6%) could help the participants to notice the parts that the teacher wanted to emphasize such as the organization of the tasks as illustrated in Extract 3.

*Extract 3:*

*I understood that the pink text (text color) here in the second task is for me to reorganize the content.*

*(Subject 5)*

## 5.2 Usefulness and attitudes

According to the results, it showed that all participants had the positive attitudes towards the use of Google Docs. They also mentioned about the reasons why they liked it. These reasons can be grouped under the aspect of usefulness as seen from Table 2.

**Table 2** Usefulness towards the use of Google Docs

Usefulness	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	%
1. Noticing of mistakes	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100
2. Convenience of online accessibility	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	83.3
3. Automatic saving of data (tasks, feedback)	✓	-	✓	-	✓	✓	66.6
4. Convenience of online submitting/ sharing/ communication/ interaction	✓	-	-	-	✓	✓	50
5. Convenience of task revision	✓	-	-	✓	✓	-	50
6. Ease of following and understanding	-	-	✓	-	-	✓	33.3
7. Fast	-	-	✓	-	-	✓	33.3
8. Increasing and developing learning	-	✓	-	✓	-	-	33.3
9. Systematic correction	-	-	-	✓	-	-	16.6
10. Providing unlimited space of giving feedback	-	✓	-	-	-	-	16.6
11. Modern	-	-	-	✓	-	-	16.6
12. Saving paper	-	-	-	-	✓	-	16.6

Table 2 shows how the participants valued the teacher's using Google Docs to provide feedback. These could be grouped into 12 aspects of usefulness. The results revealed that all participants (100%) liked the teacher's using Google Docs because the feedback on



Google Docs was useful in order to help them to notice and remind them of the mistakes as can be seen from Extract 4.

*Extract 4:*

*Using Google Docs was useful. At least, I could notice the mistakes.*

*(Subject 2)*

Four of them (83.3%) thought that it was useful in terms of the convenience of online accessibility (see Extract 5). They could access to see the tasks with feedback and receive them anywhere with the internet. Apart from that, the participants also reported that the data (tasks with feedback) on Google Docs could be automatically saved (66.6%). This was useful for them because the data would be safe even if there were some technical problems.

*Extract 5:*

*Using Google Docs was convenient in order to access to see the tasks in anywhere.*

*(Subject 3)*

Three participants stated that in terms of another convenience, using Google Docs could help them communicate, interact, share, or even submit the tasks to the teacher conveniently (50%). In addition, they also pointed out that the data, or the tasks with feedback on Google Docs were always available for them to access to review online at any time (50%). Extract 6 is the example that the participants mentioned about online communication and interaction in Google Docs.

*Extract 6:*

*There were online communication and interaction. I could ask the teacher if I did not understand something.*

*(Subject 5)*

Two participants reported that they liked using Google Docs because the data was easy to understand and follow (33.3%). Apart from that, sharing the data via Google Docs was fast (33.3%) because it was online. In addition, the feedback on Google Docs was useful because it could help them increase and develop their own learning (33.3%) in terms of writing as can be seen from Extract 7.

*Extract 7:*

*I liked Google Docs because I could easily follow the parts that the teacher wanted me to edit.*

*(Subject 3)*

Finally, there were four participants who reported their different reasons as follows. The first one stated that using Google Docs was good in order to help him/her edit the tasks because it provided the tools for editing systematically. The second one said that Google Docs provided a lot of space for the teacher to give the feedback, so it suggests that teacher could write more and longer without the worry of space. In his opinion, he earned more benefits from this feature because he could learn more from teacher feedback than teacher feedback on the paper (see Extract 8). The third participant mentioned that Google Docs could save the world from using the papers. The last one thought it was modern to use Google Docs as it is an electronic-based approach.

*Extract 8:*

*I liked Google Docs because there was unlimited space. With this feature, I could learn more from the teacher feedback. If there is more space, the teacher can write more. Comparing to the paper, it is limited. I may learn less if the teacher writes on paper.*

*(Subject 2)*

### **5.3 Problems in using Google Docs**

Apart from the usefulness as presented above, the participants additionally mentioned about the problems found from using Google Docs. In terms of the additional problems of using Google Docs, the findings showed that there were two kinds of the problems that the participants mentioned. They were 1) technical problems, and 2) the user's problems. For the technical problems, some of the participants reported that sometimes the problem may come from the sharing and revision. They couldn't see the comments that the teacher provided after sharing. However, the participants were not certain about the real cause of this problem. Apart from that, one of the participants mentioned that Google Docs had to be accessed through the internet or Wi-Fi, and without those two things, it might be useless. Extract 9 below illustrates the technical problems of using Google Docs.

*Extract 9:*

*Once, the students didn't receive the comments from the teacher. I was not sure that the problem came from the internet or technique.*

*(Subject 3)*

The participants also found that some problems came from themselves. Furthermore, one of the participants also claimed that the first time of using Google Docs was difficult as can be seen from Extract 10. In addition, some of them were confused how to use the functions on Google Docs such as sharing, sending, and receiving. Sometimes the participants were confused with the way the teacher had edited because he might type

directly on their tasks without using the technical functions of Google Docs. This affected the organization of their original tasks.

*Extract 10:*

*The first time of using Google Docs was difficult.*

*(Subject 1)*

## **6. Discussion and conclusion**

The findings indicate that every participant understood the teacher's using Google Docs to provide feedback, and they liked the feedback on Google Docs based on the usefulness in different points of views. The main reason that could help the participants understand the feedback on Google Docs came from the teacher's technical use, the highlighting with comments. The participants reported that using the highlighting with comments could lead them to notice which parts should be edited. In terms of attitudes, all participants had the positive attitudes towards using Google Docs based on the reasons of usefulness. They stated that they liked using Google Docs because it was useful for them to easily notice the mistakes as the main reason. According to the participants' perceptions towards using Google Docs to provide feedback, we have found that technology affects teaching and learning nowadays. Hence, the findings lead to the discussion as follows.

According to the study, it was found that technology influences the students' learning in the 21st century or a new generation of students. As we can see from the findings that the participants of this study thought that using technology helps them learn by searching, collaborating, reviewing or even editing the information anywhere and anytime. In the 21st century of learning, the students require the skills that relate the use of technology or information and media, including the use of critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, and etc. in order to succeed in the information age (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Blair (2012) pointed out that the students need access to the technological tools and activities that demand problem-solving, decision-making, teamwork, and innovation. In other words, the students nowadays need to access the digital tools and media-rich resources that will help them explore, learn, understand, and express themselves in the real world. As can be seen in this study, the participants needed to analyze their mistakes, and solve the problems by themselves first before seeking help or advice from the teachers. Furthermore, students had to learn to communicate and work collaboratively with the teachers via online tools. Thus, to encourage the 21st century skills, the teacher needs to support the students by merging the technology into teaching. In other words, in the 21st century students must be fully engaged with the use of technology (Duncan, 2010).

There are three main following groups that the researchers would like to mention from using technology in language class based on the results of this study. Firstly, using technology to support teaching affects the students' learning (Zhao, 2005). As can be seen from this study, in using Google Docs to provide feedback, the participants needed to read the feedback carefully, and tried to understand it by themselves before seeking help. This could help them increase the use of critical thinking systematically. Besides, using technology can encourage independent learning (Department for Education and Skills, 2006). In using Google Docs, the participants had to think and judge on their own without the teacher's control outside class. The participants needed to analyze the information from the feedback before editing the tasks. Thus, using technology to support teaching could help the students learn on their own. Secondly, using technology can promote collaborative learning (Fowler et al., 1996). From the study presented, in using Google Docs, the participants had the opportunities to learn collaboratively through online sharing, interacting, communicating with the teacher and their peers in order to edit the tasks. They could ask for help from the teacher or even their peer through online communication. According to Boswell (2010), he reported that teachers can communicate with their students via Google Docs and provide feedback to their writing tasks. The students can then use this information to improve their own works. This confirmed that using online technology in class can help the students learn from the teacher as well as peers collaboratively. Thirdly, using technology through online accessibility can increase convenience in teaching and learning (Diana et al., 2005). From the findings presented earlier, we can see that the participants liked using Google Docs because it was convenient for them to easily access to see the tasks with feedback anytime and anywhere. It allowed the teacher and students the chance to upload and access the documents, review and edit the tasks from anywhere with the internet capabilities. As you can see, using online technology can support teaching and learning in terms of accessibility and convenience.

In conclusion, we can see that nowadays technology is important and useful in terms of supporting teaching and learning as an innovative tool. It confirms that using technology to support teaching can enhance students' learning, writing, and thinking skills (Prabhu, 2010). This relates to technology and innovation in education, the changing of teaching and learning with technology as interactive and collaborative tool (Hsu, 2007). This study confirms that Google Docs is one of the alternative tools which teachers may take into consideration when teaching writing. It can help teachers promote the 21st Century learning skills i.e. critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and collaboration.

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