



WRITING A DEBATE ONLINE IN GOOGLE DOCS

Kanika Paul

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

Ph.D. Scholar,
Department of Education,
University of Delhi, Delhi, India

Corresponding Author:

Kanika Paul

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.250307022>

Abstract

Writing is an important skill required for communication. One of the specific objectives of writing in the CBSE curriculum of English at the senior secondary level is to develop the ability of the students to express their opinions, facts, and arguments through speech or debates by using a variety of accurate sentence structures. That is why, a long writing task to develop creative writing skills is assigned in the curriculum. The methods and techniques for delivering the curriculum are also mentioned. One of the methods and techniques is doing group and pair activities which can be used when wanted. Generally, the teachers should motivate students to interact actively with texts and with one another. Further, nowadays, tasks are increasingly mediated by technology. In keeping with the objectives of the curriculum, an online debate group writing task was designed and administered in class XI of a school in Delhi. All the participants were female. This paper aims to analyse the task performance quantitatively and analyse the participants' perceptions. The data was collected through the task completed, the screen recordings of the tabs, and the audio recording of the classroom teaching-learning transactions. The data collected will be analysed through basic statistics and thematic analysis.

Keywords: *Learning English as a second language, Technology-mediated task-based language learning, Group learning*

Introduction

Writing is an important language skill. It is an important means of communication. It is required in personal, professional, formal, and informal situations in life. One of the language skills that learners should have is to express their opinions, facts, and arguments. In a world full of subjective realities, one should be able to express their truth. This can be in the form of a debate or a speech. Many tasks are nowadays mediated by technology such as reading newspapers online and chatting online. Where using technology provides affordances, it also demands skills to use it. For example, in a study, it was found that when the learners used Google Docs for collaborative writing it improved their enthusiasm, digital literacy, social skills, and writing skills. They, on the other hand, experienced some difficulties in internet connectivity, the availability of devices, and their abilities (Sadiyan and Nabhan, 2021). Further, the tasks might seem easy to those who are used to but they must be learnt by new users. Learners should know how to do these technology-mediated tasks otherwise they may be afraid. Jeong (2016) in his study on Google Docs found that learners were afraid of accidentally missing data due to the unstable situation of the online writing system. While individual tasks are done by the students, group tasks are also important. When learners with different personalities, language skills, and digital literacy come together, peer learning occurs. So, group tasks are beneficial for students.

In the task presented in this paper, learners were divided into groups and asked to write a debate. Learning how to write a debate is part of their curriculum. The curriculum suggests conducting technology-mediated tasks such as reading e-books. Further, digital literacy is considered a 21st-century skill to be learned by the students. So, a task was devised in which learners get to write a debate mediated by technology. This was an integrated skills task in which the learners did both reading and writing online. Reading is important for writing. Reading provides the essential vocabulary, facts, opinions, and structures that can be used in writing. However, the learners must learn to differentiate between copying and paraphrasing in online tasks that were conveyed to the students. This is what they kept in mind while writing a debate.

Research objectives

The objective of this research paper is to analyse the learning outcome and learning process of writing a debate online in groups of class xi students and to analyse the perception of the class xi learners learning English as a second language of this task.

Data collection tools

The data was collected through screen recordings of the tabs on which the task was done, screenshots of tasks completed, and audio recordings of the classroom transactions. The screen was recorded through an app. Learners were instructed to turn on the

screen recorder before starting the task. This was done to monitor their activities and get a peek into their learning process. The app took time to start. At the end of the task, they were asked to take a screenshot of the debate written by them to back up the data in the device. Audio recording was also done on mobile phones to capture teacher-learner interaction throughout the task. The recording was saved on the mobile phone.

Data collection method

All the tasks were done in the face-to-face mode in a physical classroom. In the pre-task, a presentation was made to the learners in which a debate written both for and against the motion was read and discussed concerning its structure-beginning, supporting arguments, and conclusion. It took one period to make the presentation. The learners were already assigned to eight groups. Learners of high, medium, and low English language levels were assigned to each group based on their marks in English in board exams. A total of eight groups were formed. In the next period, learners were asked to write debate in groups. Learners were briefed about the different roles they can perform such as presenter, researcher, writer, and grammar checker in this task. The next day, they were asked to write a debate either for or against the motion "All the schools should be co-educational". A tab each was provided to all the eight groups. They were asked to turn on the screen recordings. They were asked to read material online that supports their stance and take notes. It took one period for them to read the material online. After taking notes, on the third day, they wrote a debate in Google Docs. They referred to the notes while writing the debate. They were made aware of the difference between copying and paraphrasing to avoid plagiarism. After writing the debate, they used a spell checker and a grammar checker. Then, they took a screenshot of the debate written by them. Then, they turned off the screen recording. The classroom interaction was also audio recorded through a phone. This activity was done in the presence of the teacher who monitored and guided the students in this task spread over three days.

Results and Discussion

The debates written by the students in the eight groups were analysed by the teacher through basic statistics such as counting words, connectors, and errors. Further, the content and structure, coherence, quality of arguments and language, tone, and accuracy was analysed. The analysis is presented below:

Content and structure

A debate must have an introduction, position statement, and arguments to support the position and conclusion. All the groups gave a clear introduction to the debate by greeting the audience, introducing themselves and the topic, and stating their position. All the groups ended the debate by expressing gratitude to the audience except group 8. Only group five gave a clear conclusion among all the groups. Group 5 stated So, I thought you must understand the importance of co-education schools. Thank you. The rest of the groups only presented their arguments and closed the debate with formal thanks. All the groups' arguments except group 8 were well structured. For example, one group wrote It has a superior learning environment for students whereas group eight wrote Decrease negative thinking about the opposite gender. In this argument, the subject is not mentioned in the sentence. So, they could not convert notes taken during the reading task into sentences. Group 4 wrote 173 words which was the highest. Groups 1, 3, and 4 wrote 158, 156, and 156 words each. Groups 7 and 5 wrote 144 and 142 words each. Group 6 and Group 8 wrote 86 and 85 words only which were the least. The number of words written in debate ranged between 85 and 173. The groups who wrote more words had more arguments. The arguments were not explained beyond stating them. So, they switched from one argument to the next. Perhaps, they kept the time limit in mind.

Coherence

The sentences were connected through the use of connectors such as and, that, and because. It ranged from 0-7 per group. Groups 6 and 8 did not use any connector in the debate written by them. Few examples are -

- and I am here to present
- when both genders are put up
- As we have seen in co-educational schools,
- who differ sharply in their views
- because co-education enhances

They could have used more connectors to improve the coherence and connect the arguments across the debate.

Quality of arguments

The arguments provided by the students in all the groups did not give reference to any research studies and any anecdotal evidence was not provided. For example, it helps our country economically because we don't have to make separate schools. No data was provided to back the arguments such as the previous one. Providing data would have strengthened the argument.

Language and tone

The language and tone of the arguments were clear and formal and appropriate for debate of all the groups except groups six and eight. The sentences used ranged from simple to complex. But group six partially and group eight fully used phrases instead of sentences such as remove negative thoughts from society which shows that they could not convert phrases read on websites into sentences.

Accuracy

The learners committed errors in their work which ranged from 2-8 per group. The groups that wrote less than number of words had fewer errors and the groups that wrote more words had more errors. So, there was a direct relationship between number of words and accuracy. Some examples are –

- build competition environment
- parents not allow
- It encourages
- society man and woman
- Here some views

These are some of the errors committed by them.

Grades

The debates written by the students were analysed through a website. It assigned grade B2 to debate written by groups 1, 3, 4 and 5 and grade A2 to groups 2, 6, 7 and 8. The CEFR descriptors grades are from A1 to C2 which are assigned by the website. While A1 is the lowest, C2 is the highest. This shows that four groups' writing tasks were above the beginner language level and four groups' writing tasks were in the middle language level. Similarly, Woodrich and Fan (2017) found high participation but average document scores in their research. Details of the rubrics used for grading may be read online. Like tasks can be done through mediation of technology, evaluation can also be done online.

Qualitative data analysis

It was collected through screen recordings and audio recordings. Another researcher transcribed the recordings which the researcher read while listening to them. Then, the transcripts were read again and codes were assigned to the ideas in the conversations. The codes were assigned both in vivo and otherwise. After that, the codes were categorised into themes Seven themes emerged from the data analysis which are presented below.

Teacher Role

When the teacher asked the students whether they were going to write for the motion or against the motion Most of them told her that they were writing for the motion. The teacher appreciated those who wrote against the motion as the number of groups who wrote against the motion was few in comparison to those who wrote debate for the motion. She also provided technical assistance such as she checked whether the screen recording was on or not as the learners were instructed to keep it on. The teacher asked students to participate and not sit afar as the groups were large. So, they had to be continuously monitored. The teacher provided guidance in both language and technical issues.

Variety in Reading

The students were instructed to first read about the topic and then write the debate. The history of the tab showed the websites visited by the students for reading about the topic. Upon analysis, it was revealed that Group 1 read about the topic from only one website. Groups 2, 3, 4, and 6 visited two websites each. Groups 5 and 8 visited three websites. Group 7 visited 8 websites which is the most. Four websites were visited by two or more groups whereas two websites were visited by only one group each. This shows that while searching most of the group read content from the websites which was presented in the results immediately and only one group read widely by visiting different websites. While reading a group could not understand the content on the website visited by them, so the teacher asked them to read content on some other website.

Content and structure

A Group discussed the beginning. Peer help was taken to expand the argument. They were asked to add more arguments. They praised one another. They requested one another to think while another member typed. So, they divided their role on their own. They discussed and agreed with the arguments. Not only peers, but teacher was also consulted to write the debate. Another group asked the teacher if they could write in points to which the teacher instructed them to write in paragraphs. One more group discussed the beginning of the write-up. Some learners did not know how to write a debate. So, other learners helped them. Group 2 also discussed the beginning. They discussed the para structure and organization. They discussed the length of the debate. They evaluated arguments. They expanded their arguments. They discussed arguments. The teacher guided the students in how to take notes and structure the debate.

Language-Grammar and Vocabulary

Learners and teachers also paid attention to grammar and vocabulary. Group 1 asked the teacher for synonyms. They explained an argument in Hindi. They predicted the red underlined words as an indication of error. Spelling of words was asked of each other. They were not critical in accepting suggestions by docs. One should be able to judge whether the change is required or not. Another group asked one another about the accuracy of the debate written by them. Punctuation was suggested in the write-up. They were unable to understand the content in English. So, they suggested using translation. A student admitted that she cannot write in English. Since the groups were of mixed ability, the students were able to write the debate.

Digital literacy development

Digital literacy is required to perform technology-mediated tasks. It is also developed while doing the tasks. Google Docs has many features. The learners used the word count feature in Docs. The teacher explained how to use the grammar and spell check feature in docs. A learner's conversations revealed that she learned about these features in computer classes outside school. So,

some students are becoming digitally literate through non-school learning groups. Group 6 members guided one another regarding the use of Google Docs. In another group, A learner volunteered to type. Members guided one another regarding how to use a particular feature in the tab. This is useful as students become additional resources for teaching. The teacher also guided the learners regarding the use of spell check and word count. They used a bold style of font. One of them suggested adding a heading. They discussed the use of emoji in formal writing. A student told others that she was searching and noting down the main points from a website. The teacher guided the students in how to do online search.

Issues faced

When technology-mediated tasks are done, technical issues are faced by the users. The group 8 tab stopped working. They faced technical problems. Some learners were sitting idle. A compact group and tight monitoring will help to remove idleness. They faced a tab hung problem. They were cautious in writing on a tab due to fear of something erased on a small screen. It is difficult to write as the keys are small on a digital keyboard. They were cautious of screen recording. Also, the auto-complete feature use caused wrong spellings. Students faced problems with screen recording and hung tabs. The teacher resolved the technical problems. She asked the students to be patient in handling the tab. The students waited a lot with hung tab problems. The teacher asked them to discuss their opinion till the tab resumed operations. The students faced a problem when the tab turned itself off. A student admitted she couldn't understand how to do the task.

Conclusion

The learners in this study wrote a debate online in Google Docs after reading content online. They were able to access a wide variety of material to read on the websites. Learners need guidance when they are reading such material as websites have content of different language levels which may not be suitable for them and they need to search further. Being exposed to quality content, they used better vocabulary as compared to writing a debate in their own words without any reading. However, some students could not convert phrases into sentences. Perhaps, they need assistance in that area. Writing mediated by technology has affordances such as word count, spell check, and grammar check features in Google Docs. Learners were guided about these tools. Some learners did use the feature. Still, there were errors in the debate written by them. Perhaps, they did not use the feature due to paucity of time. The learners can learn to use the feature critically. When learning is mediated by technology, the infrastructure such as the devices must function properly which requires investment. Any lag demotivates the learners. Learning in groups is beneficial as peer learning takes place in the area of language as well as digital literacy. Groups must be the correct size as the student must get hands-on practice to do the task. Their participation must be ensured. Teachers still have an important role to play in language learning as well as digital literacy. Learning mediated by technology does not automatically improve the learning level. It has its affordances which must be availed and skills must be built to avail them. Learning writing with technology requires new skills to be learned. It is imperative to build language and digital literacy skills in a world increasingly dominated by technology-mediated tasks in life.

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: Kanika Paul: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No

Declaration: Not Applicable

Competing Interest: No

References

1. Jeong, K. O. (2016). A study on the integration of Google Docs as a web-based collaborative learning platform in EFL writing instruction. *Indian Journal of Science and Technology*, 9(39), 1-7. DOI: 10.17485/ijst/2016/v9i39/103239
2. Woodrich, M. P., & Fan, Y. (2017). Google Docs as a tool for collaborative writing in the middle school classroom. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research*, (16)391. DOI:10.28945/3870
3. Sa'diyah, H., & Nabhan, S. (2021). Collaborative writing using Google Docs in an EFL classroom: Voices from high school students. *Voices of English Language Education Society*, 5(2), 156-166. DOI:10.29408/veles.v5i2.3863

Publisher's Note

The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

©The Author(s) 2025. Open Access.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>