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Google Docs to Manage an EFL Writing Class: How It Helps and What to Prepare

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Article Info	Abstract
	Google Docs has been reported by many researchers as a tool that facilitates EFL students' performance enhancement in writing class, but the facts in using this tool from teachers' point of view in managing a writing class still lack attention. This article aims to describe how Google Docs can assist EFL teachers in managing writing classes as well as the strategies that can be carried out to optimize the use of this tool. Using narrative inquiry, this study employed a teacher's narratives and documentation of activities on Google Docs. Thematic coding was done to highlight meaningful experiences. It revealed that Google Docs assisted both students and teachers in terms of proofreading, giving feedback, and recording students' activities. However, during the use of this tool, sort of challenges might hinder students' progress, such as students' ignorance of the helpful features and failure in complying with the instructions. Therefore, English teachers can prepare some strategies i.e. giving clear rules and instructions, having conferences and synchronous interaction more often on Google Docs, and building up students' responsibility for the learning progress. It implies that technology itself doesn't guarantee students' improvement in writing, but teachers' and students' ability and responsibility in using the technology contribute more to the progress.

Keywords: *EFL, Google Docs, writing class* |

INTRODUCTION

Google Docs has been widely used in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning processes for many purposes such as doing collaborative works and presentations (Mansor, 2012; Mills, 2013), giving peer-review or feedback (Mao & Lee, 2020; Neumann & Kopcha, 2019; Rastgou, 2022), and improving students-teachers engagement (Mohammed & Al-Jaberi, 2021). Along with Google Drive which functions as a storage to store data or tasks in EFL teaching and learning context, Google Docs seems to be helpful in several ways. Google Docs is very beneficial in facilitating writing activities both for teachers and students. It provides suggestions for grammatical issues and facilitates language learners and English educators to collaborate in projects, either by developing content together, or by giving feedback for students' tasks, either in a synchronous or asynchronous context.

Google Docs is very beneficial for writing classes in which students are expected to produce pieces of writing, and at the same time, teachers can give feedback and/or correction to improve the students' work (Neumann & Kopcha, 2019) Different from traditional feedback on a piece of paper, Google Docs ensure the readability of the feedback from the teachers and it is well documented in the digital version. This internet-assisted learning process using Google Docs can be more efficient and flexible since teachers can check the students' progress and activity records anytime using mobile phones or computers (Chen, 2016). Furthermore, students can do revisions in real-time and their activities are well recorded through the system. Another feature of Google Docs is the correction of grammar and spelling issues which show the errors in the students' writing.

Through this feature, students can directly see the correction from the system by having the words in red or blue underlines. Once they click on the words in colors, the suggested correction will appear above. In other words, Google Docs supports synchronous and immediate edits (Mohammed & Al-Jaberi, 2021). It is very helpful to help students recognize their errors since they automatically appear in their works. To a certain extent, this kind of tool can encourage students' learning autonomy by evaluating their writing (Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014). On Google Docs, students are to proofread their grammatical errors first by using this correction feature, and then, the teacher can focus on content and writing strategy, rather than putting too many comments or corrections for grammatical issues. In this way, teachers can work more effectively since spelling and grammar feedback combined with writing strategy feedback results in modest benefits (McCarthy et al., 2022).

During the pandemic and in this post-pandemic era, the use of Google Docs for writing classes remains pretty helpful in facilitating teachers-students interactions (Han & Sari, 2022). Since writing skill is considered to be more complex due to the language factor and inability to express ideas in a good and acceptable manner (Liu & Braine, 2005), students cannot rely on the lecturer to correct all these aspects, and instead, they have to be actively involved checking their progress. In this digital era where artificial intelligence tools are everywhere, grammatical issues can be handled by online correction tools such as Grammarly, Writing Pal, and Google Docs (McCarthy et al., 2022; Mohammed & Al-Jaberi, 2021; Ranalli, 2021). Since technology has provided supporting tools, teachers can give feedback to students' works focusing on their idea development, rather than the grammatical matters. In a writing class, particularly argumentative writing, the role of students and teachers are both essential. As students learn to write and deliver their ideas in written form, teachers' feedback is required to point out the strengths and the weaknesses of the writing, to discuss and clarify students' work, and to encourage students to revise their writing (Farid & Samad, 2012; Pham, 2021; Zhu, 2001). Both parties must interact to produce quality writing. In this case, a cooperative setting is required and recommended (Prata et al., 2019) in any teaching context,

either online or face-to-face meeting.

Google Docs has been familiar among EFL teachers and thus several studies on the use of Google Docs have been conducted by previous researchers. A study conducted by Pham (2021) on giving online feedback for a writing class using Google Docs reported that students considered feedback in Google Docs as more helpful than offline face-to-face feedback. Somehow, they suggested using both feedback forms, online and offline. Online feedback enables the students to work simultaneously. Moreover, it is also very helpful to deal with mechanics (such as capitalization, spelling, and punctuation) as well as subject-verb? agreement. However, to confirm several things dealing with the paragraph development, they prefer to have face-to-face meetings.

Awada and Diab (2021) reported in their study that online students-teachers interaction gave more systematic feedback than offline. The feedback can be clearer and more readable. Some features like giving comments, highlights, and changing font color are beneficial to help students students' focus on what needs to be revised. Online collaboration enables teachers to focus on content, organization, and language while commenting on the writing strengths and weaknesses. On the other hand, it also encourages the students to take a role in their writing improvement. The help of digital tools make the student aware of their errors and deal with grammatical issues which are important to improve their writing.

A study by Neumann and Kopcha (2019) on the use of Google Docs for peer-then-teacher review in middle school students' writing revealed that Google Docs encouraged the students to give and respond to peer feedback better than to teachers' feedback. It improved students' performance in the convention criteria. Meanwhile, the feedback from teachers led to improvement in their organization, language and vocabulary, and conventions. In other words, the use of Google Docs can encourage the students to be more actively engaged in the writing process. A similar result was also reported by Ebadi and Rahimi (2017) that students perceived positively the impact of peer feedback in academic writing on Google Docs. In a higher education context, Mohammed and Al-Jaberi (2021) investigated master students' engagement with instructors' written feedback on academic writing in a cross-cultural setting by using Google Docs and Microsoft Word. Google Docs was found to be an interactive platform that facilitated postgraduates' responses on feedback and editing in writing. It was due to its features which supported synchronous and immediate editing.

Long before the pandemic, Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2014) investigated the effects of collaborative writing activity using Google Docs on students' writing abilities by comparing the writing abilities of students who collaborated on writing assignments using Google Docs with those working in groups in a face-to-face classroom. In comparison to students working in groups in a face-to-face classroom, those using Google Docs in doing collaborative writing received higher mean results. The students who collaborated in using Google Docs in this study also stated that they had good attitudes regarding collaborative writing activities and high levels of group cooperation utilizing Google Docs, and virtually all of them thought that this learning was beneficial and easy to apply. Somehow, this result might be obtained if the students are all well-literate with the tool and take responsibility for their progress.

All five previous studies presented reported that Google Docs is beneficial for managing writing classes and improving students' writing performance. However, those previous studies put less attention to challenges and problems teachers' might find in managing their writing class and students' tasks using Google Docs. The current study investigates my personal experience as a teacher in managing a writing class using Google Docs and Google Drive as storage. I started doing it during the pandemic and continue do so now that distance

learning is no longer practiced. I find it very helpful to use this tool as has been reported by previous studies. However, the implementation of using this tool often had some problems, such as feedback that did not get responses from the students or unrevised grammatical and spelling errors. Therefore, teachers need to recognize its functions and prepare some strategies to use this tool more effectively. To comprehensively investigate this case, there are two research questions in this study: (1) How was Google Docs used in managing a writing class? and (2) What are the strategies to optimize the use of Google Docs for managing a writing class? This study is most likely to be beneficial for English educators by providing a reflection to learn from and pre-service teachers to prepare better teaching and learning experience by using Google Docs.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed multimodal narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry takes lived experience and becomes means to construct meaning (Clandinin, 2006). This method enables the researcher to reflect on her real lived experience in managing an argumentative writing class and convey meanings from it. The participant is the researcher herself, an English lecturer who handled a writing class at a state Islamic university in Central Java, Indonesia. The data were collected through written narratives in the form of written self-reflection (Barkhuizen et al., 2014) on my teaching-learning activities as well as my emotional journey since particularly giving feedback on students' writing is an emotionally-laden process (Yu et al., 2021). I also used the documentation of students' works and feedback on Google Docs. I wrote three narratives; the first narrative tells about the activities my students and I did by using this tool, the second is about my students' responses to my feedback, and the third one is about my students' progress in my argumentative writing class. For ethical purposes, I informed my students that their works would be used as research data without mentioning the name or the owner of the works.

The analysis was done by thematic coding to point out some themes obtained from the written narrative and the documents. The data from the narratives as well as students' works and feedback were coded into themes or categories. This discovery of themes represents the findings that give depth to the knowledge of the lived experience (Creswell, 2014). The findings were then discussed by comparing them to the result from previous studies. After all the data were gathered, coded, and analyzed, the conclusions were drawn and the implication were elaborated.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
The use of Google Docs in writing class
1. As a proofreading tool

In my argumentative writing class, Google Docs was utilized for three purposes, namely for proofreading, giving feedback, and checking students' activities. The proofreading stage was carried out by students when they uploaded their works. I previously informed them about the Google Docs feature that gives automatic correction feedback on their works once they uploaded it there. The students' works were compiled in a folder on Google Drive. Each student had a folder inside with their name.
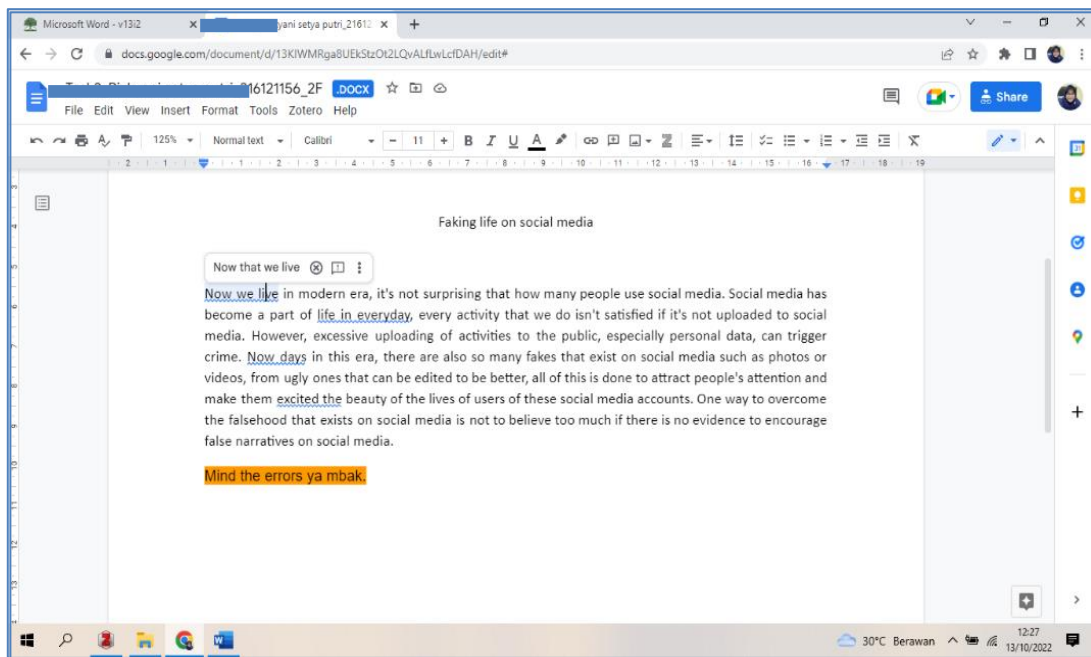
Figure 1. Automated feedback on Google Docs

Once they opened their documents in Google Docs, they would see some suggested corrections provided by the tool. I asked them to check their writing for grammatical and spelling issues. Google Docs had already given signs if there were some grammatical or spelling issues. The students can simply click on the words and they would see the suggested revisions. By clicking on the suggested correction, their works would eventually be fixed by the system. However, this tool doesn't give feedback on word choice, and therefore, teachers' feedback is still needed.

This correction feature on Google Docs is quite helpful to deal with grammatical errors, spelling, and other mechanics, such as spacing and punctuation. Students also don't need to retype their words since Google Docs will have it done once they click on the correction. However, they also can choose to ignore the correction or give feedback.

From this stage, it is noticed that the writing process indeed requires general language proficiency of the students and of course their meta-linguistic awareness in writing development by having motivation, discipline, and persistence during the writing process (Yu et al., 2021). Linguistic competence drives the students to recognize their errors in sentence development. However, it is not the single contributing factor. Even though the students have good linguistic competence, they won't show progress without meta-linguistic awareness. The students in my writing class had a weekly project which they have to fulfill. After I checked their works and gave feedback, they had to revise it based on the suggestions. This activity rhythm encouraged them to be disciplined and persistent throughout the term. Further, Mohammed and Al-Jaberi (2021) highlight three aspects of cognitive, metacognitive, and affective strategies to engage with electronic written feedback.

I believed that not all students in my class did this stage and I confirmed that they left their work right after they uploaded them. Then, I found that their works still had many errors, as shown in Figure 1. I was disappointed that they did not make the best use of the technology optimally while I had told them to do proofreading and grammar check. I also dedicated my time to give feedback on time. They argued that they didn't have enough time to proofread because they had a busy schedule or they forgot to do it. I also thought that maybe they did

not understand the instruction even though I had told them before and showed them the way how to do it. However, some students did the instruction well; they did the proofread and fixed the errors as suggested by Google Docs.

> *"I don't know how busy they were. In fact, some students were very active and performed well. I think using Google Docs is very easy. I am afraid that they actually didn't know the instruction." (Written reflection)*

Looking at many errors in the students' work resulted in less focus on their paragraph development and organization. Sometimes it is also a waste of time to comment on their grammatical errors. At times, I postponed giving comments until they revised their work.

Figure 2 below shows a student's work that has many errors in grammar and spelling. When I confirmed it to them during the class , they said they had not proofread it yet and just uploaded the file without rechecking the automated correction on Google Docs.
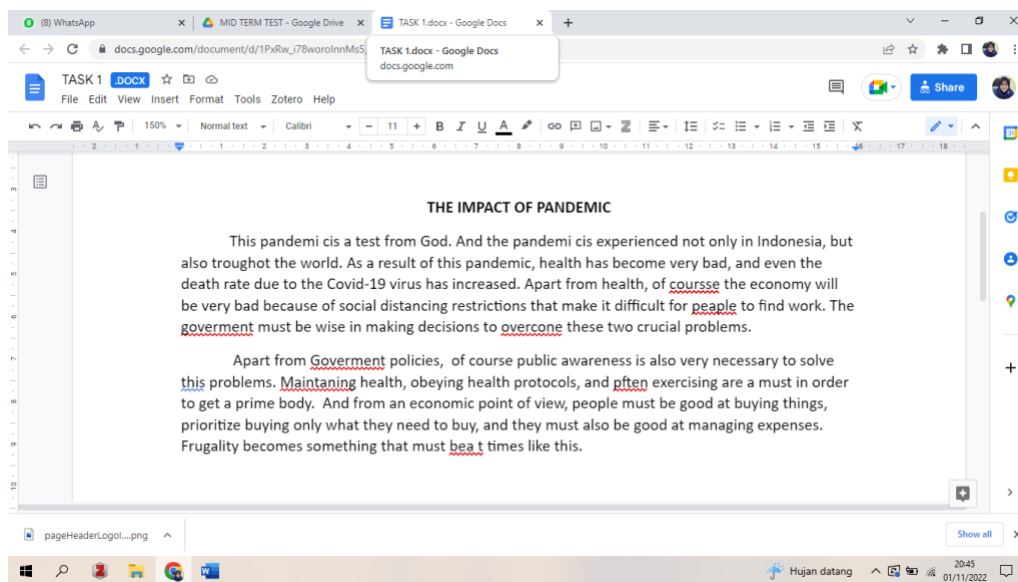

Figure 2. A student's work with errors in grammar (blue underline) and spelling (red underline)

2. To give feedback on students' works

The second purpose of using Google Docs in my class was to give feedback on students' works. It is expected that the students have already fixed their writing and then the teacher can focus on the paragraph development. I gave feedback using the comment feature or on the sheet by highlighting the parts with different colors so they could easily recognize it. Usually, I used yellow for general feedback and red for addressing very important points or when they kept repeating the same mistakes such as submitting the task without checking the errors. When I finished checking their works, I asked them to revise their works based on the suggestions. They had five days until the next meeting to check and revise it.
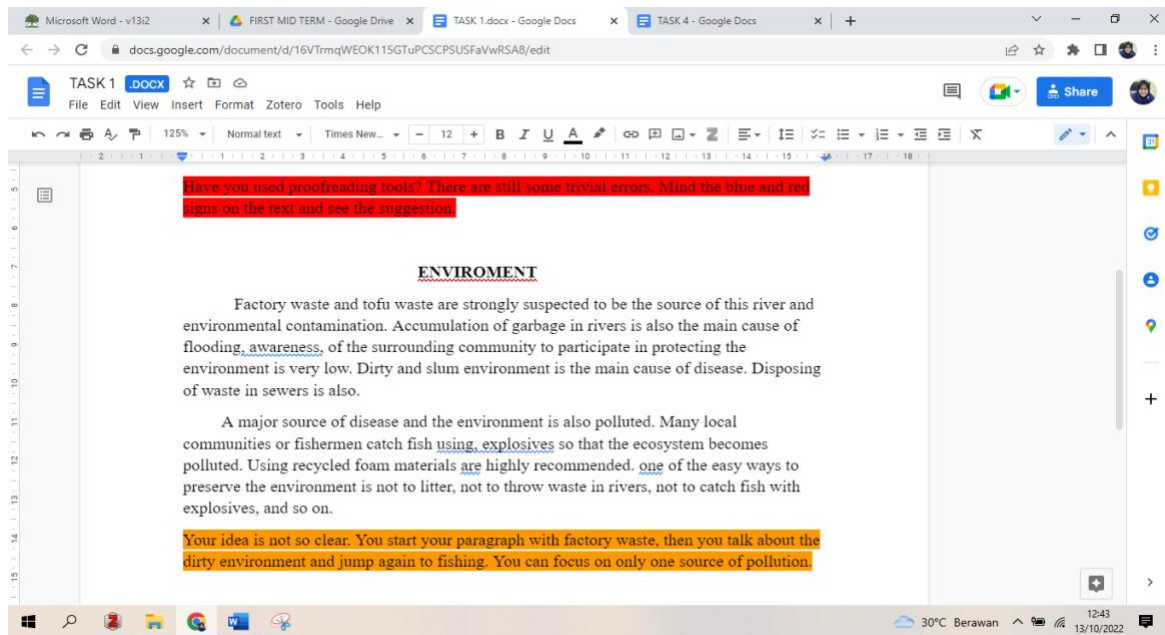
Figure 3. Comments on a student's work using different highlight colors

Figure 3 shows my comments on a student's work using yellow and red highlights. My feedback in yellow is about the paragraph organization. Instead of focusing on one idea, the student jumped from one idea to another without proper elaboration. Meanwhile, the comment in red is about the errors which had actually been detected by Google Docs, but the student didn't revise it.

What I did, confirmed the previous study by Keh (1990) who states that Google Docs is very practical in mediating the interaction between students and teachers. Teachers can give feedback, comments, or questions to clarify students' works and students can revise, answer the questions, or clarify their writing directly on Google Docs. The teachers' role in task interaction is illustrated as a 'live' audience. They ask for clarification, check the comprehensibility, and help the writers sort through problems. Therefore, teacher is perceived as a participant in the writing process rather than as a grade-giver. In other words, teachers can follow students' progress, identify the obstacles, and suggest solutions.

The students were given six days to fix their writing based on the feedback from the teacher. Many students did the instruction pretty well as can be seen in Figure 4 in which the student's work is clear and no errors were identified by Google Docs. However, a few students carelessly skipped this stage as can be seen in Figure 3. I just feel disappointed that they weren't serious about taking the course, even for the work as simple as checking their works. For those who had done the task well, I always gave my appreciation by giving compliments on their work, using phrases such as 'nice work', 'excellent', or longer feedback by pointing out the strengths of their essay.

> *"I feel sad because my students didn't even read the feedback that I have given. When I check the Drive again, I can't find their recent activity there. I spend my time reading every single word of their works, but they seem don't need my feedback. They also usually didn't perform pretty well. However, some students are very discipline and it boost my mood. I feel so happy. They directly revise their writing." (Written reflection)*

As the participant in the writing process as Keh (1990) stated, I did not expect that I have to deal with all the grammatical issues, but sometimes I have to do so. I often received no

response from students when I asked for clarification regarding their works. I tried to remind them during the writing class. Some of them immediately completed the task by responding to the feedback or revising their works, but there were still a few who did nothing. For this reason, I still need to find another strategy to encourage the students to be more active and punctual in completing the assignment.

My experience is consistent with the previous study by Yu et al. (2021) who conducted a study on teachers' emotional experiences in giving feedback to students writing. While participants who saw feedback as a way to communicate with students did experience positive emotions after giving feedback, it turned out that participants who felt obligated to provide thorough corrective feedback without any perceived benefits from their feedback-giving practice experienced negative emotions, such as disappointment and anger, more frequently. If only all students could cooperate and contribute better, this writing class would have beaen better in develop students' writing skills. Moreover, teachers might worry whether the comments will be understood, produce the desired results, or even be read (Keh, 1990).
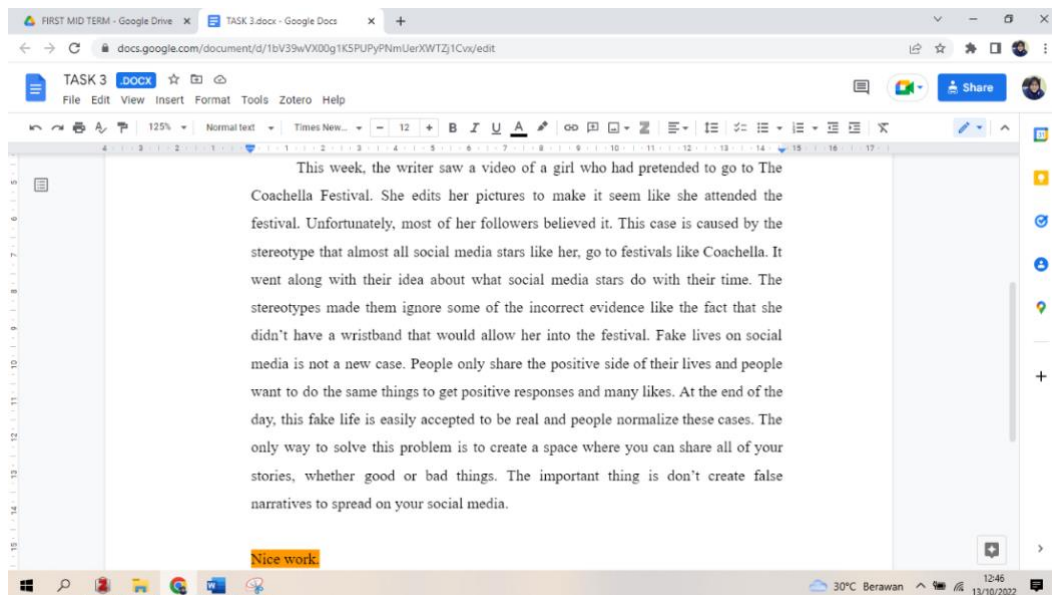

Figure 4. A student's work that has been proofread showing no correction by Google Docs

With these facts, however, I still consider giving feedback important and beneficial for me as well as my students. I could recognize students' general problems and then discuss them in class. Sometimes, I also found students' pieces of writing which were excellent, and thus I also learned from them in dealing with sentence structure and word choices. They also surprised me with their opinions and their point of views. This gives me insight that they were actually talented enough to produce quality writing. It is in line with Yu (2021) who reported that feedback activity did bring benefits for teachers such as obtaining a deeper comprehension of the students and their writing issues, strengthening their instructional strategies, improving their own writing abilities, and acquiring information in different fields.

Meanwhile, for students, receiving feedback not only improves their writing performance but also their self-efficacy (Duijnhouwer et al., 2010). By recognizing the errors, they convey the correct language usage and it makes them more confident in using the expressions or structures in other contexts. Those who are active and disciplined in completing the tasks tended to perform better than those who often ignored the feedback and instruction. It is in

line with Rastgou (2022) in the results of his study which implied that students' responses to feedback strengthen the power of elaboration, expand metacognition and insights about the components discussed, and enable students to create beneficial instructional writing techniques. It eventually contributes to their success in writing.

3. To check students' activities

The third function of Google Docs in my writing class was to check the students' activities. Google Docs enables us to see when the documents were lastly edited, and therefore, it is easy to check whether the students have responded to the feedback or not, or whether they submit their works on time or not. A study by Hoang and Hoang (2022) reported that Google Docs interaction in writing class has brought significant improvements, particularly in the area of task response and this fact corresponds to this finding. Knowing that their activities were recorded by Google Docs encourage students to give fast and appropriate responses.

Since my writing class consists of several projects, I also managed to have a Google Drive folder in which students can put their works in their own subfolder. This has made monitoring students' progress and activities easier for me. All this process contributes to how Google Docs, together with Google Drive as the storage, support systematic recording of students' task and activities as confirmed by Awada and Diab (2021).
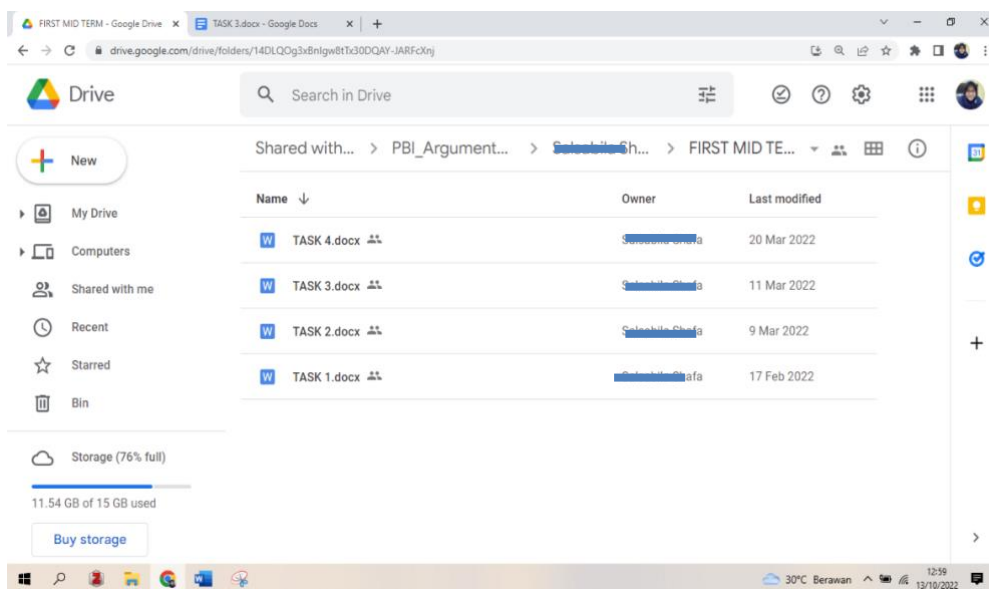

Figure 5. Students' most recent activity recorded by the system

Strategies to optimize the use of Google Docs in writing class

Looking at the fact that Google Docs really helps teachers in organizing students' works and giving feedback, it is very recommended to foster students' initiatives and responsibility to proofread their works to ensure the student-teacher interaction can run well. Another advantage is that students can follow up thefeedback and notes from the teachers directly on the sheet. It is very practical and environmentally friendly since it is paperless. For this purpose, there are several issues in dealing with the use of Google Docs to help teachers better manage their writing class as well as to encourage students to perform well.

First, clear rules and instructions are essential in managing the class. Clear instructions will make it easier for the teacher to check students' progress and activities, including when to submit the works, how to name the works, and when to revise them. Students can more

easily follow the instruction, supported by their willingness to comply with the schedule. This long-term process will train students' and the teachers' persistence and discipline.
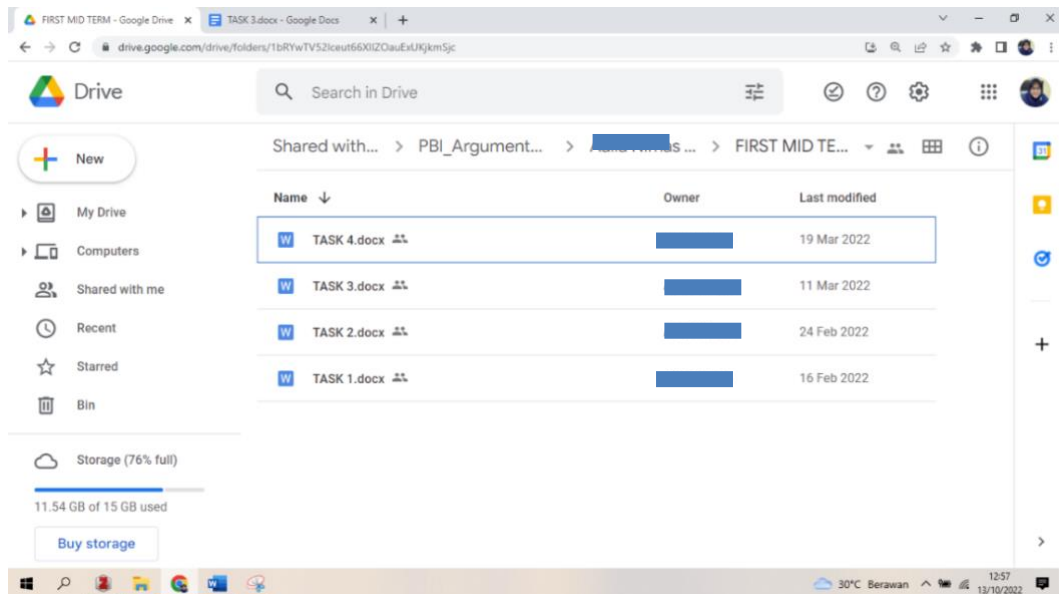

Figure 6. The task name and the deadline.

Figure 6 shows the naming of the task as I had instructed. However, several students didn't name the file correctly and it sometimes caused confusion. This naming will facilitate the teacher in identifying the newest task easily. The modified date also represents what the students had done to their writing.

> *"I don't know sometimes they don't really get what I want. Just like a simple thing, about naming the file. I only asked them to make it 'Task 1' but some of them write their complete name, student's numbers, and other words. It would be making in order by system, but instead their file will be shown randomly and I should check one by one again."* (Written reflection)

Teachers also need to ensure that students understand the instruction on how to respond to feedback. Not all students are willing to ask questions, and therefore clear instructions are needed. The clear instruction include a clear timeline or schedule. Writing is a long-term process and needs consistency, therefore students and teachers need a definite schedule. It can save time and energy for both.

Second, having a real-time interaction or conference with the students is recommended. It will show them how and what to do with the tasks. This synchronous activity allows students better recognize how the system works and how to respond to the teacher's comments.

> *"I used to do the Google Docs activity asynchronously, so I guess some students didn't really understand what to do but they hesitate to ask."* (Written reflection)

Google Docs also allows users to do real-time interactions, as Keh (1990) has proposed a long time ago. Unfortunately, I haven't practiced that for my class. Synchronous interaction may allow the teacher to see how the student works, recognize what kind of problems students have, and further identify the causes. Further, through this synchronous interaction teachers can ask for more information, shows appreciation, uses approval words, and tells the

students that their ideas are good enough. It encourages teachers to ensure more dialogic and interactive feedback and at the same time to make students become more active participants rather than only passively receiving the feedback (Saeed & Al Qunayeer, 2022). Moreover, it helps them build self-esteem and confidence to write and eventually improve their performance. It is in line with Alharbi (2020) who reported that the students-teachers engagement on Google Docs supported pedagogical practices in writing.

Third, encouraging the students to be responsible for their progress is very important. In many cases, teacher written response continues to play a central role in most L2 and foreign language (FL) writing classes (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). However, these days technology can do this stage and teachers can surely take advantage of this by motivating students to be more independent. Google Docs has provided assistance for that purpose and enables students to deal with grammatical issues. Therefore, by letting the students handle the errors themselves, it can promote the development of students' self-regulation and responsibility. Moreover, it also leads to further engagement with or investing further effort into the task to enhance self-efficacy (Bowen et al., 2022). Further, students' responsibility for the progress is also demonstrated through their responses to the teacher's feedback. The students' responses can be tracked in several ways, such as checking the 'last modified' information on Google Drive and opening the document to see whether the comments have been resolved or not.
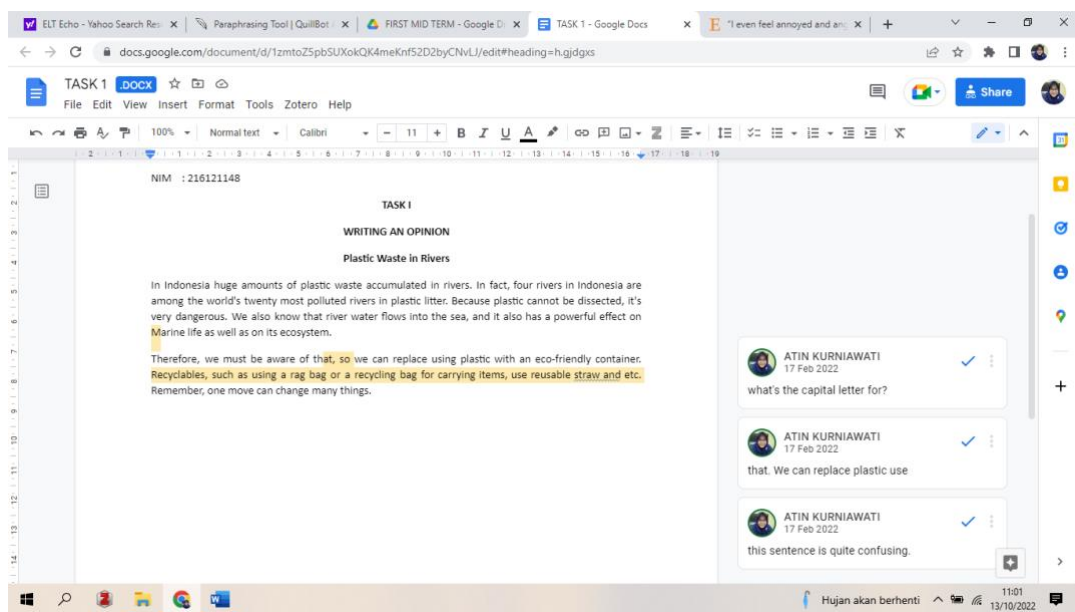

Figure 7. Feedback with no response from the student

CONCLUSIONS

Google Docs is reported as a beneficial tool in assisting EFL teachers to manage writing courses. It helps both teachers and students in several ways, such as giving automatic correction feedback and enabling interactions between students and teachers. Not only it is able to identify grammatical and mechanical issues in writing, but Google Docs also allows teachers to give written feedback by using the comment feature or directly highlighting certain parts of student's works, and the students' activities are well-recorded. Despite the ideal expectation from the teachers, several challenges potentially occur during the use of this tool. Students' ignorance of the proofreading feature makes this application less useful. They may only use it to s as a platform to do writing assignments whenit helps a lot to deal with grammatical issues. The next problem is students' undisciplined manner who don't

even read the teacher's feedback, which renders it useless. Therefore, to optimally use this tool, teachers can prepare some strategies, such as giving clear rules and instructions, having conference and real-time collaborations on Google Docs to motivate the students and let them know how it really works, and encouraging students' to be responsible for their learning progress.

This study has several limitations. It is conducted in an argumentative writing class for first-year university students. It only employed narrative inquiry from the teacher's point of view. This study implies that technology itself cannot guarantee the improvement of language skills and the metalinguistic aspects might play a more dominant role in driving students' willingness to comply with the rules and be responsible for their progress. Further studies may investigate other types of writing courses, such as narrative or creative writing, and different levels of EFL learners which might result in different findings. Besides, other research designs can also be considered to investigate the use of Google Docs in EFL writing classes.

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