

Integrating Online Collaborative Writing Into English As A Foreign Language Classes During Distance Education

Mevlüde ÇİÇEK¹ & Perihan SAVAS²

¹PhD student, Karadeniz Technical University, Trabzon, TURKEY
m.abdioglu@ktu.edu.tr
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3029-0868>

²Prof. Dr., Middle East Technical University, Ankara, TURKEY
perihans@metu.edu.tr
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9839-3081>

Abstract

For many language learners, the writing process can be a daunting and challenging journey. The present study was conducted to examine the perceptions of 27 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners who collaborated on writing paragraphs using an interactive online platform, Etherpad. The study was carried out over an eight-week period during distance education, where students worked in groups of four using the online tool, Etherpad, to plan, write, and edit their paragraphs outside the classroom. Both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered through an online collaborative attitude questionnaire administered at the end of the writing course. The findings from the study indicated that students had generally positive attitudes towards online collaborative writing. However, the study also revealed that there were some challenges encountered while working together, which affected the process.

Keywords: Online collaborative writing, Etherpad, Distance education, English as a foreign language, collaborative writing

Uzaktan Eğitimde Çevrimiçi İşbirlikli Yazımın Yabancı Dil Sınıflarına Entegre Edilmesi

Özet

Yazma süreci, birçok dil öğrencisi için zorlu bir deneyim olabilir. Bu çalışma, paragraf yazma becerilerini geliştirmek için etkileşimli çevrimiçi bir platform olan Etherpad'i kullanan 27 Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce öğrencisinin, yazma aktivitesine yönelik algılarını incelemek amacıyla gerçekleştirilmiştir. Uzaktan eğitim sürecinde, öğrenciler dörtlü gruplar halinde çalışarak Etherpad aracılığıyla paragraflarını planlama, yazma ve düzenleme fırsatı bulmuşlardır. Nitel ve nicel veriler, çalışmanın sonunda uygulanan bir çevrimiçi işbirlikçi tutum anketiyle toplanmıştır. Araştırma bulguları, öğrencilerin çevrimiçi işbirlikçi yazma konusunda genel olarak olumlu tutumlara sahip olduklarını göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte, birlikte çalışma sürecinde karşılaşılan bazı zorluklar da tespit edilmiştir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Çevrimiçi işbirlikli yazma, Etherpad, Uzaktan eğitim, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce, işbirlikli yazma

1. Introduction

Technology use in education has gathered significant momentum for decades, and due to the 2019 pandemic outbreak, language teaching and learning have undergone an unprecedented change. Integrating technology in education has become a must rather than an option. Formal education has an essential role in encouraging

collaboration and digital technologies among students in higher education since developing skills related to collaboration and using digital technologies is a need of society and a requirement for work life (Sundgren & Jaldemark, 2020). Collaboration among learners is possible with the help of online collaboration tools that have been incorporated into language classes. Online collaborative writing tools are platforms where language learners can come together to create texts collectively and share knowledge. Online collaborative platforms foster building teamwork, increase learners' understanding of foreign cultures and languages, and cultivate conducive environments for creativity and collaboration (Tyrou, 2021).

This study explores the perceptions of EFL learners regarding their online collaborative writing experiences in small groups during distance education. This research focuses exclusively on the online aspect of collaborative writing in distance education, particularly in emergency education situations. Our research focuses on learners' feedback regarding writing tasks done collaboratively in small groups and assessing how well the participants were able to recognise the advantages of collaborative writing online, which was established in prior research.

1.1. Literature Review

Collaborative writing refers to the collaborative effort of multiple individuals in composing a single text (Storch, 2019). Collaborative writing involves group members actively exchanging ideas, discussing, and responding to each other's contributions to create written content. According to Fung (2010), the key elements of collaborative writing include conflict, shared expertise, affective factors, use of L1, backtracking, and humour. Collaborative writing often involves different perspectives and opinions, leading to cognitive conflict, which can be productive as it challenges assumptions and fosters critical thinking, ultimately improving the quality of the writing.

Collaborators bring different areas of expertise and knowledge to the writing process. They can leverage their diverse backgrounds and skills to contribute unique insights and enhance the overall quality of the writing. Collaborators often revisit and revise their ideas, going back and forth in the writing process. Backtracking allowed by the features of the applications allows for reflection, refinement, and improvement of the document, ensuring coherence and clarity (Marczak, 2015). Social interactions among collaborators are enhanced by initiating and negotiating ideas, which leads to clarification of the task. Conflicting views during collaboration can help learners to learn how to solve problems. Collaborative writing is influenced by affective factors, such as emotions, attitudes, and social dynamics. Positive relationships, trust, and a supportive environment can foster effective collaboration, while negative emotions or conflicts can hinder the process. Collaborators may use their L1, especially in multilingual contexts, to enhance communication and understanding. L1 can be used to clarify concepts or overcome language barriers, although it should be balanced with the goal of developing writing skills in the target language. Humour can play a role in collaborative writing, creating a positive and enjoyable atmosphere. It can help build rapport among group members, relieve tension, and contribute to a more creative and engaging writing process (Fung, 2010).

Storch (2019) underlines the difference between collaborative writing and cooperative writing. While collaborative writing involves all co-authors actively participating in every stage of the writing process and sharing both responsibility and ownership for the final text produced, in cooperative writing projects, it is common to divide the tasks amongst members. Each person may be assigned a specific section of the text or responsible for a particular sub-task, such as gathering information or editing the final version.

Collaborating online has many benefits for learners. Firstly, it encourages personal responsibility as learners actively participate in their learning and take control of it. Secondly, it creates a sense of audience among learners as they write for real people who respond to their work. This gives them a more authentic communication experience compared to writing solely for their instructor. Thirdly, receiving feedback from peers and engaging in the revision process can significantly improve learners' linguistic knowledge and writing skills. Additionally, online collaborative writing reduces the burden on individual learners within a group, alleviating anxiety and producing a shared project. Lastly, sharing knowledge through discussions and exchanging ideas enhances the effectiveness of

learning. Overall, online collaboration in education provides active engagement, audience awareness, feedback and revision opportunities, reduced individual burden, and knowledge sharing (Choi, 2008).

A number of studies have examined online collaborative writing (Ayan & Seferoglu, 2017; Chao & Lo, 2011; Choi, 2008; Hakim Farrah, 2015; Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014). The significance of collaborative work in language learning and teaching has been stressed. For instance, Choi (2008) examined the use of online collaboration among 36 EFL learners at a community college in Hong Kong. The participants were asked to provide feedback and suggestions to peers and work on writing tasks through e-mail. Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used to collect and analyse the data. The study showed that learners held positive attitudes toward online collaborative writing and regarded online collaborative writing as a positive influence on improving their writing through increasing motivation, reducing stress, and realising the importance of revising. Similarly, Chao and Lo (2011) investigated 52 EFL learners' perceptions of a five-week wiki-based collaborative writing at a university in Taiwan. The participants went through five stages of process writing. Learners worked together in the planning, revising, and editing stages collaboratively while they had the autonomy to work individually in drafting and publishing. Qualitative and quantitative data from questionnaires indicated that the participants had positive perceptions of wiki-based online collaborative writing. Besides, they believed that peer reviewing and editing was easier thanks to the nature of the online collaborative tool since it allowed to track changes made by individuals in the documents; they spent more time revising on the wiki platform when compared to a traditional classroom setting; their motivation was higher, and online collaborative writing was effective in reducing their anxiety due to peer assistance they received in the writing process. Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2014) conducted a quasi-experimental study on 80 EFL students in a university setting in Thailand over a semester to compare two groups. They found that the students in the experimental group who collaborated on Google Docs outperformed the control group who collaborated face-to-face in the classroom in the posttests. Overall, students reported very positive attitudes toward online collaborative writing. They also agreed that using Google Docs promoted a learning environment and increased interaction among the students. In a similar vein, Hakim Farrah (2015) compared the attitudes of students who experienced online collaborative writing and the ones who did not have such an experience in an undergraduate English writing class at a university setting in Palestine. It was observed that the experimental group which worked together online held positive attitudes towards online collaboration. He also reported that less anxious learners are more satisfied in a collaborative online learning environment when compared to more anxious learners. Ayan and Seferoglu (2017) also reported the results of a mixed-method study. Their study examined how EFL learners with different language learning strategies behaved while they were working collaboratively on Etherpad. They observed that learners with different language learning strategies differed significantly, and they held positive tendencies towards working collaboratively.

Up to now, several studies have confirmed the effectiveness of collaborative writing (Dobao, 2012; Sotillo, 2002; Storch, 2005; Wang, 2009). The obvious benefits of technology for second language writing are the facilitation of collaborative writing tasks, student motivation, improvement in writing competency, development of writing accuracy, and critical thinking (Talib & Cheung, 2017). Critical thinking skills, collaboration, communication, and creativity can also be fostered by employing online collaborative writing (Krishnan et al., 2019). Learners respond more reflectively and constructively to peer feedback in online collaborative writing when compared to unidirectional teacher feedback (Lopez-Pellisa et al., 2021). It has been reported that online collaborative writing leads to higher levels of self-efficacy and better-written production (Seyyedrezaei et al., 2022).

The theoretical framework of the study was founded on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasises that human learning and cognitive development are social processes. According to Vygotsky (1978), learners can achieve independence in completing tasks after being guided in a social setting (Ohta, 2000). From a sociocultural perspective, learning is a social activity emphasising the need for interaction and peer collaboration. Higher cognitive functions emerge on the social level and are later realised on the psychological level. Learners acquire knowledge in collaboration with more capable peers. Language mediates this construction of knowledge, and

learning takes place as individuals internalise socially accumulated knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Applying sociocultural theory to language learning is likely to yield positive effects on learning since learners with differing strengths and weaknesses offer assistance to each other. Through this collaboration, learners can demonstrate better performance than individual learners cannot, as the ultimate product is beyond their present level of performance (Ohta, 2001).

Writing in a foreign language can be challenging, even for educated learners. They often struggle to produce clear, logical, and well-developed pieces in their L1 (Brown, 2004). To master the micro and macro skills of writing, learners need to choose the right topic, adapt their tone to the audience, present clear and logical ideas, and use proper grammar. However, developing these skills in isolation is not effective. A writing process that includes peer mediation and dialogue is more efficient for learners to gain these abilities (Xiaoxiao & Yan, 2010). Thus, the idea that writing is a social practice is maintained.

Considering the need for social interaction in the writing process, support from peers and the instructor can be invaluable for English language learners. In face-to-face education, most of the social interaction is reinforced naturally and at ease. However, with the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic and the abrupt transition to online EFL classes, instructors needed different pedagogical ideas and technological tools to enable and sustain social interaction for collaborative writing. Using these new pedagogical approaches and technological tools also required careful investigation of their effectiveness from the learners' points of view. Therefore, the main aim of the study here was to explore learners' perceptions of online collaborative writing that students experienced through the writing process on an online platform, Etherpad (<https://etherpad.org/>), where they shared their ideas and knowledge to achieve a common writing goal. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. What are EFL students' perceptions regarding the use of an online collaborative tool (Etherpad) in writing classes?
2. What are the challenges EFL students have regarding the use of an online collaborative tool (Etherpad) in writing classes?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

The research methodology adopted in this study was an explanatory mixed-method case study. Case studies serve as a valuable approach in social research when the researcher seeks to understand 'how' and 'when' certain phenomena occur, especially in situations where the investigator has limited control over the events and when the primary focus is on a current and real-life phenomenon within its natural context (Yin, 1994). Explanatory case studies are a powerful tool for exploring and describing various phenomena. These studies delve deep into a particular subject matter and provide a detailed analysis of the underlying factors that contribute to the observed outcomes. By examining the intricacies of the topic at hand, case studies enable researchers to gain a better understanding of complex concepts and phenomena. Additionally, the insights gained from these studies can be used to inform decision-making and drive positive change in a wide range of fields. Besides, they can explain causal relationships and be used to develop theories (Harder, 2010). The explanatory case study approach is especially preferred to see how the interventions are working and why, what challenges are encountered during the intervention, whether any modifications are called for, and tries to explain the causal effects observed (Joia, 2002). The current study employs methods to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Data were triangulated to achieve a deep and thorough understanding of the students' perceptions of online collaborative writing using Etherpad. Descriptive statistics were utilised to analyse the data from the quantitative part of the questionnaire. The standard deviation and means for each item were calculated. The qualitative data collected from open-ended questions on the questionnaire were analysed through thematic coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Ethics committee permission for the study was granted before the study began.

2.2. Participants

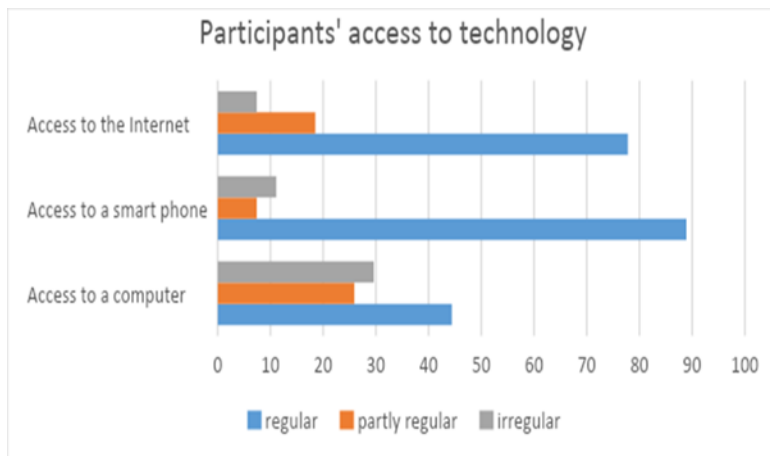
The study involved 27 EFL learners who were enrolled in the English Preparatory program offered by a state university's School of Foreign Languages situated in Turkey. The students' proficiency level was determined to be A2, with the placement test administered at the beginning of the academic year. Twelve of the participants were female, and 15 of them were males. The participants were aged between 18 and 21 at the time of the study. The participants were informed about the study through e-mail and provided a consent form. Twenty-six of the participants were Turkish, and one was Arabic.

Twenty-seven out of 50 students agreed to take part in the study. A brief training on how to use the tool was provided to the participants by the instructor/the first researcher before the study started. In addition to the demographic data, the participants' access to the Internet and technological devices was also investigated. Figure 1. illustrates how regularly the participants had access to the Internet and technological tools.

Data collected in the first part of the survey showed that 12 of the students stated that their access to a computer was regular, and 7 of them identified their access as partly regular, while 8 of the participants indicated that their access to a computer was irregular. In terms of Internet connection, 21 of the participants had regular access to the Internet, 5 of them had partly regular access to the Internet, and 2 of them had irregular access to the Internet. Another finding revealed that all the participants, except one, had an internet connection at home.

Figure 1.

The participants' access to technology

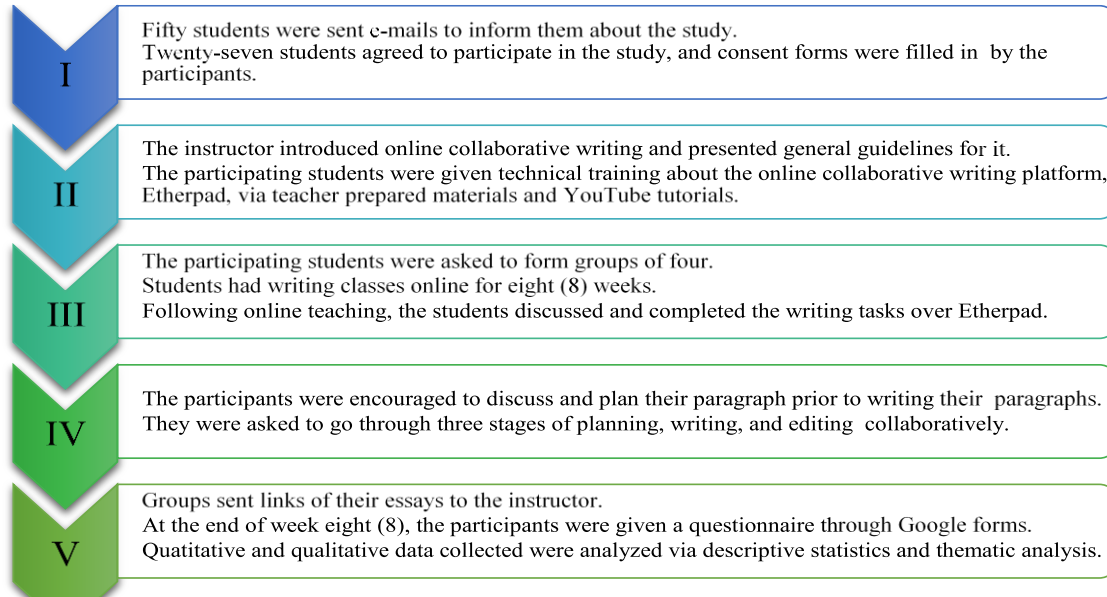


2.3. The Procedure of the Study

The study presented was conducted in five main phases. Figure 2. summarises the actions taken within each phase. In phase I, 50 students recruited at the A2 level reading and writing course were sent e-mails to inform them about the study. Twenty-seven students agreed to participate in the study, and consent forms were filled in by the participants. In Phase II, a detailed document explaining what to do and how to use the online collaborative writing platform, Etherpad, was sent to the participants. The first researcher answered the questions from the participants about the study. The participating students were also given technical training about Etherpad via teacher-prepared materials and YouTube tutorials.

Figure 2.

Overall procedure of the study



In Phase III, the students had writing classes online. After studying reading texts, which included topics contextually similar to those for writing assignments, they were expected to produce paragraphs. The content of the course was designed by following the steps below:

- a) Two or three warming-up questions,
- b) Listening activities with two or three open-ended questions,
- c) A short video activity with discussion questions,
- d) Two reading activities with comprehension questions,
- e) Writing skills practice part,
- f) Grammar focus
- g) Assignment related to the information presented in the texts and writing skills practised.

Following the online teaching in Phase III, the assignment of each unit was discussed and completed over Etherpad. The participants were encouraged to discuss and plan their paragraphs prior to writing. They were asked to go through three stages of planning, writing, and editing collaboratively. Students had one week to complete the assignment, and participants were not restricted in terms of the time they spent on Etherpad.

Students were asked to form their groups at the beginning of the study and created pads for each assignment. Group members were able to chat and work on their writing simultaneously over the tool. The participants were provided with prompts and questions about the assignment. They were required to have paragraphs of a minimum of 150 words. All the student activity was recorded on Etherpad's system, and groups sent links of their pads to the teacher after the collaboration. The word format of the assignments was also uploaded to Moodle for teacher analysis and feedback. At the end of week eight, the participants were given a survey through Google Forms in order to answer the research questions of the study.

The present study was conducted with twenty-seven A2 level students at a school of foreign languages in a state school in Turkey. The participating students were registered for the reading and writing course. The first researcher was one of the co-instructors who offered the reading and writing course. The students and instructors met online through synchronous online education every week for four hours for eight weeks. The online courses were created on Moodle for assignments, tests, and document sharing. Adobe Connect was employed for synchronous teaching.

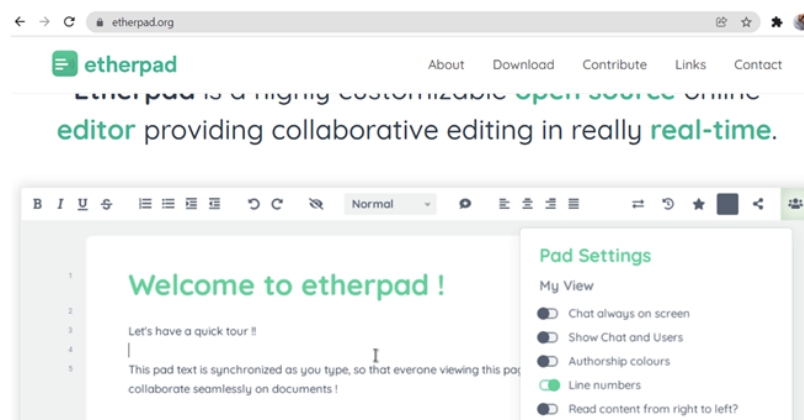
The reading and writing course was offered in the school of foreign languages along with a general English course to assist students in acquiring the academic writing skills they need for their future studies in their departments.

Students at the A2 level followed an academic reading and writing book, *Q: Skills for Success Reading and Writing 2* written by Joe McVeigh and Jennifer Bixby (2011). The students were exposed to different types of texts and paragraphs throughout the course. Groups of students produced a paragraph every two weeks. The classes met for two hours, two times a week. Students learned about planning, outlining, and revising paragraphs throughout the course. During the writing lesson, the essential elements of paragraph writing, including brainstorming, drafting, developing topic sentences, creating supporting details, presenting factual evidence, expressing opinions, and effectively utilising transitions, were covered. These key components are crucial for crafting a well-structured and comprehensive paragraph that effectively conveys a message to the reader. By following these steps, a cohesive and engaging piece of writing that effectively communicates thoughts and ideas can be created.

A collaborative, real-time editor that operates via the web, Etherpad (<https://etherpad.org/>), was utilised for this study. This tool has synchronous messaging functionality and enables several users to create texts and work on their documents simultaneously. Collaborative documents are called pads. Users can access a pad via its URL and start editing. Each participant has a distinctive colour and name, so users' contributions can be seen. A time slider feature shows all the edits done by the users. The tool saves the documents automatically. The documents can be exported to text, HTML, Word, or PDF format. Users can install the tool on their own server or use it without installing it via publicly available instances. There is a list of sites that run Etherpad on the webpage of the tool. The tool was chosen for this study because it was free and easy to use. Participants used one of the available instances to collaborate.

Figure 3.

Screenshots of the Etherpad, the online collaborative writing platform used in the study



2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

The main data collection tool used in the study was an online questionnaire that consisted of three parts. In this questionnaire, the participants were asked to describe their online collaboration experience and evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the study. Part 1 of the questionnaire was designed to elicit demographic data about the participants and reveal their access to the Internet and computers. The second part of the questionnaire included 17 five-point Likert-scale type items, which elicited participants' perceptions of:

- a. collaborative writing regarding their writing skills;
- b. improvement of vocabulary, organisation, content, and grammar;
- c. collaborative features of the tool;
- d. their anxiety while collaborating online;
- e. future motivation to work collaboratively online.

The items above were taken from the post-instruction perception questionnaire developed by Chou (2007). The third part of the questionnaire included seven open-ended questions that were developed by the researchers to gather more in-depth data on the perceptions of the students regarding their experiences with online collaborative writing. These open-ended questions included specific topics such as:

- a. the usefulness of the implementation
- b. advantages and disadvantages of writing on Etherpad
- c. the most and least effective components of collaboration
- d. general satisfaction with the experience
- e. difficulties experienced and suggestions
- f. additional comments

After the questionnaire was formed, a panel of experts from the field was asked to evaluate the items. Revisions were made according to the feedback from the expert. The questionnaire was sent to a different group of students to see whether there were any unclear parts. The questionnaire was revised again in line with the feedback from the students.

The questionnaire results were analysed to understand participants' perceptions of online collaborative writing and the overall effectiveness of Etherpad. The percentage frequency and means of the students' responses were calculated. Descriptive statistics were run to analyse the results of the Likert-scale statements. The data collected with the open-ended questions were analysed through thematic coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to identify patterns across the data set. Open coding was done to identify and report the main themes to answer the study's research questions.

3. Findings

3.1. Findings Related to the Qualitative Data

The results of the Likert Scale items (quantitative data) with the descriptive statistics for the scores of each item are reported in Table 1. As can be seen from this table, in the first item of the questionnaire, the participants were asked whether Online Collaborative Writing (OCW) was effective in improving their writing skills in general. According to Table 1, over half of the participants (59.3 %) surveyed reported that their writing skills developed as a result of online collaborative writing. When the participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of OCW in building vocabulary, 51.8% of participants agreed or strongly agreed to the statement that their vocabulary improved owing to OCW activities. It can be inferred from items 3, 4, and 8 that the most significant language writing gains were achieved in organisation (74.1%), generating ideas for their paragraphs (86.2%), and content of their writings (62.9%). However, 55.5% of the participants did not believe that OCW had a positive effect on improving their grammar. It might be concluded that OCW did not result in better grammar accuracy, according to the participants.

Table 1.

Participants' responses to the online collaborative writing questionnaire

Statements	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	\bar{X}	SD
1. My English writing skills have improved as a result of online collaborative writing using Etherpad	0	7.4	33.3	51.9	7.4	3.59	.74
2. My choice of words in English writing has improved as a result of online collaborative writing using Etherpad	0	11.1	37.7	44.4	7.4	3.48	.80
3. My organisation in English writing has improved as a result of online collaborative writing using Etherpad	0	3.7	3.7	59.3	14.8	3.85	.71
4. My content in English writing has improved as a result of online collaborative writing using Etherpad	0	11.1	25.9	44.4	18.5	3.70	.91
5. My grammar accuracy in English writing has improved as a result of online collaborative writing using Etherpad	0	18.5	37	33.3	11.1	3.37	.92
6. Overall, collaborative writing using Etherpad was helpful	0	0	18.5	51.9	29.6	4.41	.69
7. I had plenty of interaction with my classmates on Etherpad	0	3.7	3.7	44.4	48.1	4.43	.87
8. Etherpad was helpful for me to generate ideas for writing	0	3.7	11.1	56.6	29.6	4.11	.75
9. I enjoyed the Etherpad	3.7	0	40.7	37	18.5	3.67	.92
10. I prefer to write on my own to collaborate online	7.4	33.3	29.6	18.5	11.1	2.93	1.14
11. I would like to take another English course that has a web component, such as Etherpad	3.7	3.7	40.7	44.4	7.4	3.48	.84

12. Online collaborative writing was more interesting because of web use.	0	3.7	25.9	55.6	14.8	3.81	.83
13. I frequently came across technical difficulties in using Etherpad	18.5	37	18.5	22.2	3.7	2.56	1.15
14. Lack of access to networked computers impeded my writing activities on Etherpad	37	44.4	3.7	11.3	3.7	2.00	1.10
15. I felt nervous using web technology for language learning	29.6	44.4	7.4	14.8	3.7	2.19	1.14
16. I fear using web technology for learning English	40.7	37.0	15.5	3.7	0	1.85	.86
17. I was not accustomed to using web technology for language learning.	25.9	22.2	11.1	33.3	7.4	2.27	1.37

In addition, as it can be seen in Table 1. in response to item 6 about whether the whole OCW process was helpful, a high majority of the participants (81.5%) found the OCW process highly beneficial overall. Similarly, when asked whether they enjoyed the OCW process in general, 37% agreed, and another 18% completely agreed. Concerning the participants' interaction during the OCW process, 44.4% agreed, and 48.1% completely agreed to the related item, showing that the experience allowed them to interact with their peers to a large extent.

When the participants were asked to express their preference, 40.7 % stated that they preferred collaborative writing, 29.6 % were neutral, and 29.5 % showed a preference for writing on their own. For item 11, which inquired about the participants' future motivation to use OCW, 51.8 % indicated that they would like to have it. In comparison, 7 % reported that they would not like to have another course with the OCW component. Seventy- four per cent (70.4 %) of participants expressed that the OCW process was more interesting since it involved the use of the Internet use. Thus, it is possible to argue that integrating technology into EFL teaching might be appealing to learners. When asked whether the participants frequently had technical problems during the process, 55.5 % disagreed or totally disagreed, 18% were neutral, and 25% agreed that they had challenges during the process. Responses to item 14 show that 37% disagreed, and 44.4 % strongly disagreed that lack of access to networked computers impeded their writing activities in Etherpad. It can be concluded that students did not have serious technical problems during the implementation.

Items 15 and 16 in the questionnaire were formed to gauge students' anxiety towards using technology to learn English. Only 18.5% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they felt nervous using web technology for learning, and 3% agreed to the item "*I fear using web technology for learning English*", indicating that the participants had low levels of anxiety about technology integration into learning in general and language learning.

3.2. Findings Related to the Qualitative Data

The last part of the online collaborative writing questionnaire included seven open-ended questions to further explore the participants' perceptions of different aspects of OCW. The thematic coding process yielded the following themes and categories presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Themes and categories from qualitative data analysis

THEMES	CATEGORIES
Usefulness of OCW	Positive impact of the implementation on participants' writing in general
	Higher quality final product
	Improved writing skills in L2
	A positive team spirit
Perceived advantages of OCW	Convenience of collaboration
	Idea generation
	Mutual learning
	Interaction among peers
	Sharing ideas and team building
Perceived disadvantages of OCW	Easier writing process
	Organising time to meet online
	Technology-related issues
	Lack of sufficient equipment

The most effective aspects of OCW	Colour feature of the tool that shows each student's contribution Developing team skills and responsibility Peer correction Instant messaging
The least effective aspects of OCW	Irresponsibility of group members Technology and tool-related problems Lack of sufficient equipment
General satisfaction of the participants	Having a good time during the writing process An enjoyable atmosphere
Challenges of OCW	Technology-related problems Connection problems and system failure Difficulty in planning the meetings
Comments and suggestions	Preference for smaller groups Need for a Mobile phone application

In the following parts of the findings section, these themes are presented with reference to the sample participant responses.

3.2.1. Usefulness of online collaborative writing

The first open-ended question directed to the participants was whether they found the online collaborative writing practice useful considering their writing skills and in what respect. A large majority of the participants (f=24) agreed that the implementation had a positive impact on their writing in general. The reasons why the participants found the experience effective were diverse. To illustrate, participants 1, 4, 5, and 11 thought that the collaborative nature of the implementation made it possible to get corrective feedback from peers. Participant 1 stated:

Participant 1: *I think we realised our mistakes with our helpful friends and corrected our mistakes.*

Participants 7 and 11 mentioned that the final product they produced was of higher quality owing to the support they got from their group members. Participants 8, 9, 11, 19, and 22 stressed that the experience improved their writing skills in L2:

Participant 19: *As I wrote, I realised that my writing skills improved during the process.*

Some of the participants regarded the experience helped them to have a positive team spirit, which resulted in better performance:

Participant 21: *I found it useful to be able to work with our friends and brainstorm together.*

Participant 22: *I found it effective because I was on the synchronous writing platform with my friends, and I improved my writing skills with team support and spirit.*

3.2.2. The perceived advantages of online collaborative writing

The second question in this part was, "What do you think are the advantages of this application?". The specific advantages of online collaboration implementation in the light of participants' responses were the convenience of collaboration, contributing to idea generation, fostering mutual learning, encouraging interaction among peers, sharing ideas, and team building. A number of participants (f=11) expressed that taking part in such an activity enabled them to develop team-building skills that they can utilise in the future:

Participant 7: *This application improves our writing skills and helps us gain awareness of working in a group.*

Participant 9: *It teaches us how to work in a team and division of labour.*

Some of the participants (f=3) stated that working in a group with peers has a positive impact on the interaction and communication among them:

Participant 11: *The most significant advantage of this application is that there is a chat section within the application where I can communicate with my friends.*

Seven of the participants (f=7) expressed that one of the advantages of collaborative writing activity was that it enabled students to share their ideas and knowledge so that their collaborative writing is better than individual writing, and hearing a variety of ideas helps them to become more creative:

Participant 17: *Together, we can create a nicer article.*

Participant 18: *Seeing different ideas helps me think more broadly.*

It was also mentioned by one of the participants that online collaboration makes the writing process easier as all the members contribute to the final product and support each other continuously:

Participant 14: *You are writing jointly. Your load is getting lighter.*

3.2.3. Perceived disadvantages of online collaborative writing

The third open-ended question in the questionnaire asked was, "What do you think are the disadvantages of online collaborative writing on Etherpad?" The most common disadvantage articulated by the participants was organising time to meet online, which was expressed by six of the participants (f=6). They mentioned that it was not easy for them to get all the group members together to work on their writing, which made group members disappointed:

Participant 3: *Being in a group is a disadvantage. Nobody is there on time!*

Another commonly occurring theme was having technology-related issues. Even though all the participants had an Internet connection, two students (f=2) mentioned a lack of an Internet connection as a potential disadvantage.

Participant 1: *I do not see many disadvantages; it may only be a disadvantage for our friends who do not have internet access.*

Apart from the Internet connection problems, two students (f=2) commented on the lack of sufficient equipment. One of the participants mentioned that not having an adequate number of computers in the house made it difficult to collaborate as the participant had siblings, and due to the pandemic, all of them had to study online:

Participant 21: *Speaking for myself, it is difficult to deal with computer problems because the computer and phone that I have are not very good, and multiple students are working in the same house. They all need a computer.*

3.2.4. Perceptions about the most effective and the least effective aspects of online collaborative writing through Etherpad

Another question directed to the participants was related to the most effective and the least effective aspects of online collaborative writing through Etherpad. One of the effective aspects voiced by five participants (f=5) was the colour feature of the online collaboration tool. Each author on Etherpad has a unique highlighting colour. As stated by one of the participants, this feature makes it possible to see how much contribution each member makes so everybody has to work:

Participant 17: *The amount of contribution each member made to the writing was clear since we wrote in different colours.*

Another issue pointed out by the participants (f=8) was the role of the online collaborative activities on Etherpad in developing team skills and developing a sense of responsibility:

Participant 5: *I found this application very effective in terms of working for the same purpose with our group friends because the group members can assume their responsibility.*

Participant 8: *I believe we could build a teamwork environment. In the future, if we have to work from home with other coworkers, I have an idea of how to do it.*

Participant 22: *I can say that with the help of team consciousness and leadership spirit achieved while working, I achieved the results in the best and most accurate way.*

Similarly, some participants (f=2) found the experience effective in peer correction since the mistakes can be corrected easily and instantly. Another practical aspect of the application from the participants' perspectives (f=3) was the features that allowed instant messaging, which allowed them to communicate.

As for the least effective aspects of the OCW, the common themes were the irresponsibility of group members (f=4), technology and tool-related problems (f=3), and lack of sufficient equipment (f=2).

It is effective since it helped me to write. However, my teammates weren't there on time for the assignments, and this situation harmed our friendship.

Since my computer has some problems, I couldn't use my computer. I had problems working on my mobile.

3.2.5. General satisfaction of the participants

The fifth item in the open-ended part of the questionnaire was about the general satisfaction with the experience, asking whether the participants enjoyed online collaborative writing. The majority of participants (f=20) expressed that they had a good time during the writing process. The participants stated that they enjoyed the activity since it enabled them to interact and gave them a chance to speak English. One of the most recurring reasons that the participants mentioned was that working with friends created a lively and enjoyable atmosphere:

Participant 11: *I definitely enjoyed talking to friends in that chat.*

Participant 14: *I took pleasure. We were able to write and chat with our friends.*

Participant 24: *Yes, I held conversations in English.*

Six of the participants (f=3) stated that they enjoyed the experience to a limited extent since they encountered technical problems (f=2), a clash of ideas among group members (f=1), or thought the tool was not practical (f=1). One of the students found the activities boring.

Participant 13: *I enjoyed it partly because the system caused a lot of problems.*

Participant 15: *Sometimes I enjoyed it, and sometimes I got angry because it is not very convenient.*

3.2.6. Challenges of online collaborative writing

Another question in the open-ended section was "What problems or difficulties did you come across when you were engaged in online collaborative writing?" Seven of the participants (f=3) pointed out the technology-related problems they had during the implementation. Not having a computer, connection problems, and system failure were the challenges voiced by the participants:

Participant 21: *There are four students at home, and although there are many phones, there is a computer. We need to share it.*

Apart from the technology-related problems, there were some comments (f=3) on the difficulty of planning. The participants expressed that it was difficult for the group members to arrange the meeting for the writing activities.

3.2.7. Comments and suggestions

Finally, the participants were asked whether they had other comments and suggestions about the experience of online collaborative writing. Two of the participants commented on the size of the group and stated their preference for smaller groups. One of the participants mentioned that a mobile phone application of Etherpad would be great as it would be more convenient.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the online collaborative writing experience of 27 EFL learners who used an online platform to write and edit their work during pandemic teaching. The participants collaborated to write and edit paragraphs

for eight weeks. An online collaborative attitude questionnaire was employed to reveal participants' opinions on the tool.

Research Question 1: What are EFL students' perceptions regarding the use of an online collaborative tool (Etherpad) in writing classes?

The findings of this study demonstrated that students had moderately positive attitudes towards online collaborative writing. This research showed that EFL students had positive attitudes towards online collaborative writing and found it useful in improving their writing skills. Working together at the same time and getting feedback from peers helped students learn from each other and hone their communication skills. Similarly, the results of this investigation showed that learners believed that they demonstrated progress in vocabulary building, generating content and ideas for their writings, and organising their paragraphs. One of the more important findings to emerge from this study is that learners welcomed the idea of interacting with their friends, and the positive atmosphere created contributed to learners' motivation in difficult times. Learners expressed that they enjoyed the writing process and had fun with friends. It was confirmed by EFL learners in this study that through peer interaction, they could achieve better together, which supports social learning.

There are some studies in the literature examining students' perceptions about using OCW for EFL classes. Jeong (2016) concluded that integrating online collaborative tools and peer-editing activities into the EFL writing course resulted in positive opinions about the online collaborative writing experience. In their study, students stated that they enjoyed collaborating to write on an online system. The finding of the present study is in line with the research conducted by Jeong (2016). Both quantitative and qualitative data from the present study revealed that participants had a good time doing collaborative activities.

Another finding of the present study is that the participants believed that getting instant feedback and correction from their peers was valuable. This finding was also reported by Wang (2014), who studied the use of wikis in EFL writing classrooms and found that the collaboration process enabled the students to "review and revise their work and at the same time to be aware of their weaknesses in the target language" (387).

Another finding of the study is that through OCW, the participants learned how to collaborate online, and the platform fostered communication and interaction among peers. This finding is also consistent with that of Wang (2014), who concluded that collaborative activities help students to learn collaboration skills.

One of the conclusions that can be inferred from the present study is that learners believed that when they worked together, the final product they produced was better than what they could do alone. This finding supports earlier studies (Alwaleedi, M. 2020; Ciftci & Kocoglu, 2012) that students' text revisions demonstrated improved quality following their involvement in online collaborative writing. This finding was also supported by Bikowski and Vithanage (2016), who found that multiple authoring via OCW resulted in better writing quality when compared to individual works. Since the final text was a shared one, participants in the present study expressed that they felt more confident about their work. This result reflects that of Chao and Lo (2011), who suggested that OCW could enhance students' writing ability by enhancing peer interaction. Similarly, this finding broadly supports the work of Vygotsky in linking learning with peer interaction.

One of the items in the questionnaire used in this study that received a high mean was that "OCW was helpful for me to generate ideas for writing". This result also corroborates the findings of Aydın (2011), who found that students could generate more ideas while writing as they saw different perspectives.

Despite the difficulties experienced, it was discovered that participants appreciated the incorporation of technology into the EFL class. The use of an online platform for collaborative writing not only provided a new learning experience but also helped to improve the writing skills of the students. Overall, the study provides valuable insights into the use of technology to facilitate collaborative writing and highlights the need to address the challenges that arise while working together.

Research Question 2: What are the challenges EFL students have regarding the use of an online collaborative tool (Etherpad) in writing classes?

The findings of this study demonstrated that participating learners experienced some challenges during the implementation. The findings of the present study showed that students had some challenges such as technology-related and tool-related problems, computer and connection problems, and system failures, difficulty in planning the meetings, lack of sufficient equipment. This finding supports the conclusion of Brodahl et al. (2011) and Brodahl and Hansen (2014) who stated that technical problems were a significant issue, mostly related to EtherPad. Since it was pandemic teaching, students had to stay at home. Some participants said that having other students at home made it necessary to share computers, which made it difficult for group members to come together synchronously since siblings might have classes or homework to do at that specific time.

5. Limitations, Suggestions for Future Research, and Implications for Teaching

The study presented here was an explanatory case study that lasted for eight weeks. This study focused on a specific group of learners within a limited timeframe. Future research could benefit from examining the effectiveness of online collaborative writing with a diverse range of learner profiles. For instance, investigating how this approach caters to advanced, intermediate, or beginner EFL students would shed light on its applicability across different proficiency levels. The current study spanned eight weeks, providing valuable insights into short-term effects. Extending the duration of online collaborative writing interventions and assessing their impact over a more extended period can help us understand how this approach influences language learning and skill development over time. Additionally, future research could delve into instructors' viewpoints on the effectiveness of online collaborative writing in EFL classes. This would offer a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between instructors' teaching strategies and students' outcomes. Finally, to assess the relative advantages of different online collaborative writing tools, conducting comparative studies is recommended. Research that evaluates the efficacy of various platforms, software, and digital environments for language learning and writing classes can guide instructors and institutions in selecting the most suitable tools.

The findings of this study suggest that integrating online collaborative writing activities into EFL classes during the pandemic has the potential to enhance language learning outcomes. As educators navigate the challenges posed by remote teaching, it is imperative to recognise the significance of digital tools and collaborative platforms in fostering meaningful language acquisition. This study encourages EFL instructors to adapt their teaching methods by incorporating online collaborative writing tasks, providing students with opportunities for interaction, peer feedback, and the co-construction of knowledge.

Moreover, it is essential for educators to continue exploring the diverse possibilities of online tools and adapt their pedagogical approaches to suit the evolving needs of the EFL classroom, whether in traditional or remote settings. By doing so, instructors can harness the full potential of online collaborative writing activities to engage students, promote language proficiency, and navigate the uncertainties of pandemic teaching. As the educational landscape continues to evolve, the implications of this research underscore the importance of embracing innovative strategies for effective EFL instruction, both during and beyond pandemic times.

Even though learners had some challenges collaborating online, it seems that online collaborative writing is an effective strategy that can be implemented to practice EFL writing.

Acknowledgement

We, as the authors of this manuscript, acknowledge that there is no conflict of interest in this study.

Note on Ethical Issues

The authors confirm that ethical approval was obtained from Middle East Technical University (Approval Date: 23 /08 /2021).

References

Alwaleedi, M. (2020). Online collaborative writing (OCW) in Arabic as a second language (ASL) classrooms: A mixed-method study. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 2(4), 266-279. <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v2i4.459>

- Ayan, E., & Seferoğlu, S. S. (2017). Using EtherPad for online collaborative writing activities and learners with different language learning strategies. *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 3(2), 205-233. <https://doi.org/10.32601/ejal.461000>
- Aydın, Z. (2011). *Enhanced Collaboration in Foreign Language Education: Use of Wikis in collaborative writing project*. [Unpublished master's thesis]. Boğaziçi University.
- Bikowski, D., & Vithanage, R. (2016). Effects of web-based collaborative writing on individual L2 writing development. *Language Learning & Technology*, 20(1), 79-99.
- Brodahl, C., Hadjerrouit, S., & Hansen, N. K. (2011). Collaborative writing with Web 2.0 technologies: Education students' perceptions. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Innovations in Practice*, 10, 73-103. <https://doi.org/10.28945/1384>
- Brodahl, C., & Hansen, N. K. (2014). Education students' use of collaborative writing tools in collectively reflective essay papers. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research*, 13(1), 91-120. <https://doi.org/10.28945/1960>
- Brown H. Douglas. (2004). *Language Assessment Principle and Classroom Practices*. NY: Person Education
- Ciftci, H., & Kocoglu, Z. (2012). Effects of peer e-feedback on Turkish EFL students' writing performance. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 46(1), 61-84. <https://doi.org/10.2190/EC.46.1.c>
- Chao, Y. C. J., & Lo, H. C. (2011). Students' perceptions of Wiki-based collaborative writing for learners of English as a foreign language. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 19(4), 395-411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820903298662>
- Choi, J. W. C. (2008). The role of online collaboration in promoting ESL writing. *English Language Teaching*, 1(1), 34-49. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v1n1p34>
- Chuo, T. W. I. (2007). The effects of the WebQuest writing instruction program on EFL learners' writing performance, writing apprehension, and perception. *TESL-EJ*, 11(3), 1-27.
- Dobao, A. F. (2012). Collaborative writing tasks in the L2 classroom: Comparing group, pair, and individual work. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 21(1), 40-58. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2011.12.002>
- Etherpad. (n.d.). Home. <https://etherpad.org/>
- Fung, Y. M. (2010). Collaborative writing features. *RELC Journal*, 41(1), 18-30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688210362610>
- Hakim Farrah, M. A. (2015). Online collaborative writing: students' perception. *Creative Practices in Language Learning and Teaching (CPLT)*, 3(2), 17-32.
- Harder, H. (2010). Explanatory case study. In Mills, A. J., Eurepos, G. & Wiebe, E. (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of case study research*, (pp. 370-371). Sage Publications.
- 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. <https://doi.org/10.17485/ijst/2016/v9i39/103239>
- Joia, L. A. (2002). Analysing a Web-based e-commerce learning community: A case study in Brazil. *Internet Research*, 12 (4), 305-317. <https://doi.org/10.1108/10662240210438434>
- Krishnan, J., Yim, S., Wolters, A., & Cusimano, A. (2019). Supporting online synchronous collaborative writing in the secondary classroom. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 63(2), 135-145. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.969>
- López-Pellisa, T., Rotger, N., & Rodríguez-Gallego, F. (2021). Collaborative writing at work: Peer feedback in a blended learning environment. *Education and Information Technologies*, 26(1), 1293-1310. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-020-10312-2>
- Marczak, M. (2015). Online Collaborative Writing: Learners' Perceptions and Practices. In M. Marczak & M. Hinton (Eds) *Contemporary English Language Teaching and Research*, (pp. 34-43). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- McVeigh, J., & Bixby, J. (2011). *Q: Skills for Success Reading and Writing 2*. Oxford University.
- Ohta, A. S. (2000). Rethinking interaction in SLA: Developmentally appropriate assistance in the zone of proximal development and the acquisition of L2 grammar. In Lantolf (Ed.). *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning*. (pp. 51-78). Oxford
- Ohta, A. S. (2001). *Second language acquisition processes in the classroom: Learning Japanese*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410604712>
- Seyyedrezaei, M. S., Amirousefi, M., Gimeno-Sanz, A., & Tavakoli, M. (2022). A meta-analysis of the relative effectiveness of technology-enhanced language learning on ESL/EFL writing performance: Retrospect and prospect. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 1-34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2022.2118782>

- Sotillo, S. (2002). Constructivist and collaborative learning in a wireless environment. *TESOL Journal*, 11(3), 16-20.
- Storch, N. (2005). Collaborative writing: Product, process, and students' reflections. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 14(3), 153-173. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2005.05.002>
- Storch, N. (2019). Collaborative writing. *Language Teaching*, 52(1), 40-59. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444818000320>
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. Sage publications.
- Sundgren, M., & Jaldemark, J. (2020). Visualising online collaborative writing strategies in higher education group assignments. *International Journal of Information and Learning Technology*, 37(5), 351-373. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJILT-02-2020-0018>
- Suwanarathip, O., & Wichadee, S. (2014). The effects of collaborative writing activity Using Google Docs on students' writing abilities. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology-TOJET*, 13(2), 148-156.
- Talib, T., & Cheung, Y. L. (2017). Collaborative writing in classroom instruction: A synthesis of recent research. *The English Teacher*, 46(2), 43-57.
- Tyrou, I. (2021). Online collaborative written activities in L2 for the teaching of language and culture. *European Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 5(4). 34-59. <https://doi.org/10.46827/ejfl.v5i4.3744>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Wang, Q. (2009). Design and evaluation of a collaborative learning environment. *Computers & Education*, 53(4), 1138-1146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2009.05.023>
- Wang, Y. C. (2014). Using wikis to facilitate interaction and collaboration among EFL learners: A social constructivist approach to language teaching. *System*, 42, 383-390. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2014.01.007>
- Xiaoxiao, L., & Yan, L. (2010). A case study of dynamic assessment in EFL process writing. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics (Foreign Language Teaching & Research Press)*, 33(1), 24-40.
- Yin Robert, K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Sage publications.