

Enhancing Writing Engagement in Malaysian Lower Secondary ESL Classrooms through the Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle (CDWC)

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Abstract

This study explores the use of the Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle (CDWC) as a structured approach to enhancing writing engagement among lower secondary ESL students in Malaysia. Writing instruction in many ESL classrooms remains teacher centred and examination focused, often resulting in limited student engagement during the writing process. Guided by Engagement Theory, this qualitative case study investigates how CDWC is implemented in an ESL classroom and how it influences students' behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement in writing. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi structured interviews with one ESL teacher and four students, and document analysis of students' written work. The findings indicate that the staged structure of CDWC supports students in organising ideas, sustaining participation, and developing confidence in writing through collaborative digital practices. Teacher guidance played a critical role in scaffolding planning, peer feedback, and the effective use of digital tools. However, challenges related to uneven digital readiness, peer interaction management, and online distractions were also identified. Overall, the study suggests that CDWC has strong potential to enhance writing engagement when implemented with clear structure and active teacher mediation. The findings contribute practical insights for ESL teachers seeking to integrate collaborative digital writing approaches in lower secondary classrooms.

Keywords: ESL Writing, Writing Engagement, Collaborative Digital Writing, Google

Workspace, Lower Secondary ESL, Malaysia

Introduction

Today in the ESL learning environment, writing is considered a crucial skill that enables students to communicate their ideas effectively while enhancing their critical thinking abilities. Teaching students to write effectively has been regarded as a crucial academic activity that assists students in developing language skills, particularly among students in secondary schools who encounter challenging assignments (Ela Nur Laili & Muflihah, 2020; Indrayani & Sukaesih, 2022). ESL students find it difficult to write effectively because, while composing their write-ups, students need to conceptualize their ideas, incorporate grammatical skills, and use apt vocabulary at the same time (Ela Nur Laili & Muflihah, 2020; Indrayani & Sukaesih, 2022).

However, in many ESL classrooms, writing instruction remains very teacher-centered and assessment-oriented. Very often, it is also final product-oriented and therefore leaves very limited opportunities for brainstorming and revising. Such writing instruction can give students the impression of writing being a solitary and high-stakes task. Such is especially true of low secondary students who are just starting to develop writing fundamentals.

In this context, studies have emphasized the importance of digital technology in facilitating writing processes. These technologies, which facilitate collaborative writing processes, feedback, and instant editing through digital spaces for collaborative writing, include Google Docs, Slides, and Sheets (Halimatus Sa'diyah & Nabhan, 2021; Nasri et al., 2022). Research has demonstrated that students who utilize the above tools make substantial improvements in writing, displaying positive attitudes with motivation, confidence, and involvement (Albashtawi, 2020; Indrayani & Sukaesih, 2022). The application of collaborative writing using digital tools promotes interaction, sharing, and responsibility, which are crucial for engaging in writing activities (Nasri et al., 2022; Shelvam & Bahari, 2021).

However, writing is still a cognitively complex activity. To write, ESL students need to coordinate thought organization, grammar, and coherence, which are not always engaging and cause students to disengage (Jalil Fath, 2021). Although digital technologies are known to increase engagement, it has been found that many of the existing publications are more interested in the technologies themselves than in writing processes. There seems to be a substantial gap in research regarding the use of systematic writing processes, for example, the Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle, to improve writing management and engagement.

In an attempt to fill this identified gap, this study seeks to investigate the application of Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle (CDWC) in Malaysian lower secondary ESL classes. The specific study objectives include investigating how Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle is incorporated in ESL classes for teaching writing, investigating engagement in writing tasks when Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle is used in the writing process, and investigating problems faced by both teachers and students when implementing Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle in ESL classes.

Background & Research Motivation

In this context, this paper focuses on applying the Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle

(CDWC) to a lower secondary ESL classroom setting with Malaysian students. The purpose of CDWC is to enable students to carry out a writing task while using available technology such as Google Docs, Slides, and Sheets. Working with CDWC helps to enable students to become proficient at all stages of a writing task while using available technology. This is to overcome uncertainty.

Despite the observed rise in the adoption and use of digital tools in ESL classes, many lower secondary ESL students continue struggling with meaningful participation in writing activities. Writing is an activity that requires students not only to think about the generation and development of ideas but also about the use and deployment of language and organizing the composition. Nowadays, many ESL classes continue having ineffective writing lessons that are examination-centered and result-oriented, providing no systematic support for writers as they undertake the actual task of writing. As a result, students may experience uncertainty, low confidence, and reduced engagement during writing lessons.

The research examines the actual use of CDWC, the level of writing engagement of the students using CDWC, and the attendant challenges. Writing engagement is considered from three perspectives: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. While the behavioral aspects include involvement in the tasks, the cognitive includes the mental work involved in the process of reorganizing. The emotional perspective includes feelings of motivation or anxiety. CDWC is intended to address all three.

The study is done through a qualitative approach in a single class room, which is its limitation because the results cannot be generalized and the impact study of its implementation is for a limited period of time.

Also, some variables like language skill of students, availability of technology, and infrastructure could not be controlled by the researcher. Nonetheless, this research still manages to offer significant insights into the practice of ESL education. It shows the importance of having an organized and collaborative online strategy that can actually improve students' participation with writing activities. Educators and administrators would find these findings significant and applicable while weighing options for integrating online writing practices with Google Docs, Slides, and Sheets.

Literature Review

Writing in ESL Classrooms

Writing is one of the basic aspects of learning the English language in the ESL classroom, yet it is often seen as one of the most difficult skills for learners to learn. Research that has been conducted in the secondary level of the ESL classroom has found that the learners face challenges in idea generation, organisation of ideas in a coherent manner, and the application of grammar skills in the appropriate manner that affects their confidence levels in the writing process (Rakhmawati, 2020; Laili & Muflihah, 2020). Additionally, compared to the other skills of the English language, the skill of writing is more cognitively demanding as the learners need to perform multiple tasks concurrently in the writing process. Furthermore, in the Malaysian lower secondary schools, the demands of the curriculum in the examination format require the learners to compose extended prose.

Typically, the conventional writing pedagogy delivered in ESL classrooms has been model-centered, controlled practice, and teacher-centered correction. These models tend to view writing as a solitary and production-centered task where students would do the tasks only for evaluation purposes and not necessarily for communication purposes. Though this type of writing pedagogy would allow the students to focus more on the surface-level mistakes, it does not offer a chance for interaction and reflection that is necessary for the development of writing skills (Shelvam & Bahari, 2021).

However, owing to these constraints, recent approaches to ESL writing emphasize process views and a student-centric approach. Empirical data indicates that as students navigate through stages such as preparation, draughting, feedback, and revision, they are inclined to view writing as a dynamic process rather than a finished product (Indrayani & Sukaesih, 2022). Collaborations like peer talk and writing together tend to enhance idea development and alleviate writing stress among students with lower self-confidence levels (Nasri et al., 2022; Fathi et al., 2021). Modern approaches to writing emphasize the need for student engagement with writing tasks as a crucial part of instruction.

Student Engagement in Learning

Engagement has been identified as a significant factor that affects learning and student persistence. Engagement has been conceptualized through various frameworks that explain it as having behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components. In behavioral engagement, students can take part in or remain engaged in various classroom tasks through active participation and cooperation with fellow students. Emotional engagement can relate to students' feelings about tasks and can take the form of interest and enjoyment or even anxiety produced through learning tasks. Cognitive engagement is linked to student efforts invested in coping with obstacles.

In the context of ESL writing, engagement becomes a critical aspect because writing is a complex task that requires a long period of engagement. Based on research, when there is engagement, learners feel encouraged to undertake linguistic risk-taking, engage in discussions, and undergo several drafts of writing, all which lead to positive developments in writing (Shelvam & Bahari, 2021). On the contrary, if the writing task becomes irrelevant, challenging, and remote from the learners' world, there may be engagement that targets task accomplishment instead of meaning creation (Rakhmawati, 2020).

Moreover, research also indicates that engagement can be strengthened if there are opportunities for interaction and reflection in the activities related to learning. In collaborative and technology-mediated environments, the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive elements of engagement are mutually intertwined because it is expected to engage actively in class not only in terms of physical presence but also to engage with peers' ideas and personal ideas related to the learning processes (Febiyanti et al., 2021; Nasri et al., 2022).

Digital Writing in ESL Contexts

The use of digital technologies has emerged as a prominent factor influencing the teaching and learning of writing across L2 classrooms. Digital writing tools provide authors with opportunities to produce, edit, and share their writing in environments that are considerably different from traditional writing-on-paper activities. Studies have suggested

that digital writing tools may lower student anxiety because they provide the benefit of constant modification and lower the permanence of errors in writing (Laili & Muflihah, 2020; Febiyanti et al., 2021).

Digital tools also have some capabilities that support the development of writing. Shared documents, comment, and revision features in digital tools make it easy to engage students in the writing process of both teachers and students. Research studies on the use of Google Classroom and Google Doc tools in an ESL class have supported that students are enhanced by the ability to view feedback, comment on feedback, and develop their work through revision (Nasri et al., 2022; Fathi et al., 2021).

Notwithstanding the above benefits, however, literature suggests that the integration of digital writing tools requires a pedagogically sound design and a mediating role of the teacher. If technology is employed only as a replacement for the existing writing activities of the instructional setting, it could affect the potential of the technology in engaging and supporting the learning objectives (Shelvam & Bahari, 2021). Such factors point towards the need for a planned design that includes the use of digital tools during the writing process.

Collaborative Learning in Language Education

Indeed, collaborative learning is supported by the perception "that learning is a social, meaning-making activity" (Hmelo-Silver, 2002, p. 848). For second language learning, collaboration enables students to engage with meaning construction, articulate their thoughts, and improve their language use practice with other students' help. There is evidence, for example, that collaborative writing activities can promote idea development, increase language feature awareness, and mitigate the feelings of isolation usually found in solitary writing exercises (Fathi et al., 2021; Nasri et al., 2022).

Peer feedback is significantly important in collaborative learning settings. By providing as well as receiving feedback, the learners are encouraged to reflect on the issue of clarity, coherence, as well as appropriateness in terms of the perspective of the reader. Even if the feedback provided by peers is not of the highest quality, empirical evidence has found that the activity is associated with higher levels of cognitive as well as emotional engagement with the writing task (Fathi et al., 2021).

However, collaborative learning works better in a goal-oriented way with instructions from the teachers, especially in an ESL setting where students may have varying levels of proficiency or confidence. The literature also underscores the importance of having a structured approach to collaborative learning in a way that prevents unequal contribution or the mere appearance of collaboration in students' participation in the writing activity (Shelvam & Bahari, 2021).

Digital Collaborative Writing and Related Studies

Digital collaborative writing studies have also proved that blending the concepts of collaborative learning with digital environments can be effectively used for writing development and engagement. ESL and EFL-based studies have indicated that online shared documents help students engage actively in writing activities, share their ideas, and identify linguistic features through peer and teacher interactions (Fathi et al., 2021; Nasri et al., 2022).

Process studies on digital writing illustrate how important it is to use technology to help students prepare, write, provide and get feedback, and revise their work. Google Docs provides an opportunity for the student to save the document at each stage of writing, allowing revision based on the received feedback at their own pace, thus allowing for reflection and revision processes to be an essential part of writing (Indrayani & Sukaesih, 2022; Febiyanti et al., 2021).

However, most studies have tended to be related to short-term implementation or specific technology tools and therefore lack the scope to inform longer term teaching practices in a class environment in a considered manner. There has been a lack of studies conducted related to the digital collaborative writing frameworks in Malaysian lower secondary ESL settings and specifically related to learner engagement principles in a considered manner.

Research Gap

Numerous studies had been conducted on the use of online writing processes and collaboration methods within English language learning. From previous research that had been conducted, it was determined that online tools were used to foster interaction and revision procedures within ESL online writing instruction and were linked to an increase in students' motivation and engagement (Fathi et al., 2021; Nasri et al., 2022; Fitriani, 2024). Although much insight had been gained from previous studies, there were also several drawbacks to the existing knowledge.

One of the issues that are particularly significant in relation to the length of time for these instructional interventions. Indeed, many of the studies that explored the use of digital or collaborative writing strategies were only carried out over the short term, in some instances spanning only one class or instructional cycle. As highlighted by Alnajashi (2024), these types of study designs made it extremely difficult to ascertain the progress of the students in relation to their writing development and levels of engagement.

Moreover, the absence of context-specific studies on Malaysian lower secondary ESL students in the existing literature seemed to have been a problem. Despite the fact that the existing studies conducted by Lim (2022) and Thayabaran (2024) did entail the application of online platforms in the teaching of writing in Malaysia, these studies seemed to focus to a large extent on upper primary schoolchildren and secondary student groups. Consequently, the views and needs of the students in the lower secondary category did not seem to receive ample representation in the existing scholarship, especially because these students seemed to undertake more complex writing tasks than in the previous phases.

There were also limitations in terms of their methodology. To a large extent, existing research work utilized data that was perception-driven, either in the form of a questionnaire or survey. Though valuable inferences were derived from the work conducted by Aldossary (2022) and Cevallos (2025) on the perceptions of learners and teachers about digital collaborative writing, relatively little attention was given to the involvement and activities that took place within the class with regard to collaborative writing among pupils.

Moreover, the mediating role of the teacher within the digital writing environment also remained somewhat unattended, even when the issue of collaboration had been raised quite often. The studies conducted on the subject by Fitriani (2024), Fadli (2025), & Gómez Correa (2023) highlighted more on the interactions between the peers, but left less scope in their discussions on whether the teaching staff had been able to mediate or regulate the writing process among the collaborating individuals.

Notably, these research gaps established a compelling imperative for a research study that explored a systematic, process-oriented digital collaborative writing cycle in a specific defined educational context with significant support from teacher intervention. As such, the empirical investigation reported in the current research study explored the Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle in a Malaysian lower secondary class for ESL students with a specific focus on the learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement with the digital collaborative writing cycle under investigation using a qualitative approach to a specific case study.

Research Methods

This chapter shows the methodology used in the study on the implementation of the Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle in a Malaysian lower secondary ESL classroom. It covers the research design, participants involved, methods of data collection, research instruments, and the approach used for data analysis. In addition, considerations related to trustworthiness and ethical issues are also addressed. The methodological approach is developed in line with the research objectives and research questions concerning CDWC implementation, students' writing engagement, and challenges encountered in classroom practice.

The research design employed in this study has a qualitative approach since it permits a close examination of the implementation of the Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle and its impact on promoting writing engagement among students in the lower secondary school's ESL class. A case study design is employed to provide a detailed and contextualised examination of CDWC within a single ESL classroom. The case study focuses on one lower secondary class in a Malaysian international school, enabling the researcher to examine teaching practices, student engagement, and challenges within a bounded and natural setting. The study was conducted in a natural classroom setting to allow systematic observation of CDWC implementation during actual writing lessons. Additionally, the research design has placed emphasis on three major aspects, which include the application of CDWC, the engagement of the students in the writing task, and the challenges that both teachers and students may encounter.

The study took place in a Malaysian international school that offers English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction at the lower secondary level. The population of the study comprised lower secondary ESL students and an ESL teacher involved in writing lessons that incorporated the Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle (CDWC). Purposive sampling was used to choose participants who were directly involved in the implementation of CDWC. This approach was appropriate as it enabled the researcher to select participants who could give relevant information. One ESL teacher and four lower secondary ESL students were part of the sample. The selected teacher was chosen based on experience in implementing CDWC

during writing lessons. The four students were selected because they took part actively in CDWC writing activities and were able to describe their experiences with collaborative digital writing. The participants would be aware of the sampling procedure so that they can provide valuable information concerning this procedure's implementation, writing engagement, and challenges.

Various methods have been used to obtain data in this research to enable the collection of comprehensive qualitative data. These methods involve classroom observation, conducting semi-structured interviews, and analyzing documents. Classroom observation was done in relation to CDWC-based writing classes to identify how the teaching strategy was employed and how the students engaged with the writing exercise. Semi-structured interviews were also done to students and the ESL teacher, to get a deeper understanding on how they were affected and responded to concerns linked to the adoption of CDWC. Document analysis consisted of reviewing the writings done by students during CDWC classes. These data gathering techniques complemented each other since they offered different insights into a single phenomenon. By doing so, this study took advantage of triangulation and offered a comparison of data gathered from observation, interviews, and documents to provide a more complete insight into CDWC implementation, writing engagement of students, and difficulties that occurred during writing.

Three research instruments were used in this study to address the research questions: classroom observation, semi-structured student interviews, and a semi-structured teacher interview. Classroom observation was used as the main instrument to address Research Question 1 (RQ1) on the implementation of the Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle. The observation concentrated on the teaching process, classroom activities, and the integration of digital tools during CDWC-based writing lessons. Field notes were taken to record the stages of the writing cycle and student interactions during collaborative activities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four selected students in order to address Research Question 2 (RQ2) on students' writing engagement. The interview questions focused on students' motivation, interest, confidence, and experiences of working collaboratively using digital tools. This instrument allowed students to express their views and reflect on their engagement during the writing process. A semi-structured interview was carried out with the ESL instructor to facilitate responses to Research Question 3 (RQ3) regarding challenges encountered in CDWC implementation. The interview was conducted to learn about teaching difficulties, managing a classroom, and technological issues. The techniques collectively gathered data that responded to research objectives and questions.

Before commencing the study, consent was obtained from the administration of the school where the study would be carried out. Both the teacher and the students were then informed about the nature and procedure of the study that they would undertake. Consent was obtained before the start of the study. The ESL teacher provided writing class lessons employing the Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle within the normal classroom program. During these lessons, observations were conducted within the classrooms to investigate the implementation of CDWC and student engagement with writing tasks. Immediately after conducting the observation lessons, interviews were conducted among four identified students to investigate student engagement with writing and collaboration with digital writing tools. An interview was also conducted to the ESL teacher to investigate difficulties

encountered during the implementation of CDWC. These interviews were all recorded in audio format and later transcribed.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data collected from observations, interviews, and documents analysis. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Observation notes and interview transcripts were reviewed a number of times to gain familiarity with the data. Initial coding was used to identify meaningful units related to CDWC implementation, writing engagement, and challenges. Related codes were grouped into themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure accuracy. Finally, the themes were organised according to the research questions and interpreted to address the research objectives of the study.

The trustworthiness of this study was supported through several measures applied during the research process. Credibility was assured using proper procedure and accurate transcription of research data was obtained from interviews. Data obtained from classroom observation, interviews, and documents was corroborated to ensure it was consistent across sources. Dependability was assured using the same research instruments throughout and maintaining accurate records of each stage of data analysis and collection. Confirmation procedures helped to ensure that findings correspond to what actually occurred among participants and are free from any influences from the researcher's personal perspective.

Ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the research. Permission for the research was sought from the administration at the school before carrying out the research. The ESL teacher and the research participants were informed about the research objectives, procedures for carrying out the research, as well as their role as research participants. Informed consent was obtained, and participation was voluntary. Participants were guaranteed that their identities would be kept private, and pseudonyms were utilised to protect anonymity. All data collected were stored securely and used solely for research purposes. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

This chapter has pointed out the methodological approach pursued in this study concerning the research design, population/sampling, methods of data collection, research instrument, and analysis of the collected data. It has also tackled concerns with regard to trust and the trustworthiness of this study. In conclusion, the methodology approach used ensures that it tackles the implementation of the Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle and writing engagement by students.

Interview Results

The Lesson Structure Provides Clear Writing Support but Requires Strong Scaffolding to Sustain Engagement

The structure of the lesson offers a great amount of writing support but has to be well scaffolded to retain the interest of the learners. The major factor that most students indicated helped them during the writing task was the staged nature of the collaborative digital cycle. This allowed the students to sequentially work on the writing task rather than dealing with it as a single task. For instance, the writing cycle involved brainstorming, planning, writing, peer response, and reflection. This helped the students tackle the writing task step by step rather

than approaching it at once.

Some students indicated that digital planning tools played an important role in supporting idea organisation. In this regard, being able to organize paragraph structure in an informal email through Google Sheets assisted students in visualizing paragraph structure before actual writing began.

One student explained:

“When using Google Sheets, the outline for introduction, body, and conclusion is already prepared, which makes it easier for me to focus on writing” (Student 2).

Another student similarly reported:

“Digital tools help me organize my thoughts better” (Student 3).

Also, classroom observation confirmed that when the teacher explicitly demonstrated each stage of the process, with the use of the projector showing examples, students confidently transitioned between activities. From the lesson plan, it was clear that modelling was strategically included before collaborative outlining and drafting, helping the smooth execution of the lesson activities. Nevertheless, with the structured activities, it was identified by both students and the teacher that some students still needed more time to fully engage with the planning process.

According to the teacher, it has remained much harder to handle the stage of planning, especially in cases where students lack experience in applying digital tools in note organization. According to the teacher, *“students may struggle to plan their writing and require more time to become familiar with Google Workspace applications before they become adept at utilizing it”* (Teacher). This implies that despite the efficiency of the lesson design in engaging students’ participation, its success relies on students’ level of digital preparedness.

Teacher Guidance Supports Writing Development but Uneven Digital Confidence Affects Lesson Flow

Findings from the interview indicated that the role of teacher direction could not be overemphasized in influencing the students’ engagement while writing online. The students clearly indicated that proper explanations and calm instructional delivery by the teacher helped them a great deal while writing online. Student 4 indicated that they stayed on task because *“the teacher explained everything clearly and in a gentle way.”* Student 2 indicated that it became easier and more engaging because there was a clear writing map on the screen.

However, the teacher also pointed out some challenges in incorporating digital tools with writing lessons. Although Google Docs and Google Slides were relatively simple tools for students to use, working with Google Sheets proved challenging for some students. The teacher noted that some students were not aware of how to organize their thoughts using cells in a Google Sheet and thus needed more time in instructional lessons (Teacher).

The teacher also revealed that the stage of commenting was the most challenging stage for the students to control. The teacher highlighted that the peer commenting stage was particularly challenging for students, as many were unsure about how to provide appropriate feedback and expressed concern about making mistakes when responding to their peers' work.

The teacher explained:

"students are often unsure of what to say and are sometimes afraid of giving incorrect or inappropriate feedback to their peers" (Teacher).

This suggests that while teacher support promoted writing development, differences in students' confidence and digital literacy influenced the pace and effectiveness of peer feedback activities.

Peer Interaction Encourages Idea Development but Can Become a Source of Distraction

Peer interaction emerged as a significant component of the digital writing lesson, with students reporting both positive learning experiences and challenges related to collaboration.

One student described the benefit of peer feedback in identifying writing errors:

"My friends were also able to see what I had written and correct me." (Student 3).

Another student emphasised the value of feedback for mutual learning:

"Feedback is important as it helps both sides understand mistakes" (Student 2).

However, some students indicated that collaboration could become distracting during the writing process, particularly when peers edited shared documents simultaneously.

One student commented:

"People edited my document when I was still writing, so it was kind of uncomfortable. However, I had to stop collaborating on the document and share another link so that I could continue writing on my own." (Student 1).

This response suggests that while collaboration supported learning, a lack of clear boundaries during shared writing could hinder students' ability to concentrate on individual drafting tasks.

Classroom observation further confirmed these challenges, as some learners were observed switching between different documents or accessing unrelated online activities after completing their writing tasks. The teacher also noted the need for close supervision in digital environments, explaining:

"Some learners switch to sites not related to their tasks after completion." (Teacher)

Nevertheless, peer interaction remained beneficial for idea development and error awareness, provided that clear guidance and monitoring were in place to support effective collaboration.

Digital Writing Tools Enhance Confidence but Introduce New Distraction Risks

Students reported that writing using digital tools enhanced their confidence, particularly in relation to language accuracy. Features such as automated grammar and spelling support helped students identify errors independently, which contributed to greater assurance during the writing process.

One student explained:

“Google Docs identifies grammar mistakes for me to correct them; this enhances my confidence” (Student 4).

This response indicates that instant feedback provided by digital writing tools supported students’ self-monitoring and reduced anxiety related to language accuracy.

Another student noted that online writing facilitated idea development through immediate feedback during the writing process.

“The feedback helps me improve my ideas while I am writing.” (Student 3)

In addition, digital writing activities were perceived as more engaging than traditional paper-based writing tasks. Students associated online learning environments with increased interest and motivation.

A student stated:

“Writing on papers can be a little boring at times, but learning online is more exciting” (Student 4).

Despite these benefits, students also experienced challenges related to focus and self-regulation during online writing activities.

One student admitted:

“This was one disadvantage of using a laptop because it allows access to many other applications” (Student 1).

The teacher further noted that technical issues occasionally disrupted lesson flow:

“Sometimes connection problems affect the smooth running of the lesson.” (Teacher)

Overall, the findings suggest that while digital writing tools enhanced students’ confidence and engagement, effective classroom management and self-regulation strategies were necessary to minimise distractions during online writing tasks.

Student Motivation and Emotional Factors Influence Engagement in Digital Writing

Students’ motivation and emotional responses played an important role in shaping their engagement during digital writing activities. Students who were confident in using technology demonstrated greater willingness to participate in writing tasks, comment on peers’ work, and complete assigned activities independently.

One student explained:

“When I make mistakes, the system shows me and helps me correct them [in] digital writing, which boosts my confidence.” (Student 4)

This suggests that immediate feedback provided through digital writing tools contributed to increased confidence and reduced anxiety during the writing process.

Conversely, some students experienced initial hesitation when providing feedback on peers’ work, particularly when language accuracy was involved.

One student shared:

“I felt a bit nervous while commenting.” (Student 3)

The teacher confirmed this observation and explained that structured guidance helped reduce students’ anxiety:

“All students were initially reluctant when commenting, but sentence starters and clear criteria helped ease their anxiety.” (Teacher)

These emotional factors influenced students’ engagement with writing activities. Students were more willing to participate when they felt supported, whereas uncertainty and fear of making mistakes reduced their confidence and level of interaction.

In conclusion, what has been found is that the Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle offered significant learning contexts in which the engagement of students in writing was supported in a structured manner using digital technology effectively and collaboratively. Nevertheless, factors associated with digital readiness, peer management in interaction, and self-regulation in relation to the engagement of the learners have affected the outcomes to a certain extent.

Conclusion

The study focused on the application of the Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle (CDWC) and its effectiveness to promote engagement with writing tasks among lower secondary ESL students in Malaysia. In sum, the evidence suggested that the CDWC provided organized and relevant contexts that enabled students’ engagement with writing as an activity mediated by digital technology on a collaborative approach. In an organized manner that involved the stages of writing from planning, drafting, revising, to the final stage of editing, the CDWC demystified the whole process that had been perceived as complicated by the students.

It is apparent that the application of technology in the form of Google Docs, Google Sheets, or Google Slides facilitated positive behavioural, cognitive, and affective engagement on the part of the students. As the students engaged in the use of the technology tools, they were more eager to take part in the collaborative writing activities. In addition to this, the students seemed more organised as they confidently dealt with their writing. Instructional guidance by the teachers played an essential part in promoting the level of engagement.

However, the research also identified that several issues affected the results of the implementation of the CDWC. Problems associated with the lack of equality in digital readiness, the struggle to handle peer interaction, and the problem of the students' self-regulation skills played a certain role in the degree of engagement. Moreover, certain students felt nervous in offering as well as receiving the feedback of their peers. In some instances, it restricted the quality of the peer interactive function.

Although it was implemented in a single classroom setting, this research still managed to give insights into how a structured online collaborative writing strategy can be effectively used on lower secondary students learning English as a Second Language. There are, however, some limitations in this research that must be taken into account. The results of this research cannot be generalised, and a possible limitation on the long-term effects of CDWC on student writing engagement in a relatively short period of research implementation. Future studies can thus include longitudinal designs to explore long-term participation as well as variations of the CDWC adapted to reduce students' anxiety levels during peer reviewing exercises. With proper teacher facilitation, the Collaborative Digital Writing Cycle can thus continue to be useful as a strategy enabling rich levels of engagement within ESL writing classes.

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