

## Using Google Docs to facilitate collaborative writing in an English Language course

Title	Google Docs
Developer	Google Inc.
Homepage	<a href="https://docs.google.com/">https://docs.google.com/</a>
Type of product	A Google product for creating and sharing online documents
Minimum hardware requirements	A personal computer (PC or Mac) with Internet connection and one of these browsers: Internet Explorer 7 or above; Mozilla Firefox 2 or above; Google Chrome 1 or above; Safari 3 or above
Supplementary requirement	A Gmail account
Online help	Google Docs Help [Available at: <a href="http://docs.google.com/support/">http://docs.google.com/support/</a> ]
Price	Free

## Introduction

With the development and advancement of computer network, online collaborative learning becomes possible even if students cannot meet in a classroom (Macdonald, 2006). In a writing classroom, collaborative writing can also be encouraged with the use of the World Wide Web (WWW). For collaborative writing, Haring-Smith (1994, p. 360) defines it as involving more than one person who contributes to the creation of a text and so “sharing responsibility” becomes essential. Most often, a group brainstorms the ideas of a text which is drafted by one or more individuals working alone and then revised by the other individual learner in collaborative writing.

Computer networks make collaborative writing easier (Haring-Smith, 1994). They allow students to co-author an article with another by exchanging drafts electronically. A number of emerging Web 2.0 (the second generation of the World Wide Web) technologies can facilitate collaborative writing and collaborative editing among students. These well-known web technologies include blogs (also referred to as weblogs) and wikis. While the former allow writing to be shared more easily (Bloch, 2008), the latter allow anyone to edit, modify, or even delete the content on the website (Lamy & Hampel, 2007). The purpose of this paper, however, aims to introduce another Web 2.0 application, Google Docs, which includes the functions of blogs and wikis. Sharp (2009, p. 208) suggests that Collaborative Editing tools allow a group of individuals to edit a document “simultaneously” and they can view the changes made by others to that document “in real time”. It is the collaborative editing tool that makes Google Docs a powerful program which can facilitate collaborative writing in a language classroom. An overview about Google Docs and how Google Docs is used will be presented in the following sections.

## **An Overview of Google Docs**

Google Docs is “a free, web-based word processor, spreadsheet, presentation, form, and data storage service offered by Google” (Wikipedia, 2010a). It allows users to create, edit and store their documents online (Thompson, 2008). Google Docs includes four major options: Google Documents, Google Spreadsheets, Google Presentations, and Google Drawing. The functions of each of them are similar. To explain how the functions of Google Docs can facilitate students’ collaborative writing in an English language classroom, this paper is mainly focused on discussing Google Documents.

## **The Use of Google Docs**

### **Creating and editing a Google document**

To start using Google Documents, users need to sign in to their Gmail account at [mail.google.com](mailto:mail.google.com) (Simply create an account if the users do not have a Gmail account). To create a new document, they can click the ‘Create new’ drop-down menu in the Docs List on the left-hand side of the Windows and select ‘Document’, or use one of the templates available by clicking ‘From template’ (see Figure 1). The templates which are more suitable to be used in a language classroom are available in the category of Students & Teachers. Inside Google docs, the default name of a document (‘Untitled document’) can be renamed by entering a new document name. Users can upload their documents to Google Docs at any time by choosing ‘Upload’ under the File drop-down menu. Then, select file(s) and the destination, and then click ‘Start upload’ (see Figure 2).

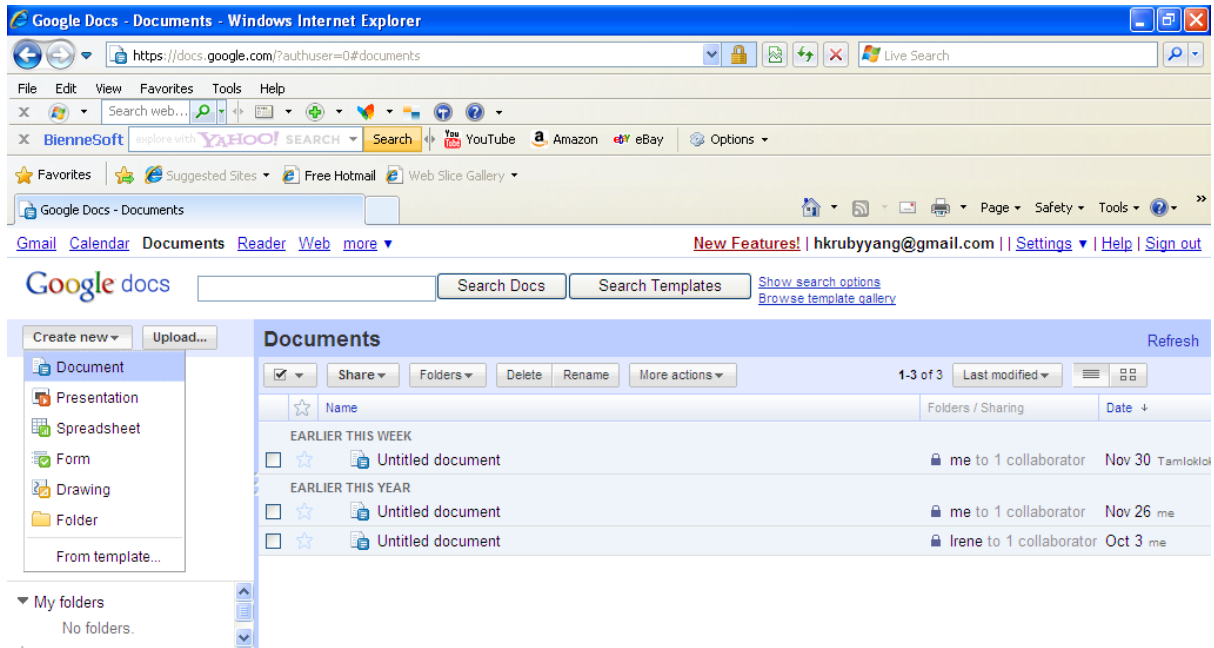


Figure 1 Create a new document

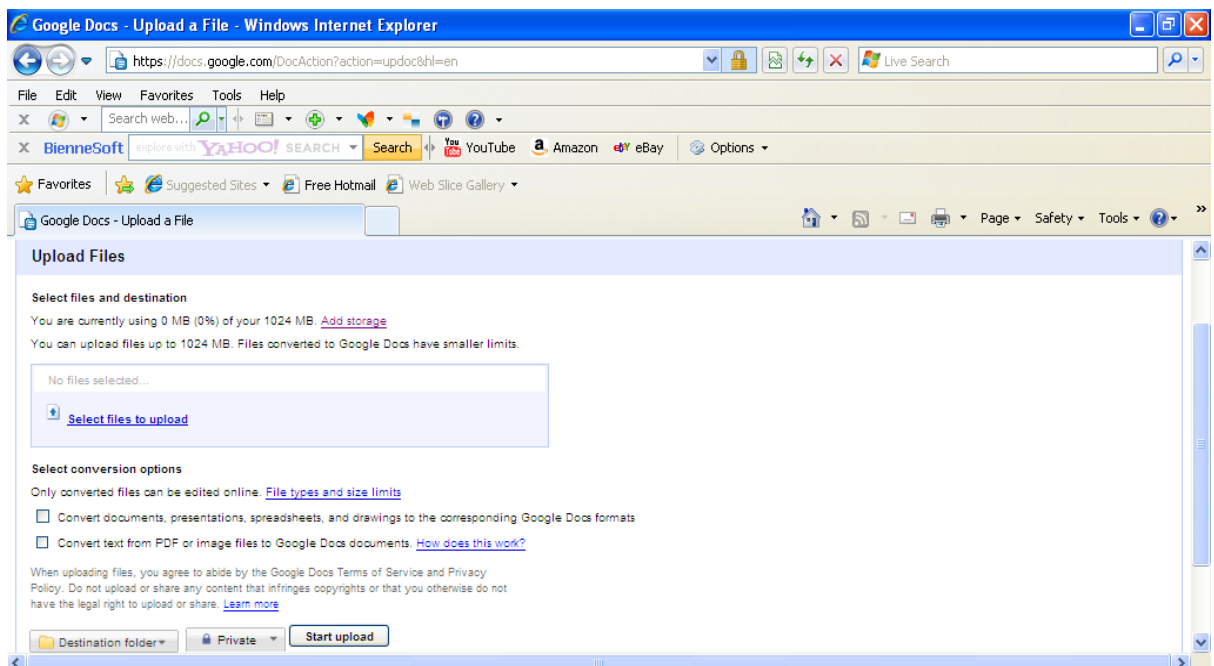


Figure 2 Upload a file

Similar to other word processing programs such as MS Word, Google Documents has the function of text editing. The format of the text, including the font, font size, font style (bold, italic, and underline) or text colour, can be changed by using the menus in the toolbar (Google, 2010). Also, images or URL can be added by selecting Image or Link from the Insert menu.

## Inserting comments, sharing and collaborating

However, the feature that makes Google Docs different from other word processing programs is its function that allows sharing, collaborating and publishing.

To share a created document with others, click the Share drop-down menu on the right-hand side of the Windows. Then, select 'Sharing settings'. In the middle of the Sharing settings dialog box, type the email addresses of the people a user wants to share his/her document with in the 'Add people' box, or choose the people from 'Choose from contacts' (see Figure 3). On the right-hand side of the list of names, specify whether those people 'Can edit' or 'Can view' only. It is recommended that the 'Send email notifications' option should be checked. After that, click 'Share'. Alternatively, the created document can be shared as an email attachment by selecting 'Email as attachment' under the Share drop-down menu (see Figure 4).

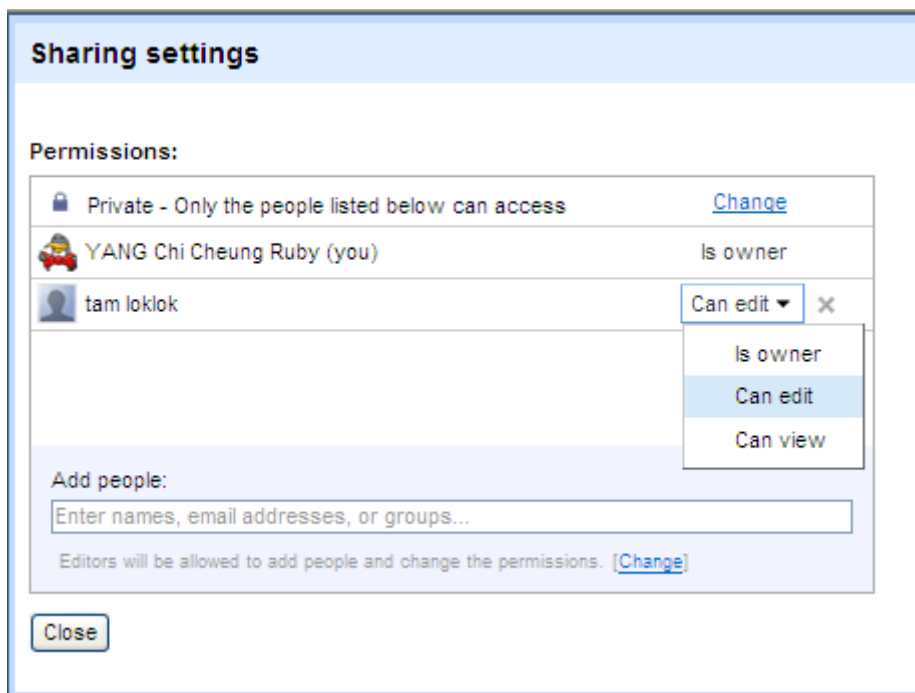


Figure 3 Sharing settings

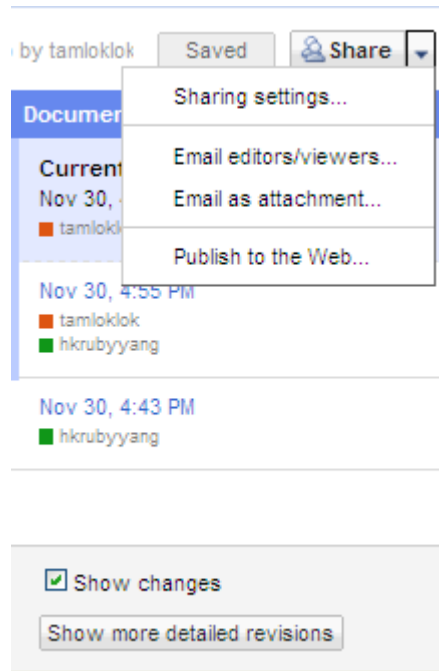


Figure 4 Email as attachment

In producing a piece of written work collaboratively, students may need to exchange ideas and give comment on others' ideas. This can be achieved by choosing Insert and then click 'Comment'. The username of a user will be shown in the box on the right-hand side of the document and the user can type the comment inside the box (see Figure 5).

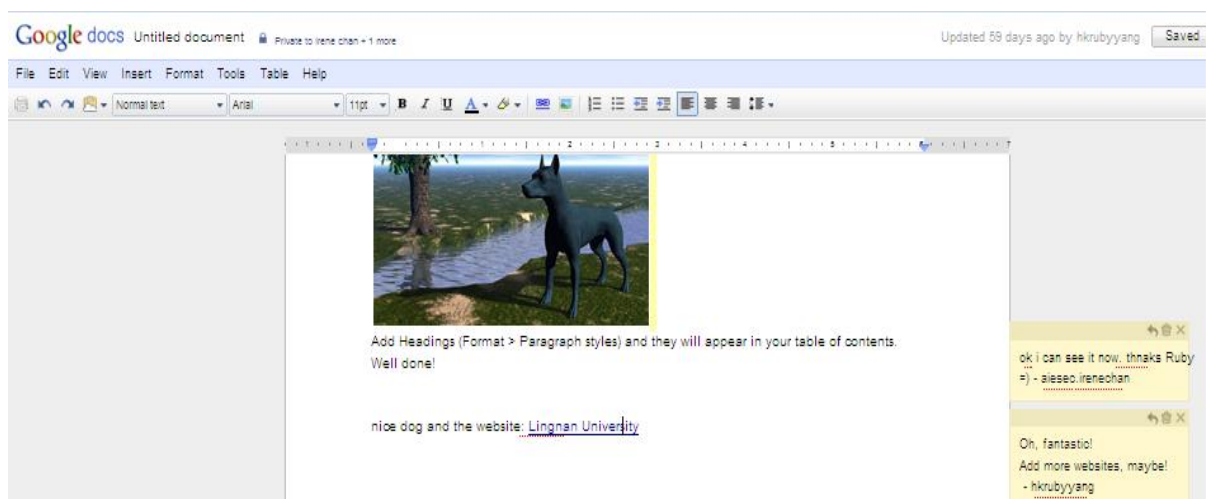


Figure 5 Inserting comment

When the user and his/her collaborators are editing the document, they can keep track of the changes made by them (see Figure 6) by clicking 'See revision history' under the File drop-down menu. One interesting feature of Google Docs is that if the collaborators are

online at the same time, they can edit the document “simultaneously” and can view the changes made by others to that document “in real time” (see Figure 7).

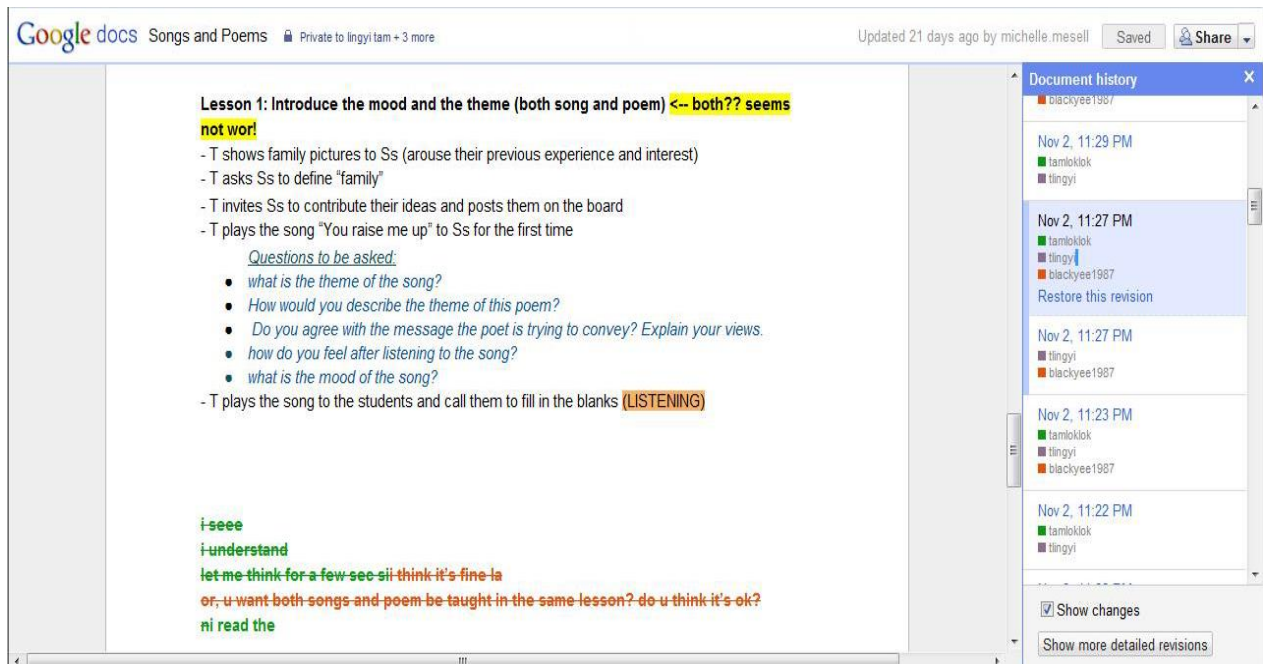


Figure 6 Document revision history

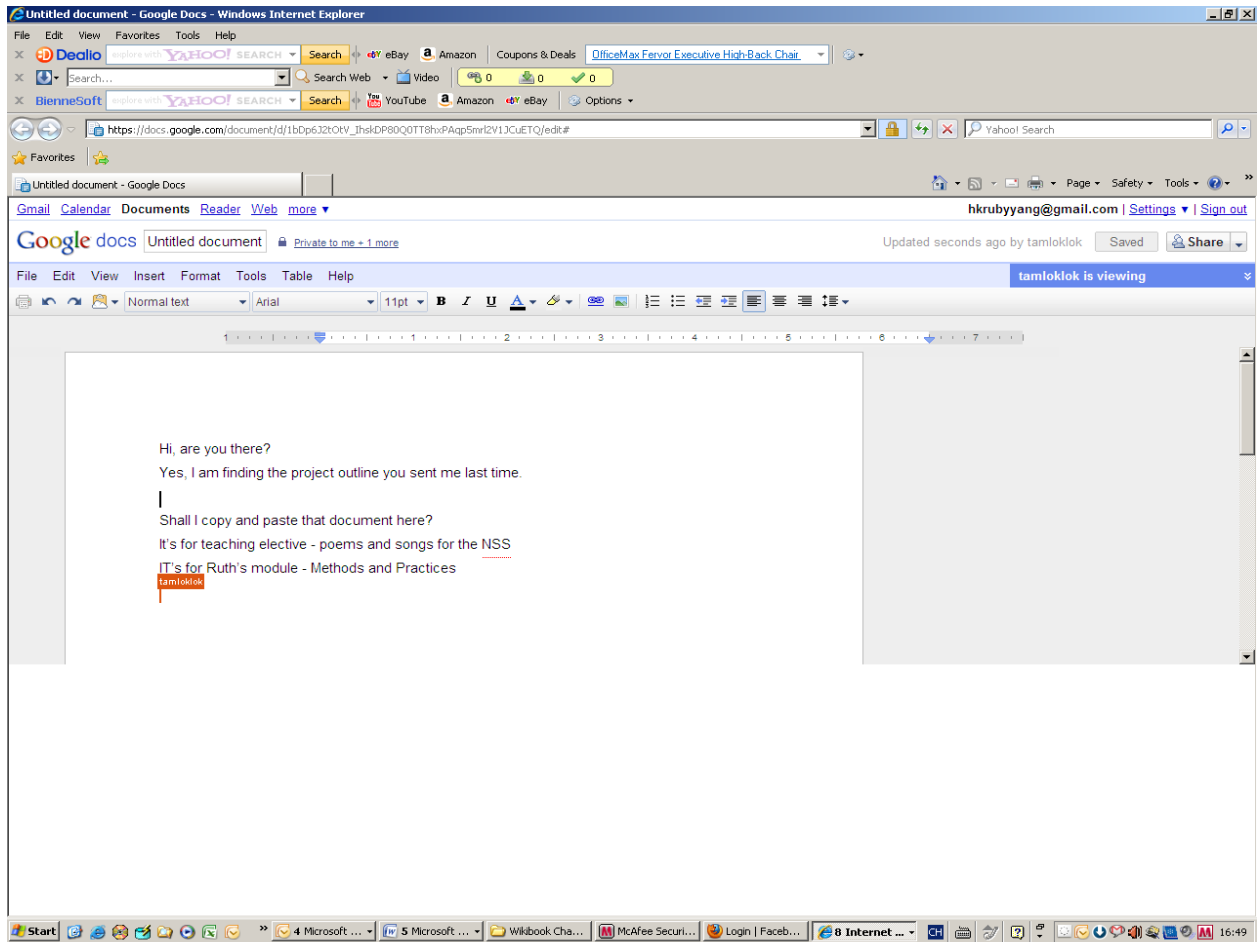


Figure 7 'Real time' collaborative writing

## Publishing

Once the document has been created, it can be published by selecting the 'Publish to the Web' option under the Share drop-down menu. Inside the 'Publish to the Web' dialog box, click 'Start publishing' and then confirm by clicking OK in the 'Message from webpage' dialog box to make the document available as a webpage. The link of the published document will then be shown in the 'Document link' box (see Figure 8) and the document can be accessed and seen by anyone from the whole world.

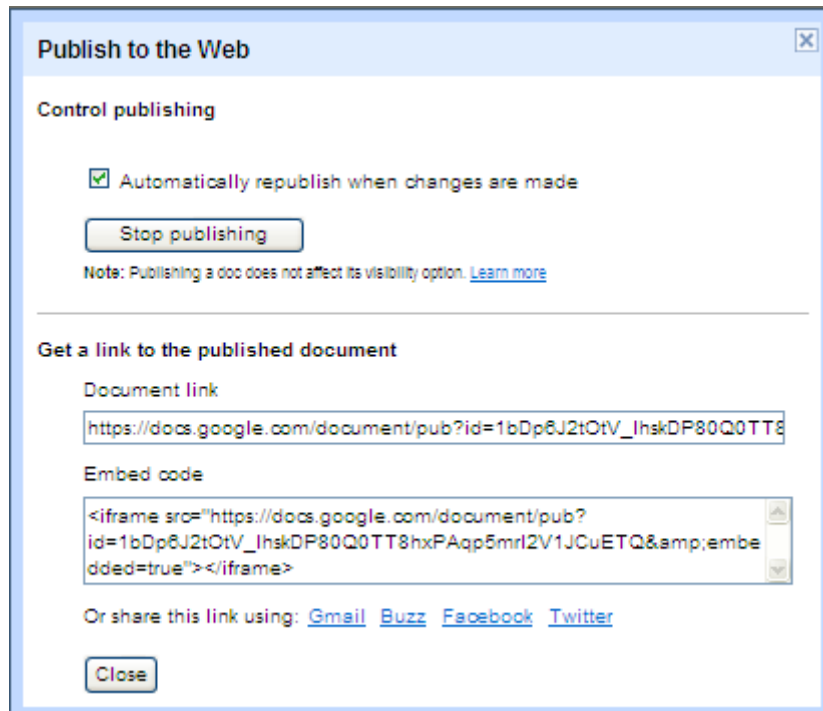


Figure 8 Publish to the Web

## The Use of Google Docs in an English Language Classroom

As suggested at the beginning of this paper, Google Docs is a web-based application which can facilitate collaborative writing. To achieve this, students can first form into small groups and are assigned with a writing topic. They can then co-author a piece of text using Google Docs in a computer lab in which they can get access to the Internet. They can give comments to other collaborators and edit other collaborators' drafts in real time. It is this kind of synchronous communication among collaborators that makes Google Docs a more powerful tool for collaborative writing than wiki or email which involves only a kind of asynchronous communication, i.e. the sender and receiver are not communicating with each other simultaneously (Wikipedia, 2010b). With the feature of a web-based application for Google Docs, collaborative writing is no longer bound by time and space. If the students cannot finish the writing task within class time, they can save their work and store it online and then continue the writing at any time and in anywhere.

## Conclusion

This paper reviews the use of Google Docs, one of the emerging Web 2.0 applications, and how it can be used to facilitate collaborative writing in a second language classroom. It is user-friendly and students can work collaboratively on writing tasks without being restricted by time and space. It also has a benefit over email with which synchronous communication can be achieved. One major shortcoming of Google Docs is that one cannot edit others' work if



he/she is not a Gmail user. However, with the popularity of Gmail, of 193.3 million users monthly (Wikipedia, 2010c), using Google Docs is not a big problem for most students. Godwin-Jones (2008) suggests that Google Docs is probably the most widely used online text editing tool. With the use of Google Docs, not only it is expected students can have stronger motivation to write collaboratively, but also their higher-order thinking skills (in evaluating and commenting on other peers' written work) can be enhanced.

## References

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