Learning from Home Environment: Academic Writing Course for EFL Undergraduates through Google Classroom Application

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Abstract

Learning academic writing seems to be a great challenge for most English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in non-native English-speaking countries, including in Indonesia. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the issue appears to be more challenging where teachers are persuaded to learn from their home environment (LHE). Several online applications are freely available, and one of the most common applications is Google Classroom. However, the use of such application towards the students' performance and perception remains understudied. This research aimed at exploring the practices of Google Classroom in facilitating the Academic Writing course of EFL undergraduates. Engaged by 96 participants of third-year students in the English Education Program, the research conducted an explanatory sequential research design by correlating the results data on writing assignments and a set of questionnaires. The findings indicated a significant correlation between using Google Classroom and the students' writing performance. Moreover, most students expressed their satisfaction with Google Classroom's practical features to get involved in the academic writing course. The students were satisfied with Google Classroom's features that were easy to be recognized and easy to be operated. The Google Classroom features also provide clear instructions, practical directions, and the most valuable feature, that is assignment reminders for the students. It can be said that using Google Classroom in the EFL academic

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writing course at higher education is a great experience and brings great advantages to students' outcomes.

Keywords: Academic writing course, COVID-19 pandemic, EFL undergraduates, Google Classroom application, learning from home.

1. INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of 2020, the world, including Indonesia, was shocked by the unexpected disease called COVID-19. The disease with a high-risk impact (Guidon & Amato, 2020) had persuaded many educational institutions to be locked down. In this situation, all teachers and students had to stay at home and collaboratively organized a virtual classroom (Handarini & Wulandari, 2020). In Jakarta, Indonesia, one of the red zone regions, the government has supported the learning process from elementary school to high school levels with several online applications that can be easily accessed by both students and teachers. However, for higher educational levels, each institution has its learning management system. Different institutions have different circumstances and preferences.

Concerning nowadays is the advanced technology; the use of technology has become popular and provides excellent opportunities in language teaching for language teachers, material developers, and syllabus designers (Golshan & Tafazoli, 2014). Moreover, a study on ESP writing reported that technology-based language instruction might be called effective for language teaching and learning (Kutlu, 2013). As a result, its use and application should be adhered to and integrated into language practices (Boudjadar, 2015). Although writing skill is one of the most effortful skills to teach, technology has come and brought changes to today's face of teaching writing. Social media platforms, search engines, and applications have been applied to facilitate teachers and learners in writing courses. Social media platforms have been extensively employed to mediate writing classes, such as Twitter (Altakhaineh & Al-Jallad, 2018), Facebook (Yunus & Salehi, 2012), and Instagram (Soviyah & Etikaningsih, 2018). Besides, several online sources and websites have also been applied to support writing classes, for example, Wikipedia (Akbari & Erfani, 2018), web-based pre-writing (Zaid, 2011), and online writing courses (Zhang, 2018). Similarly, Google Docs (Jeong, 2016), COCA (Xiao & Chen, 2018), and LiFT (Lim & Phua, 2019) have also helped writing courses in giving feedback to the student's writing product.

Other tools and applications that facilitated teachers in managing their writing courses have a long list to be mentioned, such as Moodle (Elhawwa, 2017), Canvas (Yundayani et al., 2019), digital storytelling (Chiang, 2020), and mobile phones (Alsied, 2019). With the rapid growth of technology and its utilization in language teaching classes, the list may not stop here. More to come are the latest tools and platforms that can be implemented in the classroom with other studies and research.

Considering Google Classroom that was first released in 2014 and purposely developed by Google to shorten the file distribution between teachers and learners, it is one of the applications that help teachers teach with technology. Both teachers and students are broadly pleased with Google Classroom as a supplementary tool for classroom learning (Heggart & Yoo, 2018). In language learning, the Google Classroom application can be one of the teachers' assistance for their classes

(Megawati & Astutik, 2019), particularly during the pandemic period. However, few studies have been done to discover the use and impact of Google Classroom for language learning, especially in the writing course. Somehow, Google Classroom application in an academic writing course is still limited.

Regarding the descriptions mentioned above, this current paper aimed to explore Google Classroom application practices as one of the free online tools during the learning from home environment in facilitating English as a Foreign Language (EFL) undergraduate students' academic writing course. In particular, this study is designated to answer three primary questions:

(1) What learning activities can be implemented in academic writing courses through the Google Classroom application?
(2) What practical features and positive impacts of Google Classroom can help students in academic writing activities?
(3) Is there any significant correlation between applying Google Classroom application and students' writing performance?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Learning from Home Environment during the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, learning from home environment becomes the only option for education settings worldwide to break the virus infection chain (Roy et al., 2020). This pandemic has led to various reactions for both students and teachers or lecturers who have experienced anxiety in dealing with the educational platform (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Baloran, 2020). For some educational circumstances, it might be simple to migrate from face-to-face classroom learning to virtual classroom learning; though, some conditions are stuck in the conventional learning model (Dhawan, 2020).

In Indonesia, the pandemic has compelled all educational setting elements to continue the learning process by searching for the most suitable platforms for both students and teachers (Herliandry et al., 2020). Several investigations based on local needs and adopted global experiences have been conducted to find the solution, from elementary to tertiary levels (Mishra et al., 2020; Rizaldi & Fatimah, 2020). Hand in hand collaborations in line with *Merdeka Belajar* (or Freedom of Learning, proposed by Nadiem Anwar Makarim, the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia (see Aida & Wedhaswary, 2019)), with integrated contribution among the government, the educational institutions, the teachers and lecturers, the parents, and the students are needed to support the transformation of the educational system (Abidah et al., 2020; Churiyah et al., 2020). As the facilitator of the learning process, teachers and lecturers need to decide and prepare several approaches in virtual teaching so that the students will have the best outcomes of the learning (Arlinwibowo et al., 2020). The implementation of the approaches is varied due to the teachers' or lecturers' levels of knowledge and the students' levels of understanding, where the implementation is driven by technology readiness (Sulisworo et al., 2020). During the pandemic COVID 19, educational settings and social and economic circumstances have been changed and transformed into a new normal episode (Firmansyah & Kardina, 2020).

2.2   Teaching Writing skills for EFL Undergraduate Students

Writing can be defined as an activity to express feelings, thoughts, and ideas through written symbols. Writing skills play an essential role in education for academic goals and communicative purposes in many countries, such as Malaysia (Ambrose & Palpanathan, 2018; Li & Razali, 2019), Mainland China (Xiao & Chen, 2018), Taiwan (Chen, 2012), and Indonesia (Ilyasa, 2013). In Indonesia, it has been years that English writing courses at the university level mostly address to enable the learners in composing various types of paragraphs and essays (Setyowati et al., 2019). Composing paragraphs and essays requires fluency and accuracy considering some elements, such as mechanics, grammar convention, vocabulary, style, and expression (Coxhead, 2012). It demands a substantial integrated knowledge and competence for both teachers and learners.

Due to its complexity, learning to write can be more complicated than other skills. It is considered the most challenging skill to teach (Fata et al., 2018). As a result, teaching and learning writing, particularly in a foreign language context, may face many challenges (Bhowmik, 2009). Hence, several studies have evaluated several analyses and approaches to find the best practices in teaching writing skills for EFL learners. One of the studies indicates that teaching writing skills and increasing EFL undergraduates' proficiency level can start with self-assessment training (Mazloomi & Khabiri, 2018). Meanwhile, another study in China has comprehensively revealed a significant enhancement in students' writing frequency, accuracy, and functions of their citations, particularly after two years of writing practices from English sources (Cumming et al., 2018).

In Indonesia, an investigation on the use of different approaches was conducted in a state university in West Java. Emilia and Hamied (2015) endorsed the use of Systemic Functional Linguistics Genre Pedagogy (SFL GP) in developing students' writing, particularly on students' awareness to develop their writings in structured sentences and appropriate linguistics features. Nonetheless, teaching writing for EFL learners at higher education levels needs a variety of methods and needs to be delivered in sequence instructional materials (Ghufron et al., 2016; Rosyada, 2018). In this way, the students can easily follow a set of step-by-step instructions and complete every challenge in each step and help produce the best final draft.

2.3   Google Classroom Application in EFL Writing Course

It was formerly stated that using an online application in teaching and learning languages in advanced technology has provoked and changed educational situations. In particular, the use of Google application in EFL writing courses has also been intensified. Formerly, a collaborative writing approach using Google Docs was used as a supporting tool for EFL secondary learners in an English writing course. By comparing different procedures through face-to-face classroom, online classroom, and anonymous writing practices, the study identified that students got higher scores through face-to-face classroom, more comfortable in anonymous writing activity, and enjoyed learning through Google Docs (Woodrich & Fan, 2017). Similarly, a study in Iran was conducted to discover Google Docs' impacts as an online peer-editing tool on EFL undergraduates writing skills. Ebadi and Rahimi (2017) administered a quantitative analysis and found that peer-editing through face-to-face classroom

improved the participants' writing ability than using Google Docs. Moreover, the participants showed positive perspectives in using the online tool.

In Costa Rica, a current evaluation of utilizing Google Classroom was conducted. It was selected as an online platform to practice EFL undergraduates writing skills. Based on the participants' answers to questionnaires, the study concluded that Google Classroom conveyed many benefits for both students and teachers where they could interactively learn and practice their writing in a comfortable setting (Brand Fonseca & Soto Peralta, 2019). Thus, learning and practicing English writing could be conducted anywhere and anytime, and it has become a preferred and favourite platform.

In line with the prior research, a case study on Google Classroom effectiveness in EFL undergraduates of English learning was also examined in Kendari, in the southeast region of Sulawesi, Indonesia. By managing an in-depth qualitative analysis through questionnaire and interview, the study indicated the effectiveness of using Google Classroom on the learning process despite several limitations on technical procedures, such as the uneven distribution of the classroom's account, unstable connectivity of the students' internet, and limitation on the institution's available networking (Alim et al., 2019). Those limitations spotted a great picture of virtual learning environments in Indonesia, particularly in the eastern regions. They delivered an important message that learning virtually needs readiness and well preparation from every element of educational stakeholders.

3.   METHODS

This research used Google Classroom as one of the free online tools to facilitate the EFL undergraduate students' academic writing course during the learning from home environment. Therefore, an explanatory sequential research design with correlational analysis and descriptive analysis were administered. An explanatory sequential research design was implemented by collecting quantitative data at the first phase, then qualitative data in the second phase (Creswell, 2012), as seen in Figure 1.
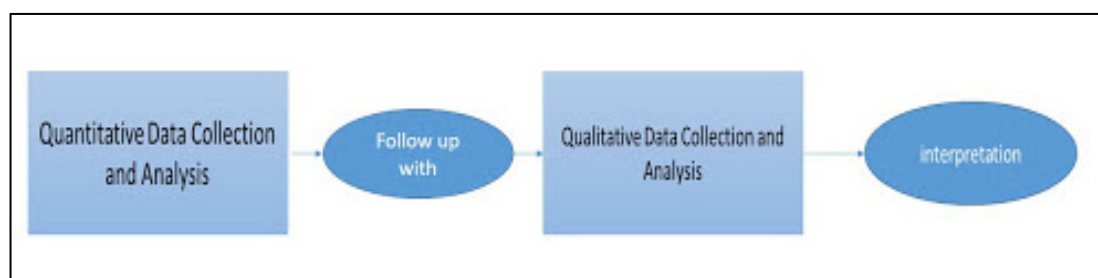
Source: Creswell (2012, p. 541

Figure 1. Explanatory sequential research design.

3.1   Research Sample and Setting

The research involved 96 students of EFL undergraduates in the English Education Program. They are the third-year students of the 2019/2020 session at a private university in Jakarta, Indonesia. Among 14 classes, the students were randomly

selected from six classes as the research sample (Patten & Galvan, 2019). The 96 participants comprised 77 female participants, and 19 male participants with ages ranging from 20 to over 25 years old. All participants joined the Academic Writing course in the Google Classroom application for seven meetings. Each meeting had 150 minutes for course explanations and discussion. Some selected materials were posted on the Google Classroom wall in each meeting according to the scheduled time. Every participant was able to ask questions in the column of the material on the Google Classroom wall, and the lecturer answered the questions in the column as well.

3.2   Research Instruments

In this research, each participant contributed two different scores from the two research instruments. The Google Classroom application in the EFL writing course was acted as the first variable while the participants' writing performance was treated as the second variable. The use of Google Classroom in the EFL writing course was measured through questionnaires, consisting of 10 statements in ascending scaling score that can be observed in Table 1. The close-ended questionnaires were also accompanied by two items of open-ended questions to cover the participants' perspectives on the most valuable aspects of the Google Classroom application in facilitating the Academic Writing course, and aspects to be improved in Google Classroom application to help the participants in learning in this course. The open-ended questionnaires were intended to complete the close-ended questionnaires with more detailed information on the use of Google Classroom application in the course. All items were authentically generated based on the demand of the research (Richards, 2015).

Table 1. Close-ended questionnaire.

No.	Aspects	Items	Responses	Score
1	Practical features of GC[*] on Academic Writing course	5 items	Poor - Excellent	1 - 5
2	Positive impact of GC on Academic Writing course	5 items	Poor - Excellent	1 - 5

[*] Google Classroom

Meanwhile, the second instrument measured the participants' writing performance through an essay writing assignment. The cause-and-effect genre was given to the participants regarding two themes, *Papua Reads* and *Corona Virus-19*. The assignment was graded following the modified essay writing rubric based on the participants' handbook (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). The rubric was altered due to the course's needs and covered five essay writing composition elements as displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Essay writing composition.

Criteria	Descriptions	Score
Mechanics	Proper punctuation, capitalization, and spelling	10
Content/Ideas	Originality, novelty, and reasonable	30
Organization	Topic sentence, supporting sentences, introduction, and conclusion	30
Grammar rules	Structured sentences	20
Sources	Proper citation	10

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

After seven meetings, two different instruments in the eighth meeting were distributed to the participants: questionnaires and an academic writing assignment. The questionnaire had to be completed simultaneously, while the assignment had to be turned in within one week. The questionnaire's responses were collated through Google Form, while the writing assignment was attached in the Classwork menu of the Google Classroom application. With a quantitative data collection and analysis to provide general information on the research problem as the initial stage, the quantitative data analysis was collected and statistically measured for both instruments. The results were then correlated to perform general information of the Google Classroom application and its relation to the participants' writing performance. The correlation analysis was followed with a qualitative data collection and descriptive analysis. The descriptive analysis was applied to elaborate the general information into specific information by exploring a few typical cases. In this research, the common distinctive results were identified based on the highest or the lowest results, both in the writing performance and in the Google Classroom questionnaire responses (Subedi, 2016). The results were also supported by the participants' answers on the open-ended questionnaire that conveyed particular expressions.

4. RESULTS

As per the parametric analysis requirements, the sample was first determined in the statistical calculation of normal distribution. With the Lilliefors normality test, the result showed that $L_{observed} = 0.0130$ was lesser than $L_{table} = 0.0889$, which means the sample was normally distributed. After accomplishing the requirements, this section was continued to answer the three primary questions of the research. The answer to the first question was displayed in Figure 2. Based on the participants' essay writing results, classifications on the participants' writing performance were measured out in five descending levels: very good, good, satisfactory, needs improvement, and poor. The classifications are arranged in intervals and displayed in different colours. Figure 2 showed that most participants are in good and very good levels of writing performances.
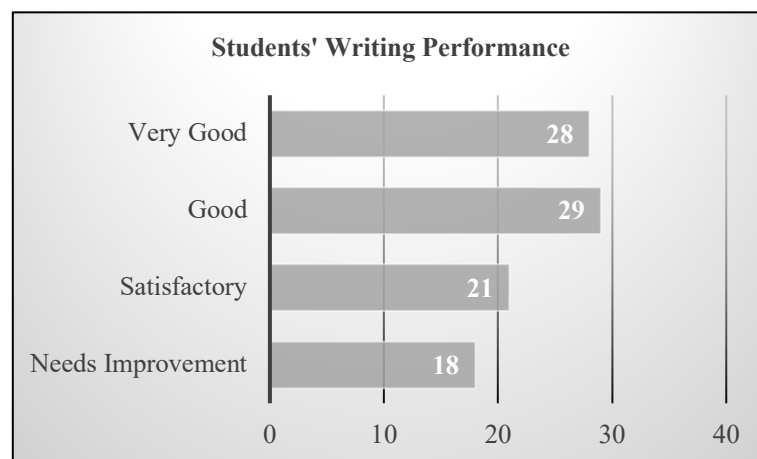

Figure 2. Participants' writing performance.

Moving to the second question, the results of the participants' responses on a set of questionnaires were displayed in Figure 3 and Figure 4. Figure 3 presents several practical features of the Google Classroom platform in helping the participants learning the Academic Writing course. Based on the responses, most participants stated 'Satisfactory' in almost all aspects of easy to be recognized, easy to be operated, clear instructions to be followed, and practical directions to learn the Academic Writing course. However, most participants responded 'Fair' for one aspect that Google Classroom helps the participants to write an essay easily.
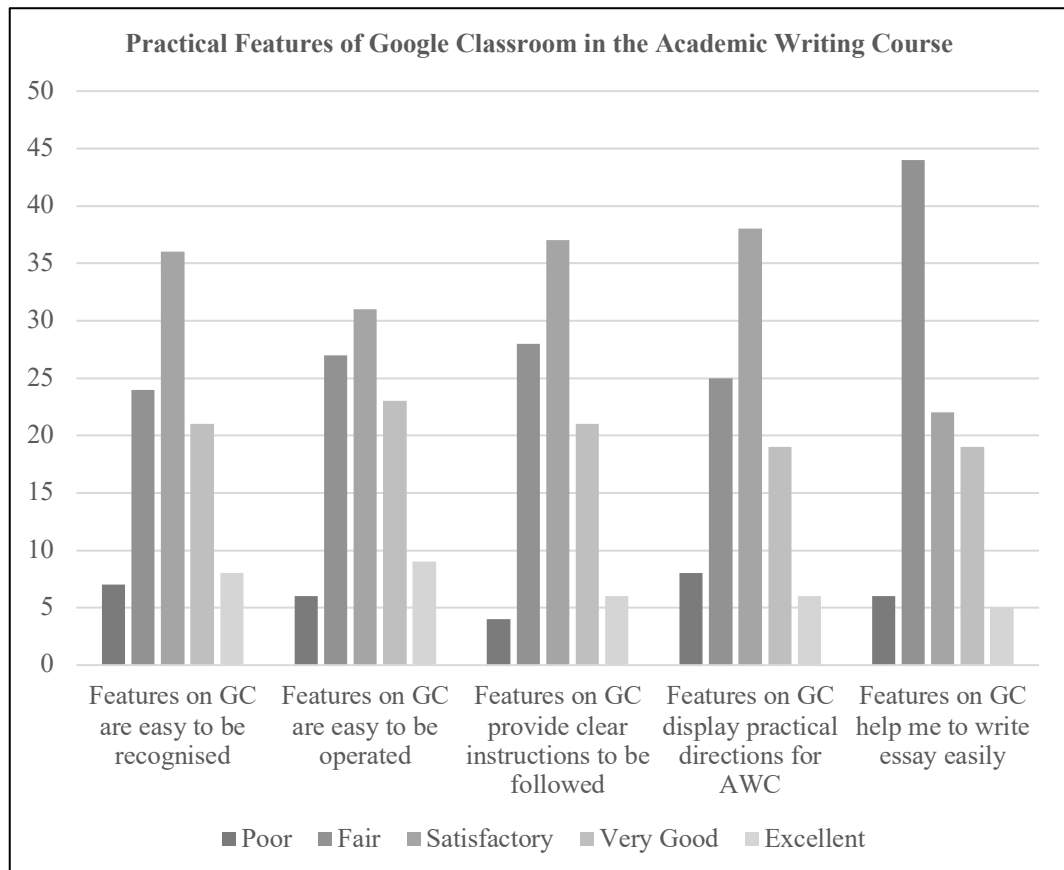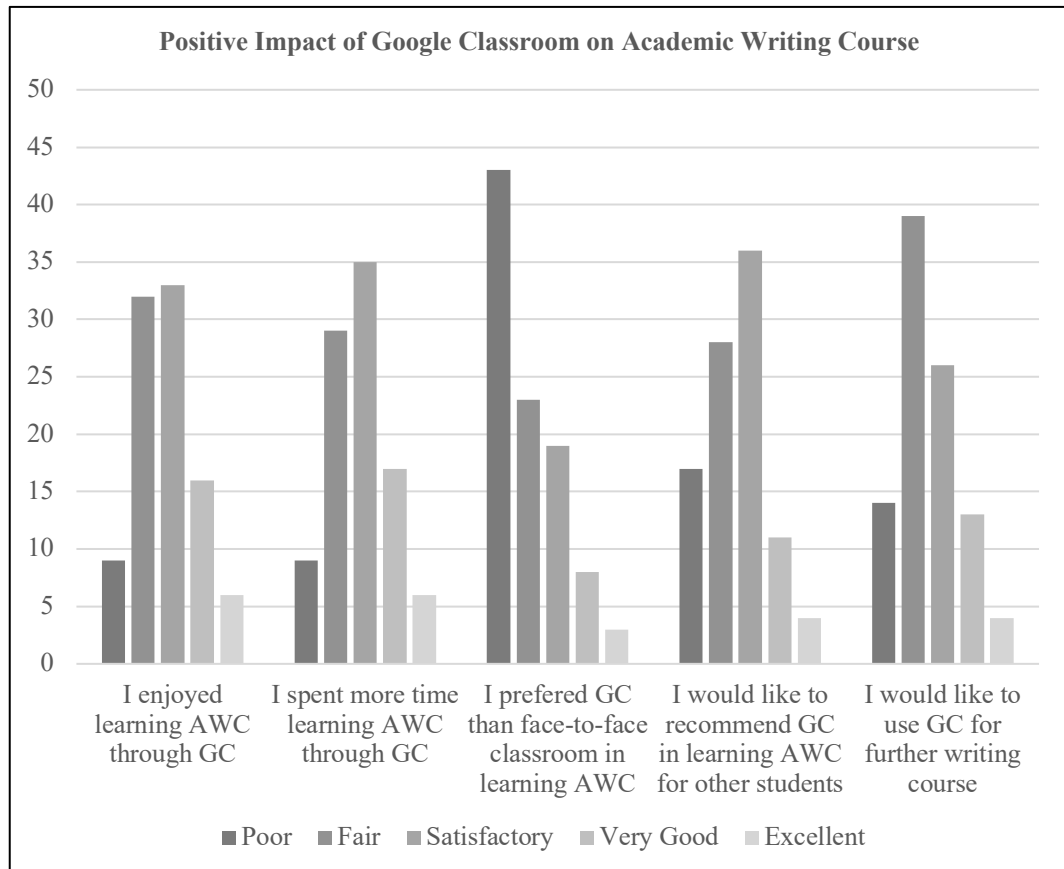

* GC = Google Classroom
** AWC = Academic Writing course

Figure 3. Practical features of Google Classroom in the Academic Writing course.

Meanwhile, Figure 4 expressed the positive impacts of Google Classroom in learning the Academic Writing course. Among the five elements of the impacts, most participants opted 'Satisfactory' for enjoyment, spending more time in the Google Classroom platform, and recommending the Google Classroom platform in learning the Academic Writing course. Nevertheless, most participants revealed 'Fair' for using the Google Classroom platform in further writing courses; and even stated 'Poor' to prefer Google Classroom in learning the Academic Writing course than a face-to-face classroom.

* GC = Google Classroom
** AWC = Academic Writing course

Figure 4. The positive impact of Google Classroom on Academic Writing Course.

The last question of the research referred to the results of the two different scores on the questionnaire responses and the writing assignment that enabled the statistical calculation of correlational analysis. The correlational analysis was measured using the Pearson product-moment formula. With the significant value of $\alpha = 0.05$ and N = 96, the r observed resulted in 0.1679 compared to the r table = 0.1671. This indicated a significant correlation where the r observed was higher than the r table. The correlation result demonstrated a significant correlation between using the Google Classroom platform and learning the Academic Writing course for EFL undergraduate students.

5.   DISCUSSION

Based on the results, the research questions were evidently and undoubtedly answered. At the beginning of the learning from the home environment, most participants experienced an uncomfortable feeling that they had to deal with unexpected learning circumstances through virtual learning. The uncomfortable feeling was typical and commonly encountered by both teachers and students since the pandemic's beginning shocked them with confusion and depression (Rosyada, 2020). With the unexpected learning circumstances, the participants preferred to learn face-

to-face where they were comfortable than learning through online platforms such as the Google Classroom application (Amin & Sundari, 2020).

However, despite refusing or blaming the uncontrolled situation and conditions, the participants realized that they had to face it whether they like it or not and prepared or unprepared. By devoting a self-regulated commitment, the participants tried to learn independently based on individual learning circumstances (Lee, 2016). In this situation, the learning outcomes would be varied due to the participants' different home environments and technology equipment (Zhang et al., 2020). For the unexpected learning circumstances, it brings different outcomes and different satisfaction of the students' perspectives. A different atmosphere of learning settings takes time for adaptation and transformation. The students need to adapt to any possible situation and become autonomous learners with self-regulated commitment to achieve their self-satisfaction and self-efficacy (Su et al., 2018). During the unexpected learning situation, time was considered one of the crucial aspects for the participants. By providing sufficient time, the participants would get familiar with the new habit using online learning platforms such as the Google Classroom platform to produce a better learning outcome (Kumar & Bervell, 2019).

Timely consumed yet effective, the results evidenced that the participants were verily supported by the Google Classroom application in learning from home environment, particularly in learning academic writing during the pandemic COVID-19 (Al-Maroof & Al-Emran, 2018; Okmawati, 2020). By posting selected course materials in the form of slides, presentations, and videos, added by several exercises and assignments on the Google Classroom wall and classwork, all participants were allowed to access the Google Classroom anytime and anywhere to see and download the materials accordingly. The participants could read the lessons again and again to meet their understanding. It revealed that through the Google Classroom application, the lessons were more accessible to the participants (Scull et al., 2020). Furthermore, through the Google Classroom application, all participants experienced a considerable challenge of online learning circumstances. By providing several group assignments, every participant was gradually motivated to transform their learning style from individual learning to cooperative learning in comprehending the lessons (Ivone et al., 2020).

Based on the overall results, it can be seen that teaching writing to EFL learners was not about determining the writing elements as the standalone aspect. Other aspects were also considered, including the learners' preference for the essay genre and the learners' needs on assessment aspects (Sukandi & Sani, 2019), particularly in extraordinary circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, teachers and lecturers play a central role in facilitating students in an online or offline class (Lim et al., 2019; Morgan, 2020). During the pandemic, there is no single best way on how to design the best students' learning outcomes. Nevertheless, as a teacher or a lecturer, several elements must be reconsidered in facilitating the learners achieving their best outcomes. It covers the learning design or the learning activities, including the context, the tools, and the resources, and the tasks; the teacher presence incorporating the motivator, communicator, and the facilitator; and assessment comprising the time and effort of the learners in achieving the learning goals (Rapanta et al., 2020).

6.   CONCLUSION

The present study investigated virtual learning activities and students' writing performance in learning through the Google Classroom application, explored the practical features and positive impacts of this application, and reported the correlation between applying Google Classroom application and writing performance. The data showed that most participants were in good and very good writing performance levels. Google Classroom application had brought several valuable aspects to the EFL writing course, such as simple, clear, and reminder features that suit students' needs. However, students needed more time to get used to the Google Classroom application. The more time they spend using the application, the more they get used to the new academic writing practices. It can be said that using Google Classroom in the EFL writing course of higher education was a great experience, and the time they spent with the application brought significant advantages to their outcomes.

Additionally, teaching academic writing is a great challenge for every teacher and student, especially during the pandemic, where educational circumstances have changed unexpectedly. Thus, the research was confronted with limited time and space to gain more comprehensive result. However, the challenge is not to be disregarded, but it has to be accepted and managed. Concerning progressive technology and communication, emergency classroom settings are possibly developed where Google Classroom is among the options. There must be both positive and negative sides to every application, tool, approach, or other elements in educational circumstances, including the Google Classroom application. Hopefully, this research brings broader perspectives for every education stakeholder, particularly for the teachers/lecturers as the designer and the facilitator, in constructing the best educational circumstances due to different situations and conditions.

While investigating learning activity and writing performance in a virtual learning environment, the study's limitations were unavoidable. The sample of the participants was restricted from only one university. Thus, the findings should be wisely implemented in other contexts. Further research is advised to explore how and to what extent learning activities in virtual learning situations prepared by the teachers affected students' writing performance.

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