Google Apps for English Language Teaching and Learning: The Classroom and Beyond

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Abstract

Language teaching and learning can be facilitated through collaborative online platforms that allow users to simultaneously work on a given text in real-time or work independently on it later. These also provide access to the saved version of the work as also the history of its evolution. Various applications developed by Google allow learners multiple communication tools that can be utilized for English language learning. These include Google Forms, Docs, Slides, Jamboard and Blogger, among several others. Google apps are flexible and versatile and can be used effectively for designing activities for language practice and knowledge enhancement. With myriad attractive and useful features, Google apps can be employed for collecting information, drafting and presenting written as well as audiovisual content, creating and sharing drawings and images, and broadcasting posts, all under the domain of Google. While these apps can be used for different academic activities, their features especially support language improvement and editing. Their collaborative feature allows easy feedback and encourages participation, thus making them a perfect tool to enhance learning in a language classroom and beyond. Google apps provide

learning opportunities that are social, interactive, and multimodal and encourage diverse learning
styles thus proving their efficacy and utility.

Keywords: Google apps, forms, docs, slides, jamboard, blogger, English

Introduction

As we are gradually moving away from the chalk-board and pen-paper method of teaching and learning towards digital pedagogy, most of our work is saved on electronic devices, which often get cluttered as we tend to repetitively save numerous versions of our assignments and manuscripts. The problem aggravates when we are working from multiple locations, such as home and work, and using multiple devices like laptops and desktops. It necessitates carrying around our files in external memory devices that are vulnerable to technical mishaps. We constantly run the risk of losing our progress.

With easy internet availability and accessibility nowadays, working online saves a lot of such trouble. Even though the shift towards digital technology has been swift, many people are yet to fully exploit the advantages of online teaching, learning and working. Saving progress simultaneously, we can resume working from where we left, without involving any data transfer. Moreover, progress gets saved automatically. When it comes to English language teaching and learning, such online platforms provide scope for more interactive and collaborative engagements among their users.

It can be said without doubt that Google is ubiquitous in our lives, so much so that it is more commonly used as a verb than a noun, as we constantly "google" information. Its quick and efficient search engine provides advanced capabilities and filters, making knowledge gaining and sharing not only faster but also smarter (Adams 97). However, Google also provides many online

applications that can be creatively utilized for English language teaching, learning and research. These applications can be used both synchronously (i.e. being simultaneously engaged together in real time), and asynchronously (i.e. working independently) by learners engaged in a collaborative project (Dagen and Morewood 22). This paper examines the use of five such apps, including Forms, Docs, Slides, Jam board and Blogger, all of which can be accessed from a user's Google Drive that provides fifteen gigabytes of free storage. Drive is a file storage and synchronization service provided by Google. Simply creating a free G-mail account offers many advantages. Being cloud-based, work is saved automatically and changes can be tracked in real-time. It can be accessed on both, computer and smartphones. Files and folders can be created or uploaded and shared with others with varying access settings, saving one the time and effort of sending attachments back and forth. It also allows reverting to older versions when needed, and save files for offline access.

Google Forms

In the world of research, it is well-known that Google Forms are a savior. When it comes to language teaching and learning too, this app offers myriad possibilities, such as conducting a language needs analysis of learners, administering graded quizzes, creating listening and reading comprehension exercises, taking assignment submissions in an organized manner, and inviting feedback for classes.

Conducting language needs analysis

Forms are an efficient way to conduct language needs analysis of learners, which involves gathering information from the learners about the expected use and needs of language, so that content can be prepared and teaching methodology be adopted accordingly. Many studies have acknowledged the centrality of conducting language needs analysis (Munby; Hutchinson and

Waters; Berwick; Brindley; West; Dudley-Evans and St. John). It proves useful for successful course planning and achievements of course objectives. Besides, it helps in building the learners' awareness about their learning and encourages goal-setting. Forms can be used to create questionnaires if the analysis requires a survey, which can be administered online. Different sections can be created, and different answer types are possible to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Once done, Forms automatically creates a summary of all the responses, which can be exported into a Google Spreadsheet. It also creates dynamic charts and graphs for better understanding of data.

Administering graded quizzes

Quizzes are a great way to check students' learning, and Forms are very useful to administer graded quizzes online. They can be used to test different skills as they offer the choice to create diverse question types like multiplechoice, checkboxes, short-answer and paragraph. One can add as many questions and options as one wants to. Each question can be awarded a different score, correct answers set for automatic scoring, and feedback added for correct answers. One can also choose to release grades automatically or manually, and shuffle question or option order. Moreover, questions can be imported from any previous form(s) one has created. The link to the form can be shared with the target audience to collect responses. Once the time is up, "accepting responses" toggle buttons can be used to stop accepting new responses. If sharing the quiz on Google Classroom, one can also schedule it for a specific date and time.

Creating exercises

Just like quizzes, exercises of various types for different language skills can be created using Forms. By inserting an image as a prompt and adding a "paragraph" type question, one can create a picture composition. Similarly, by inserting videos, listening comprehension exercises

can be created. Reading comprehension exercises can be developed by inserting screenshots of passages or copy-pasting the text of the passage as a question or in the description.

Taking assignment submissions

Sometimes, students have to be tested on certain writing skills that require the use of a specific format that cannot be accommodated in the template offered by Forms. Some students are also unable to type, and prefer to submit handwritten assignments. Through Forms, such assignments can be systematically collected from learners by providing them with an option to upload a file. This helps in having all assignment submissions at one place and maintaining a record, instead of individual emails all over the mailbox. Creating a new question and changing its type to "file upload" will let the respondents upload files to the form owner's Google Drive. Respondents will have to sign-in to Google when file upload questions are added to a form.

Inviting feedback

Forms have also proven to be very helpful for creating feedback surveys. From a classroom perspective, forms can be sent out to invite feedback on classes (including curriculum content, teaching methodology) to improve the teaching-learning environment. Feedback forms commonly have rating-based questions for which "linear scale," "multiple choice grid" and "checkbox grid" question types can be utilized in Forms.

Google Docs

Google Docs is an online word processor that offers many possibilities in ELT including collaborative writing projects, providing feedback to learners, writing practice, pronunciation practice and collaborative brainstorming.

Collaborative writing projects

Docs can be used by the language teacher for assigning collaborative writing projects to learners, such as working on a story or an essay together. Whenever a new document is created, Google provides the option to pick from many ready-made templates or start with a blank one. Each document can be given a name and shared with people or groups using sharing settings. Multiple learners can work on the same document simultaneously. Different colour codes are automatically assigned to different editors. Learners can use the chat option to discuss with each other while working on the document. Peers can give feedback to each other by directly editing, suggesting edits or adding comments. Once the document is ready, they can choose to share it with the teacher using the "Share" button, or they can download in the format of their choice or directly send the file as an email attachment by choosing the appropriate option from the "File" menu.

Providing feedback to learners

As changes in a Google document are tracked simultaneously, it helps the teacher provide real-time but reduced intervention to the learners. With the "Suggesting" option, the teacher can guide the learners without disturbing their work. It also provides flexibility to the teacher as they do not have to carry around bulky bundles of paper. The learners can simply share a link with the teacher, who can review it anytime, anywhere on a device with an internet connection. There is neither a need to download files to PC nor to revert to each learner separately as any changes are automatically saved on Drive. However, sometimes, one cannot articulate their views clearly as written feedback. In such cases, third party add-ons (such as Kaizena) may be used for recording and providing feedback as a voice note. Sometimes, one may want to share a learner's work or a particular example of good writing with the entire class as a mentor or model text. The work may

be annotated using various formatting tools and adding comments, and then by selecting "Publish to Web" from the "File" menu it could be shared as a URL with the class.

Writing practice

Docs can also be used for independent writing practice by learners. Docs has integrated reference tools which are particularly useful for academic writing, and can be accessed from the Tools menu >> Citations. The user can pick a formatting style, add a citation source, create in-text citations and even add a bibliography. Docs also provides a smart spell-checker that keeps a check on spellings, and it helps improve sentence construction by suggesting corrections in language. The "Translate" option is particularly helpful for multilingual learners who struggle with finding the right words. Docs allows one to easily revise drafts and reflect on their evolution through its version history feature.

Pronunciation practice

The "Voice typing" feature of Docs can be utilized for pronunciation practice as it recognizes spoken language and transcribes it into text. It can help learners to recognize areas of improvement in English pronunciation, as it reflects inaccuracy if the transcript does not coincide with the intended words. Having a script beforehand is particularly useful while practising pronunciation using this feature as it will help in observing one's progress. Instead of speaking individual words to practice pronunciation, it is better to provide context to the words in a sentence so that there are more chances of getting the pronunciation right.

Collaborative brainstorming

Docs also has a drawing component, which can be used to create visual maps with shapes, arrows, text and images. It can be accessed by selecting the "Drawing" option from the "Insert"

menu. This is helpful for collaborative brainstorming during seminars and discussions. Digital brainstorming is generally more inclusive than traditional brainstorming where the shy and quiet learners in class are less likely to contribute.

Google Slides

Google Slides is an online tool useful for creating, editing and collaborating with others on presentations. Many features of Docs are common to Slides, so they will not be discussed again. However, being a presentation tool, Slides offers other possibilities as well. In a language classroom, it can be used by the students to work on group presentations, and by the teacher for creating interactive presentations, developing WebQuests, creating Jigsaw activities and PDF E-books.

Preparing group presentations

Like collaborative writing projects in Docs, Slides can be used for preparing group presentations. Using presentations in a language classroom not only encourages learners' fluency but helps them practice all skills of language, including speaking, reading, listening, writing, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Using Slides, learners can comment on or edit each other's works for feedback. All changes are saved in real-time. Since images and videos are usually important components of a presentation, Slides allows the user to add them directly from the web. So, instead of initiating a search in the browser by opening a separate tab or window, one can easily and quickly insert an image or a video on the required slide without breaking the thought-flow by clicking on the "Explore" button in the bottom right corner. Once done, the "Present" button can be used to deliver the presentation to the audience.

Making lessons interactive

Slides are a useful platform for teachers to prepare their lessons as they can keep updating them on-the-go. Moreover, the "Presenter View" gives many options - the "Notes" option allows one to look at the speaker notes during the presentation for additional explanations, and the "Pointer" option lets one use the mouse as a laser pointer to maintain audience attention. The "Q/A" option makes the presentation very interactive by generating a link where the audience can post their questions, even anonymously, which keep getting displayed on the screen for discussion. This helps the otherwise quiet students to get their doubts and queries resolved.

WebQuests

Slides can also be used as a tool by the teachers to develop WebQuests to promote the learners' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, besides encouraging language learning. A WebQuest is an inquiry-oriented activity in which learners seek information from the web. The model was developed by Bernie Dodge at San Diego State University in February 1995 ("What is a WebQuest?"). It usually involves multiple steps including introduction, task, process, evaluation and conclusion. Many studies have focused on the utility of WebQuests in a language learning classroom (Amer and El-Okda; Shan; Kocoglu; Renau et al; Baguzina). The introduction stage can bring in new vocabulary and concepts, the task stage may involve the participants in a collaborative activity like role-playing while the process stage may revise essential grammatical points. Since much of the information has to come from the internet, WebQuests are included with links. The format of an online presentation is best suited for such a stage-based, collaborative, web-oriented activity.

Jigsaw activities

A jigsaw activity is one in which different learners work on different parts/versions of the same task that needs to be completed together by exchanging information. It was developed by Elliot

Aronson and his students at the University of Texas and the University of California in the early 1970s ("Overview"). Such a collaborative activity can be best carried out with the help of a tool as Slides. In a jigsaw activity, the class is divided into groups of the same number of learners as the parts/versions. Within a group, called the jigsaw group, a separate part/version is assigned to each learner. Learners who were assigned the same part/version are brought together to form an expert group and made to discuss their part/version ("Jigsaw in 10 Easy Steps"). They can be asked to create a collaborative presentation using Slides. After bringing the learners back to the original group, learners are asked to present their respective part to their group and then tested. In an ELT classroom, Jigsaw activities are very effective in enhancing language skills (Nurbianta and Dahlia; Namazianndost et al; Esnawy; Dwiniasih and Nugraha). Multiple skills can be integrated into one activity. Learners can read or hear different parts, then exchange information by speaking, and put it together by writing.

Creating E-books

Slides are also useful to create interactive E-books for language teaching. They provide the creator with the flexibility of layout and control over content like images, graphics, tables, etc. Organizing the content in the form of a presentation allows for easy understanding by the learner. Once the presentation template is chosen, the dimensions can be set and other settings, like background and font colour, can be modified as desired. After adding content, page-turning buttons and page transitions can beaddedthat do not hamper the reading experience. One may also choose to download it as a PDF for easy circulation. Creating e-books on Slides is particularly helpful when collaborating with another author.

Google Jamboard

It is an interactive digital whiteboard which can be used for visual collaboration. The user can add frames, change the background, write with a digital pen in different colours, create a text-box, add a shape, insert an image or create a sticky note. These draggable components can be used to devise activities suitable for language learning, such as brainstorming sessions, preview activities, and exercises involving grammar and vocabulary building. To make it interactive, it should be shared andediting accessshould be allowed. Once ready, the Jamboard can be downloaded as an image or a PDF.

Brainstorming sessions

The teacher could provide the learners with a prompt on the Jamboard and brainstorm around it by adding their ideas in sticky notes. They could also sort the ideas by colour, organize them on different frames or connect them by drawing lines. This promotes their creative thinking skills while encouraging target language use in an interesting manner.

Discussions

Learners could engage in group discussions and debates on a given topic. While discussions could follow a pattern similar to brainstorming, debates can take place by making two columns and contributing ideas under each. It could also be used for storytelling by letting learners write stories to an image added by the teacher, and for creating character-notes to teach them adjectives.

Exercises

On Jamboard, one could create various types of exercises such as rearranging words to form grammatically correct sentences and matching tasks for vocabulary building. Fill-in-the-blanks exercises can also be created by writing words in sticky notes and having learners drag and drop them in the correct blanks.

Blogger

Blogger is a blog-publishing service offered by Google. A blog can be created by selecting a template or designing something new. Blogging is a popular language-learning tool. It not only encourages writing but also reading practice.

Writing practice

Blogger can be used for learners' writing practice in three ways – first, by encouraging learners to write blogs on a given prompt or topic and respond to each others' blog posts, second, by stimulating discussions as they respond in comments to a blog post created by the teacher, and third, by creating a shared blog for the class where both learners and the teacher can collaborate. Feedback on writing may be given by the peers and the teacher in the comments section.

Reading practice

As the learners need to respond to their teachers' or peers' blogs, they have to first read them. In this way, blogging encourages reading and enhances reading skills. The teacher could also create reflective activities that make the learners go back and read previous blogs to be able to respond. As blogs are public and can be shared, learners are motivated to work hard and write better,

which is only possible if they read better. More reading also means building vocabulary and improving sentence construction.

Conclusion

It can, therefore, be concluded that the apps offered by Google open up a world of possibilities for interactive activities and projects to facilitate language learning. They can be used in the classroom and beyond for fruitful collaboration and feedback between the teacher and the learner and among the learners. They encourage participation and make the classroom more inclusive. They provide interesting ways to teach concepts and integrate various language skills. This creates an active-learning environment where learners are more likely to communicate and share knowledge, which are the two primary goals of language teaching.

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