

GOOGLE ASSISTED EFL READING INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

The use of Google as a search engine has been a commonplace practice both in and beyond the education; however, what is recently burgeoning is the use of Google applications as instructional tools in the field of language education. Among various applications, Google docs launched in 2007 seem to be promising aids that could be explored to create effective, efficient and engaging learning environments. Google docs, in essence, is a free, user friendly, web-based word processing, spreadsheet and presentation program that allow teachers to design internet based activities. This paper presents the results of a 12-week study which integrated Google docs into EFL reading instruction. The participants were beginner level students of English (n=32). Throughout the study, the students were provided with Google-assisted reading activities to support their in-class teaching and they were required to keep vocabulary logs through Google docs. At the end of the study, they were administered a post instruction perception questionnaire asking about their attitudes towards using Google docs language learning. Students' perceptions of this experience are discussed in relation to the course design, and practical suggestions are provided for language teachers wishing to create engaging learning environments.

Keywords: EFL, reading instruction, Google docs, language teaching.

1 INTRODUCTION

With its inception in 1990s, the World Wide Web was quickly integrated into the school system, and today there is a common belief that the use of technology and internet facilitate classroom instruction [1]. Various internet tools with the properties of low-cost, ubiquity, accessibility and ease of use have offered a lot to change the way language education is presented in the classroom setting as well [2]. Among the benefits of internet use in the second and foreign language classrooms, the most important are:

- Internet tools help to increase the motivation and the participation of the students [3].
- They provide students with more opportunities to interact with the target language as the students spend more time on task [4].
- They allow for greater integration of reading and writing skills with the possibility of providing written, audio and video input [5].
- They open the path to more self-paced autonomous learning [3].

Such positive outcomes have led researchers and language teachers to continually search for new internet tools to use in teaching language. One of the recently emerging applications is the use of Google in language instruction. Although Google has been around as a search engine for years, with the extensions constantly released, it has turned out to be more than a simple search engine. Chinnery (2008) identifies five main functions of Google in connection with language learning. 1. As an informative tool, Google is a natural spell-checker and collocation provider for the language learner. 2. As a productive tool, it fosters opportunities for the output through Google Docs which enable language teachers to create web based materials easily and share with the students, and guide them during the instruction. 3. As a collaborative tool, Google Docs, Google sites and Google calendar provide a space for the instructor to create an environment to which related parties could easily contribute. 4. As a communicative tool, Google talk and Gmail have the potential to enhance the interaction among the students and the teacher. 5. As an aggregative tool, iGoogle and Google Reader can be used by "learners and instructors to collect updated news feeds, blogs, podcasts and vidcasts together into a single interface" (Chinnery, 2008 p. 6). Among many tools offered by Google, this paper presents the Google Docs with a special focus on its integration into an EFL reading class

2 GOOGLE DOCS IN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: AN OVERVIEW

Google Docs is free web based productivity software which includes a word processor, a spreadsheet, a presentation package and a form designer. Beside these tools, Google Docs offers a space of about 1 gb on the server to store the documents created through Docs. Google has also recently allowed users to upload the files of any type to the storage area, which enables the user to back up files online [6]. When a document is created either by the instructor or the students, it can be shared with the selected users or the general public, published and co-edited or simply displayed on Google sites.

Some possible ways of employing Google Docs in language education are:

- Google Docs can effectively be used for homework production and submission. Whatever the content of the assignment, the language teacher can direct the students to submit their homework online through Google docs. After the students share their assignment files with the teacher, it is very easy for the teacher to detect the mistakes and provide feedback for them. Research has demonstrated that students pay more attention to comments from teachers on their work when they get feedback on the earlier drafts with the graded assessment [7]. In addition, by using the “revision history” function, Google Docs help the language teacher to have an idea about the student progress through various stages of homework production [6].
- Google Docs can also be used as a tool for self-assessment. As an example, students can be required to fill in a self-assessment form easily created through Google Docs. The form may be in the form of a short questionnaire to be sent to the students after each unit of work, and the students can reflect on their development through the unit work. As the results will be presented in a spreadsheet for each student separately and as a whole for each question, the teacher will be able to plan the future steps regarding the course reasonably. For the students, having the opportunity of self-assessment on a regular basis will be helpful to develop a kind of consciousness on their learning.
- Google Docs can make effective peer assessment tools for the language classrooms as well. Ertmer et. al., (2007) underline that peer feedback has the potential of increasing the quality of learning as it provides new learning opportunities for the students, increases the meaningful interaction both with the peers and the course content, which subsequently promotes course satisfaction and fosters learner engagement. Google Docs offer the user an option to share his files/work with the other users. Through the “sharing settings” the language teacher can create a virtual classroom on the net and enable the class members to see and comment on each other’s work. In this way, the students can reach their work and related feedback at any place and time, and the teacher can easily observe the interaction and peer feedback process. By using forms and spreadsheets in Google Docs, feedback is automatically collated in a spreadsheet for owners to quickly access.
- In addition, Google Docs can be employed for the course evaluation. Teachers wishing to have specific feedback on the course syllabus, the activities carried out in the classroom and the kinds of learning experiences their students are having are able to prepare detailed questionnaires through Google forms. Feedback forms can be designed to be either anonymous, or to require the student names or ID fields. The initial creation of a detailed form may require much time; however, once created, it is very easy to replicate and customize for future uses.
- Last but not the least; Google Docs can serve as an online space to keep track of grades, attendance or any type of student-related data. Using the spreadsheets which support formulas and a number of functions, the teacher could effectively record student data and calculate them without too much work.

Apart from such general applications, Google Docs seems promising for EFL reading instruction, which makes the core of the present study. The following section describes in detail the integration of Google Docs into a university level reading course in an EFL setting.

3 THE STUDY

3.1 Research Setting and Participants

This study was carried out in a university in Turkey with the participation of beginner level preparatory students (n=32) drawn in accordance with the *convenient* sampling procedure. The number of female

students was 6 and the rest was male. 29 of the students were majoring in Software Engineering and three of them were the students of Computer programming. In the prep program, they were offered a 30-hours of English per week; however, time allocated for the reading instruction was only 6 hours in a week, which could be regarded as very limited. In the research site, the overall goal of the reading course has been identified as to develop an awareness of process of reading. It aims to help students develop comprehension and critical thinking skills so that they can become wise interpreters of written works. Students read a variety of informational texts from a large number of disciplines and receive instruction in reading skills and strategies that support comprehension. Vocabulary instruction is embedded into the course activities. The first term of an academic year when the present study was undertaken is planned as a period during which students build general language knowledge, and the second term covers an intensive strategy-based reading instruction.

3.2 Integration of Google Docs into the Course

Various studies on extensive and intensive reading as well as web based reading have all clearly demonstrated that the more students read, the more their overall language learning improves. In order to expose the students to more reading materials, to increase the opportunity of language contact for them and to meet the foregoing course objectives in a 6-hours of time, Google Docs were integrated into the general flow of the course. In the first week of the implementation, Google Docs were introduced to the students and they were required to create a Google account. This is not a compulsory step, though. The teachers whose students are given accounts by the school, all ending in the same domain, may consider using *Google Apps Team Edition*. This is a quick and easy solution, which will allow teachers to sign up, and then add their students' addresses to one account quickly and easily. After recording all the students' account data, the next step is to create a *group* through the teacher's account so that all the students can be accessible at one click. Google Docs in this study served two main purposes. The first one was to deliver online reading materials chosen in line with the target week's course content. Each week, the students were provided with several texts among which they were able to choose at least one according to their own interests regarding the content. Addressing all the students interests in the classroom setting is not easy; however, through Google Docs, as there is no time limit, the teacher could easily upload a number of texts on different themes, which can increase the possibility of addressing each student individually. Each text included various activities related to vocabulary and general comprehension skills. Hunt and Beglar (2005) state that reading large amount of texts combined with intensive exercises result in the most efficient means for expanding vocabulary knowledge over time and betterment in comprehension. In uploading the reading texts, Google Forms, which feed their results directly into a spreadsheet in Google Docs, thus, allowing teacher to evaluate the students' performances on a reading task in a practical way, were employed. Another reason for choosing the Forms is that it offers a number of question types ranging from multiple-choice through open-ended questions to scales, which could effectively be used in evaluating comprehension skills of the students. To get started, log into Google Docs and select **New/ Form** from the upper left menu. In the opening window, give your new form a name, provide a description for your students, and choose a template to identify how the form will be seen by the students. By default, Google Docs offer a number of templates, yet, you can visit <https://drive.google.com/templates?type=forms#> to choose from a great number of templates. The first question should be asking for the student information (e.g. name, id, or department etc...) so that you can observe the students performances individually. Do not forget to check the box "make this question required" so that you can make the students fill in their information before proceeding to the text and exercises. In order to upload the text for the students to read, you can use the box for the first question. Write the whole text there and start to add questions related to the text content. You can choose as many or as few questions as you'd like in your material, and you can switch question types later. Each answer will be a new column in your spreadsheet. Assessing students' comprehensions of the text is possible in various ways: you can ask your students to comment on a point in the text through "paragraph text" question, or to put the events in the text in order through "grade" question, or to respond as true/false through "checkboxes" question etc.... When adding question is completed, the form should be saved. The next step is to decide how to share your form. You can share the form in one of three ways: linking, embedding, and emailing. The public URL for your form is on the bottom of the page, and you can use this for linking to the form. You can get the code to embed your form into a Web page by clicking on the **More actions** button on the top right of the screen. Clicking the **Email this form** button lets you enter your students email addresses in a second through clicking on the *group*. Immediately after your students access the task, their responses will be recorded into a spreadsheet and will be visible through your own account. Figure 1 is the screenshot of one of the reading tasks prepared through the steps described above.

WEB BASED READING LESSON 3

With the purpose of providing students with extra reading activities, this form has been prepared for Firat University students. The theme of this week is SPACE. The reading text has been prepared based on National Geography Documentaries. Have fun!
* Required

NAME & SURNAME *

DATE *

3. If you contact someone, you communicate with him or her

a. in person

b) by phone, email, etc...

OTHER WORLDS

Is there intelligent life on other planets? For years, scientists said "no" or "we don't know". But today, this is changing. Steh Shostak and Alexandra Barnett are astronomers. They believe intelligent life exist somewhere in the universe. They also think we will soon CONTACT these methods, such as radio signals. In any case, they are trying to communicate with us now, but we don't have the right tools to receive their MESSAGES. But this is changing. By 2025, we could make contact with other life forms in the universe.

1. What is the main purpose of this reading?

(purpose)

a) To explain how life started on Earth

b) To explain the beliefs of two scientists

c) To explain how telescopes work

d) To explain what life on other planets may look like

2. What would be a good title for the second paragraph?

(Main Idea)

a) Earth: The only planet with intelligent life

b) The age and size of the universe

c) Our galaxy: the Milky Way

d) Why intelligent life might exist

3. Why was it harder to look for signs of intelligent life in the universe in the past?

(Detail)

a) Planets used to be farther apart

b) We did not have the right tools

4. If you have lived in a place your entire life, you have lived there of your life.

a) some

b) all

5. The moon circles the Earth. This means that the moon goesthe Earth

a) around

b) above

strong message

USING WORD PARTNERS, WRITE 2 SENTENCES IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Sentence 1

USING WORD PARTNERS, WRITE 2 SENTENCES IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Sentence 2

Figure 1. Online Reading Task Prepared through Google Docs

The second function of the Google Docs in this study was online Vocabulary Logs. Vocabulary knowledge is a driving force for developing comprehension skills, and one way of building vocabulary is to direct the students to keep vocabulary logs (August, Carlo, Dressler & Snow, 2005). In general terms, a vocabulary log is a personal record of new words that one learns, generally accompanied with some reflections on the learning process by the learner. In order to help the students keep their own vocabulary logs in this study, each week the students were sent a log template prepared through Google Docs. The vocabulary log included several questions designed to guide the students reflect on their vocabulary learning by asking them to comment on what they have already known; what they have learned from the target week's course on vocabulary and what strategies they use to remember the words. While filling in the spaces in the Google Doc, the students were also provided with a framework for the newly learned vocabulary. The framework required students to add linguistic knowledge regarding synonym, antonym, word formation etc... Here is how to prepare such a log through Google Docs. After logging in Google drive through your account, go to **Create** and click on **Form**. Give your form a name (e.g. Vocabulary Log Week 1) and choose a template. In order track each student individually, the first question should be related to students' personal data, and do not forget to check the box "make this question required". While adding other questions, choose "paragraph text" question type for reflection-related part of the log, and choose "text" question type for the students to write their newly learned words with their linguistic complements. After adding questions, save the form and click on "done" to continue with the sharing process which is explained in detail above. Figure 2 presents various screenshots from a vocabulary log prepared for this study.

Figure 2 A Sample Vocabulary log used in the study

When the students fill in the spaces, their responses automatically are sent to the teacher in a spreadsheet. Therefore, the teacher can effectively monitor their progress and vocabulary growth, and take informed decisions regarding the course plan.

The forms exemplified above were repeatedly sent to the students each week with some changes in the appearance and content of the tasks according to the target week's course content. For a period of 12 week, the students actively used Google Docs to support their in-class reading instruction. At the end of the term, they were administered a questionnaire measuring about their attitudes towards the treatment. Following section presents the results of the questionnaire.

4 RESULTS

Through a five point Likert scale, the students were asked about their perceptions towards the integration of Google Docs into their learning process in 15 statements. The statements were related to ease of use, effectiveness on vocabulary and reading comprehension and effect on developing a positive attitude towards reading skill. Each statement in the questionnaire has a part for additional comment by the students.

Concerning the ease of use, 82.3 % of the students agreed or strongly agreed that Google Docs was easy to use and they reported no problems in using them. When they were asked to compare Vocabulary Log through Google Docs with the traditional paper-based vocabulary logs, 78.4 % of the students stated that Google based vocabulary logs were more effective. They also commented that studying vocabulary in front of the computer is something enjoyable and up-to-date, which can be linked to their natural tendency to use computers in their learning: As today's learners are grown in a technological environment in every single part of their life, using computers and internet in their learning will naturally seem motivational for them [8].

Regarding the effectiveness of Google Docs on reading skill and language learning in general, most of the students responded positively. 91% of the students said that reading tasks through Google Docs helped them to practice English outside the school and class assignments. Furthermore, 80.6 % believed that tasks through Google docs increased their language contact, which could be regarded as a positive outcome of providing students with the online materials. The students were also asked to comment on their being tracked by the course instructor through Google forms. 68.9% of the students responded positively stating that “*knowing that my progress would be tracked by the teacher was motivating*”. They also appreciated individual progress reports and the chance of discussing their idiosyncratic strategies with the teacher.

When they were asked about their overall attitudes towards the Google Docs integration, it was found out that almost all of the students had a favourable perception. 73.5% of the students were willing to use this application in their future learning. 80.2 % of them stated that Google based tasks helped them perform better as a student, and they thought that the course design integrating Google forms made the course funny.

5 CONCLUSION

Google Docs as free, easy to use, web-based tools have the potential to address to a great number of learning and teaching needs in the field of language instruction. The relevant literature reports several studies using Google Docs in writing instruction [2, 9] and in managing student records [6]. This paper aims to present one way, among many, of integrating Google Docs into an EFL reading course.

The study was conducted to investigate utilization of Google Docs in a reading course and to explore the students' attitudes towards the use of Google Docs as a supplementary to their in-class reading instruction. The findings revealed that students had a positive perception towards the use Google Docs appreciating the ease of use, motivational and enjoyable aspects of the Google Docs. This study provides an implication that Google Docs can effectively be used to support the teaching of reading. This web-based application enables teachers to create and share their own materials and provides access to a multitude of resources designed considering idiosyncratic features of the target learners. Allowing teachers to keep track of students' progress on different tasks and activities is also a significant factor to make use of Google Docs in course design. This paper suggests that the language teachers who want to overcome with the time limits of classroom setting and to turn their classes into a technology enhanced, motivating and enjoyable course at the ease of several clicks effort should integrate Google Docs into their classes.

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