

Enhancing English Communication Skills of Thai University Students through Google Apps for Education (GAFE) in a Digital Era during Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

During the covid-19 dilemma, all educators worldwide have been alerted by the alarm clock of urgent online teaching and learning. This leads to a curiosity of which online tools are suitable for the online learning contexts, especially for English classrooms where there are more than just lecturing, but also practicing English skills. Google Applications for Education (GAFE) is one of the teaching alternatives to create collaborative learning and being used as major media in online teaching. Therefore, the aim of this quantitative study is to explore the opinions of Thai university students regarding the use of G Suite Applications namely Google Classroom, Google Meet, Google Docs, and Google Forms, in an English online course during the Covid-19 situation and to indicate how the applications can be integrated with online tasks that promote English skills. The participants of the study were students who enrolled in a fundamental English course which was conducted online at the time of the Covid-19 crisis by the researcher. The data were gathered from an online questionnaire consists of statements that represent key indicators of efficiency and validity of Integrated Technology and the information is interpreted by 5-point Likert Scale (Strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree). The results show that the students have a positive experience using the applications in their online learnings. They agreed that the combinations of this application based on the functions enable them to enhance all English skills and grammatical and lexical knowledge. There is also a guideline that suggests how to apply these applications to create learning activities and tasks in an online setting. All in all, it is believed that this research will be a starting point for English teachers to use Web 2.0 tools, particularly G Suite, to serve the needs of the learners in the future online during this covid-19 crisis.

Keywords: Google Apps for Education (GAFE), English communication skills, Task-based learning teaching, Online learning

Introduction

Under this covid-19 wrack, educators and teachers are trying their best to cope with the teaching difficulties. Although there are many challenges associated with online teaching and technological competency and proficiency issues among teachers and students, the teaching and learning activities must continue. Therefore, the use of new technologies and innovative teaching strategies are applied in these online classrooms, which are now replaced face-to-face classrooms at the time of this writing. Moving away from brick-and-mortar classrooms to these online classes leads to the questions of how to conduct the most effective classes and how to select the most suitable online tools and use online platforms for students. According to Cruickshank (2020), without online teaching experience, many teachers may struggle with how to create and manage their classroom activities successfully. This leads to several discussions among scholars and teachers to seek extra learning tools and platforms to face the challenges and incorporate Web 2.0 technology within both synchronous and asynchronous learning contexts.

In terms of language learning classes, there are many challenges in conducting online courses based on the four fundamental skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and other learning topics which are related to skill practicing. Bailey & Lee (2020) point out that conversation classes that emphasize on pronunciation skills and writing classes create the teachers' hardship more than other online learning lessons because there are some activities that require corrective feedback. Thus, not all English classes are fit into this online learning context; however, there might be other supplementary devices and platforms that serve the needs of the teachers and learners. The introduction of Web 2.0 platforms and technologies such as social networking sites (Facebook, YouTube, Wiki, etc.) have been applied to solve the learning and teaching problems and enhance a better learning environment. Halim & Hashim (2019) point out that ESL learners can greatly earn benefits from the use of Web 2.0 tools in their English learning. For instance, it encourages a sense of learning community, and learners gain more opportunities to interact with their teachers and other learners. Nevertheless, as Grandzol & Grandzol (2010) suggest that there are also barriers to using those new technology in ESL learning, such as being challenging for learners to control themselves to study in an online setting. Adding more to this, social networking sites can bring about more studies related to the impact of the usage of new technologies in English classrooms.

Moving to the next point, Google Applications for Education (GAFE) is one of the teaching alternatives to create collaborative learning and be used as major media in online teaching, such as for task submissions and communication channels. These GAFE tools are produced and administered by Google. There are several studies indicating that the apps can be applied with traditional classrooms as well as blended learning during normal circumstances. Within this covid-19 situation, GAFE may also play an important part in creating a successful online English learning course according to their functions and the usability of the apps. This leads to the question that to what extent GAFE can make a positive impact on an English online course that requires various tools to promote four fundamental English skills as well as other language knowledge such as vocabulary and

grammar lessons. Moreover, because of the nature of the subject, communication and interaction are one of the main priorities for creating learning activities which the learners need to experience while learning the language.

Therefore, the study of the use of GAFE and the enhancement of English communication skills among the learners should be conducted to investigate the students' experience, perceptions, and attitudes towards the effectiveness of the Google apps such as G Suite (Google Drive, Google Form, Google Docs, Gmail, Google Hangouts, Google Sheets, and Google Calendar) in an online setting. Although there are several discussions that are linked to the use of other social media and Google applications such as Google Classroom and Google Drive in English blended classrooms, there is relatively little research into the integration of G Suite apps, particularly Google Classroom, Google Docs, Google Meet, and Google Forms within an online learning course to create a communicative English classroom during the Covid-19 situation and how students were encountering the difficulties with this learning dilemma. As there is little research that investigates deeply English online interactive classrooms and aims to explore students' opinions towards using English as a communicative tool to think, learn, and share their ideas within the online learning environment. Moreover, there are few studies that research about the challenges of using Google applications to enhance students' English competencies and learning in an online course. It is believed that the results of this research will be a starting point for English teachers to apply a task-based learning approach along with the use of Web 2.0 tools, particularly G Suite, to serve the needs of the learners in the future online and blended learning contexts.

Research Objectives

- To explore the opinions of Thai university students regarding the use of G Suite Applications in an English online course during the Covid-19 situation
- To indicate how G Suite Applications can be integrated with online tasks that promote English skills

Literature Review

Interaction through Computer-mediated Communication Tools

Technological advancements have a significant effect on learning styles. Computer-mediated communication to further their written and spoken skills. Although the effectiveness of these innovations greatly depends on the way they are used. Online teaching and learning activities have continued to expand as an alternative to traditional face-to-face teaching and learning. Computer-assisted language learning can promote collaborative, learner-centered knowledge construction and offer a more comfortable and less face-threatening environment for interaction than instruction and discussion in a traditional classroom setting (Dickson et al., 2008). Moreover, the new learning perspectives encourage teachers to consider themselves as facilitators and guides who accompany students during the process of their learning. As a result, the students are motivated to act as active learners but not only for individual action but also in a collaborative way within a virtual learning community.

In terms of online interaction, it refers to student-student and student-teacher contact, which take place in online environments. Learners learn when they communicate and interact with their classmates and their teachers through computer-mediated tools such as web-based real-time audio, video conferencing, and blogs. As Wagner (1994) explains, interactions happen when at least two objects and two actions influence one another. In virtual learning environments, asynchronous and synchronous are two types of interactions (Murray, 2004). Firstly, asynchronous interaction, participants do not interact with others in real-time such as e-mails and forums.

On other hand, synchronous interaction takes place in real-time, which is like face-to-face conversations. Moreover, synchronous communication tools are used to promote interaction in the language-learning areas. Several studies researched the advantages of applications combining video, audio, and text chat for negotiating meanings. In addition, authentic interaction is also useful to motivate active learning as Lee (2007) studied video conferencing to enhance communicative language skills applying with visual interaction in real-time and audio.

Google Applications for Education (GAFE)

Google is a search engine that became popular among users. It proves its success by developing more Google tools including Google Apps for Education, Google Apps for business, and Google for Work. They are the online tools that facilitate collaborative working among users. According to Google (2013), Google Applications for Education (GAFE) is cloud-computing solution that work for learners regardless of the learners 'online devices, time, and locations. GAFE consists of Google Drive, Gmail, Google Docs, Google+, Google Sites, and Google Calendar. Universities and schools use them as collaboration tools to improve their teaching and learning. According to Awuah (2015), these tools enable users to collaborate virtually on presentations, projects, and documents. As well as White (2015) points out, GAFE apps are useful in a higher educational context due to their functions that allow coursework collaboration and submission. Within this area of study, there are four apps that are included in the study, which are Google Classroom, Google Docs, Google Forms, and Google Meets.

Relevant Research

There have been some studies published over the last decade. These studies have explored and investigated various online learning tools and applications such as WhatsApp, Zoom, Google applications and other social network sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter towards English teaching and learning. The areas of the studies were involved four fundamental English skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), including lexical and vocabulary aspects. One interesting piece of work is Mannong (2020); the study aimed to analyze the students' experience in utilizing learning-based applications and the difficulties in learning the English language in the pandemic era. There were four applications in the research: Google Classroom, Google Meet, Zoom and WhatsApp. The finding found that WhatsApp was the most effective application which enabled the students to improve their English skills because of its convenience and stability. As Mannong (2020) states, the students also developed their digital literacy as well. In addition, there are other studies which are related

to online learning tools and platforms such as using Google Apps as a Learning Strategy to Enhance ESL Writing Basri, et al., (2019); EFL Students' Perceptions towards Using Google Docs and Google Classroom as online Collaborative Tools in Learning Grammar (Khalil, 2018); Using Google Meet in Teaching Speaking Fakhruddin (2018); the Application of Google Classroom as a Tool for Teaching and Learning (Nizal, et al., 2016). About the online learning tools in English classrooms, there are several ongoing studies that aim to bridge the gaps between the changing learning contexts and technology advancement.

Research Methodology

This study used descriptive quantitative research to explore the opinions of Thai university students regarding the use of G Suite Applications in an English online course during the Covid-19 situation and to indicate how G Suite Applications can be integrated with online tasks that promote English skills.

Participants

The participants were students who enrolled in a fundamental English course conducted online at the time of the Covid-19 crisis by the researcher. There was an integration of Google Classroom with other GAFE tools such as Google Meet, Google Docs and Google Forms in the online course. The participants were assigned worksheets and homework via Google Docs. Moreover, they were required to complete the tasks and turn those assignments into Google Classroom every week. The students always joined classes using Google Meet as the main media of communication for the online course. The Google Forms were used for taking quizzes. All data were gathered and saved in Google Drive to use the information as evidence of teaching and learning. Therefore, there was the utilization of those mentioned tools within this course which leads to the study to explore the implementation of online interactive tasks in the online English teaching contexts and students' and teachers' perspectives towards learning through the online tools.

Research Instrument

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of personal Information, the students' experience towards using G Suite Applications, and the students' opinions towards the use of those applications in an English online course during the Covid-19 situation. The problems while using those applications were also indicated within the questionnaire questions as open-ended questions. The questionnaire consists of statements that represent key indicators of efficiency and validity of Integrated Technology and the information is interpreted by 5-point Likert Scale (Strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree).

Data analysis

The questionnaire was designed using Google Form, which provided a link for the participants to answer the questions. The data that was obtained from the online questionnaire were collated onto a data spreadsheet and summarized. Descriptive statistics such as percentages of frequency were used to gain the results, and the findings were presented using tables and charts.

Results and Analysis

The first part of the questionnaire explores the participants' personal information and their experiences regarding the use of Google applications (Google Classroom, Google Meet, Google Docs, and Google Forms). The information in figure 1 shows that more than 90% of the participants have experienced the utilization of Google Classroom and Google Meet. Meanwhile, Google Docs and Google Meet were less than the first-mentioned applications, around 20%. Apart from the users' experiences, the results also indicate that the participants were considered their English competencies as moderate in each skill (listening, speaking, reading, writing), including grammatical and lexical knowledge.

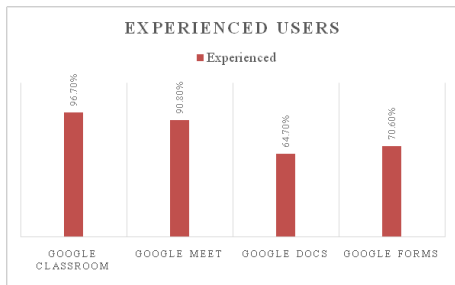


Figure 1: Experienced Users of the Google Applications

Moving on to the second part of the questionnaire, it was about students' opinions regarding the utilization of Google applications in general and in the online EFL learning context. The following information is the highlighted data that were gathered from the participants as follows:

Table 1: Google Classroom

Statements	Responses
Google Classroom enables me to review learning contents all the time	Strongly Agree (52%)
Google Classroom enables me to turn in my work conveniently and quickly	Strongly Agree (56%)

Table 2: Google Docs

Statements	Responses
Google Docs enables me to receive feedback from my teacher and peers immediately	Agree (49%)
Google Docs enables me to manage and save my work easily on my computer	Agree (46%)

Table 3: Google Forms

Statements	Responses
Google Forms enables me to complete quizzes or tests quickly.	Strongly Agree (52%)
Google Forms enables me to receive my scores after taking quizzes or tests immediately.	Strongly Agree (52%)

Table 4: Google Meet

Statements	Responses
Google Meet enables me to learn online conveniently and quickly	Strongly Agree (50%)
Google Meet enables me to express my opinions and respond to my teacher immediately	Strongly Agree (48%)

Table 5: Google Classroom

Statements	Responses
Google Classroom enables me to revise my grammar and vocabulary lessons all the time	Agree (43%)
Google Classroom enables me to enjoy English exercises in each week	Agree (45%)

Table 6: Google Docs

Statements	Responses
Google Docs enables me to be more careful about my spelling and using correct word choices	Agree (49%)
Google Docs enables me to improve my English reading skills	Agree (50%)
Google Docs enables me to use English grammar correctly	Agree (49%)

Table 7: Google Forms

Statements	Responses
Google Forms enables me to read faster within limited time	Agree (44%)
Google Forms enables me to improve my grammatical and lexical knowledge	Agree (46%)

Table 8: Google Meet

Statements	Responses
Google Meet enables me to be more interested in English listening	Agree (49%)
Google Meet enables me to improve my speaking skills	Agree (49%)

To summarize, the key findings show that the ease of use, usefulness, effectiveness and safety of the information were the important elements that the participants responded to based on the functions of the applications. In terms of English pedagogical aspects, these applications supported the online learning activities greatly, including enhancing four fundamental English skills and grammar and vocabulary lessons. Therefore, it could be said that the Google applications can be integrated into online learning platforms due to the great demand for online learning during the covid-19 crisis.

Moving on to the obstacles and difficulties while using the applications, it seems likely that the participants faced similar problems, which were technical problems such as poor internet connection and the accessibility of the learning platforms and

their learning devices. The results also show in the word-cloud format below.



Figure 2: The Difficulties of Online Learning and the Utilization of Google applications

Discussion and Conclusion

The study aimed at exploring the opinions of Thai university students regarding the use of G Suite applications in an English online course during the Covid-19 situation and indicating how the applications can be integrated with online tasks that promote English skills. The results of the questionnaire suggested that most of the learners have prior experience with the Google applications, which are Google Classroom, Google Meet, Google Forms, and Google Docs, respectively. The students perceived the benefits of integrating the

applications within their online learning contexts; however, they also pointed out that they were faced with some technical problems in losing internet signals which sometimes caused anxiety and dissatisfaction. According to Awuah (2015), GAFE is seen as a powerful technical solution via cloud-computing systems which facilitate learners without the limitation of time, places, and various types of devices such as laptops, mobiles, iPad, etc. Moreover, it encourages the learners to work together in a virtual classroom on presentations, documents, and projects. This usefulness of the applications would strongly promote the effectiveness of online instruction.

Interestingly, when it comes to an English integrated skills class in an online setting, this might create some teaching difficulties for teachers. Therefore, the research findings also aimed at suggesting some teaching guidelines by applying the applications with teaching four fundamental skills and other knowledge for English teachers who are interested and are having a difficult time designing their tasks and activities. Based on the characteristics and functions of each application, the tasks can be arranged and processed as presented in the given table below.

Table 9: Online Task Guidelines by Integrating the Google Applications

Types of Tasks	Suggested Google Applications	Suggested Activities	English skills and others
Group Presentation	Google Classroom	Assign and provide task information	Integrated skills (Speaking, Writing, reading, and listening)
	Google Docs	Work in groups and edit drafts Provide comments Receive Feedback	
	Google Meet	Arrange a meeting to present the presentation	
	Google Forms	Fill in the evaluation forms by the teacher and peers Received scores and comments immediately	
Writing Tasks	Google Docs	Practice writing skills based on writing strategies and topics Edit written drafts Provide comments Receive feedback	Writing & Reading skills
	Google Classroom	Assign and provide task information Turn in the writing task	
Job Interview (Q & A)	Google Docs	Provide questions and speaking rubric scoring	Speaking & Listening skills
	Google Meet	Do the job interview individually, pairs, groups	

Online Quizzes	Google Classroom	Explain about quiz rules and make an appointment Post the quiz	Vocabulary & Grammar knowledge
	Google Forms	Complete the given quizzes via the provided links on Google Classroom Receive the scores after the quizzes or later	

Among the four applications, the most familiar and recommended application for the students was Google Classroom. As Heggart & Yoo (2018) point out, Google Classroom helps to increase student’s collaboration, participation and improve learning outcomes. It is suitable to use in higher education because it is linked with the university’s systems. However, this does not mean that the other three applications were not useful and recommendable. The results also indicate that Google Docs, Google Meet, Google Forms also play crucial roles as successful learning tools. For Google Docs, it is in line with Boyes (2016), “Google Docs allows instant feedback and collaboration on student-generated text when students are online at the same time”. In addition, the students’ written texts are saved instantly. The problem of losing the documents will not occur. In the part of Google Meet, Daud (2016), this application provides the users with the textual chat function as well as video-based communication. Google Meet can be used as an alternative tool for conducting a virtual classroom. Lastly, Google Forms was also seen as a great tool to use in this language class. As Conner (2008) states, with Google Forms, the responses of the students appear as a summary or in a spreadsheet to show other information and save on Google Drive. One interesting aspect which was provided by Agrawal & Maurya (2016), the results from the online surveys are secured and cannot be edited. As a result, it can prevent cheating. This is extremely useful for the teachers to integrate the application for doing online quizzes.

Limitations

The first limitation for this research is related to the results of the study cannot being generalized because the populations in this research were conducted in a specific learning context. The data collection was also limited at one university which the findings may not apply to other learning contexts. To be noted, the data could also be collected from various sources in different universities. Moreover,

the areas of the study could be extended to widen greater sights into the changing trends in English teaching and technology within higher education settings.

Implications for Future Research

The study offers useful information and guidelines for other teachers to redesign their English courses, especially the integrated-English skill courses in virtual classrooms. The ease of use, effectiveness and safety of the stored information of Google Classroom, Google Meet, Google Docs, and Google Meet enables the teachers to create an effective learning and good online atmosphere for their students. In addition, the results of the study imply that this is when Google applications should be integrated into English teaching, and the use of these applications would be beneficial for teachers in terms of supporting them in their online course.

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